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When parents object to using film in the classroom

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By **STEPHEN F. GAMBESCIA**

Periodically, parents raise concern over classroom materials used by teachers. Recently, a few parents took umbrage with R-rated films used in Bucks County high schools. Parental concerns range from too much, if any, profanity, violence, sex, innuendos, lewd behavior, or materials seen as promoting a political position.

When such concerns are raised, both sides of the debate should give pause before judging who is harming the students' quality education.

Whenever parents get involved in the education of their children implicitly should be seen as a good thing; research consistently shows that parental involvement improves student success. Teachers and educational policy makers should not be too quick to dismiss parents who express concern as naive, unsophisticated adults. Censorship calls have come from the range of the political spectrum.

Parents should give reasonable latitude to educators that they have not simply assigned a book or shown a film for entertainment or shock value. Chances are that the teacher has given much thought and consideration about the purpose of the teaching tool and has already anticipated concern but sees value in the provocative artistic piece. Teachers don't find indoctrination of any kind valuable or interesting in what they do.

It is important during these evaluations that the context of the teaching tool be considered in relation to its student learning objectives. At face value, it is easy to see parts of a film or book as inappropriate for students. One needs to do more than simply look at the words, acts, and deeds of a book or film used for an educational purpose but look at the work within the context of its artistic meaning and use. The context includes such variables as the age of the students, the work's relation to the subject matter, and even the local, regional or national mood.

For example, one would be surprised to learn the books and films that were banned in their day, such as the following classics: *The Grapes of Wrath* (John Steinbeck); *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Harper Lee); *The Color Purple* (Alice Walker); *The Lord of the Flies* (William Golding); *Ulysses* (James Joyce), to name a few.

Context and opportunity are key variables in the educational process. As a college professor I use with joy, and I believe effectiveness, popular films to emphasize important concepts, show the complexity of the human condition, or present current or enduring psycho-social problems. For

example, to challenge students to think about what code of ethics they are willing to follow in their lives or what will they do when they face conflicting codes in the workplace, I have shown clips ranging from the edgy court scene when Tom Cruise interrogates Jack Nicholson in *A Few Good Men* to the courtly discussion that Ian Charleson, playing Eric Little, had with the 1924 Olympic Committee in *Chariots of Fire* to the rise to your feet closing statement that Al Pacino delivered at a prep school during a judicial affairs hearing in *Scent of a Woman*.

Using film and books in teaching, as with any learning activity, should be made with much thought and a clearly defined purpose. One best practice that I use when teaching with film is to create a detailed background, rationale, and learning objectives handout so the students know exactly why they are looking at the film or clips in a movie. I also place an opt-out statement that allows students to leave the room with no questions asked if anything in the film is offensive or disturbing. Students get a detailed account of the film, and I include the rating.

Teachers at all levels have varying styles and use several strategies but as Sean Connery explained to Rob Brown in *Finding Forrester*, one should not be too quick to judge the tough English teacher (F. Murray Abraham) because his teaching style could be very, very effective or very, very dangerous. Having open, sincere, and constructive dialogue about adjunct teaching tools helps us ensure that we are providing the former.

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