ILLUSTRATION: JULIE MCLAUGHLIN

LESSONS IN POP

Does pop culture belong in the classroom? *By Caralee Adams*

One day, Anneke Emerson, then a seventh-grade teacher at the Chandler School in Pasadena, California, decided to show her students how history is all around—a part of their everyday lives.

So she challenged them to find historical references in pop culture: A *Far Side* cartoon mentioning the invasion of Normandy or an episode of *The Simpsons* in which Marge, Lisa, and Bart head for the New World as passengers on the *Mayflower*. Students wrote a paragraph about their findings to earn extra-credit points.

"It was a great hook. The kids felt like they were figuring out secret clues inside cartoons and movies," says Emerson, who is now dean of tech integration at the K–8 school.

Students got so excited about the hunt that they would run into Emerson's classroom during free periods to turn in their observations. "If you don't capture their interest, the basics don't get taught," she says. "This is the topping on a sundae. If you don't have room for the sprinkles, you've never taught a middle school student."

Many teachers are finding that weaving in examples from current movies, television, music, and popular fiction (*True Blood*, anyone?) makes their lessons come alive for students. A clip from *The Daily Show* or rap lyrics can be vehicles to talk about politics and poetry. Pop culture is what students talk about in the hallways, so why not harness that interest and relate it to learning? Though some argue kids are already saturated with pop culture and don't need more in school, the trick is finding the balance.

It's Not "Jersey Shore"

Bringing pop culture into the classroom takes time. It means updating lessons with fresh material and finding the right examples to appeal to kids while covering essential material.

"We're not talking about making the Kardashians curriculum. By using pop culture, [teachers] are trying to link

students' interests to solid learning," says Annie Condron, editor of TeachHUB.com. "You can fight against what kids like or use it to your ends. Mostly, it's a segue," says Condron. "The teacher is saying, 'Here's something you like, here's something I want to talk about. Here's where we can meet in the middle.'"

Just showing a movie and not thinking about how it relates to the standards is not a good use of pop culture, says Erik Walker, who teaches English and journalism at Plymouth South High School in Plymouth, Massachusetts. "I try to go deep."

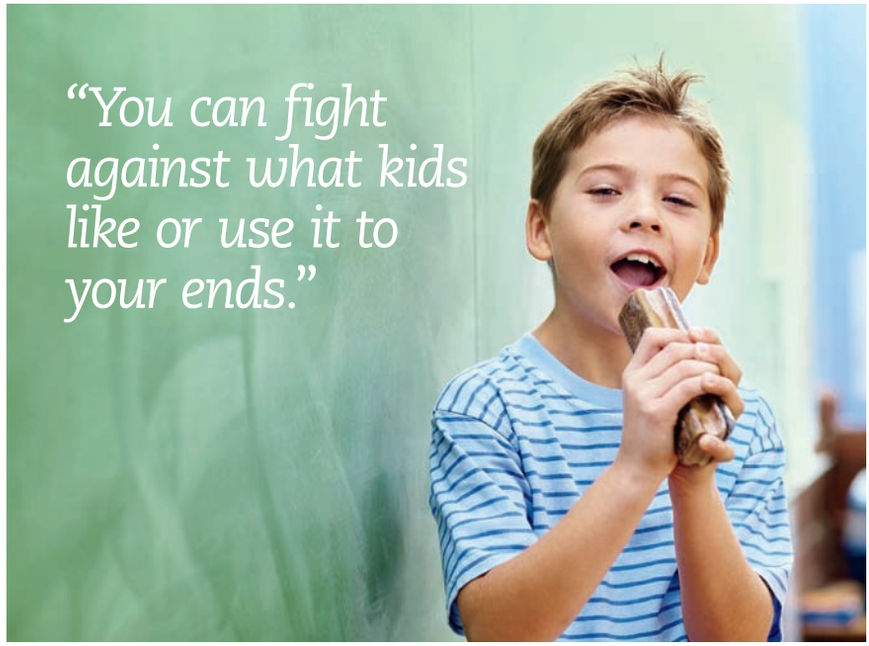
His students might watch clips from romantic comedies from different decades to talk about gender roles and sexism. When the class is reading *The Scarlet Letter*, Walker will have kids review YouTube clips of high school students doing skits based on the story and critique them.

"We still read books and we still do the traditional curriculum. But when my students get to college and the workplace, they will be negotiating a multimedia society," says Walker. "Pop culture is really part of the world, and they need to be able to analyze it."

Mona Choucair, a senior lecturer at Baylor University School of Education in Waco, Texas, found in her research that middle school students related to universal themes in *Romeo and Juliet* much more quickly when the class also looked at how they play out in Beyoncé lyrics. "It has to be relevant," she says. "If kids are not into it, they are missing it."

And when Choucair brought the Twilight series into the classroom, she found students would check out all the copies and get hooked on reading. "You are bolstering test scores when you give them something to read that they like," she says. It's not "kowtowing" to the kids—it's finding an avenue that will work. The tide has turned and effective classrooms are often now student-centered, she says.

This doesn't mean using "junk" pop culture or letting it take over a lesson, says Myree Conway. She has used clips from *Transformers* in her fifth-grade classroom in West Haven, Connecticut, to talk about robotics and transformation in writing.



"Let them know ahead of time the structure and how you are going to use the film clip," says Conway. "Setting boundaries keeps them focused."

The Counterargument

Of course, not all educators buy in. Kids are flooded with youth culture so many hours of the day, the classroom doesn't need to be filled with it, says Mark Bauerlein, professor of English at Emory University and author of *The Dumbest Generation*. He argues we must treat the classroom as a separate space in which the focus is not about what kids want but about what kids need.

"Classroom minutes are finite," says Bauerlein. "The more time you spend with MTV videos and Twilight novels, the less time you spend with Charles Dickens and Leonardo da Vinci." It's not surprising that teenagers would rather be online than read about events that happened 200 years ago, but good teaching can make the subject engaging, he says.

"The push toward novelty … speaks to the abandonment of authority," says Bauerlein. "Why would you let adolescent concerns steer the classroom? You are the teacher. It is your job to get kids in your class to be more aware."

Eminem and Rhymes

Dana Richliew, a third-grade teacher in Atlanta, combines a paper-and-pencil approach with tools from pop culture. Playing multiplication rap songs from YouTube helps her students learn their math facts. As kids learn rhyming words, Richliew talks about how Eminem makes up his own words so his lyrics rhyme. "It really clicked with them," she says. "A lot of stuff is on the fly. You don't write Eminem into the lesson plan."

Most of the fifth graders in Shauna Riggs's class at Stonebridge Community School in Minneapolis are from low-income families that tend to move often. Riggs finds teaching social skills, as well as academics and music, is one strategy that has helped.

Riggs plays positive hip-hop music from a band called the Figureheads from Madison, Wisconsin. The lyrics are about doing the right thing, pushing past a hard home life, and kid power. "That's their reality," she says. The students sit in a circle, read the words, and discuss the songs and what parts relate to them. Lyrics are on signs throughout the room. The music is played in the background as the kids write in their notebooks. "It's the calmest time of their day," says Riggs.

Music provides a condensed way to

PHOTO: DANIEL LAFLOR/ISTOCKPHOTO

teach about metaphors and symbols in poetry and literature, says Tiffany DellaVedova, an English teacher and academic dean at Grandview Preparatory School in Boca Raton, Florida. Depending on students' interests, she will use Taylor Swift or Metallica in class. "I love music and thinking about how to connect."

As long as there is still relevant learning going on, DellaVedova says she thinks using music and other media in the classroom is acceptable. Even on the SAT, high school students are asked to think of examples from pop culture to support their arguments in writing, and they can't do that if they have limited exposure, she notes.

Chaucer and the Brat Pack

Choucair finds that pairing the old and the new works. For instance, students can get excited about Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* when it's discussed along with the 1985 movie *The Breakfast Club*. "The characters are clearly the same," she says. Students can read blogs from soldiers serving now in Iraq alongside the classic book *The Red Badge of Courage*.

With middle schoolers, Choucair says you have to take into account students' fluctuating emotions, short attention spans, and often limited worldviews. "Ask them to read this stilted language and they turn you off," she says. "Enter the adolescent mind." This means, for example, putting Edgar Allen Poe into their world. Ask them about a horror movie they've seen. Play eerie Halloween music. Then relate it to a modern gory thriller, such as *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins.

Integrating popular culture and news can encourage students to make connections, says Condron of TeachHUB. A recent hurricane can spur a discussion of the science of weather. "Sometimes those end up being the best moments, especially if it is a big new event," says Condron. "Letting students have the freedom to talk can lead to interesting conversations. At the end of the day, that's what they will remember."

The use of video games in schools has mushroomed in recent years, and the negative vibes have all but disap-

POP CULTURE

peared, says James Paul Gee, author of *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy.* Some games are used for skill-and-drill to make curriculum more entertaining. Others teach problem solving, creativity, multiple solutions, and critical thinking.

Video games help students relate words to images and actions, not just text, says Gee. They can better solve a problem in physics, for instance, if they're immersed in the world the text is about, manipulating vectors. "Video games allow you to create experience. The theory is that people can understand text more deeply."

Pop culture is complicated. It has great potential for learning, but its effectiveness depends on the teacher. "It doesn't matter what you bring to the classroom [but] what you do with it," says Gee. "Nothing is a panacea."

Pop culture in itself is not a good thing or a bad thing, it just is, says Anne Dyson, professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. "The job of educators is to connect with what children know, help them live satisfying, intellectually wide-awake lives in the present, and have a belief in self and the knowledge to contribute to our future," says Dyson. "Pretending the world is other than it is, a mediated world, doesn't help." □

POP CULTURE RESOURCES

Scholastic for Kids
Find learning games and activities for popular books and films.
scholastic.com/kids

Disney Educational Resources
Disney film clips from nature docs to WALL-E to help teach a variety of subjects. *dep.disney.go.com*

Educational Rap Songs
Rap and hip-hop songs for math, science, and more. *educationalrap.com*

Simpsons for Teachers
Use the Simpsons to teach English, social studies, and civics.
simpsonsforssteachers.wikispaces.com