

Teaching Middle School Students about Media Representations

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Rationale

For the past two years, I've read the screenplay *Smoke Signals* by Sherman Alexie and watched the film directed by Chris Eyre with my eighth grade students. Although students appreciated Alexie's story and enjoyed the film, I did not teach it in a way that enabled them to learn as much as I wanted them to about film production and technique, script writing, or the impact media has had on our society's views of American Indians. I've created this unit in hopes that I might reach these goals more successfully. I used Grant Wiggins' Understanding by Design framework for developing the unit.

From discussions with my students about the role of the media in their lives, I've discovered that many of them feel it plays no part in their development of ideas or behaviors. They tend to argue that the media reflects people's lifestyles rather than influencing them. Since they do not currently see the media's influence on people, I sense they would resist the notion that the media's portrayal of various cultures has often negatively impacted the individuals within that culture. So, rather than jump right into the analysis of media's representation of American Indians, a culture with which my students are not very familiar, I've decided to begin studying the role of media representation by first looking at something they are very familiar with, their gender. Once they see the stereotypical images of their own gender, something with which they can easily identify and disagree, they may be willing to view the representations of American Indians more analytically.

My overall hope is that they will learn how the media in general and film in particular uses the techniques at its disposal to form representations, rather than reflections, of reality. This knowledge will enable them to be more critical consumers of the media. I'd also like them to use their new knowledge of film production to design a short film in which they can present their own representations of people through the stories and characters they create.

Unit Overview

Students will investigate media representations of gender and debate the degree to which they accurately portray each gender. Students will then study media representations of American Indians throughout history. They will read the screenplay *Smoke Signals* by Sherman Alexie and explore the contemporary issues confronting Native Americans. Our focus will be on the role of history, culture, and media in determining the development of personal identity; we'll explore the process and value of forgiveness; and we'll explore the art of cinematography and its ability to shape public views and behaviors. Students will employ their knowledge of film to compose a short screenplay and to create a storyboard representing how they would attempt to film it. Students will also write dialogue journals based on additional readings.

Desired Results/Enduring Understandings

Students will understand: that the media does not portray "reality" or the "truth" about life but rather creates representations of particular groups, institutions, ideas, or practices that these representations can influence the audience's views and behavior; show representations can be used to support a particular ideology or value system; the benefits of forgiving others and ourselves as well as the considerable challenges of the journey towards forgiveness, a theme developed in the film *Smoke Signal*; the complex nature of identity formation as it is influenced by history, culture, gender, and familial relationship; show film techniques such as pacing, sequencing, editing, sound, lighting, and camera angles are used to

develop the literary aspects of the film such as plot, characters, themes, and mood
the impact media has had on our society's views of American Indians
the impact media has had on our society's view of what it means to be male or female
Students will know:
the stereotypical representations of American Indians throughout history
the literary term allusion
the vocabulary for film studies
the collective yearly revenue of advertising agencies in the US and its relationship to television programming
the names of the major contributors to the film *Smoke Signal*
show audiences received *Smoke Signal*
the film is loosely adapted from Alexie's collection of short stories, *Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*
that a tension exists between maintaining American Indian traditions and assimilating into mainstream majority culture
Students will be able to:
Distinguish between stereotypical and more realistic portrayals of American Indians
apply the film terms in their own writing
draw conclusions about one of the themes or main characters in the film
view the media with an eye to how they are representing people, institutions, and ideas
identify Alexie's use of allusions

Essential Questions

Does the media reflect reality or create it?
What impact does the media have on its viewers?
What does it take for one individual to forgive another? for one society to forgive another? What are the benefits and drawbacks of forgiveness?
Does history affect our individual identity development?
How does culture affect one's identity development?
How are film techniques used to create meaning?
How have American Indians been represented through media?
How has gender been represented through media?

Performance Tasks

write a one minute screenplay and storyboard for a scene from a book
write a film review of *Smoke Signal*
write an essay about the development of one of the themes or characters in the film
create a presentation of the research gathered about gender representation in the media
debate the verisimilitude and impact of gender representations based on their own experience and knowledge of gender
keep a dialogue journal to reflect on the readings and films presented in this unit
analyze a one minute film clip from any film appropriate to show in school and ask them to present to the class the film's use of each element of film technique we've studied
Learning Activities: (performance tasks occur after some activities to assess student learning)

research the representation of gender in various forms of media and present findings with specific examples

read and discuss "Representation and Youth" on the MediaEd web site

watch, summarize, and discuss film clips from the following films: *Slim Hopes*, *What a Girl Wants*, *Tough Guise*

watch the film *Images of Indians: How Hollywood Stereotyped the Native American*

read and discuss "Coyote Goes Hollywood" from the *Native People's Magazine*

watch clips from *Hollywood's Indian: the portrayal of the Native American in film*

read Alexie's poem "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel"

read the screenplay *Smoke Signals* and learn terms related to the study of film

watch the film *Smoke Signals*

read and discuss “Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals, An Interview with Sherman Alexie” in Cineaste

write a 30 second to one minute screenplay and storyboard based on a book

Printed Materials and other Resources

Screenplay and DVD of Smoke Signals
Article “Sending Cinematic Smoke Signals, An Interview with Sherman Alexie” in Cineaste available on the web
Article “Coyote Goes Hollywood” from the Native People’s Magazine available on the web
Film Hollywood’s Indian: the portrayal of the Native American in film available in the U of M library
Film Images of Indians: How Hollywood Stereotyped the Native American available to purchase on the internet
Film clip from Slim Hopes, What a Girl Wants, Tough Guise available on the Media Education Foundation web site
Poem “How to Write the Great American Indian Novel” by Sherman Alexie found in the collection Native American Songs and Poems
Article “Representation and Youth” on the MediaEd web site
Internet and a projector capable of projecting the computer screen image

Part One: Researching Gender Representations

Sequencing of activities:

1. Performance task: dialogue journal entry. List adjectives they would use to describe their own gender in order to gauge their preconceptions.
2. Divide students into four single-sex groups. Each group is responsible for gathering examples of the media’s representation of their gender. Students need to find at least three examples from the following media forms: film, television, commercials, magazine articles and advertisements, newspapers, web sites, books, songs/music videos, and cartoons.
3. The group should share their findings then discuss the following questions

What adjectives describe the men and women being portrayed in their examples?
If there is a power dynamic between people, who has the power?
Who solves the problems? how do they solve the problems?
What activities are the people doing in the images?
4. Performance task: Create a poster or powerpoint presentation of their findings.
5. After presentations, the class can discuss the following questions:

Are all forms of media providing the same range of representations of gender? Are some widely different? If so, which ones? How can you account for the differences? How do the audiences affect the representations offered? Where are certain representations most prevalent? Who is seeing these representations? How wide is the gap between “the truth” and “media representations”?
6. Have students read and discuss “Representation and Youth” on the MediaEd web site
7. Have students watch, summarize, and discuss film clips from the following films: Slim Hopes, What a Girl Wants, Tough Guise, Media Representation with Stuart Hall, Playing Unfair (women athletes) Wrestling with Manhood, Killing Us Softly 3

8. Performance task: dialogue journal activity. Students read their partners original views of their gender and respond to the first journal entry. Students then write an entry about their reflections of the video clips.

9. Performance task: employing their new knowledge, students debate the following issue:

Should the media's use of representations be regulated in any way? If so, how? Students can be divided into three groups. One group would represent the film and television industry. One group would represent the government. One group would represent lobbyists attempting to pass some media regulations.

Part Two: Researching Representations of American Indians

Sequencing of Activities

1. Performance task: dialogue journal entry. List adjectives they would use to describe American Indian culture and people in order to gauge their preconceptions.
2. Think, pair, share their journal responses (in small groups so students feel safer when sharing their ideas).
3. watch the film 25 minute film Images of Indians: How Hollywood Stereotyped the Native American and ask students to summarize the most prevalent representations of American Indians according to the film.
4. Read and discuss "Coyote Goes Hollywood" from the Native People;s Magazine
5. Ask students if they have had any experiences viewing these representations. If not, since many of the images are very old, ask students to discuss this with their parents and other adults.
6. Performance task: dialogue journal entry. Students write about their conversations with adults about the representation of American Indians in all forms of the media.
7. Watch clips of more recent images of American Indians (1980s-2003) from Hollywood's Indian: the portrayal of the Native American in film
8. Discuss whether or not the images have changed over the years. If so, how? What are the prevalent representations of American Indians?
9. Read Alexie's poem "How to Write the Great American Indian Novel" and have students write a quick write about their understanding of the poem as well as what parts of it they do not understand. Think, pair, share. Discuss what we think Alexie's message is and point to the words in the poem that convey that message.
10. Teach the following film terms and provide film clips as examples of each:

basic elements of film:

frame, shot, sequence, sound track, sound track, dialogue, music, narration, and sound effects

sequencing, (show flashbacks and flashforwards since Alexie uses so many of these). There is a flashforward in Luhrmann's film when Romeo kills Tybalt and the image of him walking

towards his death in Juliet's tomb follows)

pacing, (use examples from Zeffirelli's *Romeo and Juliet* and Luhrman's *Romeo + Juliet* since students are already familiar with these films and will recognize how the pace impacts the meaning) editing, camera angles, camera distance, and perspective

11. Provide film clips and ask students to examine them, each one for a different element of film
12. Performance task: use the iMacs in class and ask students to work with their dialogue journal partners to choose a one minute clip from films available online or in my collection of DVDs and ask them to write a brief analysis of it. It will be graded as a group project. They will present their clip and analysis in class.
13. Read the screenplay *Smoke Signals*. Provide a key to the abbreviations and a handout or notes about the key contributors to the film such as the director, editor, actors, and producers' names. Begin reading in class with students role playing some of the scenes.
14. Review the term "allusion" and ask students to identify each example of an allusion in Alexie's text and to keep a running tally of them in their notebooks, keeping track of the page numbers where they appear. Students might need to be taught or asked to research some of the names to which Alexie refers. Performance task: Then, through the use of their dialogue journals, students should make guesses as to what meanings are conveyed through the allusions.
15. Performance task: In their dialogue journals, have students respond to the following questions once the related issues have been addressed in the screenplay:

This journal entry must be written about something they are willing to share with their partner or me but not with the entire class. Reflect on a time when you've done something that required forgiveness. Or, think of a time when someone has asked you for forgiveness. Describe the emotions you felt. What was the outcome of the request? What does it take to truly forgive someone? What may be the results if you choose to forgive them, or not to forgive? Should Victor forgive his father? Why or why not? Consider all of the reasons Victor is upset with his father. Are some of Arnold's behavior's more "forgivable" than others? If so, why? Should Victor tell Thomas that Arnold is responsible for starting the fire? Why or why not? Describe Thomas' view of Arnold. Describe Victor's view of Arnold. How and why do you think they are different? How might Thomas respond if he knew? What leads you to think so? How do Thomas and Victor differ in their beliefs about the power and value of the past? What causes Victor to change his view of his father? What experience or conversation impacted him the most?

16. Watch the film. Pause occasionally to discuss changes in the film from the original screenplay as well as the cinematic aspects of the film. While students watch, have them record the film's use of framing, camera angles, sound track, sequencing, pacing, and editing.
17. Using their notes, have students use Nicenet to discuss the cinematic aspects of the film. Also, have them explore the possible themes in the story.
18. Students read and discuss "Sending Cinematic *Smoke Signals*, An Interview with Sherman Alexie" in *Cineaste* for homework.

19. Performance task: brief reading quiz on the article.

According to Alexie, what does the title of the film mean? What other reasons influenced his choice in titles? Summarize Alexie's explanation of the visual metaphor of the car going into reverse.

20. Show students film reviews (of other films, not of Smoke Signals). Use rottentomatoes.com

21. Performance task: write a film review of Smoke Signals.

22. Teach students how to create storyboards. Use Krueger and Christel's example on p. 56 of Seeing and Believing

23. Students work in pairs to write a 30 second to one minute screenplay and storyboard for a scene from a book.

24. Students present their screenplay and storyboards and explain how their characters are being represented.