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Real Teaching and Real Learning vs Narrative Myths about Education

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Abstract

All real classrooms are saturated in the fictional narratives about education from TV and movies that swirl about thickly and persistently in western culture, yet the influence that these fictions exert on real teachers and real students is seldom examined. This article argues that since these fictional narratives nearly always deal in recycled stereotypes of both students and teachers, and that since they seldom receive critical attention, the influence they exert on real teachers and real students is to mislead, confuse, and impoverish their evaluations of and expectations about the nature of genuine education.

Keywords *education narratives, educational myths, images vs words, student stereotypes, teacher stereotypes*

We all of us, grave or light, get our thoughts entangled in metaphors, and act fatally on the strength of them.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Chapter 10

Souls live on in perpetual echoes.

George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, Chapter 16

Narratives as a Serious Influence on Serious Views

In this article I want to advance a remarkably simple thesis. While the importance of analyzing education by looking at it through many different lenses such as race, social class, economics, gender, ethnicity, class size, parental involvement, teacher preparation and so on, has been long recognized, some of the *most* important lenses (and certainly ubiquitous) that influence the views of every person in any society possessing television and movies have received hardly any investigation at all. The lenses I refer to are the thousands of education narratives that swirl thickly in

most cultures, especially western culture. In this essay I will argue that this thick swirl of education narratives has the curious effect of creating notions *about* education that in fact work *against* education. Education narratives haunt real classrooms like ghosts and invisibly distort all students' and teachers' notions about what education is for, how it should be conducted, and what kind of experience it should provide.

My claim about the influence of stories may not seem immediately true or self-evident. Many people — academics most notably — strongly resist the idea that stories influence *any* of their serious views, but not only *do* stories influence everyone's views and expectations about education, they do so much more profoundly than we might think. However, I can just hear you expressing your resistance in a few typical ways.

- "Stories are just entertainment," you might say. "They don't sink in deeply."
- "I'm too well educated for stories to have any real effect on what I think or who I am," some people say, especially academics. "I'm too experienced a reader, too savvy a movie viewer; I'm too good at critical thinking and emotional control."
- "Movies and novels and television?" people scoff. "They're just fluff, something to relax with at the end of a busy day; there's nothing in these performances that can exert any lasting effect, not on me anyway."

In many such assertions people insist that interactions with stories are merely casual and therefore do not touch the heart or shape of the mind. And people tend to maintain this shaky insistence in spite of two common realities that argue against them. First, people fail to realize that the frame of mind they put themselves in when they pursue entertainments is a frame of mind in which they are least likely to power up their critical resistance, and is therefore the very frame of mind in which they are most susceptible to being influenced without noticing it. Second, nearly everyone can name a movie, novel, play, TV show, children's book,

or other narrative that they will readily and often fondly admit has exerted a major influence on them at one time or another, a fact that certainly undermines the credibility of their insistence that stories never influence them in serious ways.

Because stories can only invite our assent without commanding it, we find it easy to ignore the fact that we almost always *do* assent. We almost always do agree to accept a story's invitations to feel, believe, and judge as it asks us to, and, of course, our willing assent actually creates a much wider door for influence to walk through than coercion could create against our will. Our predilection for saying "yes" to stories is no accident. We assent to stories because human minds are so constructed that, generally speaking, there are a few things anyone likes better than being in the grip of a story, and there is hardly any activity that people spend more time and energy pursuing than interactions with stories, even those people who claim that stories do not influence them deeply. The readiness with which many people yield assent to stories, combined with the belligerence of their denial that stories actually influence them creates a curious disconnect.

One reason why so many people fall prey to this disjunction — the reason they think that they are the ones 'above' such influence — is that most examples of such influence as we are likely to think of first tend to be sensationalistic and gross. We think of the hoodlums in New York, for example, who, immediately after the release of the movie *Money Train* (1995), killed a man by imitating the movie's horrific scene in which a subway ticket seller is squirted with gasoline and burned to death in his toll booth. Or we remember the two boys who accidentally killed themselves in New Jersey when right after the release of the movie *The Program* (also in 1995), they lay down in the middle of the freeway, intending like the movie heroes to let the cars straddle them harmlessly. Or we remember the large number of young

people who, after reading *On the Road* in the 1960s, bought Volkswagen buses and struck out for the highways and byways of America in the direct imitation of Jack Kerouac. In all of these cases we congratulate ourselves with such thoughts as, "How gullible, how immature, how uncritical, how unlike me. No story could every influence me like that." But it all depends on what "like that" mans, doesn't it? Moreover, we must not forget that in the second-hand realm of story we experience an immediacy of feeling, a rush of emotion, and a flow of sensations that frequently match the intensity and flow of first-hand experience Reading *Great Expectations* or watching a rerun of *NYPD Blue* or listening to a narrative song are first-hand events. We do not *imagine* that we are doing these things, and imagining them does *not* mean that we also imagine the emotional, intellectual, and ethical responses that are triggered by the narrative representations. Our responses are always first-hand experiences.

Complacency about our supposedly high sales resistance to narrative's influence may be, as Twain said of reports about his death, premature. Even though few of us are impressionable enough to let a story persuade us to commit a crime or lie down on the freeway, this hardly forms solid ground for congratulating ourselves about our high sales resistance to the influence of stories in general. Even if academics and intellectuals don't fight bulls because Hemingway wrote about bull fighters, or believe in witches because of the sermons of Cotton Mather or the novels of J.K. Rowling, academics *do* internalize such intangibles from education narratives as expectations, values, attitudes, ideas, and beliefs about how they and their students should conduct themselves in real classrooms as they teach and learn. These stories seldom attract notice or comment inside classrooms, yet all the while they exert a powerful influence on teachers' and students' notions of good

teaching, bad teaching, good learning, bad learning, proper roles, acceptable attitudes, reasonable behavior and justifiable expectations about education.

Which Education Narratives in the Classroom?

In the West, narratives about teaching and learning go back to the beginnings of our literate history — Plato's Socratic dialogues, for example, provide verbal narratives of education-in-progress — but it was not until the 19th century, with the publication of Thomas Hughes's *Tom Brown's School Days* in 1857, that stories about schooling and education ceased being ad hoc or random and evolved into a recognizable genre. As the conventions of this evolving genre became more and more repeated, and as the genre itself became more and more popular, the views about education advanced by the genre became more and more influential. I contend that this influence has been bad for education in several important ways, but, before I make this case, let me identify some of the conventions of the genre of education narratives.

In America these conventions have been worked so many times that they have taken on mythic status. One of America's most persistent educational myths is the archetype of the old-timer who claims to have walked backwards three miles through four feet of snow every morning in order to get to that one-room clapboard school house, where he chopped wood and built a fire in the stove before everyone else arrived, and where all students learned the old-fashioned American virtues of plain living and high thinking. This is an archetype that we all laugh at but that never goes away. Its most powerful reincarnation is in the series of vastly popular novels written in the 1930s by Laura Ingalls Wilder collectively known as *The Little House on the Prairie* stories, and it was resurrected again in the long-running 1970s and 1980s TV series of the same name. *The Little House on the Prairie* television show ran from 1974-1984 and is still being seen in syndication even though Melissa Gilbert, the actress who

play Half Pint on the show, turned 42 in May of 2006. Complementing the old-timers' frontier myth of the one-room school house are other powerful myths such as urban myths, suburban myths, rural myths, immigrant myths, students-as-wild-and-subversive myths, and the myths of schools as their own special versions of heaven, such as Dr Strong's school in *David Copperfield*, or of hell, such as Buffy's Sunnydale High School in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. Your mind is no doubt cataloging many additional stories about educations that I have not mentioned — David Lodge's stories, perhaps or Kingsley Amis's — but you will understand that if I attempt to pursue historical completeness in my examples, I will never get traction on the question really at hand: the question of how these narratives influence the quality, good or bad, of every one of our classrooms. And, since teachers may read David Lodge but students do not, I will concentrate here on narratives that influence both teachers *and* students.

The stories that historically established the conventions of the education narrative, were, of course, all print stories, but the narratives that exert the influence of this genre in contemporary culture are, today, of course, a thousand times more likely to be movie and television narratives. Few students today would read *Tom Brown's School Days* unless he or she is taking a course in Victorian studies, but television and movie stories about education are pervasively available to everyone in our culture. TV narratives about education have now been around for nearly 60 years. In order to give us a concrete sense of how densely western culture is saturated with education narratives on TV and in movies, I will briefly cite some examples. I will start by referencing such narratives from the 1950s, when movies and TV narratives began to overlap. Later, in different contexts, I will reference education narratives that pre-date 1950.

The 1950s gave us the movie *The Blackboard Jungle* (starring Glen For, 1955) and the television series *Our Miss Brooks* (1952-1956) that starred Eve Arden and was set in a supposedly typical high school of the Eisenhower era. The 1960s gave us such movies as *Up the Down Staircase* (starring Sandy Dennis, 1967), *To Sir, With Love* (also from 1967, starring Sidney Poitier) and *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969, starring Maggie Smith, and based on Muriel Spark's 1961 novel of the same name), as well as the TV series *Room 222* (starring Pete Dixon and Michael Constantine, 1969-1974). Television in the 1970s gave us *Welcome Back, Kotter* (starring Gabriel Kaplan and John Travolta, 1975-1979), as well as the outrageous movie *Animal House* (starring John Belushi, 1978). The 1980s gave American culture a large boatload of popular education narratives in movie form. It is easiest, perhaps to mention all the popular John Hughes films in a cluster, starting with *Sixteen Candles* (starring Molly Ringwald, 1984) and going on to *The Breakfast Club* (starring Molly Ringwald and Emilio Estavez, 1985), *Pretty in Pink* (starring Molly Ringwald, 1986), and, finally, the vastly popular *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (starring Matthew Broderick, 1986). But John Hughes was not the only storyteller working in the education genre in the 1980s, which also gave us at least six other highly popular education narratives: *Fame* (1980), *Educating Rita* (starring Michael Caine, 1983), *Back to School* (starring Rodney Dangerfield, 1986), *Stand and Deliver* (starring Edward James Olmos, 1988), *Lean On Me* (starring Morgan Freeman, 1989) and *Dead Poets Society* (starring Robin Williams, 1989).

The 1990s gave us at least four popular movies about education, *The Freshman* (starring Marlon Brando and Matthew Broderick, 1990), *Renaissance Man* (starring Danny Devito, 1994), *Dangerous Minds* (starring Michelle Pfeffer, 1995) and *Never Been Kissed* (starring Drew Barrymore, 1999), plus Christ Farley's *Tommy Boy* (1995), a movie that opens with images of college life reminiscent of the scenes in *Animal*

House. On TV in the 1990s the education narrative was dominated by two vastly popular shows, the first of which was *Saved By the Bell*, which ran three and a half years, from 1989 to 1993, and which was popular enough to generate two spin-off shows, *Saved By the Bell: The College Years* and *Saved By the Bell: The New Class. The College Years* version of *Saved By the Bell* only ran for a half a year, but *The New Class* version ran another seven years from 1993 to 2000. The second vastly popular education narrative of the 1990s was *Beverly Hills 90210*, which ran from 1990-1999 and starred an ensemble cast depicted as moving through high school, into college, and into early post-school life. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, a TV series that ran from 1997-2003, overlapped with *Beverly Hills 90210*, and, along with *Felicity* (which ran for four seasons, 1998-2002, starring Keri Russell), created a bridge for education narratives into the 21st century. The first decade of the new century has given us such TV series as Comedy Central's *Strangers With Candy* (starring Amy Sedaris and Stephen Colbert, 1999-2000, 30 episodes), the four-year run of *Boston Public* (starring Chi McBride, 2000-2005); the short lived *Jack and Bobby* (starring Christine Lahti, 2004), in which Ms Lahti represented a left-wing college professor trying to get her boys through grade school and high school without crashing; and the blatantly exploitative, and deservedly short-lived, reality TV show depicting the drummer of Motley Crue, Tommy Lee, supposedly returning to college in a program titled with blazing subtlety, *Tommy Lee Goes to College*.

In movies, the first decade of the 21st century has given us *Finding Forrester* (starring Sean Connery, 2000), *Loser* (starring Jason Biggs, Mena Suvari and Greg Kinnear, 2000), *The Emperor's Club* (starring Kevin Klein, 2002), *Orange County* (starring Colin Hanks and Jack Black, 2002), the vastly popular *Harry Potter* movies (starring Daniel Radcliffe, 2002 and ongoing), *The Human Stain* (starring Anthony

Hopkins and Nicole Kidman, 2003), National Lampoon's attempt to reclaim its *Animal House* audience with *Old School* (starring Luke Wilson, Will Ferrell and Vince Vaughn, 2003), and *Mean Girls* (starring Lindsay Lohan, 2004). Recent narratives about education such as *Rushmore* (starring Bill Murray, 1998) and *Election* (starring Matthew Broderick and Reese Witherspoon 1999) have left satirical bite marks on some of the time-worn myths about education, but even the satires on education mostly work hard to stay within the conventions of the genre, and thus manage to reinforce certain persistent stereotypes about both teachers and students. Sometimes, as in movies such as *Mean Girls* or *Orange County* and in TV series such as *O.C. or Beverly Hills 90210,* schools may be more of a setting than an integral park of the plot, but this fact only disguises rather than obviates their influence. Whether education narratives focus in a central way on education or whether they merely use schools, teachers and students as a background, or students — our everyday real-life students — are presented with a huge number of intensely vivid and compelling images, on movie screens as big as Maryland, of actors who are as beautiful as dreams, as energetic as storms and often as imposing as mountains.

The trouble is that the content of these images is almost as corrosive as acid to any real-life student's motions of the hard work, self-discipline, repetitive practice and powers of attention required for getting a real education. The images of education in movies and television hammer home that the *real* reason for being in school is to have fun, fun, fun; that academic classes are about as tasty as walnut shells; and that teachers — a generally contemptible tribe of aliens — are either out-of-touch nerds, supreme egoists, disgusting lechers, out-of-fashion uglies, or vicious bullies who focus on the helplessness of students with sadistic delight. In many education narratives, teachers care only about petty power, petty ego, petty grades, petty rules, and petty

indulgences. Even in those education narratives that portray teachers as heroes, the misrepresentation is as misleading and unfair in that direction as it is when they show teachers in the cheesiest lights.

In thinking about the influence of these narratives, we must remember that they possess, for practical purposes, immortality. TV and movie narratives are not like most news events that occupy a window of visibility for give minutes and then disappear. Old news stories are never rerun, but television programs are syndicated and movies get shown over and over on TV. And nowadays, as both TV series and movies become more popular in the DVD format, their immortality is intensified Nowadays people buy DVDs of the entire series of their favorite TV shows and their favorite movies/ The comparative indestructibility of DVDs means that someday in the future your great-grandchildren may be watching the whole series of *Little House on the Prairie* that will have come down to them through your estate. Culturally, these narratives are like the thickener in the gravy: the longer the cultural gravy simmers the thicker it becomes, and the thicker our viscous swirl of education narratives becomes the harder it is for any of us to approach education issues afresh. Every new though about education has to fight against a viscous thickness of stories that *already* tell us what we are looking at.

Education Narratives' Influence in the Classroom

I have already stated that this narrative influence in everyday classrooms is mostly dysfunctional. Even when education narratives honor teachers, as they often do, narrative images of education tend to project stereotypes that are misleading, restricting, and therefore dysfunctional. Because of the vividness and visceral attractiveness of visual pictures, however, these stereotypes make it nearly impossible for anyone to succeed in getting a fresh view of, or to have a fresh thought about,

education. That this is my genuine view came as a great shock to me because I have poured a lot of energy into articulating the belief that stories, especially literary stories, offer their consumers many educational benefits.[i] I have not abandoned these views in general, but it seems to me that education narratives complicate my general view about the benefits of narratives, and indeed, offer special problems. I will discuss these problems under three headings.

Education narratives and teacher stereotypes

Mr Chips Stereotype

For teachers, one of the commonest stereotypes is the beloved 'Mr Chips' stereotype,[ii] initially drawn by James Hilton in his 1933 novel, *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, and then redrawn twice in two movie versions of that same novel, one from 1939 starring Robert Donat and Greer Garson and the other from 30 years later, in 1969, starring Peter O'Toole and Petula Clark. The Mr Chips stereotype combines two other, more general cultural stereotypes — that of the saint and the martyr. Any teacher who is a Mr chips (and there are many female versions of Mr Chips) is the teacher for whom teaching is not really a profession but is like a religious calling, a total way of life that swallows up everything the teacher does and thinks such that s/he will go to any lengths of personal sacrifice or deprivation in order to protect the reputation of the school and the well-being of his or her student charges. Masterpiece Theatre reincarnated the Mr Chips stereotype in 1982 with its 13-week mini-series *To Serve Them All My Days,* based on the 1972 novel by R.F. Delderfield and starring David Powlett-Jones. More recent reincarnations of the stereotype include Kevin Klein's representations of two different teachers in the movies *In and Out* (1997) and *The Emperor's Club* (2002), and in Richard Harris's representation of headmaster

Dumbledore in the *Harry Potter* films (2000 and ongoing). A taxonomy of other teacher stereotypes would include the following.

Teacher-as-Untouchable-Authority-and-Heartless Stereotype

This teacher's authority may be that of a stern disciplinarian or that of an intellectual so far ahead of everyone else mentally that he cannot be touched or understood, like the Charles W. Kingsfield character played by John Houseman in both the movie version of *The Paper Chase* (1973) and in the spin-off TV series of the same name that ran for a full eight years, from 1978-1986. Sometimes the stern disciplinarian and the teacher of untouchable knowledge are combined as they are in Houseman's representations of Kingsfield; in *The Freshman's* New York University film professor who mouths all the dialogue from *The Godfather* in class but who cannot find any sympathy or fellow-feeling for the Matthew Broderick character; and in Eriq LaSalle's representation of Dr Benton in *ER,* who was introduced in *ER*'s first season, 1994, as the surgery teaching of the young intern, Dr Carter, played by Noah Wylie.

Oddball-Pedant-Who-Manages-to-Touch-Just-One-Student Stereotype

A good example is *The Browning Version*, a movie that was redone in two versions, one from 1951 starring Michael Redgrave and one from 1994 starring Albert Finney. An additional example is Kevin Spacey's teacher-role in *Pay It Forward* from 2000.

Teacher-Whose-Challenges-Antagonize-Students-at-First-but-Earn-Their-Respect-in-the-End Stereotype

An example is *Mona Lisa Smile* from 2003, starring Julia Roberts; and Mark Edmundson's 2002 book, *Teacher: The One Who Made the Difference*, about Edmundson's high school teacher, Mr Franklin Lears.

Cool-Teacher-Who-Isn't-a-'Regular'-Teacher-but-Who-Does-Better-Than-Regular-Teachers Stereotype

An example is in the 1974 movie Conrack starring John Voight, the 1987 movie *Summer School* directed by Carl Reiner and starring Mark Harmon, or the 2003 movie *The School of Rock* starring Jack Black.

Teacher-Who-Joins-With-Students-to-Subvert-the-System Stereotype

The would include the 1986 movie *Children of a Lesser God* starring William Hurt, the 1997 movie *In and Out* starring Kevin Klein, and the movie versions of *Nicholas Nickleby*, done twice, the first time in 1947, starring Cedric Hardwicke, and the second time in 2002, starring Christopher Plummer.

Teacher-as-Hero Stereotype

An example is in *Stand and Deliver* (starring Edward James Olmos, 1988), *Dead Poets Society* (starring Robin Williams, 1989), *Lean on Me* (starring Morgan Freeman, 1989), and *Mr. Holland's Opus* (starring Richard Dreyffus, 1995).

Dufus-Teacher-who-Bumbles-and-Funbles-or-Blusters-and-Preens-but-is-Easily-Outsmarted-or-Totally-Routed-by-Clever-Students Stereotype

An example is the French teacher in *Mean Girls*, the social science teacher in *Clueless,* or the principle of the school in *The Simpsons.*

Sleazy, Malicious, Teacher-as-Lecher-or-Manipulator Stereotype

Such as Dickens's sadistic teachers in *Nicholas Nickleby* and *David Copperfield*, or the teacher who likes to beat and who gets beaten in the movie *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), or the teacher whose cold and ideological sternness masks heartless cruelty, as in the cases of Professor Snape in the *Harry Potter* movies and Mr Brocklehurst in all of the movie versions of *Jane Eyre* (1944, 1971, 1997, 2003); or the teacher who lies and cheats in order to take out personal hatred on a student he

dislikes, as does Matthew Broderick's character in *Election* (1999), or the teacher who sexually exploits naïve young women such as Greg Kinnear's role as a professor of modern literature in *Loser* (2000, also starring Mena Suvari and Jason Biggs).

Student Stereotypes

Student stereotypes exist in such profligate abundance that they hardly need movie titles to make them identifiable: the popular/beautiful students both male and female, the unpopular students both male and female, the popular but nasty students, the egg-head nerds, the dumb-as-rocks nerds, the bullies, the wimps, the cry babies, the teachers' pets, the brown noses, the pranksters, the outsiders, the suck-ups, the sneaks, the manipulators, the mindless, the snobs, the jocks, the fat-lonelines, the ugly-lonelies, the shy-lonelies, the cool dudes, the freaks, the slackers, the preppies, the future execs, the drug heads, the irresponsibles, the uber-responsibles, the female bubble heads, the dullards, the frat maniacs, the sorority obsessed, the screw-ups, the up-tights, the wounded from bad poor homes the malicious, the dopes, the timids, the reckless, and so on. Simply because there *are* stereotypes, these representations crop up again and again in movies such as the 1992 movie *School Ties* starring Matt Damon and Brendon Fraser, in the 1995 movie *Clueless* starring Alicia Silverstone, or in Mr. Skinner, the principal of the school in *The Simpsons,* and in practically all the movies already mentioned.

Bad movies vs Good Movies: It Doesn't Matter

Not all movies that deal with student and teacher stereotypes are bad movies. My point h as noting to do with which of the movies I mention might be good or bad a movies. My point, rather, is that movies and television are not well suited as a medium for conveying accurate pictures that show the real dimensions of cognitive development, problem solving, and intellectual discourse that lie at the heart of all

meaningful education. Such activities, mostly intellectual, do not make entertaining movies and engaging TV shows. Intellectual activities are too subtle, too interior, and involve too much stumbling, bumbling and back tracking. Visual narratives must plow ahead in order to be effective; they cannot wander around on the mental winding paths and switch back trails that characterize real learning.

Nor am I saying that all media stereotypes are totally false and demeaning. My point is not about the stereotypes' truth of falsity, but about their inability *not* to be misleading, limiting, and confusing both to teachers and students. On TV and in movies, students enjoy vivid vicarious engagements with teachers who are physically beautiful, charismatic, powerful, and heroic. Even the teachers who are harsh and frightening, like Professor Snape in the *Harry Potter* films, generate great vividness and power. How can students not be led even if they are unaware of it to view ordinary, everyday, real teachers as second-class people, especially in light of the fact that everyone's engagements with visual narratives about education are so persistent, repeated, and ongoing? Students might not think of their teachers as second-class people if they were to meet them *outside* of the classroom, but when they meet them *inside* the classroom, looking at them through the lenses of television and movie teachers who are immensely entertaining, vastly beautiful or compellingly heroic, it must be difficult for them not to see everyday teachers as very poor possessors of all the qualities that the movies have shown to make great teachers: perfect teeth, beautiful faces, taught youthful bodies, shiny hair, entertaining lines fro a snappy script, or emotionally evocative lines from a heart-rendering script.

Most of us real teachers simply don't measure up as Titans or goddesses. Most of us do not have the charisma of Morgan Freeman or the beauty of Michelle Pfeiffer. Most of us live on the same human scale as our neighbors, friends, and colleagues.

Teachers' classroom conduct is not only less theatrical, flamboyant and emotionally intense than the spectacle of Robin Williams standing on his desk in *Dead Poets Society* or William Hurt dancing with on of his students in *Children of a Lesser God*, but it *should* be less theatrical, flamboyant and emotionally intense than the movies. A real teacher in a real classroom is trying to lead her students toward autonomy. An actor playing a teacher in a fictional classroom is trying to lead the movie audience into an intense vicarious emotional experience. The two different sets of aims and audiences put the two activities at polar ends from each other, but the images and the feelings aroused by the kinds of stereotypes I have discussed are so compelling and intense that both teachers and students get misled and confused about what they should be doing in everyday classrooms, and about what counts for success there.

Visual Images Cannot Show Details of Mental Activity

The problem with these stereotypes is worse than merely having students wish that their teachers were better looking. The deeper problem is that the kinds of relationships between teachers and students shown on television and in the movies are not relationships about learning. Movie and TV narratives about education focus (as do most narratives) on social and personal relations — this is what movies and TV are good at showing — and since narratives need to be compelling in order to retain the viewer's interest, the social and personal relations they depict are usually in some kind of crisis or crux. The relationships are emotionally intense and socially fraught. Such representations make good stories, and they may sometimes be profoundly insightful, but they seldom have anything to do with the kinds of relationships between teachers and students that lead to effective leaning in chemistry, physics, literature or religion classes, where intense emotions and personal crises pretty much short-circuit rather than aid real learning. Insofar as these stereotypes influence education directly, the do

so in dysfunctional ways, and, insofar as they influence education indirectly, they simply make it hard for real students and real teachers in real classrooms to see themselves and each other as they are.[iii]

Another reason that media stereotypes are so dysfunctional is that such stereotypes completely mask the nature of classrooms as spaces of emergent possibilities, not settled conclusions. By their very nature, students are in the process of trying to discover what to become. Whenever I can get students to quiet their inner minds such that they can actually hear their own intuitions, those intuitions tell them quite accurately that they are not "done" yet. This is why students look for models amongst their peers but especially amongst their teachers, because their teachers, they assume, have already become something and thus hold the answer, or at least a set of clues, about how becoming something might be done. Teachers in the classroom's space of emergent possibilities must be alert, attentive, and sensitive to the student hunger for models, but how can real people in real classrooms attend to each other in concrete and vivid detail when the power of compelling images from television and movies causes us to see not real people but stereotypes? And insofar as we buy into the stereotypes we are not only influenced to see them but to be them.

It is virtually impossible for any media narrative to create visual images of the critical forms of cognition, intellectual inquiry and intellectual discourse that lie at the heart of getting a genuine education. Secondly, what is made to seem trivial and irrelevant in media images of education is, for real teachers, the heart of the educational enterprise: learning how to think critically and analytically; learning how to read difficult texts; learning how to conduct intellectual discourse with others; learning how to attend closely to the structure of complex objects; learning how to measure, compute, and speak with distinct precision and accuracy; learning cognitive and

emotional patience; learning to be thoughtful rather than impulsive; learning how to take historical and ethical perspectives on social issues; and so on.

What education narratives *ever* show compelling images of *these* kinds of cognitive and intellectual exercise?

According to the conventions of education narratives, any student who shows an interest in real intellectual activity gets branded by one of the negative stereotypes: geek, nerd, egg head, brainiac, and so on. But even if movies and television shows *wanted* to show compelling images of students achieving cognitive and intellectual development, they could not successfully do so because the kinds of effort that go into real education are nearly impossible to represent by means of dramatic images. What does a picture of someone studying a sonnet or solving a mathematical proof or contemplating a scientific hypothesis look like? At the very least, one's appearance in such moments is not interesting to someone else. If you and I are the outside observers, we might be in a coma; he might even be dead. What we see in recently popular education narratives such as *Dead Poets Society, Renaissance Man, Dangerous Minds* — and this is equally true of earlier education narratives such as *The Blackboard Jungle* or *To Sir, With Love* — are narrative images about the importance of social context and personal relations in schools. What we do *not* see, however, is students learning how to study or think.

Sports narratives: The contrast that makes my point

The specialized sub-genre of the sports movie nestled inside the more general genre of the education narrative helps make my point by serving as a contrast. In movies like *Breaking Away* (starring Dennis Christopher, 1978), *Hoosiers* (starring Gene Hackman, 1986), *Rudy* (starring Sean Astin, 1993), *Miracle* (starring Kurt Russell, 2004), *Million Dollar Baby* (starring Clint Eastwood and Hilary Swank, 2004), *Coach Carter*

(starring Samuel Jackson, 2005) and *Glory Road* (starring Josh Lucas, 2006) — even that old chestnut, *Rocky* (starring Slyvester Stallone, 1976) — views receive a visceral and visual sense of the concrete realities and requirements that are involved in learning how to do something difficult. We see the sweat, the difficulty of practice, the tiresome repetitions, the frustration of failure and defeat, the determination to overcome failure and defeat, and the look of victory, But this is because the learning activities involved in mastering a sport are obviously physical in a way that learning languages, studying sonnets and constructing mathematical proofs are not physical. What is physical and emotional can be shown in dramatic images; what is intellectual is nearly impossible to show in dramatic images. TV programs and movies can hardly be blamed for not showing realities that a visual medium is not well equipped to show. On the other hand, the fact that these images are *not* shown, combined with the fact that people draw many of their ideas and expectations about education *from* movies and TV, gives viewers a distorted and inaccurate perception of what comprises education.

Classrooms can seldom be entertaining in the same way that education narratives are entertaining

My final major point is that education narratives confuse students and teachers alike about what counts as good teaching and learning by orienting everyone in the classroom to expect — or, if not to expect, at least to desire — that each real-world classroom should provide students with an entertainment value equal to the entertainment value of educational narratives themselves. Entertainment and education are not necessarily antagonistic aims, but it is certainly a mistake to conflate them. Becoming educated requires hard work. Watching a movie or TV program about cool kids challenging or outsmarting their teachers does not require hard work.

However, the entertainment value of education narratives leads teachers to think that they should be dazzling their students with wit and beauty, and leads students to think that if they are not being as well entertained in their real classroom as they are by the fictional classrooms they enjoy in movies and on TV, then somebody is short changing their whole educational experience.

During my years of directly pedagogy seminars, I have learned how deeply resentful, and, indeed, angry, many teachers are about the pressure they get from their students to be entertaining in the way that TV and movies are entertaining. However, for teachers to get tied up in knots of resentment about the Entertainment Imperative derived from TV culture is not productive. When have teachers ever had the option of handing society a recipe for the only kinds of students they are willing to teach? In my pedagogy seminars I grow weary, weary of listening to teachers' persistent, effete, self-absorbed, whinny complaints that their students are 'not adequately prepared'. Of course your students are not adequately prepared. Many of them are adolescents/ Most of them have been raised on too many Pop Tarts, too many cartoons, and in too much luxury. What do you expect? In order for students to get adequately prepared they need the education that some of us become stiff-necked about giving to them because, we claim, they behave like the unwashed masses or like TV entertainment addicts. All this accusation really boils down to is that we would like students better if they behaved more like us instead of behaving like their parents or their peers. Fat chance. Teaching students is about them, not us. If our students want only to be entertained this is because our society has taught them to hold this expectation, and our job as teachers is to *deal* with it, not blame them for it. Who is going to help them to expect something different if we do not?

Conclusion

In the end, however, it is clear that we would not be facing this issue in this particular way if our society were not already saturated with education narratives that mislead, misinform, and, in fact, engage in profound miseducation about education. No analysis of the kind that I provide here will make this problem go away. On the other hand, until we have learned how to see the problem, which has mostly lain just outside the range of our intellectual peripheral vision, and until we have analyzed the problem as it really exists, we may be buffeted by it and still have no idea how to deal with it.

It won't do, I think, for teachers to whip themselves into a frenzy of self-righteous denunciation about the corrupting influence of movies and television. This is a rant that is all too easy to do and already too much of it is going on. To give in to this rant turns us into one of the stereotypes that movies and TV love to make fun of. Movie makers and TV producers do not make education narratives with the insidious intent of sabotaging real education. They sabotage it without even thinking about it. *Thinking about it is our job*. Thinking about it is what *we* need to do. Thinking well and thinking hard are the best resources we have. I hope the analysis I have offered here may help all of us think more clearly about the dynamics that operate in our everyday classrooms. If we can think more clearly than we can operate more effectively, and to create classrooms in which all of us, teachers and students alike, can gladly learn and gladly teach is our highest, most fulfilling aim.

Notes

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[i] See Marshall Gregory, 1990, 1995a, 1995b, 1998, 1999b, 2001, 2004.

[ii] 'Mr Chips' was the students' affectionate nickname for their teacher, Mr Arthur Chipping.

[iii] Print narratives generally do better by education than media narratives not because words are superior to images for every purpose but because the task of

capturing the subtleties of a process as complicated as teaching and learning are more easily caught in the fine weave of words than in the blunter presentation of images. A few solid examples of print stories that capture subtleties of education and learning seldom captured by movies and TV programs, for example, would include such accounts as found in James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1915), in Herbert Gold's essay 'A Dog in Brooklyn, a Girl in Detroit, A Life Among the Humanities' (1962), in William Golding's essay 'Thinking as a Hobby' (1961, in Malcolm Bradbury's novel *Eating People is Wrong* (1959), in Lionel Thriling's Story *Of This Time, Of That Place* (1943), in Joyce Carol Oates's story *In the Region of Ice* (1965), in Charles Baxter's 'Fenstad's Mother' from his novel *The Relative Stranger* (1990), in Rich Bass's 'Cats and Bubbles, Bubbles and Abysses' from his novel *The Watch* (1989), in Frederick Busch's 'Ralph the Duck' from his novel *The Children in the Woods* (1994), in James Carse's 'A Higher Ignorance' from his personal narrative *Breakfast at the Victory* (1995), in Gerald Graff's personal essay 'Hidden Intellectualism' in the journal *Pedagogy* (2001), in Marshall Gregory's personal essay 'Correspondence School and Waterford Crystal' in *Change Magazine* (1999a), in Richard Marius's personal essay 'Politics in the Classroom' in *ADE Bulletin* (1992), in Earl Shorris's 'The Liberal Arts as Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students' (1997). It is an open question whether satires that skewer the academic profession, such as Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (1954), or David Lodge's *Changing Places* (1975) and *Small World* (1984), or Don DeLillo's *White Noise* (1985) but that do not deal substantially with actual representations of Learning and teaching fall into the category of 'education narrative' as I am using the term here.

List of Television and Film Productions

Animal House (1978) Universal Pictures. John Belushi. Dir. John Landis.
Back to School (1996) Orion Pictures. Rodney Dangerfield. Dir, Alan Metter.
Beverly Hills 90210 (1990-2000) Fox. Created by Darren Star.
Blackboard Jungle (1955) MGM. Glenn Ford, Anne Francis. Dir. Richard Brooks.
Boston Public (2000-2004) 20th Century Fox. Created by David E. Kelley.
Breakfast Club (1985) A&M Films, Universal. Molly Ringwald, Emilio Estevez. Dir. John Hughes.
Breaking Away (1980) 20th Century Fox Television. Dir. Jeff Blekner, Kim Friedman, Stan Lathan, Joseph Ruben.
Browning Version, The (1994) Percy Main, Albert Finney. Dir. Mike Figgis.
Buffy the Vampire Slayer (1997-2003) 20th Century Fox Television. Sarah Michelle Gellar. Created by Joss Whedon.
Children of a Lesser God (1986) Paramount. William Hurt. Dir. Randa Haines.
Clueless (1995) Paramount. Alicia Silverstone. Dir. Amy Heckerling.
Coach Carter (2005) MTV Films. Samuel L. Jackson. Dir. Thomas Carter.
Conrack (1974) 20th Century Fox. Jon Voight. Dir. Martin Ritt.
Dangerous Minds (1995) Hollywood Pictures, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, Via Rosa Productions. Michelle Pfeiffer. Dir. John N. Smith.
David Copperfield (1999) BBC. Maggie Smith. Dir. Simon Curtis. (IMDb.com lists at least 13 television and film versions of Charles Dickens' classic story: http://us.imdb.com).
Dead Poets Society (1989) Silver Screen Partners IV, Touchstone Pictures. Robin

Williams, Ethan Hawke. Dir. Peter Weir.

Educating Rita (1983) Colombia Pictures Corporation. Michael Caine, Julie Walters. Dir. Lewis Gilbert.

Election (1999) Bona Fide Productions, MTV Films, Paramount. Reese Witherspoon, Matthew Broderick. Dir. Alexander Payne.

Emperor's Club (2002) Becon Communications, Fine Line Features, Horsepower Films, LivePlanet, Longfellow Pictures, Sidney Kimmel Entertainment. Kevin Kline. Dir. Michael Hoffman.

ER (1994-present) Amblin Entertainment, Warner Bros. Television. George Clooney, Noah Wyle. Created by Michael Crichton.

Fame (1980) MGM. Irene Cara. Dir. Alan Parker.

Felicity (1998-2002) Imagine Television, Touchstone Television, Warner Bros. Television. Keri Russell. Created by J.J. Abrams.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off (1986) Paramount. Matthew Broderick. Dir. John Hughes.

Finding Forrester (2000) Colombia, Fountainbridge Films, Laurence Mark Productions. Sean Connery. Dir. Gus Van Sant.

The Freshman (1990) TriState Pictures. Marlon Brando, Matthew Broderick. Dir. Andrew Bergman.

Glory Road (2006) Glory Road Productions. Josh Lucas, Derek Luke. Dir. James Gartner.

Goodbye, Mr Chips (1969) APJAC Productions, MGM. Peter O'Toole. Dir. Herbert Ross.

Harry Potter films. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001) 1942 Pictures, Heyday Films, Warner Bros. Pictures. Richard Harris, Maggie Smith, Daniel Radcliffe. Dir. Chris Columbus.

Hoosiers (1986) Hemdale Film Corp. Gene Hackman. Dir. David Anspaugh.

How Green Was My Valley (1941) Twentieth Century-Fox Film Corp. Maureen O'Hara, Walter Pidgeon. Dir. John Ford.

The Human Stain (2003) Miramax, Lakeshore Entertainment, Stone Village Pictures. Nicole Kidman, Anthony Hopkins, Ed Harris. Dir. Robert Benton.

In and Out (1997) Paramount, Spelling Films. Kevin Kline, Joan Cusack. Dir. Frank Oz.

Jack and Bobby (2004-2005) Shoe Money Productions, Berlanti Liddell Productions, Warner Bros. Television. Created by Greg Berlanti.

Jane Eyre (1996) Cinerintino S.r.L., Flach Film, Mediaset, Miramax Films, RCS Editori S.p.A., Rochester. Anna Paquin. Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. (IMDb.com lists at least 17 television and film version of Charlotte Brontë's classic novel: http://us.imdb.com.)

Lean on Me (1989) Warner Bros. Pictures. Morgan Freeman. Dir. John G Avildsen.

Little House on the Prairie series (1932-1943) Ed Friendly Productions, NBC. Dir. Maury Dexter and Victor French.

Loser (2000) Branti Film Production, Cockamamie. Jason Biggs, Mena Suvari. Dir. Amy Heckerling.

Mean Girls (2004) Broadway Video, Paramount, MGM. Lindsay Lohan, Rachel McAdams. Dir. Mark Waters.

Million Dollar Baby (2004) Epsilon Motion Pictures, Albert S. Ruddy Productions, Malpaso Productions, Lakeshore Entertainment, Warner Bros. Pictures.

Clint Eastwood, Hilary Swank, Morgan Freeman, Dir. Clint Eastwood.

Miracle (2004) Pop Pop Productions, Mayhem Pictures, Walt Disney Pictures, Kurt Russell. Dir. Gavin O'Connor.

Mona Lisa Smile (2003) Red Om Films, Revolution Studios, Columbia, Julia Roberts, Kirsten Dunst, Julia Stiles, Maggie Gyllenhaal. Dir. Mike Newell.

Money Train (1995) Columbia Pictures Corporation. Woody Harrelson, Wesley Snipes. Dir. Joseph Ruben.

Mr. Holland's Opus (1995) Hollywood Pictures, Interscope Communications, Polygram Filmed Entertainment, The Charlie Mopic Company. Richard Dreyfuss. Dir. Stephen Herek.

Never Been Kissed (1999) Bushwood Pictures, Flower Films (II) Fox 2000Pictures, Never Been Kissed Productions. Drew Barrymore. Dir. Raja Gosnell.

Nicholas Nickleby (20002) Hart-Sharp Entertainment, Cloud Nine Films, United Artists, Potboiler Productions. Dir. Douglas McGrath. (IMDb.com lists at least 8 television and film versions of Charles Dickens' classic novel: http://us.imdb.com.)

The O.C. (2003-present) Wonderland Sound and Vision, College Hill Pictures, Inc., Warner Bros. Television. Mischa Barton, Peter Gallagher. Created by Josh Schwartx.

Old School (2003) The Montecito Pictures Company, Dream Works. Will Farrell, Luke Wilson, Vince Vaughn, Dir. Todd Phillips.

Orange County (2002) Scott Rudin Productions, MTV Films, Paramount. Jack Black. Dir. Jake Kasdan.

Our Miss Brooks (1952-1956) CBS Television, Desilu Productions, Inc. Eve Arden. Dir. William Asher and John Rich. Also Our Miss Brooks (1956) Lute Productions, Warner Bros. Pictures. Eve Arden. Dir. Al Lewis.

The Paper Chase (1973) 20th Century Fox, Thompson Films, Thompson-Paul Productions. Dir. James Bridges. Also The Paper Chase (1978-1986) 20th Century Fox Television. John Houseman. Dir. Georg Standford.

Pay It Forward. (2000) Bel Air Entertainment, Tapestry Films, Warner Bros. Pictures. Helen Hunt, Kevin Spacey, Haley Joel Osment, Dir. Mimi Leder.

Pretty in Pink (1986) Paramount. Molly Ringwald. Dir. Howard Deutch.

Prime of Miss Jean Brodie (1969) Twentieth Century-Fox Productions, Ltd. Maggie Smith. Dir. Ronald Neame.

The Program (1993) Touchstone Pictures. James Caan and Halle Berry. Dir. David S. Ward.

Renaissance Man (1994) Cinergi Pictures Entertainment, Parkway Pictures, Touchstone Pictures. Danny Devito. Dir. Penny Marshall.

Rocky (1976) Chartoff-Winkler Productions. Slyvester Stalone. Dir. John G. Avildsen.

Room 222 (1969-1974) 20th Century Fox Television. Dir. Allen Baron.

Rudy (1993) TriStar Pictures. Sean Astin. Jon Favreau. Dir. David Anspaugh.

Rushmore (1998) American Empirical Pictures, Touchstone Pictures. Bill Murray, Jason Schwartzman. Dir. Wes Anderson.

Saved By the Bell (1989-1993) Peter Engel Productions, NBC. Mark-Paul Gosselaar, Tiffani Thiessen. Created by Sam Bobrick.

Saved By the Bell: The College Years (1993-1994) Peter Engel Productions, NBC. Mark-Paul Gosselaar, Tiffani Thiessen. Dir. Michael Higuera.

Saved By the Bell: The New Class (1993-2000) Peter Engel Productions, NBC. Dir. Don Barnhart.
School of Rock (2003) MFP Munich Film Partners, Scott Rudin Productions, Paramount. Jack Black. Dir. Richard Linklater.
School Ties (1992) Paramount. Brendan Fraser, Matt Damon, Chris O'Donnell, Ben Affleck. Dir. Robert Mandel.
The Simpsons (1989-present) Gracie Films, 20th Century Fox Television. Created by Matt Groening.
Sixteen Candles (1984) Channel Productions, Universal. Molly Ringwald, Dir. John Hughes.
Stand and Deliver (1988) American Playhouse, Warner Bros. Pictures. Edward James Olmos. Dir. Ramón Menéndez.
Strangers With Candy (1999-2000) Comedy Central. Amy Sedaris, Stephen Colbert. Created by Stephen Colbert, Paul Dinello, Amy Sedaris, and Mitch Rouse.
Summer School (1987) Paramount. Kirstie Alley, Mark Harmon. Dir. Carl Reiner.
Tommy Boy (1995) Paramount. Christ Farley, David Spade. Dir. Peter Segal.
Tommy Lee Goes To College (2005) NBC. Tommy Lee. Written by Greg Heller.
To Serve Them All My Days (1980) BBC. Dir. Terence Dudley, Peter Jefferies, and Ronald Wilson.
To Sir, With Love (1967) Columbia. Sidney Poitier. Dir. James Clavell.
Up the Down Staircase (1967) Park Plae Production. Sandy Dennis. Dir. Robert Mulligan.
Welcome Back, Kotter (1975-1979) The Komack Company, Inc., Wolper Productions. John Travolta. Dir. Nick Arnold.

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