



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1984 Volume V: American Adolescents in the Public Eye

Introduction

There is a curious tie between changes in cultural attitudes and values, on one hand, and changes in adolescent behavior, on the other. The intriguing and, for parents and teachers, sometimes maddening behavior of American adolescents is not random or causeless; the eccentricities of the teenager arise from a conjunction of biological, social, historical, and intellectual influences. The complexity of the relation between culture and adolescence is, all at once, the source of great interest among adults and the source of great perplexity. Partly because the psychology and culture of American adolescence are tangled and ill-defined and partly because both American culture and American adolescence are being transformed with dizzying speed, any attempt at a systematic study of the connections between them must be tentative, many-sided, and modest.

As a way into the tangle, the seminar *American Adolescents in the Public Eye* took as its theme the representation of young Americans in film, television, commercial advertising, specialty magazines, and fiction. During our work together, we looked closely at both periodical print portrayals of adolescents (especially as they have changed over the last three or four decades) and a series of commercial films (for example, *Endless Love* and *Breaking Away*) that present a vision of contemporary adolescence. In a series of exercises, the members of the seminar also turned to their own students to ask about what they read, what they watched on television, even what they ate. The net of our inquiry swept widely and tentatively but the catch persuaded us all that it was critical, particularly in this time of frantic transformation, for both teachers and adolescents to try to understand better the lives of “in-betweening” young Americans.

In the curricular units that follow, you will find eight straws to build bricks. The units show great variety in content and great diversity of method; the seminar calls them to your attention with the hope that your sampling from them for your work in the classroom will carry our exciting search much further than we were able to go in one term of the Institute. With enough bricks...

Let me introduce the units in a word or two. The first unit is perhaps the most immediately applicable in English classes; it is organized around the vision of adolescence that Salinger sketched in *Catcher in the Rye*. It draws on style, language, and character development to illustrate coming of age in an earlier generation. The second unit is of a somewhat more specialized sort, most useful to arts classes with access to video equipment. However, the unit calls for an examination of the most rapidly growing invention of contemporary life—music television (MTV)—and therefore deserves a look by academic teachers as well. Unit Three is about television, too, but with a different emphasis. The activities are designed to instruct students about the uses and abuses of television programming and it frankly tries to reduce the dependence of today’s youth on the dominating rectangle of light that lives with us all.

Units Four and Five form a neatly connected pair and you may want to use both or your own combination of the two to teach about nutrition among adolescents and about some of the pathology of eating. Two facts—the reduction of the school’s commitment to education about nutrition and the startling increase in disorders of eating (especially, anorexia in adolescent girls)—make these units most apt in schools nowadays.

The psychology of adolescence is sharply addressed in the units on self-esteem and anger in young Americans. The changes of adolescence are seen as posing a set of problems for young people to solve; Unit Six offers several activities to support the discussion of self-esteem and others to help young people like themselves better. Unit Seven turns to the specific problem of living that is seen in anger and aggression. Here, again, there are presented a series of activities that aim to clarify the perceptions of adolescents and to help them in ways of solving their problems that are less fraught with danger than aggression is.

The last unit that grew from the seminar is perhaps the most ambitious. It recognizes that health, sound education, and confidence among students depend on an alliance between parent and teacher. The unit uses the entrance of students into sixth grade to construct a cooperative unit of student, teacher, and parent that is intended to ease the transition to a new school culture and to build useful study habits for the new middle-schooler.

The seminar had a good time preparing the varied dishes we set before you here; we all invite your critical attention to the menu, and we welcome your comments about its taste and its nutritional value.

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