

School at the movies: teaching and educational relationships (Part 2)

Luciano Mariani info@cinemafocus.eu

[Go to online version \(Italian and English\)](#)

9. Re-introduction

At the start of the [first part](#) of this Dossier we focussed on the two extreme points on a continuum of pedagogical-teaching models, which we broadly labelled as transmissive and constructivist. We noticed that, through the analysis of film sequences, we could highlight a few aspects of these models, arguing that no ideal model exists, and that what is important to show are the teacher's verbal and non-verbal behaviours, which point to different approaches, i.e. very personal, and even idiosyncratic ways, to manage classroom learning.

10. [Pocket Money](#) (by François Truffaut, France 1976)

*This sequence parallels the one in *Amarcord* (see the first part of this Dossier, [paragraph 3](#)), since, even through very different filmic treatments, it shows an example of merely superficial factual knowledge: while in *Amarcord* the history teacher mentioned a historical event and the student was asked to remember its exact date, here we witness the opposite: the teacher mentions a date and students, in turn, have to say which event it refers to. Obviously, students have their own strategies too - the last student addressed by the teacher looks at a clock outside the window: it is nearly half past four (the time lessons end), so he hesitates to give an answer and gets away with it: the schoolbell rings and freedom is once again gained ...*

11. [Freedom writers](#) (by Richard Lagravenese, USA 2006)

Based on a true story, this film recounts the first year of teaching of Erin Gruwell in a school in the suburbs of Los Angeles, in a mixed ethnic class (African-Americans, Latin Americans, Cambodians, Chinese and just one white American boy). Racial tensions are high, and ready to explode within and without the school between violent, tough gangs. The teacher immediately realizes that no teaching activity is possible if this explosive situation is not duly managed. Through the activity shown in this sequence, she thus tries to see the situation through her students' eyes, to elicit their emotional states, which are made of violence but also of huge hardships and distress, and to start making them aware of their identity and letting them approach each other, even physically.

After that, she will invite her students to write something, anything, every day. Their notebooks will be anonymous, and she will read them only with their approval. Though quite suspicious and distrustful at the start, the students will soon discover that writing can be a way to express their stories and define their identity and by the end of the school year they will decide to put together their work in a book. The teacher will thus reach her primary aim: establishing an educational relationship based upon respect, cooperation, rescuing her students' dignity and making them accept the challenge of re-evaluating school as the first step towards a different future.

12. Stand and deliver (by Ramon Menendez, USA 1988)

This film, too, is based on a true story. Jaime Escalante leaves a good job in order to teach mathematics at a high school, in a class where students are most Latinos ("chicanos"), certainly not really well-disposed towards learning, with a special demotivation for maths. The teacher is himself of Bolivian origin, so he can address his class in English, but with occasional words and sentences in Spanish.

Right from the start he doesn't feel intimidated by the students' reactions, but tries to establish his authority with humour, self-irony and determination. At the same time, he tries to introduce some basic concepts (like the difference between positive and negative numbers), and when he gets "unemployment" as an example of "negative numbers", he tries a different strategy, by eliciting a real life experience (playing with the sand on a beach). He then insists on getting an answer from a rather reluctant student ("a negative two plus two equals ..."). Notice how he can modulate his voice from very harsh to very soft tones, from suave to (apparently) aggressive, thereby surprising the students but also getting their attention ... Then, when he gets the right answer ("zero"), he reminds his students of the value of their culture: "Did you know that neither the Greeks nor the Romans were capable of using the concept of "zero ... it was your ancestors, the Mayas, who first contemplated the zero - the absence of value". By alternating words in English and Spanish, he then gets his class to repeat a formula aloud several times ...

By starting "from scratch", establishing a contact with the students, and recognizing the impact of different cultures, Escalante will not only succeed in teaching maths to his class, but will even persuade them to enter a national maths competition - and eventually lead them to win it ...

13. Mona Lisa smile (by Mike Newell, USA 2003)

From a riotous and deprived context we move on to an apparently "privileged" environment. This film is set in 1953, in a prestigious and very conservative girls' college, where Katherine Watson finds herself, almost by chance, to teach art history. Since the very start, Katherine realizes that her students are used to a kind of rote learning of superficial factual knowledge (they can immediately recall artists' names, titles and dates), but cannot express personal ideas or a motivated critical discourse - this happens within an institution which actually prepares students to the role they will traditionally play in their future: wives, mothers, caretakers ... Katherine, a born feminist and an innovative teacher, sets herself the task, through a teaching approach based on personal critical expression, of undermining, as far as possible, this traditional culture and to train her students for a greater independence, both at school and in their personal lives.

In this sequence, we see her showing a series of slides. Her first slide baffles her students, who uselessly try to find a reference in their textbook and cry out, surprised: "It's not in the syllabus!". Katherine asks them, "Is it any good?", and, in the silence that follows, prompts them to express an opinion. "Come on, ladies, there is no wrong answer ... There's also no textbook to tell you what you think". The girls start expressing very subjective judgments, which soon leads them to

wonder whether there are any criteria to follow in order to judge a piece of artwork. This allows Katherine to set the basis for her programme: "What is art? What makes it good or bad, and who decides?", thus highlighting the crucial question, What is art? (recall Prof. Dunne in *Half Nelson*, asking his students right from the start: What is history? - see the first part of this Dossier, paragraph 8).

With her next question, Katherine baffles her students again: she shows a drawing, only to reveal that she drew it as a child ... and, in the same way, following this with another slide ... a photo of her mother. "Is it art?". This is followed by a debate whether photography can be considered as "art" ... However, the girls' opposition is strong: "Art isn't art until someone says it is ... the right people ...". Then Katherine goes back to her first slide: "Just look at it again, look beyond the paint ... let's try to open our minds to a new idea...".

Building an independent critical spirit is no easy task, and Katherine uses teaching strategies suitable for the (initially very hostile) context facing her: she relies a lot on surprise and on baffling her students, putting them in a difficult position by showing them unusual materials and letting their contradictions come out, wide open ...

14. Running on empty (by Sidney Lumet, USA 1988)

Within a film which deals with several important issues, this sequence shows the beginning of a music lesson. We see a boy, Mansfield, entering the class for the first time. Without any introduction, the teacher plays a pop music piece, and, beating his hands in unison with the students, accepts that they start dancing - to the bewilderment of the new student (who, by the way, has some musical ambition). After "bringing back order" in the classroom, the teacher now plays a classical music piece, miming at the same time with humour the conductor's gestures, thus making everybody laugh.

This "introductory" stage, without any teacher's comments, is followed by a reflection/discussion stage: "Can anyone tell me the difference between these two pieces?". The teacher accepts a few rather generic answers, then asks the new student, "Would you care to venture a guess?", who answers: "Well ... you can't dance to Beethoven", thus gaining his classmates' approval and admiration. "You're quite right, you can't dance to Mr Beethoven. Can you tell me why, Mr Mansfield?. Following the boy's embarrassment, the teacher goes on with a direct explanation: "Because the Beethoven's piece doesn't use a constant rhythm or tempo ...". The students react with attention to this explanation and start taking notes. Even Mansfield, who looked very skeptical about the teacher's method at the start, now sets down to work ...

Notice that, within a basically "frontal" lesson, the teacher uses several "motivating" strategies. He starts, as we saw in other sequences of this Dossier, from the students' concrete experience and background knowledge, i.e. from their musical tastes; he activates a collaborative, informal atmosphere, using his sense of humour and irony; starts with inductive questions, i.e. (rather uselessly) tries to elicit the students' own intuitions; and only when he realizes that he cannot get any more input from them, he goes on to a more formal explanation, which, at this stage, is welcomed by the students. A relaxed, collaborative classroom climate is the basis for the teacher's strategies, which prompt learning "by discovery" and by "direct experience": at this stage the class is ready to face a theoretical explanation of complex concepts.

15. *Dead poets' society* (by Peter Weir, USA 1989)

Clip 1

We now turn to a "cult" movie, which has turned its protagonist, Professor Keating, into the "ideal teacher" that lots of people wish they (had) had. In the light of the preliminary remarks we made at the start of this Dossier, and also considering all the film sequences we have analysed so far, we can make several useful considerations about the ways in which Keating manages both his teaching strategies and the educational relationships within his class.

No doubt Keating has a very strong personal charisma, which allows him to face up to his students, is a brilliant speaker, often has recourse to his sense of humour and to "probing" questions, to which he seldom waits to get an answer. We see him in this sequence imitating the different ways in which Shakespeare has been played (by such actors as Marlon Brando and John Wayne), thus making everybody laugh. He is, in a word, a very efficient entertainer, who knows how to "hook on" his audience and keep them close to him. Keating is also a master of non-verbal behaviour: he stands on the teacher's desk and asks his students to do the same. In this way he puts forward the concept that they need to see things from a different perspective. And, at the same time, he launches a passionate, enthusiastic (and certainly sincere) appeal: "You must thrive to find your own voice ... because the longer you wait to begin, the less likely you are to find it at all ... break out, don't just walk off the edge like lemmings, look around ...". Keating is obviously putting his charisma at the service of a fascinating instance of seduction. He knows how to spark off passions, desires and dreams in his adolescents' hearts, without any restriction or inhibition. But, we may ask, can passions, desires and dreams work as the only reference points, as the only criteria to give judgments and make choices?

Clip 2

In this sequence, Keating selects one of the shyest and most introvert of his students, Todd, to elicit a sort of "poetic performance" from him. To this end, he uses what could be labelled an example of psychodrama: he grabs his attention in a violent way, at the same time writing a quotation from one of Walt Whitman's poems on the blackboard. Todd is pushed, almost brutally, to do what comes most difficult to him, until he falls into a sort of a trance, during which, as if under a spell, he recites some verses, to his classmates' cheering. It is questionable whether this violation of a person's intimate thoughts can be justified, even if done with the best of intentions. The problem is not the efficiency of a teaching strategy, but rather the respect of individual characteristics and the gradual way in which cognitive operations, not to mention emotional reactions, can be activated. Keating seems to favour shock, "enlightenment" and flashes of inspiration that can be obtained from a person through what looks like a sort of "violent hypnosis": a boundless, unchecked excitement ... "bounds and checks" which are part of an adolescent's gradual approach towards her/his cognitive and emotional autonomy - without denying the possibility of experiencing enthusiasm and involvement, which, too, are part of the beauty (and risk) of adolescence.

Clip 3

The main topic of Keating's lessons seems to be poetry. At the start of this sequence, he asks one of the students to read aloud the introduction in their textbook, and in the meantime, whistling, he draws a graph on the blackboard: the graph that, according to the textbook, should measure the "greatness" of a poem. Then, "Excrement", he says: this is how Keating defines the method of analysis described in the book - then inviting his students, to everybody's astonishment, to rip out the whole introduction from the book. Although hesitant at first, the students excitedly start ripping out the pages, which Keating gathers in a wastebasket. Notice once again the almost "physical" passion of Keating's teaching: he gives severe judgments ("excrement") while gesturing around, which his students soon imitate. Setting aside the value of the model of analysis suggested by the

textbook (which is clearly implausible, from our point of view), the "Keating method" does not allow for compromises and implies the physical elimination of alternatives, thereby starting "from scratch", as the next sequence shows.

Clip 4

What, then is this totally alternative "Keating method"? "Now, you'll learn how to think using your own head, you'll learn how to taste words and speech". "I've a little secret for you ... Huddle up ... huddle up!": Keating invites the students to form a circle round him, then starts a passionate defence of poetry, quoting Walt Whitman again. "But poetry, beauty, romance, love ... these are what we stay alive for ... The powerful play goes on, and you may contribute a verse ... What will your verse be?". A question he asks all the students, but the sequence ends with the face of one of them, Perry, clearly fascinated. (Perry will actually be the one who, towards the end of the movie, will carry out the extreme sacrifice to his own passion.)

There is no doubt that a similar approach to poetry is amply justified: one of the most innovative (although certainly not the most common) teaching strategies consists in activating imagination and emotion as the first approach to a poetic text, so as to "hook on" and motivate the following steps, which involve analysis, reflection and discussion. We do not know what steps are involved in the "Keating method" (and the movie certainly did not aim to provide examples of "good teaching practice"): we only know that everything, in Keating's lesson, is filtered through him (with occasional quotations from Whitman's works). Each student is individually connected to Keating, and is subject to the charm of a seductive, bewitching leader. True, a bit later in the movie the students will form a "reading group" (the Dead Poets' Society), but we do not know what additional activities Keating carries on with his students to lead them towards a personal, conscious and critical approach to evaluate what they study.

At the start of this Dossier we stated that the task of teaching/learning is to lead students towards personal autonomy and responsibility. A teacher's charisma is a gift of nature which can be put to good use (but how many teachers are "endowed" with it? And is it necessary to possess it to be a teacher, a "good" teacher?), but what we could say about Keating is that his charisma, spread out at full speed, with no restriction whatsoever, seems to forget that the process of developing personal autonomy is a gradual, long and even taxing one; no steps can be avoided. Adolescents need to dream and experience their own emotions and conflicts; but they also need to use these emotions to learn something more about themselves, about their own abilities and limits; they need to do all this together with the teacher but also together with their classmates; and they need to constantly relate their experience to reality, which is often many-sided and not always so easily comprehended.

Clip 5

Keating will pay for his determined, irresistible craving for freedom, passed on to his students, not just with his colleagues' criticisms and his final dismissal, but, first and foremost, as the cause, although an indirect one, of Perry's final tragedy. His failure, however, is shown in an ambiguous way in the movie. In the final scene, most of his students stand on their desks and greet him as "Captain, my captain!", in a moving emotional crescendo accompanied by the powerful musical score, and the image we have of Keating, surrounded by his students' admiration, is certainly not an image of defeat - moved by his students' adoration, he will continue to believe in his passion and mission. Is this really the kind of teacher we all wish we (had) had?

[Back to Part 1](#)



Want to know more?

- * From IMDb - International Movie Database:
[Movies about teachers and schools](#) - an extensive annotated list
- * From <https://en.wikipedia.org>:
[Films set in schools](#)
- * From the www.edutopia.org web site:
[At the movies: Films focused on education reform](#) within the American education system

cinemafocus.eu