

A "classy" cinema: Teachers and students in the movies



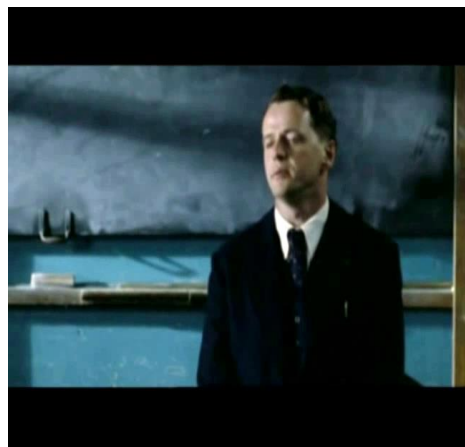
1. The 400 blows (by François Truffaut, France 1959)

In an otherwise dramatic and touching film set in France in the 1950s, this sequence has an ironic tone: the P.E. teacher takes his students for a run through the streets ... without realising that, behind him, the boys actually take different routes ...!



2. Song for a raggy boy (by Aisling Walsch, Ireland/Denmark/GB/Spain 2003)

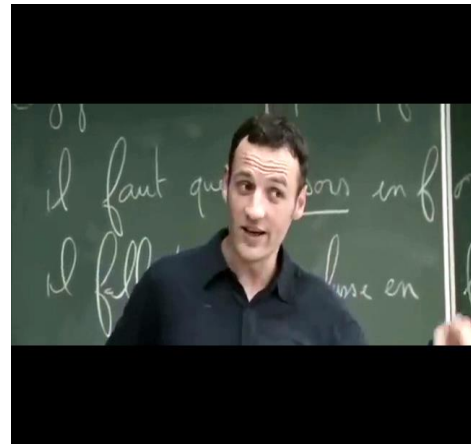
The film is set in 1939 in an Irish Catholic reform school (a highly repressive type of institution, suppressed only in the 1980s): here comes, back from the Spanish civil war, democratic Professor Franklin. Since the very beginning, it is clear that Franklin wishes to establish an open relationship of mutual respect and clarity of the respective positions: "Any questions?" A student raises his hand, presenting himself as "458 Peters" - in this environment, the boys are identified with a number and not with their name - but Franklin replies: "Stand up, Mr. Peters". This first exchange shows that the students have immediately realized that



they can ask questions and claim answers - a first, elementary form of democratic participation. Franklin does not demand what he knows to be impossible, but starts from the boys' actual situation and on this he begins to build his teaching: he has to start from scratch, from "knowing how to read and write", also entrusting those who already own such skills to collaborate with him, and helping individual students in their difficulties.

3. The class (by Laurent Cantet, France 2008)

Let's now move on to the fourth class of a middle school of a Parisian banlieue (in France the Collège or middle school lasts four years), with a high rate of immigrants and discomfort and social degradation. Professor Bégaudeau (in the role of himself, also the author of the book from which the film was drawn) faces a pluriethnic class reality, where there is a mixture, not only of different languages and cultures, but also of social and economic inequalities that the school often makes worse rather than remove. The teacher is well aware of this situation and in the face of a turbulent class, in which violent provocations, indifference, disinterest, demotivation are daily bread, and, with a strong dose of humour and irony, launches into the immense challenge of teaching the language as the first step towards a wider intercultural experience.



4. Half Nelson (by Ryan Fleck, USA 2006)

The history teacher Dan Dunne enters the classroom and immediately starts to establish an informal relationship with his students: he uses irony, makes a few witty remarks, moves a desk and stands in front of the teacher's desk. Then he starts with a simple yet complex question, "What is history?", thus starting an intensive, and yet amusing and enjoyable, dialogue with his students. His further demand is crucial: "I don't want just dates and facts, I wanna know why, I wanna know consequences, I wanna know what it means", thus introducing the methodology that teacher and students will follow.



5. Pocket money (by François Truffaut, France 1976)

This sequence shows an example of merely superficial factual knowledge: 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 ...



6. 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.



7. *Mona Lisa smile* (di Mike Newell, USA 2003)

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. 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. The 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. Through this dialectic approach Katherine sets 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?*).

8. *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 ...

9. Dead Poets Society (by Peter Weir, USA 1989)

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. 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.



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. The students look at and listen to him, clearly fascinated.

Keating is obviously putting his charisma at the service of a clear task - seducing his adolescent students and brightening up their passions, desires and dreams. However, to what extent can passions, desires and dreams be the only reference points, the only criteria for making judgments and choices?

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