

RETHINKING “GENERAL AUDIENCE”: A COMPARISON OF STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF POPULAR FILM IN HIGH SCHOOL HONORS AND GENERAL-LEVEL CLASSES

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Abstract

Research suggests that secondary teachers across the United States are regularly turning to popular film as a way to engage students and deliver content. However, research on the use of film in secondary education has yet to focus on how students of varying abilities are able to understand and synthesize academic content when it is presented within the context of a popular film that is generally marketed for a broad audience. This study compares the ways in which students in two high school civics classes, one honors-level and one general-level, responded to the same film used in similar ways throughout the course of a semester. Our findings suggest that using film is not just a way of differentiating instruction, but also an instructional activity that needs differentiation itself.

In the 2011 comedy, *Bad Teacher*, Cameron Diaz plays a disenchanted middle school English teacher who openly admits disdain for her profession and her students. Although Diaz’s character has many personality flaws that make her worthy of the movie’s title, it is interesting to note that the primary

way in which director Jake Kasdan chose to illustrate her poor instructional practices was by having the character show Hollywood movies to her students on a daily basis. Kasdan seems to be playing to the common perception that movies represent a passive form of instruction used to fill time and keep students quiet, a stereotype that, unfortunately, has its roots in reality (Hobbs, 2006).

Despite the negative connotations surrounding the use of movies in the classroom, research suggests that popular media, such as Hollywood motion pictures, documentaries, and television shows, can play a vital role in secondary education by providing students with visual representations of content. For example, students stymied by William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* may develop a better understanding of the play by watching Leonardo DiCaprio and Claire Danes' on-screen love affair the same way Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* can provide a type of visual imagery about the moral decay of the Roman Empire that cannot be equaled in a textbook. Film has the potential to both captivate the imagination and increase understanding, provided that teachers use film selectively, actively, and with clear pedagogical goals in mind (Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010).

It is, however, the perception that film offers students an "easier" way of conceptualizing content that often causes teachers to forget that films are a type of visual text students must "read" and interpret (Giroux, 2002; Kellner, 1991; Trier, 2001, 2007). Too often, teachers take a "one size fits all" approach to using film in their classrooms that ignores the cognitive, cultural, and academic differences students bring to their viewing of a film. The present study compares the ways in which students in two high school civics classes, one honors-level and one general-level, responded to the use of film in their classes. The findings from this study offer a starting point for future research into this underexplored aspect of the use of popular film in secondary classrooms.

Popular Film in Secondary Education

Shortly after the turn of the previous century, Albert Einstein argued that the advent of the motion picture would radically change public education in the United States to the point that books would become "obsolete in the schools" (Reiser, 2001, p. 55). Although Einstein may have been a tad ambitious about film's influence on education, it is clear that film has become a staple of secondary classrooms in the United States. Teachers in nearly every subject area consider films to be an instructional tool at their disposal. A quick scan of the literature in all of the major content areas will uncover arguments for film as a way to both engage students and to promote understanding of content

(e.g., Chappell & Thompson, 2000; Goll, Schiebel, & Ley, 2006; Hibbing & Rankin-Erickson, 2003; Iuzzolino, 2007; Marcus, 2005, 2007; Marcus et al., 2010; Metzger, 2010; Smilanich & Lafreniere, 2010).

Underlying all of these accounts is the understanding that popular films are a type of visual text that requires students to engage in active processes of reading (watching) and interpreting (Giroux, 2002; Kellner, 1991; Trier, 2001, 2007). In his work on how students read visual texts, Werner (2002) argued that students must a) be positioned as interpreters, b) have the capacity to interpret the text, and c) be given opportunities to discuss their interpretations with others. Existing research on the use of film in secondary education, suggests, however, that the second criterion is often ignored. Researchers document ways for teachers to position students as active interpreters of film, either by using film as a cultural artifact or as one of many sources on a topic (Metzger, 2007), but research has paid relatively little attention to whether students differ in their ability, their *capacity* to understand film and engage in processes of interpretation.

In his definition of capacity, Werner (2002) included several elements that are integral to understanding, such as adequate background knowledge and the ability to ask insightful questions. Werner (2004) argued that these competencies are essential for students to engage in *intertextuality*, which he defined as the ways in which visual texts are interpreted in relation to individuals' prior knowledge or their interpretations of other visual or written texts. We would argue that students' ability to comprehend such aspects of film as dialogue and basic plot designs, should also be considered competencies with respect to their ability to interpret visual texts. However, the literature on using film in secondary classrooms is generally silent on this issue.

Most of the literature that speaks to the difficulty of students understanding film has actually been written by practitioners who have struggled with this issue in their own classrooms (e.g., Goble, 2010; Morgan, 2010; Woelders, 2007). They, along with others (e.g., Marcus et al., 2010; Nielsen, 2011; Russell, 2007), have offered strategies for increasing student comprehension of film, such as showing clips multiple times, stopping films during important sequences, and using advanced organizers to predict future plot-lines. It is unclear, however, how many secondary educators take the time to scaffold visual texts for students.

Too often, teachers approach popular films as being designed for general audiences, as opposed to written texts which are often considered to be either "easy" or "difficult" for students to understand and are often discussed in terms of being above or below students' ability levels. As a result, teachers often use film in their classrooms under the assumption that since

it is designed for a broad audience, it will be better understood by more students. Few, if any, studies on the use of film in secondary education have attempted to challenge that assumption through a comparison of film usage among students of varying abilities.

Overview of the Study

In the present study, we seek to better understand the differences that can occur in students' comprehension of popular film through a comparison of honors-level and general-level high school civics classes that used the same film in similar ways. We believe the findings of this study offer implications for secondary teachers who choose to use film as an instructional tool in their classrooms.

Research Context

This study took place during the fall 2010 semester at Madison High School, which is located in a small town in the eastern United States. At the time of the study, approximately 1,000 students were enrolled in grades 9-12, and based on our interviews with teachers and other school personnel, the student body contained a mixture of students from higher-income suburban areas and students from middle to lower-income rural populations. Academically, the school performed well in comparison to other high schools in both its district and the state, and Madison's end-of-course test scores earned the school the title of "school of distinction" by the state.

Our observations focused on two Civics and Economics classes taught by Mr. Monroe, who was White, in his mid-twenties, and starting his third year of teaching. Mr. Monroe was recruited to participate in the study because he taught courses in civics and expressed a desire to use film as a regular accompaniment to his classroom instruction. The principal at Madison and other school leaders lauded Mr. Monroe as an exceptional teacher, and Mr. Monroe's end-of-course test results supported those assertions.

The two civics classes we observed were chosen for the purposes of making comparisons between honors and general-level students' ability to understand and interpret film. At Madison, civics was a required class designated primarily for sophomores and was subject to an end-of-course state assessment that held graduation implications. The honors class was comprised of 29 students, 25 of whom were White. Two of the honors students were African-American, and two were Latino/a.

The general-level class was considerably more diverse, which Mr. Monroe said was typical of general-level classes at Madison. This class contained 22 students, nine of whom were White, six of whom were African-American,

and five of whom were Latino/a. In addition, two students were Eastern European immigrants who moved to the United States at a young age. Finally, all five of the Latino/a students were classified as English Language Learners.

The film used in this study was the first season of *The West Wing*, a political drama that aired on NBC from 1999-2006. The series, which won multiple awards for "best drama," chronicles the fictitious administration of Democratic President Josiah Bartlet through the eyes of his senior staff and members of the First Family. Although the show's subplots venture into the characters' personal relationships and romantic interests, the main focus of the show is on the Bartlet administration's attempts to shape policy and control public opinion. Creator Aaron Sorkin envisioned the series as a weekly civics lesson and hired former high-profile White House staffers from both sides of the aisle to serve as consultants for the show in order to make the storylines as authentic as possible (Levine, 2003; Pompper, 2003).

The West Wing aired on NBC, so it was apparently written for a general audience. Ratings indicate, however, that a considerable portion of the series' viewership came from highly-educated, high-income households (Hayton, 2003). Although research on the use of *The West Wing* for educational purposes is limited, several scholars have argued that the series has pedagogical value both as a representation of politics and as a type of democratic text (Authors, 2012, in press; Beavers, 2002; Gaudelli, 2009).

Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected using a case study approach (Stake, 1995). The primary mode of data collection was classroom observations of both the honors and general-level civics classes in which the researchers acted as participant-observers (Merriam, 1998). Every Friday during the fall 2010 semester, the first author observed Mr. Monroe showing an episode of *The West Wing* to both classes and leading each class in a discussion of the episode. In total, 14 episodes were shown and observed over the course of the semester. In addition, either the first or second author would observe both classes one or two additional times per week in order to see whether Mr. Monroe or his students' related information from the show to the formal curriculum. In total, one or both of the researchers observed Mr. Monroe's classes 34 times over the course of the semester; however, this study is focused primarily on the 14 observations in which Mr. Monroe showed episodes of *The West Wing*.

Additional data came from teacher interviews, student surveys, and artifact collection. Both researchers formally interviewed Mr. Monroe twice, once at the beginning of the study and again at the end of the semester. The first interview served to gain background about Mr. Monroe's teaching philosophies

and beliefs on using film in his civics instruction, and the final interview was used to gauge Mr. Monroe's perceptions of his use of *The West Wing* over the course of the semester. Each interview was audiorecorded and transcribed for accuracy. In addition to the formal interviews, both researchers remained in close contact with Mr. Monroe over the course of the semester, often asking him research-related questions before or after class and via email.

Data were analyzed by adhering to guidelines for case studies established by Stake (1995). We identified specific areas of interest within the data, assigned meaning to them, and then looked for relevant patterns within the data. Whenever possible, we engaged in processes of triangulation in order to increase the validity of our interpretations (Maxwell, 1992). Although we realize that the findings from this study are specific to the time and place in which it occurred, we believe that others can apply our findings to similar contexts in which teachers make use of film as part of their instruction (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Findings

When we interviewed Mr. Monroe at the end of the semester, he seemed to believe that all of his students benefitted from watching *The West Wing*. He stated that the series was "something [his students] looked forward to and that they were excited to come to class on Friday.

Every student is going to really look forward to at least one day a week, and hopefully, they are looking forward to more than that. If they can come in and enjoy what they are doing and gain some understanding, then I think that is a win-win.

When we asked Mr. Monroe whether he believed one class benefitted more from the show than the other, however, he was quick to say that the honors class appeared to understand the show at a higher level than the general-level class:

I think that it was more effective for second period, the honors class. . . . First period, [the general-level class], I worry about a lot of the stuff going over their heads. I remember in graduate school, they talked about Vygotsky's zone of proximal development. . . . and, you know, I was sort of worrying whether they were there.

Mr. Monroe was also concerned that some of the ELL students were struggling, even though they had all told him that they liked the show:

I think they're getting—you know, that is always helpful for learning English. I mean, they may not be getting the civics content portion of it, but I think it's, you know, it's helpful in some ways. But I know that, when I think about [his classroom], I think there were some little pockets that might not have understood it as well as others, and you could tell. I think the ones that didn't understand it didn't like it as much.

. . . then there's some other students that understood it at a much higher level than I would have expected them to. . . . I mean, [*The West Wing*] was assigned as homework for me when I was in college, so I think it's expected that some students are going to struggle with it, but I would say it was—I think it's more effective for the, I guess, the higher student.

Over the course of the semester it was clear that despite their best efforts and that of Mr. Monroe, the majority of students in the general-level class experienced difficulty in comprehending the political content in *The West Wing* and applying it to larger civic themes, at least compared to what regularly occurred in the honors class. In the subsequent sections, we outline the analytical differences between the two groups of students.

Film Comprehension in the Honors Class

Organization of filmic instruction. In each class, Mr. Monroe had students complete a guided viewing activity, an example of which can be found in Appendix A. These questions were intended to ensure students were paying attention to key points in each episode. In the honors class, Mr. Monroe showed the weekly episode with few interruptions and then led a discussion about what occurred in that episode.

Students in the honors class seemed to be able to complete the guided viewing activities and follow the plotlines with little difficulty. Students in the honors class answered most of the questions as they watched the episode, and minimal time was spent having to recap the plotlines, allowing Mr. Monroe to facilitate whole-class discussions about the larger political themes that were depicted in the episode. They would occasionally ask questions about aspects of politics of which they did not have prior knowledge, but overall, the conversations that occurred in the honors class were fairly substantive. For example, students might ask for clarification of political terms referenced in an episode, but the majority of the discussion was dedicated to tying the filmic content to the real-life political world or previously-learned course material.

Ability to comprehend plotlines. Students in the honors class generally

were able to follow plotlines of individual episodes as well as remember previous plotlines and connect them to information learned in subsequent episodes. Take, for example, the discussions that occurred before and after the episode entitled, "He Shall, From Time to Time." As the title suggests, the primary focus of the episode was the preparation for President Bartlet's State of the Union Address. A secondary plotline continued a story from the previous week regarding the President's response to a possible international crisis between India and Pakistan over the disputed area of Kashmir. Prior to showing the episode, Mr. Monroe asked the class to recap the previous week's episode. The honors students did so with little difficulty, as the following conversation shows:

Mr. Monroe: Let's get a recap from last week because a lot of things that went on last week will get resolved this week. Anyone?

Rita: There was that battle for land between those countries.

Mr. Monroe: (to Rita) Which two countries were involved?

Rita: India and Pakistan.

Malcolm: And eventually China.

Mr. Monroe: Exactly right. What was the name of the area of land they were fighting over?

Several Students: Kashmir.

Mr. Monroe: Does anyone remember how it ended?

Samantha: There was a two-week cease fire.

These students seemed to retain most of the information about this plotline from the previous week. As a result, they spent less time recapping the previous episode, and Mr. Monroe was able to proceed to prepping them about the State of the Union. After the episode, the discussion was representative of what occurred throughout the semester: the honors students seemed to understand the plotline well enough to discuss the political implications of what they had seen. For example, in this portion of the discussion, Mr. Monroe asked students to reflect on a conversation between Toby, the administration's chief speechwriter, and a couple of unnamed politicians:

Mr. Monroe: Who is Toby talking to about the speech?

Robin: Some senators or something

Mr. Monroe: Yeah, they are Democratic congressmen who are running in the fall. Why do you think they are concerned about what the President says in the State of the Union?

Walter: It might make them look bad.

Mr. Monroe: Right: We saw this in the most recent election. We saw ads from Democratic congressmen who were running away from some of the things Obama had done because it was unpopular in their districts.

Although Mr. Monroe revealed part of the answer to his own question when he noted Toby's conversation partners were Democratic congressmen, it was clear that Robin had picked up that Toby had been talking to legislators. Walter's response to Mr. Monroe's question also suggests that he had understood the importance of the scene and had possibly even tied it into his prior understanding of what had occurred in the recent 2010 midterm elections.

Ability to apply filmic content to the formal curriculum. Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing* was purposeful in that he did not show episodes in isolation; rather, he intended for the show to reinforce his other instructional goals. Specifically, he envisioned being able to reference elements of *The West Wing* when introducing related civic content to his students throughout the semester (for more on this aspect of the study, see Authors, in press). Overall, the honors class seemed to transfer what occurred in the fictional Bartlet administration to what they had learned in class fairly well. For example, each week's guided viewing activity contained one open-ended question that was designed to link *West Wing* content to the formal curriculum. These questions required students to give their opinions about something that occurred in the episode based on information they had already learned in class. The honors students regularly answered these questions thoughtfully.

Even when their answers were not lengthy, it was clear that the honor students had understood the nature of the question and were able to synthesize their prior knowledge with what they had viewed. For example, for the episode "Five Votes Down," which provided a behind-the-scenes look at the legislative process, students were asked to explain how politics influences legislation. A representative response from the honors-class was, "A lot of the decisions are politically biased. It's like a compromise between 'do this and get that,' like a deal. Bottom line, not everyone decides based only on what they think is right."

In another example, Mr. Monroe started his unit on the executive branch by telling his classes that, because of *The West Wing*, they knew more about that branch of government than his classes in previous years. He then had his students write a paragraph explaining everything that they had learned about the executive branch from the show. Nearly all of the honors students wrote lengthy paragraphs that explained how life in the White House is hectic and the President has to make difficult decisions on a regular basis.

The following is a representative example:

In the executive branch, the president is always the one to ultimately make decisions. By watching *The West Wing*, I have learned that the president has a lot of responsibilities and they are not always easily made choices. Staff in the executive branch can make suggestions but the president has final say. Life as a person working in the executive branch is portrayed as very chaotic, as I imagined it really is. The president often faces problems that affect him emotionally but he must choose to do what is best for the country as a whole.

Summary of honors instruction. Mr. Monroe did not really attempt to differentiate his instruction in the honors class, and the majority of the students in that class appeared to follow *The West Wing* well enough to accurately synthesize information from each episode and apply it to other contexts. As a result, the political discussions that occurred in this class were mostly substantive. We are not suggesting, however, that all of the honors students understood the show with the same level of sophistication. It is certainly possible that several students may have found aspects of *The West Wing* challenging, but any comprehension issues that existed appeared isolated.

Film Comprehension in the General-Level Class

Organization of filmic instruction. At the beginning of the semester, Mr. Monroe's approach to showing *The West Wing* in the general-level class was to show each episode in full and then attempt to initiate a discussion afterward. After only two weeks, however, it became clear to Mr. Monroe that watching the entire 45 minute episode was too much for the general-level students to process. In consultation with us and based on advice we received from experts on using film in social studies classrooms, Mr. Monroe began splitting each episode into 15 minute increments to ensure that all students were understanding the plotlines and political information presented in the episode.

This small change seemed to greatly increase most of the general-level students' comprehension of the show, which allowed Mr. Monroe to move the post-episode discussions from plot recaps to more substantive topics. Although this strategy seemed to improve student comprehension, it came at a cost. As Mr. Monroe noted, "It took 90 minutes to show a 42-minute episode." He continued by saying,

When we tried to show it the first time, I remember we just showed it all

the way through and they were frustrated. They had tons of questions. I think it still ended up taking almost 90 minutes, but I think breaking it down was the right thing to do, but just the time of it was tough [on his instructional planning].

The students in the general-level class also found the guided viewing activity challenging, although less so after Mr. Monroe began splitting each episode into 15 minute increments. Overall, the general-level students struggled to keep up with the fast pace of the dialogue on the show, and most of the students had multiple unanswered questions on their sheet at the end of each episode. This forced the subsequent "discussions" to center around students asking Mr. Monroe for the answers, which basically served as a plot summary rather than a substantive discussion in which Mr. Monroe could draw parallels between the fictional plotlines and the real-life political world. At the end of the first couple of *West Wing* episodes, Mr. Monroe would ask his students in the general-level class what they thought of each episode, and although the students would almost unanimously state that they enjoyed watching the show, they would use words like "confusing" and "hard to follow" to describe the experience.

Ability to comprehend plotlines. In contrast to what occurred in the honors class, the students in the general-level class often appeared to struggle with comprehending individual plotlines and linking multiple plotlines together. Again, data collected during the "He Shall, From Time to Time" episode provides an apt comparison:

Mr. Monroe: Let's start by recapping last week's episode because a lot of the things that went on last week will get resolved this week. Does anyone remember what happened last week? (No one seems to know)

Peter: I remember, is it the Mendoza one?

Mr. Monroe: No, that was two weeks ago.

Rick: There was something about a conflict over land that was named a bland color.

Mr. Monroe: Does anyone remember which two countries were fighting?

Several Students: India and Afghanistan.

Mr. Monroe: Not Afghanistan, but...

Several Students: Pakistan.

Shirley: Didn't they also talk to the Chinese?

Mr. Monroe: Yes, the Chinese got involved as well. Does anyone remember the name of the piece of land India and Pakistan are fighting over? (No one knows; Mr. Monroe finally tells them.) Does anyone re-

member what happened? (Students mumble; a few mumble something about reaching a solution.)

Rachel: Wasn't there a two week cease fire?

Mr. Monroe: Exactly. They got them to agree to stop fighting for two weeks.

Although Mr. Monroe eventually got the class to where they needed to be in order to understand upcoming episodes, he had to fill in more gaps than he did in the honors class.

After each episode, students in the general-level class often appeared to miss crucial pieces of political information. For example, using the same scene described before for the sake of comparison, here is how the conversation about the scene illustrating Toby's meeting with the Democratic senators went in the general-level class:

Mr. Monroe: Who is Toby (the administration's chief speechwriter) meeting with?

Ralph: Members of the Cabinet and other groups who are saying what they think should be in the speech.

Mr. Monroe: Not Cabinet members, but you are on the right track. Who do you think those people are?

Rick: People who are going to run against Bartlet.

Mr. Monroe: Not running against Bartlet; I think they are Democratic Congressmen who are going to be running for reelection and they are concerned about what the President might say. We just talked about some of the ads from the recent election where Congressmen were trying to run away from some of the things that Obama had done in office. This is the same thing that is going on here; they don't want to be hurt by something the President says in the State of the Union.

It is worth noting that Mr. Monroe considered Ralph and Rick two of the more advanced students in his general-level class. They were two of a handful of students who regularly participated in class discussions, both about *The West Wing* and other civics topics. Yet, it seemed clear that neither understood the symbolism surrounding that particular scene.

Despite these challenges, the vast majority of students in the general-level class appeared able to understand *The West Wing* with additional scaffolding. However, Mr. Monroe consistently struggled with modifying the films, viewing guides, and whole group instruction to continuously support the ELL students' content and language learning. After the fifth episode, Mr. Monroe

had the ELL students stay after class, and he asked them whether they were "lost" in terms of being able to understand *The West Wing*. All five students answered affirmatively, but when Mr. Monroe offered them the option of meeting with the ELL teacher on Fridays to complete an alternative assignment, all five students stated that they would rather watch *The West Wing*.

For a couple of episodes, Mr. Monroe tried using the subtitle function of *The West Wing* DVD, but it did not seem to help the ELL students' comprehension of the show. The subtitles were in English, and although research has shown that English subtitles are useful in helping ELL students learn English while watching films in their native language (Holmes, Rutledge, & Gauthier, 2009), the use of English subtitles to accentuate English dialogue may have actually decreased student comprehension because it forced them to focus on multiple dialogues which did not always exactly match. Had *The West Wing* DVD been equipped with the ability to show Spanish subtitles, the ELL students may have been able to comprehend the political information being discussed during the show (Garza, 1991; Gradman & Hanaia, 1991). Because Mr. Monroe did not have that option at his disposal, however, his ELL students often appeared uninterested in the show and had difficulty contributing to the post-episode discussions.

It is important to note that the problem was not that the ELL students had difficulty understanding the content, but rather that they had difficulty understanding *The West Wing* dialogue, which is fairly advanced and fast-paced, even for a native English speaker. Unfortunately, the adaptations that Mr. Monroe used to promote understanding among the native English speakers in his class did not seem to increase the ELL students' comprehension of the show. Although Mr. Monroe recognized that his ELL students needed additional scaffolding to understand the show, neither he nor the school's ELL support staff possessed the expertise needed to successfully adapt a complex film into a format that all students could understand.

Ability to apply filmic content to the formal curriculum. Compared to the honors class, the students in the general-level class had more difficulty transferring *The West Wing* into previously learned material. Again, a comparison can be made using students' answers to the open-ended questions on the guided viewing activity. A handful of students would consistently provide answers that were similar to those found on the honors students' guided viewing activity sheets. However, an equal number would not answer the question, and the majority of students would consistently provide answers that suggested either that they did not grasp the nature of the question or that they had difficulty synthesizing what they watched in the episode to larger civic themes discussed in class.

The following response to the same prompt from the "Five Votes Down" episode is a representative example of what was typically found on the guided viewing activity sheets of students in this latter group: "The president gave a speech and lost five votes, but the Congress speak and fix the problem with the vice president getting credit." This response briefly summarizes the main plot of the episode rather than answers the question. It is impossible, however, to tell whether this student had difficulty understanding the question itself or struggled with tying the episode content to previously learned material.

The example from the executive branch unit provides another example of the variability within the general-level class in terms of being able to apply *The West Wing* to previously learned material. Several of the students' responses were equivalent to their peers in the honors class, both in terms of length and substance, as this example shows:

I know that the president is the head of the executive branch. Every day he has something to do. The president has to worry about bills that are trying to get passed, national emergencies, weather emergencies, terrorist attacks, and people sneaking into America. Those are just a few of the things that can happen in one day. While thinking about his jobs and politics, he also has to worry about his family. The president makes the final decisions on many of the topics that go through his office. What he says though is influenced by his staff members. His staff members are always trying to protect his image. At the same time they do almost all the work, then he makes the final call. His staff also writes the presidents speeches if he ever has to give a speech. The secret service protects the president from harm.

There remained a small portion of the class that struggled with tying the content learned through *The West Wing* to an understanding of life in the White House. For example, one student wrote, "The potus is in that branch. The executive branch mainly resides in *The West Wing*. The executive branch is in charge of a lot. They are stated in the 2nd amendment. Can either be democratic or republican." Other than the vague reference to being "in charge of a lot," it is unclear whether this student was applying anything learned from *The West Wing* into his answer. Rather, his response seemed to be a collection of facts that he had retained, although sometimes incorrectly, from previous class discussions.

Another student wrote, "The executive branch carries out the laws. President Bartlet tries to pass the bill of banning the gun and ammunition that killed Charlie's mother." This student's response seemed to combine a

random fact about the executive branch that she probably learned from a previous unit on the Constitution and a fairly inconsequential plotline from a single episode.

Summary of general-level instruction. Ensuring that his students understood *The West Wing* was more challenging for Mr. Monroe in the general-level class. He had to scaffold both the viewing of episodes and the ensuing discussions for those students who had difficulty following the plotlines. These strategies were fairly successful for most of the native speakers, but the ELL students struggled even with the adaptations.

Discussion

The findings from this study illustrate the need to rethink the use of popular film in secondary education. It seems clear that some of the students in Mr. Monroe's general-level class, and possibly a few in the honors class, did not possess all of the necessary capacities (Werner, 2002) required to understand a complex visual text like *The West Wing*. In particular, the general-level students' inability to follow the fast-paced dialogue and multiple plotlines kept them from being able to process what they were watching well enough to apply it to the formal curriculum when asked. Therefore, one of the conclusions teachers should draw from this study is that not all popular films are appropriate for all learners, even if the films are produced for a broad audience.

Yet, the findings also suggest that even complex filmic texts can be differentiated for use with learners of varying academic abilities. The strategies that Mr. Monroe used with his general-level class greatly improved his students' comprehension of *The West Wing*. With unlimited time and resources, we are confident that Mr. Monroe could have found additional ways to adapt *The West Wing* so that his students in the general-level class were able to understand it to the same degree as their peers in the honors class. Institutional constraints, however, often limit a teacher's ability to devote the necessary attention required to reach that point.

Again, the problem with Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing* was not that the show failed to engage students with content; on the contrary, our data in both classes suggest that the show helped students both conceptualize the formal curriculum and better understand current political events (Authors, in press). The issue was that a significant number of his general-level students struggled with the film as a type of text. Based on our observations of the strengths and limitations of Mr. Monroe's use of *The West Wing*, we suggest the following recommendations for teachers wishing to use popular film as a classroom text:

- *Minimize Complexity When Selecting Filmic Texts.* *The West Wing* is a challenging text, even for many adults. Although the content was appropriate for a high school civics course, it required a considerable amount of differentiation, especially in the general-level class. The time spent ensuring students understood the show perhaps could have been better spent elsewhere. Teachers may consider taking excerpts of dialogue from a film and assessing its reading level to determine whether it would be appropriate for certain learners.
- *Model Appropriate Responses to Inquiries About Filmic Texts.* One source of frustration for Mr. Monroe was that his general-level students often struggled with extrapolating information from the show and tying it to previously learned material. Part of the issue could have been students' struggles with the film as a text, but we also noticed that Mr. Monroe never modeled how to answer these critical-thinking questions. Applying information from a filmic text is a skill not unlike applying information from written prompts. Research suggests that students struggle with such processes unless provided help by their teachers (e.g., Schunk, 2003)
- *Activate Prior Knowledge.* This is a strategy mentioned by others who study the use of film in K-12 classrooms (e.g., Marcus et al., 2010; Russell, 2007). Ironically, Mr. Monroe did a better job of activating students' prior knowledge in the honors class, perhaps because he was able to spend less time recapping previous plotlines. However, the general-level students were much more successful in following episodes when Mr. Monroe sufficiently prepared them for the content they were about to see.
- *Stop Films Intermittently to Check for Understanding.* This was a strategy that worked well for Mr. Monroe. Stopping each episode in fifteen minute intervals seemed to improve student comprehension of the filmic text. In fact, we would suggest that teachers use this strategy in honors classes as well, given that there is often a wide range of academic variability in classes of all levels.
- *Use a Guided-Viewing Activity.* Again, this is a strategy mentioned by others, but our research supports the use of guided-viewing activities. Besides keeping students attentive, the questions on Mr. Monroe's worksheets cued students to important scenes and issues.

- *Use a Whole-Class Discussion to Recap the Film.* Mr. Monroe did an excellent job of leading post-episode discussions in both classes. These discussions allowed him to check students' understanding of the filmic text as well as highlight issues of importance.

We should note, however, that we recommend these strategies for using film as an instructional tool for native-English speakers. The struggles of Mr. Monroe's ELL students provide another implication of this research. Unfortunately, nothing he tried seemed to help his ELL students better comprehend the fast-paced nature of *The West Wing*. In our attempts to help Mr. Monroe throughout the semester, we found that few studies documenting ELL students' comprehension of complex popular film in classroom settings exist.

Given the propensity of film usage in secondary education, we believe that more research is needed on increasing ELL students' content acquisition through the use of film. If all of the ELL students in a certain class speak the same language, then one possible solution would be to choose films that allow teachers to use subtitles in their students' native languages. However, if teachers are not given that option or their classes contain students who speak multiple languages, then simply relying on subtitles is not a viable option. Perhaps more sustainable solutions can be found within the literature on adapting content knowledge for ELL students (e.g., Chamot & O'Malley, 1994; Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2004).

We believe that many of the strategies that teachers already use to make content more accessible for ELL students can be adapted for use with popular film. Strategies such as using graphic organizers, focusing on content-related vocabulary, and pairing ELL students with native language speakers hold considerable potential for increasing students' comprehension of film. However, empirical research is needed before best practices can be identified and implemented.

Conclusion

Research has shown that popular film is an effective way for teachers to increase student engagement and provide visual representations of content that would otherwise remain abstract. Yet, as the findings from this study illustrate, in order to maximize the pedagogical potential of film, teachers must realize that film is a visual text that may need to be adapted to match students' learning needs. As secondary classrooms across the United States become more diverse, it is important that teachers are able to differentiate all of their instructional strategies accordingly, even those which have been marketed for general audiences.

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Appendix A Five Votes Down

Answer the following questions as you watch this episode of *The West Wing*. A list of main characters in this episode is located at the bottom of this sheet.

1. What bad news does Leo receive during the President's speech?

2. Based on the context cues, what do you think the "whips" in Congress do?

3. Who does Sam and Josh think is needed to sway Congressmen Tillinghouse and LeBrandt into voting for the bill? _____
4. In the midst of securing the five missing votes, what has Leo forgotten?

5. How does Josh get Congressman Katzenmeyer (the one he meets outside) to change his vote? _____
6. Why did Congressman Wick (the one Josh meets in the White House) decide not to vote for the weapons bill? _____
7. How does Josh get Congressman Wick to agree to vote for the bill? _____
8. Why does Congressman Richardson (the African-American Congressman Leo meets with) not want to vote for the bill? _____
9. What do we find out about Leo and Vice President Hoynes during their conversation? _____
10. How does Vice President Hoynes get Congressman Tillinghouse to vote for the bill? _____
11. Who ends up receiving the credit for the legislative win? _____
12. In the space below, write at least 2-3 sentences explaining what you learned about the influence of the White House on Congress from watching this episode

List of Main Characters in This Episode

Leo McGarry—White House Chief of Staff

Josh Lyman—Deputy Chief of Staff

Toby Ziegler—White House Communications Director

Sam Seaborn—Deputy Communications Director

CJ Cregg—White House Press Secretary

John Hoynes—Vice President of the United States

Congressmen Tillinghouse, O'Bannon, LeBrandt, Katzenmeyer, and Wick—

The missing five votes

Congressman Mark Richardson—Chairman of the Congressional Black
Caucus

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