



A Global Curriculum Made in Hollywood
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Over 45 years ago Carl Sandburg declared that "Hollywood is the foremost educational institution on earth." Sandburg was speaking of what Joseph Nye of Harvard University would later call "soft power", or the ability to influence behavior, actions, and perceptions through attraction or a desire for emulation. Personally, I had no difficulty accepting Sandburg's thesis, and was aware of Hollywood's influence on stereotyping popular images of Asian-Americans and their use of English through a number of my own studies. While doing some of this research, however, I began to wonder how far Hollywood's influence actually extended. What I discovered was that Hollywood's products not only influence how we view peoples and cultures, but also how we view professional and academic disciplines. I became especially eager to learn how it influenced student perceptions of disciplines, and especially motivation to undertake certain courses of study and expectations about what would be taught in those courses.

First, though, let me set some definitions. "Curriculum," of course is a Latin word referring to a racecourse, and as such means the path that is followed in pursuing a goal. In a wider meaning, it is the courses, and their content, educators establish to allow students to approach mastery of a body of knowledge. A group of educators, or administrators, working together may establish what we actually call the curriculum, but it is the syllabus that best defines what it is educators wish to teach their students in various courses of studies. In this paper, therefore, I will focus on the syllabus as a means to understand the curriculum.

As I claim in the title to this paper, the language, stories, and values of movies and television now have the power to establish educational curriculum. Movies influence what we teach, and how we teach it. There can, and should be, debate about whether this influence is beneficial or not but, as I will show in this paper, we can no longer ignore its influence. It is widespread, across disciplines, and across the entire spectrum of secondary and higher educational institutions. In this paper I will document, in a preliminary manner, the ascendant nature of movies and television in higher education.

I was truly amazed by just how widespread Hollywood's influence on curriculum actually is. I have catalogued uses in disciplines all the way from A to Z, from Anthropology to Zoology. I found courses at

community colleges, state universities, and Ivy League research institutions where movies were a part of the syllabus. Through this study I began to understand why and how "Indiana Jones" could be used to motivate students to study archaeology, or "Mermaids" to help in the study of architecture. No wonder the Italian philosopher and novelist Umberto Eco once said that 70% of our knowledge was derived from Hollywood.

At first I had believed that films such as "Star Wars" or "Star Trek" would find their place in the syllabi of astrophysics courses. However, I soon began to see that there was a wider role for films in the sciences and humanities. As Dr. Christopher Rose of James Madison University has said "Movies play a significant role in society as disseminators of scientific facts, ideas, and misinformation." This is a seminal observation, because it implies that we often must teach to movies as much to address a popular misconception or scientific inaccuracy as to build on knowledge the movies have imparted to our students.

The popularization of the disciplines by Hollywood means that it, rather than academia, increasingly defines what students want to learn. In the past we controlled content, because it was we who wrote the textbooks that students were expected to read. Movies might be used as supplementary material, but they were never the focus of a non-cinematic course.

Today, however, courses are often structured around the movie content, and what is being taught is fit toward the content made available by Hollywood. Movies have become so central to the discipline that Professor Walter Block at Loyola University even says he will be happy if in 10 or 20 years the most memorable aspect of his course will be the assigned movies. He is, as he says "a big fan of the educational efficacy of movies."

Movies are so effective, in fact, that at the University of Southern California film is used to teach American History because "few contemporary institutions have had a greater effect on molding popular understandings of the world than film or television. Yet, most citizens lack the critical tools to contextualize, analyze, and critique the images and ideologies conveyed on the screen." The degree, though, to which film media can help to teach these skills is an issue teachers need to deal with. Dr. Jerry Zolten at Penn State believes film can help "to develop analytical skills in semiotics", the art of recognizing the signs and symbols of communication. If we accept this argument, must we also accept that it the best means of developing this recognition, or the most appropriate for our students?

It is not only the effective portrayal of images and ideologies that has led educators to fall in love with the movies. Professor Nicole Rafter at Northeastern University uses film as a means to increase something we call "visual literacy". It has become almost a matter of educational faith that visual literacy is a good thing, and I must admit that I also am attracted to VL. However, I would also hope that we might be brave enough to ask ourselves whether or not we spend too much time today on visual literacy, to the exclusion, for example, of printed media. Are students reading less because we are encouraging them to read less, or is this merely an irreversible trend produced by the convergence of technology and the needs of society?

Dr. Maggie Beers at the University of British Columbia believes that the visual media are so important that she teaches her students to actually create their own content using the technology available with iMovie. She, though, is a Media Studies instructor. I feel it important to ask whether the creation of video to replace the production of written papers across the disciplines is something to be desired.

I think there is no debate that film is, as Professors Eubanks and Corey at Baylor University claim, "a uniquely modern and powerful medium" that "offers perspective on the world around us. If used intelligently, it is possible that films can be approached seriously, reflected upon analytically, and written about in a critical manner." I certainly have no doubt that Professors Eubanks and Corey are correct, but I would also maintain that we should never be so lazy as to allow Hollywood to set the agenda for what is studied in the classroom.

When Michael Warren insists that "the most powerful educative channels have passed from the hands of those who call themselves educators," I think we find ourselves confronted with perhaps the most frightening assessment of the power of Hollywood. It is necessary that we ask ourselves the question of how we, or our discipline, can regain control of content. Do we need to become media content creators ourselves in order to take control back from Hollywood? Is this process already underway with material that we can find on YouTube? Will our own students race ahead of our own efforts if we fail to adapt?

Today we find ourselves defending our turf, and increasingly placing media interpretations of our disciplines at the center of our teaching. Students demand it, and we comply in an effort to remain relevant or popular. Where this will lead us is difficult to say, and I believe some of us have only begun to feel the impact of Hollywood on our discipline. The future, though, seems likely to increase the power of Hollywood to mold

our syllabi, our curriculum, and our students. For some disciplines that future is already here, and we are merely the players in this new educational environment. Let us look, now, at how pervasive this influence really is, with just a small sampling of courses available.

In a sense human psychology is the prime mover for all movies, and it seems only natural that abnormal psychology, as a discipline, would find ample material to draw upon within the fare offered by Hollywood. Interestingly enough, the abnormal psychology portrayed in movies has become central to the discipline because reality has become too inconvenient to study. As Dr. Carol Bernstein at the New York University School of Medicine points out, "A paranoid patient isn't going to consent to have a lot of people interviewing them." Students, therefore, are best able to learn about certain personality disorders through actors who provide accurate interpretations of those disorders, such as Jack Nicholson in the film "As Good As It Gets". Fortunately, textbooks are now available to complement the material presented in the movies. One might, for example, choose the *Movies and Mental Illness: Using Films to Understand Psychotherapy* text by Danny Wedding, Mary Ann Boyd and Ryan M. Niemiec.

It is interesting here to note, again, that it is the movies which are the central pedagogical component of the course, and textbooks complement in the way that they once complemented lectures given by educational experts. Educators complain that courses are being dumbed down or popularized to meet student expectations, but of course we are willing conspirators in Hollywood's attempts to define culture on a worldwide basis. Assistant Professor Kevin Rozario at Smith College, though, would argue that popular culture is not frivolous, but "deserves critical attention", which it of course achieves in and through the movies. Is "Rainman," for example, inaccurate merely because it seeks to make autism understandable to the general public? Or, has it contributed to a better understanding of autism among the population at large, and thus served an important educational function?

It would be all too easy to assume there are certain disciplines which naturally belong in the domain of the movies, as abnormal psychology might seem to, but in fact almost any discipline can be made to accommodate the material Hollywood produces. There might, for example, at first glance seem to be little Hollywood can teach about architecture and how to build the structures we inhabit at home, work, and for recreation, but even architecture has a human component, as a course in the College of Architecture and Planning at the University of Colorado proclaims in

its title. Is it any wonder, therefore, that we can learn about the relationship between people and the buildings they design in movies such as "Mermaids" or "Heart of Darkness"? Again, the textbook for such a course is also available, in the form of *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* by Donald Albrecht, who is Adjunct Curator of Architecture at the Museum of the City of New York.

There have probably been more courses inspired by "Star Trek" and "Star Wars" than by any other movie or television series. It is little wonder, therefore, that many students also found the inspiration to begin their studies in astrophysics or related subjects as a result of these sci-fi productions. In fact, Nichelle Nichols, who starred as Lt. Uhura in the original Star Trek television series was even employed by NASA in the 1970s and 1980s to recruit students to NASA's astronaut program. Might there be a role for popular actor Jude Law to play in recruiting students to medical programs, or to genetics departments, based on his character in the film *Gattaca*? Certainly educators at Arizona State University, in a course on "Medicine, Science and Public Policy" believe the film important enough to warrant a role in the course. There is, moreover, no shortage of material to draw upon, as the subject of biomedical ethics is seemingly as fascinating for audiences of Hollywood movies as it is for students in courses such as MiraCosta College's "Biomedical Ethics", taught by Department Chair Louisa Moon.

A very interesting development, from my perspective, is that even courses that would seem to be centered on the written word, such as courses in the Classics, whether they be Greek or Roman, or Shakespearean, now seem to feel it is necessary to introduce students to the material through movies, in the belief that the film media will make the written material more accessible and interesting. The problem is, having seen Mel Gibson in the role of Hamlet, or Brad Pitt as Achilles, is there really anything additional Shakespeare or Homer can offer to the student beyond what Hollywood has already taught? Have we, and our material, become irrelevant to our students, and certainly to the producers of these modern classics? When we teach Communication, as does Professor Jerry Zolten at Penn State University, by examining "Rebel Without a Cause", are we teaching students how to communicate, or why they have so many difficulties communicating with adults whom they can not relate to? I am not being critical here, but merely asking what communication entails in our modern world, and whether we are guiding our students or being led by our students. I certainly do not wholeheartedly subscribe to prescriptive definitions of the curriculum,

or of knowledge in general, but a purely descriptive definition of knowledge might find educators increasingly playing catch-up with their students. Have any of you seen the movie version of "Lord of the Flies", or did you all merely read the book?

But of course the ethical and educational issues most important to all of us, as well as to our students, have been covered by Hollywood in movies such as "To Sir, With Love," where those issues were resolved. Is there any need for us to worry that our perspectives will be lost when Hollywood sets the curriculum, rather than we academics? Is Hollywood any less capable of addressing those issues than we are? I would like to believe that almost a decade of intense study and examination during graduate school have provided me with certain skills that are of use to my students, but I may be in error. Certainly we are all as capable of "Finding God in the Movies" (the title of a book by Catherine Barsotti and Robert K. Johnston) as the most educated theologians, and a course on "Jesus: Real to Reel" certainly promises to be interesting. I assume there will be some reading of the actual text in this course but, again, the text may prove to be irrelevant and rather boring to our students after they have seen the movie.

Or perhaps the movie will indeed inspire the students on to further study, and of course it is for this reason that we offer courses dripping with the sweet honey produced by Hollywood. Two thousand years ago the Roman educator Quintilian, writing in the *Institutio Oratoria* declared that the curriculum must be determined by the interests of the learner. "Above all else," he wrote, "we must take care that . . . studies be made an amusement." Certainly none of us are capable of competing with the amusement offered by Hollywood, and it is in that I see the danger.

Increasingly, education is a business that perhaps only incidentally seems to be involved in the search for truth, or greater understanding, or scientific discovery. Few schools today actually claim to produce knowledge, though we do all aspire to teach it. Hollywood does not yet make that claim, but the fact remains that we are in many respects in competition with Hollywood. Of course we often agree on the most basic interpretations of the world around us, and with regard to most of the knowledge that forms the basis for our own academic disciplines. When, however, we do find ourselves in conflict regarding some basic assumptions regarding our discipline, as Dr. Christopher Rose of James Madison University previously explained, can we be certain that it will be our views, rather than the views of Hollywood, that will prevail? If

Hollywood provides the better amusement, where do you think students will turn for their global curriculum?

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