

How Pop Cultures Makes For Better Teachers

I have often classified my teaching style as personality-driven. I use my classroom presence and my personality to inspire students. A grad school mentor once described my teaching style as a “Pied Piper” approach where I work to convince students to follow me in occasionally unorthodox projects. Of course, in the myth, the Pied Piper steals all the children in town when the citizens fail to pay him for eradicating the town’s mouse problem. I think my personality driven classroom is more benign than that.

But a personality driven classroom doesn’t just happen through power of personality. You can’t just jump into a classroom and shout, look how interesting I am! You have to earn that trust from the students. That’s where pop culture can come in. What I want to talk to you about today is how pop culture can help cultivate a classroom presence and personality. I will discuss my strategies for building classroom relationships and building trust with students and how pop culture plays a role.

One of my favorite strategies for building trust and comfort in the classroom is the use of an ice breaker. I don’t call it that though—I call them “roll questions” and, each class meeting, I start the class by asking one of these questions. They’re not always pop culture related, but they can be. I’ll started the class by asking one of these questions---this week, I asked a couple of classes who their favorite superheroes were—and then we progress from person to person. Students bond through listening to each other’s answers and students ease into the more academic portion of the class by opening up. With these questions, I know that everybody—even the most reserved students—will contribute at least something. And those most reserved students could contribute more (and they often do) but they’ve been encouraged to speak in a comfortable and non-threatening environment.

To the outside, this technique can create concerns. When I've had my class observed in the past, I will occasionally hear concerns from my observers that the process can take too much time from the class. It's a fair criticism—if I'm taking 10 minutes from a 50 minute class to discussing our favorite movies, that's 20% of the class time being taken up with non-academic conversation. I recently taught a creative writing poetry class where I asked that very question—favorite movie. This class is an upper-division course with primarily majors. They're English majors. They're chatty. It took 16 minutes to go around the room. The class comments on each other's answers. They cheered and jeered. It was a wonderful conversation, but it took 16 minutes. Granted, this is was a longer class—a biweekly two and a half hour meeting—but it was still 16 minutes. I have a grad student in this class who is attending as an independent study teaching practicum. Basically, we meet regularly to discuss pedagogy and whatnot. I expressed my personal concerns about the time spent on that question. And this student immediately dismissed my concerns—that conversation is what allowed the class to work as well as it did, he said. If the class wouldn't have had that chance to ease into discussion the students wouldn't have been as comfortable with each other during a workshop. As I mentioned earlier, I don't always ask pop culture driven questions—sometimes I ask questions about paper topics and the like—but it's the pop culture ones that lead to the most comfortable classes. If you have a class filled with students who are comfortable with each other—but also willing to listen to the instructor and not disrupt the class—you've got a class that you can work with.

But I don't start with pop culture references and then turn them off—on the contrary, I weave them into discussion. I wear them. I teach around them. I do what I can to make myself and my class as accessible as possible and if a Cobra Kai shirt or a Mandalorian LEGO set in the background of my teaching space can help, then I'll do it. It's important though, to be honest about it. Don't wear a Cobra Kai shirt just to be cool. Trust me, it won't work. Instead, find things that

you legitimately care about or, if a student asks, the pop culture outreach will have the opposite effect. My mom, who is older than me, works at Anderson Dairy in Vegas. She recently told me a story about an interaction with a younger co-worker. The younger co-worker was wearing a Led Zeppelin shirt to work and my mom made a comment about the band—something about how passing up a chance to see them live in the 70s was her great concert regret. The co-worker told my mom that she didn't know anything about the band and that she and her friends (her whole generation, she summarized) don't care about the bands, they just wear shirts for fashion. That's fine, of course, if that's a fashion choice, but when I'm creating a classroom persona, I can't get away with that. If I'm going to wearing a shirt with a pop culture reference or hold a mug with a pop culture reference, I want to make sure that it's going to do two things—potentially lead to a conversation or make me seem like a more relatable figure. But even if it's just to help shape an image, I can't overlook the possibility of a conversation. If I wear a Doctor Who shirt, I can follow that up with conversation. If I wear a BTS shirt, I can't follow up.

The pandemic has, obviously, changed the ways we do everything. It seems like I've basically had to learn how to teach again. I'm sure many other feel the same way. In order to figure out how to teach anew, I've once again leaned on pop culture references. I am currently teaching exclusively from home. With the exception of occasional visits to my campus office for books or whatever, I am not on campus at all. When I realized that I was going to be teaching from home for the long haul, I immediately realized that I needed to consider my space. When I was teaching on campus, my psychical classroom rotated and were uniformly non-descript. This isn't to say that the classrooms were bad—they just didn't have the potential for much personalization. My campus office, obviously, did—and I had several pop culture elements in place—Doctor Who posters, a framed picture of The Rat Pack, some action figures, a stuffed John F. Kennedy doll—but a student

would almost always be in my office for a very brief period of time—a ten to fifteen minute conference, but my office would be an inviting place with a splash of personality.

When it came to establishing a home office as a teaching space, I knew that function and practicality would be a priority, but personality would be equally as essential. So, I put up a whiteboard, not a pop-culture totem, but as sign of my credibility as a teacher (and it's practical). From there, I put up a number of shelves that I installed entirely for pop culture displays. As you can see, I have a wide variety of Vinyl Pop figures atop the white board, some LEGOs pretty visible and a few toys on corner shelves. These things don't go unnoticed. Just last week a student stayed a few minutes after a Zoom class to ask about a LEGO set in the background. We talked for a few minutes about his collections. I assume that student will be more engaged going forward because he is more comfortable. It really matters.

While I stated earlier that it's crucial to be honest, it's also useful to reach students where they are. I don't follow every pop culture thread that a given student unfurls, I am certainly willing to learn more about things that become often discussed. If there's a point of cultural reference that will help me reach students, I'll take it. If it behooves my ability to connect with students to watch a particular tv show, that doesn't feel like much of a sacrifice. Once when I was working at an elementary students, I noticed how big a deal professional wrestling was to a certain group of kids that I was having a bit of a challenge reaching. They were especially fans of Rey Mysterio. So, I did my homework and watched a bunch of WWE shows and learned enough to have a conversation about these things. Maybe my girlfriend wasn't totally down with my new interest, but those fifth graders were impressed. And my girlfriend and I are married now, so it all worked out.

Generally, this isn't necessary, because I care about a lot of things my students naturally care about. I use examples from popular movies (references to MCU movies typically work). One example of that came a few weeks ago in a literature class when we were discussing effective

character development. When the conversation about the characters in the book was stalling, I shifted gears and started talking about Marvel movie villains. The class—a small group—snapped awake. We talked about what made for compelling movie bad guys. Instead of forcing the conversation on the assigned text (it was “Young Goodman Brown”), we diverted for five minutes to talk about Loki and the Vulture and Thanos. When we got back to the text and the suddenly had an easier time discussing the symbolic archetypes in the story. It isn’t just about saying you’re in on a given pop culture topic—you need to be able to use that knowledge when it’s going to help a conversation.

I talk about my research too, not to shamelessly plug anything (because I would never do that), but because it shows them how much I care about these things. For example, I have a book about 1980s and 90s Captain America comic books coming out this Spring from McFarland books. Okay, maybe I’ll shamelessly plug sometimes. But I’ve mentioned this book to my students, not to promote the book, but to promote the relatability of my research. Students have asked about it and subsequently asked me questions about Captain America, typically about the movies, but that’s okay. We’re making connections. I presented at the FWPCA a few years ago with a paper about Harry Potter and what a lousy school Hogwarts is. I had more specific reasons why Hogwarts wasn’t a great school, but that was my main theme. I mentioned this to a class (in part to explain why I was going to be missing a class later in the semester and part to share the pop culture topic I knew some of them would be interested in). Sure enough, a couple of students came after class to debate the topic with me. It was great! Those students were more invested in the class because they were more invested in me on a relatable level.