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## Movie lessons for New Learning

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### Abstract

*In 2004 the Australia Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) released a report entitled New teaching, new learning: A vision for Australian education. This report was prepared on behalf of the ACDE by Mary Kalantzis and Andrew Harvey, respectively the President and Executive Officer of the ACDE. The argument put forward in the report is that education is implicated “in the realms of work, citizenship and identity ... that learning is pivotal to its success, and that teaching is the central profession in the knowledge economy” (p. 5). However, developments in technological, commercial and other realms deem it necessary to reconsider the practices of, and the relationship between, teaching and learning. New Learning basically recommends that teachers concentrate on creating a productive learning environment and adopt teaching strategies that encourage students to take greater responsibility for their learning. The ACDE has thus called on educators to dramatically rethink “education systems, the nature of knowledge and the role that educators need to play” (p. 91). This invitation to reconceptualise teaching and learning also raises questions about what models of practice that may already exist and how these examples are popularly accepted.*

*In popular culture the ‘urban school’ genre of movies portrays some teachers as individuals who are able to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds and succeed in teaching students for whom others have given up, and do so with positive results. These portrayals of ‘hero’ teachers have sometimes been dismissed as Hollywood fantasies designed to appeal to middle-class beliefs about the limitations imposed by bureaucracies, the power of the individual and the relative ease of overcoming what have become entrenched educational problems if a little creativity and persistence are applied (see Bulman, 2005). The urban school genre therefore was useful to explore using a basic discourse analytic approach for examples of teaching ‘success’ and evidence of teaching strategies that were consistent with the new learning approach.*

*This paper examines the idea of ‘New Learning’ in relation to three urban school movies to ascertain whether the strategies depicted were consistent with the vision put forward by the ACDE. The three films considered *Stand & deliver* (Menendez, 1988), *Dangerous minds* (Smith, 1995) and *Freedom writers* (LaGravenese, 2006), were all set in Los Angeles public schools and respectively show events from 1982, 1989 and 1992. Interestingly, each of the movies also made some claim to being based on true story to some degree. In these movies instances of classroom interaction were analysed to determine the pedagogic strategies used by the teachers concerned. It was found that the first two films showed behaviourist teaching techniques, though the teachers were shown to be benevolent and caring. However, the more recent film, while portraying the teacher as a caring individualist, the film also contained examples of learning and teaching consistent with the new learning approach. In particular, the third film provided a strong example how narrative techniques can be used with students to good effect.*

**Keywords:** New Learning, urban school movies, pedagogy, narrative

## Introduction

Recently the student enrolment in Australian schools has become more linguistically and culturally diverse. In NSW, for example, the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students has increased from 3.3% of the school population in 1997 to 5.1% in 2007. For students from Language Backgrounds Other Than English (LBOTE) the proportion has risen from 25% to 29.7% over the same period of time (Planning and Innovation, 2008; Strategic Information and Planning Directorate, 2003). One consequence of this increased diversity is the realisation by some (for example Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006) that traditional didactic approaches to teaching are becoming less effective. It has also been acknowledged that while schools remain an important site of teaching and learning, the forms and sources of pedagogy and instruction have become more wide spread. "Teaching and learning are permeating all aspects of life; pedagogical activity is spilling over from formal to informal spaces" (Hayes et al., 2006, p. 3). If, as Bernstein argues, "the crucial social relation through which cultural reproduction and production takes place is a pedagogic relation" (2001, p. 22) then schools certainly do not exercise this relationship alone. Traditional forms of teaching, therefore, may not only be seen as becoming less effective but also face greater competition.

The vast array of instructional information and advice, formal and informal, has caused some academics in Australia (see for example Arnold & Ryan, 2003; Kalantzis, Cope, & Harvey, 2001; Lovat & Mackenzie, 2003) to reconsider the formal link between the teaching and learning dyad, and education. This thinking has led to the formulation of 'New Learning' as a potential way to reconceptualise teaching and as a possible way to embrace appropriate aspects of the myriad skills and knowledge that students may need to develop to successfully negotiate society, community and the changing demands of a working life.

This paper explores three films of the 'urban school' genre to gauge whether the ideas proposed by New Learning and similar lines of thinking have begun to appear in the popular culture of cinema and if so, how these ideas are represented. The movies chosen for scrutiny have been selected primarily because the stories are set in a common location and focus on a teacher who is able to make a change in the lives of the students shown. These movies show events over a ten year period: *Stand and deliver* shows a school in 1982, *Dangerous minds* 1989 and the *Freedom writers* is set in 1992. This span of ten years should give the opportunity to view the effects of changes or developments in curriculum, instruction or assessment practices and the changing role of teachers.

## New Learning

Various pedagogic styles have been advocated over the last 50 years or so. We have seen traditional didactic methods where the teacher provides the information for the students to learn and there is little interaction beyond students seeking clarification. Critical pedagogy rejected traditional methods of teaching as merely a form of 'banking pedagogy' where the teacher makes information deposits that can later be withdrawn, usually for a test of knowledge. Critical pedagogy aimed to have students identify the assumptions that produced the frames of reference that legitimised the knowledge they were being taught. Authentic pedagogy, an approach linked with the work of John Dewey, challenged the dominance of abstract learning and its

proponents believed the best form of teaching was that which placed students in a learning environment similar to the actual situation where the learning might have otherwise occurred. However, New Learning is an approach that focuses on *learning* rather than teaching.

In 2001 the Australia Council of Deans of Education (ACDE) circulated a discussion paper (Kalantzis et al., 2001) that contained eight propositions designed to reshape Australian education. In this paper while the contexts and funding of education were considered, the emphasis in the propositions was that New Learning strategies could better address social inequality than previous measures. The arguments in the discussion paper were framed noting that new economic times had altered the technologies used in the workplace and the conditions and cultures of work. Changing technologies and economy cultures had also influenced the ways that citizens participated in society. These changes also shaped the conditions of identity and recognition. Education, the discussion paper argued, needed to respond to these changed and changing circumstances.

The report, *New teaching, new learning: A vision for Australian education* (Kalantzis & Harvey, 2004) published three years later, was prepared on behalf of the ACDE by Mary Kalantzis and Andrew Harvey, respectively the President and Executive Officer. The issue of funding for education had become more prominent in the report, but much of the earlier proposals remained. The argument put forward was that education is implicated “in the realms of work, citizenship and identity ... that learning is pivotal to its success, and that teaching is the central profession in the knowledge economy” (p. 5). However, developments in technological, commercial and other realms deem it necessary to reconsider the practices of, and the relationship between, teaching and learning. Thus the ACDE called on educators, politicians and the community to dramatically rethink “education systems, the nature of knowledge and the role that educators need to play” (p. 91).

The New Learning advocated by the ADCE is likely to have been influenced by the work done by the Australian State government department, Education Queensland, and the New Basics Project that has been used in Queensland since 2003. Views similar to those of the ACDE on the centrality of a student learning focus are also reflected in the UK Qualifications and Curriculum Authority’s program, *Futures in action: Building a 21st century curriculum* initiated in 2007. That focus has in turn been reiterated in the MCEETYA (2008) *Melbourne Declaration*.

The brief history given above might suggest that New Learning was a product of thinking at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but the idea can be traced back at least to the nineteen seventies. Paulo Freire’s publications the *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (1972b), *Cultural action for freedom* (1972a) and *Education for critical consciousness* (1975) outline an approach to teaching literacy to adults that, according to Symes and Preston, “presents a normative understanding of education which more accurately reflects underlying realities in the ‘nature’ of persons, society and their culture; it attempts to meet the learner where he or she is, and promotes negotiation and dialogue” (1997, p. 75). Freire’s work influenced other educationalists such as Merriam and Cafarella (1991) and Mezirow (1991) who regarded their approaches as ‘transformative education’. bell hooks (1994) also acknowledges her debt to Freire in developing her ‘transgressive’ educational practices.

Kalantzis and Cope have produced an expanded account of their approach in a text entitled *New learning: Elements of a science of education* (2008) and maintain that their focus is primarily the design of new learning environments. In explaining their approach they outline four foundational values and principles that inform the theory and practice of New Learning as:

- Diversity is a key feature that must be at the core of education
- Education must seek to cultivate deep knowledge
- Education needs to develop and maintain a focus on designing learning experiences and tracking learning processes, and be
- Globalist in content and aspiration (2008, p. xvii)

The elements of this approach are described further below and are used to analyse the films in this study.

### **Storytelling**

Gee, Hull and Lankshear (1996) argue that literacy is socially constructed and their position links with approaches suggested by Freire and many transformative education proponents. Elaborating this point, James Gee asserts that acquiring literacy is a cultural process where “children who learn to read successfully do so because, for them, learning to read is a cultural and not primarily an instructed process. Furthermore, this cultural process has long roots at home – roots that have grown strong and firm before the child has walked into school” (Gee, 2004, p. 13). He argues that the reason some students do not do well at school is because they arrive at school with literacy skills, but not with the skills desired by schools. Gee illustrates this claim with reference to examples of story-telling by children some of whom are able to demonstrate the ‘prototype academic literacy’ and ‘meta-level thinking’ about story content that are approved of by schools. Consequently, these students are readily accepted. These examples are contrasted with an observation of a female student who also demonstrated sophisticated language practices, but those that reflected the social practices of her African-American community, and the story told was deemed by the teacher to be rambling. Gee argues that rather than this being an example of poor literacy skills, it illustrates the expectation of the teacher that the stories students tell should conform to a certain narrative template or they are considered unacceptable.

Story telling is not only an important literacy practice but also way of making sense of ourselves.

The telling of stories is a prevalent part of social life, through which people recall, recount and reflect on their lives. From the mundane narratives that are produced in conversation, to published (auto)biographies and life histories, from the Internet to other forms of mass communication, we live in a ‘storytelling society’ through which we make sense of our lives (Benwell & Stokoe, 2006, p. 130).

As such, story telling plays a significant role in identity construction. Perry (2008) reports an instance of storytelling being used with refugees to both sustain identity and develop literacy skills. Hartley uses term ‘digital storytelling’ to describe any computer-based narrative expression and can include computer game narratives and YouTube movies (Hartley, 2009). This considerably expands the possibilities for exploring self and society.

## Movie stories

Kellner (1995) observes that movies also provide a means for people to understand themselves and others. Movies can thus also have a powerful influence of identity construction. Cinema stories provide the material out of which people forge their identities and provide models of what it means to be male or female, successful or unsuccessful. They also give a sense of what is considered to be good or bad, what is positive and what is negative, what is good and what is evil. Since people are most experienced with their own cultural community, movies also supply the materials that enable people to construct a sense of class, ethnicity, race, nationality, sexuality and importantly a sense of who they are and who they are not; a sense of 'us and them'. As such, movies contribute a rich source of symbols, myths and other resources which constitute a common culture. Much of the movie fare available to us comprises stories devised in Hollywood and therefore presents 'common culture' as understood or imagined by these directors and script writers. hooks extends the idea that movies provide materials or resources and points to their educative function. She observes,

Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned. ... Movies not only provide a narrative for specific discourses of race, sex, and class, they provide a shared experience, a common starting point from which diverse audiences can dialogue about these charged issues (hooks, 1996, p. 2).

Similarly Giroux (2002) notes that

Films do more than entertain, they offer up subject positions, mobilize desires, influence us unconsciously, and help construct the landscape of American culture. Deeply imbricated within material and symbolic relations of power, movies produce and incorporate ideologies that represent the outcome of struggles marked by historical realities of power and deep anxieties of the times; they also deploy power through the important role they play connecting the production of pleasure and meaning with the mechanisms and practices of powerful teaching machines (Giroux, 2002, p. 3).

The ideas contained in movie stories provide a rich source of cultural material for analysis and models for further story telling. Indeed, Trier has drawn on this trove of information when preparing pre-service teachers for their future occupations (see Trier, 2000, 2001, 2005). Movie stories can also be used to explore teaching methods and practices.

## Analysing movies for New Learning

There are sufficient movies that feature teachers, students or schools for them to constitute a specific genre of film. In *Hollywood goes to high school* Bulman (2005) considers the High School movie genre solely and has included in his research 185 films that used "a high school as their primary setting or films whose plots orbit around the life of a high school or high school students" (2005, p. 3). Bulman suggests that the High School genre of Hollywood movies can usefully be divided into three subgenres: suburban, urban and independent private. These films, he argues, largely reflect the relationships that middle-class Americans imagine they have, or could have, with these school institutions. For Bulman, urban high school

films “represent the fantasies that suburban middle-class Americans have about life in urban high schools and the ease with which the problems in urban high schools could be rectified” (Bulman, 2005, pp. 9-10). The suburban high school films tend to reflect students’ frustrations with “the emptiness and meaninglessness that a life of conformity and individual competitiveness fosters” (2005, p. 10), and the private schools movies “reflect middle-class ambivalence about wealth” (2005, p. 11). A number of other authors have also looked at the meanings that can be drawn from School genre movies (see for example Dalton, 1999).

The movies cited in this paper are set in schools in urban locations, and have a high popularity rating on the *Internet Movie Data base* (IMDb) (1990-2009). Using the IMDb genre search function for ‘based on a true story’, ‘high school’ and ‘Los Angeles, California’, the *Freedom writers* (LaGravenese, 2006) and *Stand and deliver* (Menendez, 1988) are ranked second and third with ratings of 7.5, and 7.2 out of ten respectively. The first and fourth placed films, *Catch me if you can* (2002) and *Better luck tomorrow* (2002) are not movies primarily set in a High School. *Dangerous minds* (Smith, 1995), the third movie considered in this paper, has a rating of 5.8/10, and though it is not listed on the IMDb as being based on a true story, the screen play was created from a book “*My Posse Don't Do Homework*”: *A funny and inspiring story of teaching* (Johnson, 1993) written by a teacher about her teaching experiences. In addition to the popular acclaim that gained these movies high ratings by users of IMDb, the films *Freedom writers*, *Stand and deliver*, and *Dangerous minds* have all won and been nominated for peer and industry awards, sharing 16 wins and 11 nominations between them.

The framework for analysis used here predominantly considers the classroom interactions shown in the movies, but also draws on comments made by the actors about what constitutes good teaching, how schools should run and so on. Throughout *New learning* (2008) Kalantzis and Cope make a number of suggestions that act as a useful guide for analysing the teaching shown in these movies, though this was unlikely to have been their intention. First, they suggest there are eight dimensions that may “prompt us to formulate a theory and practice of New Learning” (2008, p. 8). These dimensions include taking account of the social significance of education, and the institutional locations of learning given that these days so much learning happens outside schools. New media (Internet etc) influences learning and thus demands teachers account for this in their teaching practices. New Learning, they claim, is also likely to lead to new outcomes of learning. With a shift toward increased learner responsibility there will also be a shift in the balance of agency away from a model where the teacher is dominant and the student subservient. Difference must also be considered significant whether in its material, corporeal and symbolic forms. While New Learning presents a substantial change, this does not suggest it will or should entirely replace other forms of teaching. The final dimension concerns a new image of the teacher. This, Kalantzis and Cope consider, will be a professional who is autonomous, highly skilled and a responsible manager of learning. But, these teachers will also be grounded in community, be corporate players and collaborators at the same time as being designers of learning environments, evaluators, researchers and social scientists (2008, pp. 8-12).

At a micro level, the ‘tools’ that need to be a part of a New Learning teacher’s repertoire include knowing the learners that they teach, aiming to create open learning

pathways, and endeavouring to connect with the different lifeworlds of the students. Teachers should also aim to connect with the different ways of knowing, seeing, feeling and thinking employed by their students. Given that there is likely to be a shift in balance of responsibility between teacher and student, teachers should also create space for learner agency. Kalantzis and Cope argue that productive diversity will come to supplant post-Fordism in labour processes and as such teachers should aim to create a knowledge ecology for this productive diversity. Finally, teachers should aim to know what their learners have learnt (2008, pp. 134-136). These considerations will be used to examine the teaching shown in *Stand and deliver* (Menendez, 1988), *Dangerous minds* (Smith, 1995) and *Freedom writers* (LaGravenese, 2006).

### **Movie representations of schooling**

The main similarity between the three movies chosen for analysis is that they feature classes of socio-economically disadvantaged students, who are mostly Hispanic, African-American or Asian-American. In Hollywood movies these students are generally signifiers of trouble inside the school and in the community. Teenage members of these racial groups are identified with gang violence, drug use, theft and various other sorts of mischief. So, as viewers we assume that these students will have problem behaviours and will probably perform poorly as students.

Each of these movies also has a teacher as the main character in the film story. These teachers are all from outside the area of the school and are generally from a different cultural and socio-economic group to the students. This latter point is not particularly remarkable, but it does suggest an additional barrier for the teacher to cross if she or he is to make a close connection with the students. These teachers are also new appointments to their schools either because they have recently qualified as or because they have made a career change. The recency of an appointment indicates that the school may also have high staff turnover and trouble keeping staff. Being an outsider or coming from another occupation gives the new teacher an added air of mystery. More importantly, from the point of the classroom, the three teachers have somewhat unconventional teaching methods and *expect* that their students can achieve at school. Their methods and expectations put the main characters of the films at odds with the other staff at the school who are shown to be set in their ways, dull, unimaginative and/or lazy. By contrast our 'hero' teachers are shown to be hard working, persistent, optimistic and, consequently, inspirational.

*Stand and deliver* begins with Jaime Escalante driving his dilapidated Volkswagen through the streets of East Los Angeles. This is the social environment of his future students that we see as he makes his way to take up his teaching position. On arriving at the 'Garfield High School' Escalante discovers that while he was recruited to teach computers the school has none and he has been assigned to teach math 1A to a rowdy class of mainly Hispanic background students, some of whom do not speak English, and most of whom have no interest in maths. The majority of the staff at the school is resigned to their jobs being little more than 'child-minding' in their classes until the students eventually stop attending. These staff members express the belief that nothing will change until the school attracts students from wealthier families. However, despite these opinions Escalante decides to teach his 'remedial' students algebra, then calculus and have them sit the Advanced Placement Calculus exam to gain college entry credit.



In the movie narrative Escalante faces opposition to his efforts from other staff, from parents and from the students who find the work difficult. Initially, the students indicate that they would prefer the *status quo* of enjoying the social aspects of their final year at school, “this is our year to slack off”, and some students have made arrangements with teachers that allow them to pass without doing any class work. However, the biggest set back comes when his students, who all pass the Advanced Placement Calculus exam, are suspected of cheating by the Educational Testing Service (ETS).

In the classroom Escalante uses some unconventional techniques to aid his teaching of maths: he dresses as a fast food cook and hands out pieces of apple to teach percentages and uses his fingers for one student to demonstrate his skills in multiplication. The ‘apples’ lesson shows some relevance in using percentages, but mostly one suspects it is the teacher in an amusing costume that would be most memorable to the students. The ‘finger multiplication’ scene is visually funny from an audience point of view, but for the student concerned it was more likely to have been used as an opportunity to intimidate. While there is little doubt of Escalante character’s dedication to teaching and assisting the students to successfully complete their mathematics course, he also makes clear that if they are not fully committed to the project then they can leave. He ridicules students when they say they are struggling or they misunderstand, and makes jokes at the expense of students, he covertly threatens violence for non-participation in class activities, and mocks them when their private lives infringe their study time. Most of the humour used seems to be about developing or maintaining cohesion in the class rather than providing further insights into learning.

Interestingly, Escalante is from Bolivia and he able to use his Hispanic ethnicity to with his class. He speaks Spanish and understands the language difficulties some are having, though we do not see this skill used for teaching purposes, except in the scene where he first meets the class. We do see Escalante teaching an evening Adult English class just before he has a heart attack, but this linguistic ability is not deployed for use in his math classes. By the time the class is fully underway all the students appear to be fluent English speakers. Escalante also seems aware of gender politics because he goes to the restaurant owned and run by the father of a talented female student, Ana, who has just been made to withdraw from school so that she can work in the family business. In the restaurant he argues with the father, Mr Delgado that Ana should stay in school and that that would be a better way of helping the business. However, in class Escalante is not averse to making sexual asides, “is it true that intelligent people make better lovers?”, the lesson on gigolos and prostitutes (or girlfriends as they are called here) or when Claudia gets up to leave the class early “Where you going? You late for another date? [To the class] She’s got more boyfriends than Elizabeth Taylor”. This may be amusing to the class but it is gratuitous and embarrassing to Claudia. While Escalante may be aware of gender issues he is also willing to use them to bolster his standing as an authority figure.

Escalante’s teaching style is didactic and strongly controlling. Students are expected to sign contracts that commit them to coming to school early, staying to 5:00 pm, and attending classes on the weekend and during vacation time. While the extra work maybe necessary to make up for poor past teaching, it seems more likely to be a response to comments made by other staff in the staffroom that Escalante would not

be able to achieve positive results with his class. The philosophy followed by Escalante is that all one needs to succeed in math is *ganas* or desire. However, when it comes to classroom practices what is clearly required from students is obedience. This is a considerable change in attitude from the group he first encountered. In Escalante's classroom the wisdom could only come from him. This actually became the source of the problem that led to the ETS's allegation of cheating. All students reproduced the same answer that they had learnt by repetition from him. At the time of being taught the incorrect solution a number of students had complained but in the examination all had overridden their instinct for the correct understanding in preference to the 'drilled' answer. So much for developing independent mathematical thinking!

The teacher in *Dangerous minds*, LouAnne Johnson, is also on her first appointment after having recently left the US Marine Corps and currently going through a divorce. The school setting is 'Parkmont High' a desegregated Los Angeles High School and Johnson is offered a position as an 'academy class' teacher, a class for a group of particularly lowly performing students. Johnson is tested by the students and wins them over by offering to teach those who work hard karate moves, by using candy as a reward for correct answers and using outings as prizes. The school authorities caution her over unconventional teaching methods and the use of rewards, and although she resists she eventually decides to leave the school after a student from her class dies in a gang related incident. The most dispiriting aspect of Emilio's death, for Johnson, comes when she hears that the student had sought help from the Principal, but was turned away because he did not knock before entering his office. Johnson is persuaded to stay by her students who basically convince her of the importance of her work and this reminds her where her passion lies.

When Johnson first enters the class all the students are engaged in some activity or other, rapping, dancing or talking and Johnson struggles to get their attention. Eventually one of the students, Callie, calls the class to order "Yo, yo, yo, yo, yo! Listen up! Yo, listen up! Whitebread wanna know what happened to Miss Shepherd": Whitebread being LouAnne Johnson and Miss Shepherd being the teacher who recently resigned after teaching the class. Then a student makes an overtly sexual advance when explaining the reason for the last teacher's departure. This student, Emilio, continues to challenge the authority of this new teacher. Johnson decides to take a different approach to classroom management and teaching.

On the second day Johnson dresses in boots, jeans and a leather jacket, and we see her in the room before class with her feet up on the desk. The first students who enter express some amusement, "Girl, you didn't get enough yesterday?" and "Hey, everybody, everybody, look! A cowboy!" Her strategy to win the students over initially involves two things: to offer to teach some karate moves and to give everybody an 'A' grade. Karate clearly acts as diverting entertainment for the students and on the next day when Johnson announces that they are about to conjugate verbs, one student queries why they are not doing karate again, and leaves when he is told another 'hold' will be shown next week. Giving everybody an A grade has a different effect. The idea here is that everyone has an A to begin with, and according to Johnson "if you wanna pass, all you have to do is try." Notwithstanding the difference between passing and an A grade, some students are impressed because they have never received such a high mark before.

Johnson begins using what were standard approaches to the teaching of English via grammar and parts of speech, but changes the sorts of examples used. Instead of using the sentence ‘We eat green beans for dinner’, she writes ‘we want to die’ on the board. The aim of the lesson is apparently to emphasise the role of verbs in sentences, but when the word ‘chose’ is offered in place of ‘want’ in the sentence, the issue of choice is seized upon and explored. In the lesson the matter of verb use is dispensed with and the question of agency, whether one wants or chooses to die, becomes the focal point. Clearly the incorrect African-American narrative template is being employed by the students is being used. The direction of the learning however, as with the character of Escalante, is all determined by the teacher. Johnson chooses whether they will conjugate verbs or talk about choice, or whether they will do karate. No recognition of their linguistic abilities is given and class is dependent on her good will. The purpose of conjugating verbs or naming parts of speech is never made clear, at least not in the film, and we do not see the students using this knowledge in ways that are useful to them.

At one point when discussing poetry in class, Johnson calls on Emilio for an opinion. Emilio declines saying the matter is too personal. Johnson sees his electing to not contributing as a challenge to her authority and tries to cajole him to join in.

- Johnson: So, what do you think, Emilio? Do you think that Raul is right?  
 Emilio: All right, it's too personal to discuss.  
 Johnson: What? You mean you choose not to participate in the discussion?  
 Emilio: Not about somethin' so personal.  
 Johnson: Wanna draw for it?  
 Emilio: What?  
 Johnson: High card, you don't have to discuss anything.  
 Emilio: Why do I gotta draw for it? That's the way it is now.

This exchange between Johnson and Emilio is revealing about the control of the teacher and shallowness of the claims of agency. Emilio’s point about not having an entitlement to say to agency “That’s the way it is now” is well made. It is not learning that he is interested in yet he has few options for non-participation.

The third film has a similar social setting but shows a different approach to teaching. Erin Gruwell takes her first teaching appointment at ‘Wilson’ a High School in Los Angeles where we are told standards have fallen since ‘voluntary integration’, or desegregation, has been introduced. Gruwell had chosen to teach at Wilson because of the high non-Anglo enrolment and the potential that that offered for making a difference in the lives of the students. However, in spite of holding these optimistic goals Gruwell is confronted by difficulties on her first day. Where Gruwell had envisaged that the students would share her enthusiasm for classical literature, *The Odyssey* in early lessons, we sense that student interest is more directed to using class time to further gang related activities: settling scores, mobilising resources and the like. Gruwell’s next attempt is to garner interest in English by using the lyrics of Tupac Shakur. There is a palpable sense of indignation from the students who resent *their* cultural property being appropriated for a lesson and when they point out the transgression, Gruwell resorts to disciplinary measures to reassert control.

- Andre: You think we don’t know 2Pac?  
 Marcus (mockingly): White girl going to teach us about rap.

- Gruwell: No, it's not that. See, what I was trying to do ...
- Eva: You have no idea what you're doing up there do you? You ever been a teacher before?
- Jamal (in background): And teacher gets nailed!
- Gruwell: All right Jamal, that's enough. You know I want you to move to this front seat right here now.
- Jamal: What?
- Gruwell: Come on. I am sick of these antics in my classroom
- Jamal: Well there you are. I was wondering when you were gonna lose that smile.

The tension continues when in a later lesson Gruwell intercepts a racist picture that is being circulated and, to the class, draws a parallel with the strategies of the Nazis during the Holocaust. This outburst leads some students to question Gruwell's approach to engaging the class.

- Marcus: Lady, stop acting like you're trying to understand our situation! You're just doing your little babysitting up there.
- Gruwell: Is that all you think this is?
- Marcus: It aint nothing else! When I look out in the world I don't see nobody that looks like me with their pockets full unless they're rapping a lyric or dribbling a ball. So what else you got in here for me?
- Gruwell: And what if you can't rap a lyric or dribble a ball?
- Andre: It aint this. I know that much.

The movie shows Gruwell drawing on these conflicts in a productive way rather than being defeated by them and becoming authoritarian. The students' lack of knowledge of the Holocaust inspires her to organise copies of *Diary of Anne Frank* for the class to read, but more importantly Gruwell realises that the students have a very different set of life experiences to her own and that she needs to engage with this in a meaningful way in order facilitate their learning.

Gruwell encourages the students to begin writing a personal journal. She announces this project to the class as follows:

Everyone has their own story. And it's important for you to tell your own story, even to yourself. So, what we're going to do is, we're going to write every day in these journals. You can write about whatever you want, the past, the present, the future. You can write it like a diary, or you can write songs, poems, any good thing, bad thing, anything. But you have to write every day. Keep a pen nearby, whenever you feel the inspiration, and they won't be graded. How can I give an A or B for writing the truth, right? And I will not read them unless you give me permission. I will need to see you've made an entry but I'll do this [riffles the pages a journal] skim, to see that you wrote that day. Now, if you want me to read it, I have ... a cabinet over here, it has a lock on it, and I'll keep it open during class and you can leave your diary there if you want me to read it. I will lock this cabinet at the end of every class. OK?

The response to the journal writing activity exceeds Gruwell's expectations and this combined with reading *Anne Frank* has a profound effect on the students.

## Movie lessons

It is unusual for a Hollywood movie to provide detail about what goes on in classrooms. We either see instances of teachers being frustrated by students or exercising authority over them, the things that fashion the hero status. It is even more rare to read analyses of teaching, with Grant's (2002) appraisal of *Stand and deliver*, *Dangerous minds*, and *187* (Reynolds, 1997) being one exception and aspects of the work by Trier (Tillman & Trier, 2007; Trier, 2001, 2002, 2005) on using films in the education of pre-service teachers.

In Hollywood movies about urban or inner-city schools we are familiar with a plot construction that generally runs as follows. Mysterious teacher arrives at the school and is given the most difficult class to deal with. After an initial set back, the hero teacher wins the students over, though alienating other staff members and the decision makers in the school. The films have happy endings with the unteachable students succeeding. Kellner (1995) suggests that this is an aspect of a conservative cinematic and ideological code where we would expect to see a hero being tested but succeeding and cultural imagery that allow us to identify with the hero. In Gruwell's case it might be the pearls she wears, frequently commented on to draw attention to them, which signifies she is middle class – like the majority of viewers, and thus less likely to be scrutinised or criticised. Johnson is similarly located in spite of her military background. We are also invited to share the hero's frustration with bureaucracy. For Escalante it is with the ETS, for Johnson it is the Principal who insists that she, and others, must knock before entering and with Gruwell it is the Head of Department Margaret Campbell who under the policy of 'site-based instruction' determines that Gruwell's class are only allowed to read condensed versions of novels. However, what Gruwell actually does as a teacher is somewhat different.

Leaving aside the other stories within the movie of gang warfare and marital disharmony, the *Freedom writers* contains classroom sequences that allows a greater understanding of how conflicts are managed and practices used. On entering the classroom the students rearrange the seating, disrupting the straight ordered lines of desks. From the outset the students disengaged, and the prevailing tensions quickly lead to some conflict. In subsequent lessons Gruwell tries to follow her plan of using the *Odyssey*, even though she has been warned by Campbell not to, but it is not the text that proves to be the difficulty, it is the ongoing social disadvantage felt by the students and the internal ethnic divisions within the class. When Gruwell deals with disrespectful behaviour towards her by changing where people sit she encounters resistance, the seating apparently follows an established 'tribal' configuration and Gruwell's deliberate creation of 'new borders' leads to other sorts of disruption. Movies typically show classrooms as being the province of the teacher, so such a tactic is not unusual. Escalante claimed the room to be his "domain" and in each of the classrooms the seating confined students to sit in rows. Managing the 'territory' is one technique of gaining and maintaining control. However, in the movie Gruwell was intent on connecting with her students and the breakthrough was unplanned.

A cartoon of Jamal, with exaggerated lips, was being circulated while Gruwell was conducting a lesson. Eventually Gruwell notices and with barely controlled rage lectures the class on the Holocaust. Unknown to Gruwell, only one of the students knows of the Holocaust and she continues her tirade. The students hear the references

to gangs and read the outburst as another attempt to demonstrate an understanding of their social and cultural circumstances.

Marcus: You don't know nothing, homegirl.

Gruwell: No, I don't Marcus so why don't you explain it to me!

Marcus: I aint explaining shit to you!

The interaction is highly, emotionally charged and reveals that the students do not feel respected; they believe respect must be earned but that they will be respected when they are dead. Eva also states that she hates white people. Gruwell feels confronted by these expressions of a differing worldview to her own but this leads her to reassess how best to teach the class. The 'line game' which she devises not only gives her information about the backgrounds and circumstances of her students, but also begins to breakdown some of the tribal barriers between students as well. This activity supports the intersubjective and socio-cultural concerns raised by Kalantzis and Cope that successful learning is most likely to occur in a social context that affirms learner identity and a social setting that supports learner interests, values perspectives and contributions. It also supports the view that differences are fundamental and must be dealt with (2008, pp. 37-38).

The journal writing activity is a significant strategic move for Gruwell to have employed. It encourages the students to tell their stories and consequently to productively engage in a literacy practice that transcends cultural boundaries, at least in the way that Gruwell uses it. Where early in the film one student, Andre, shows that he understands how their literacy is regarded, "It's the dumb class, cuz", journal writing which is not to be graded allows freedom of expression and the development of a writing practice. The encounters with Department Head Campbell also bear out Gee's contention that teacher expectations are likely to be the cause of poor student achievement as the attitudes of the students themselves. Campbell also demonstrates rigidity and belief in the adherence to rules that would be unlikely to benefit any but those from the dominant cultural group.

Kalantzis and Cope (2008) advocate 'knowing your learners' and 'knowing what they have learnt' and this is not uncommon for teachers who are engaged with their students. What is different and innovative in the movie character of Erin Gruwell is that she is able to put aside a need to be in control and focus on nurturing learning in her students. In the terms of New Learning she connects with diverse lifeworlds, creates open learning pathways, connects with different ways of seeing, feeling and thinking, and creates space for learner agency. And even more surprisingly, the movie allows a different sort of hero to emerge; a teacher who promotes learning. Like most Hollywood movies the *Freedom writers* has a happy ending Gruwell in only her second year of teaching is allowed to take a Junior class, contrary to the traditions of the school (though only after appeals to higher levels of authority) and the family-like bonds that have developed among class members, even across ethnic lines, can go on. It still fulfils the middle-class fantasy that the structural barriers in the educational system are not that important and can be overcome providing you can find an inspirational individual willing to sacrifice a private life and a relationship for the cause of teaching, and in the case of the real Erin Gruwell she only taught for a relatively short time before taking a University appointment. However, it does reveal a glimmer of hope that there are strategies, like those of New Learning, that make teaching culturally diverse classes a realistic possibility.

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