

JUST WHO ARE THESE KIDS I'M TEACHING? AN IMMERSION IN YOUNG ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

By

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The Course and Context

Returning to the classroom after a summer away is always exciting for middle school teachers, though they tend to laugh and complain during every minute of those opening meetings and workdays. Who's in my class this year? Wonder how much the seventh graders grew over the summer? What if I'm not ready on time? What was I thinking of when I ordered that extra bulletin board? What did you just say...another meeting? Now what's that all about?

When you couple the anxieties of opening the school year with the first class, first semester of a rigorous M.Ed. program, well...you tend to greet a classroom of teachers who are excited to be with you as students, but who are nervous and distracted, and whose heads are more worried about the kids they're ready to meet than your opening week's research assignment. These folks simply have too many things to worry over and too much to accomplish in their classrooms during that opening month of school. Our society holds high expectations for its middle school teachers, and they feel it.

I've learned over the years to bring into my college classroom, and thus model, everything that I valued about teaching as an eighth grade instructor, like lively discussions, purposeful readings, guest speakers, relevant assignments, the positives and negatives of the media in varied forms, cooperative learning, in-class opportunities to work with colleagues, a chance to fellowship, and yes, occasionally a time to complain and then to figure out together how to address those complaints. In other words: really getting to know my students as individuals and then working myself crazy to tailor what I know they need to know to how they learn best and what they're most interested in.

Along those lines, I've also learned to make use of the moment, and so it was my students' anxious moments at the opening of the school year that eventually led me to redesign a class that is now my very favorite to teach, Adolescence and Learning. Although this course was once much later in the program's sequence, it is now the first taught each fall to new students seeking an M.Ed. in Middle Grades Education here at UNC Charlotte. This allows me to catch teachers at the beginning of their new school year, which ensures them a terrific understanding of the young adolescents they're meeting. Likewise, this shares the strong message that understanding the kids you're teaching is the foundation for all that we do in our masters program; therefore, this course provides a critical part of the background

that my teacher-students will need for strong research, curriculum development, instructional design, and solid teacher leadership. The old adage, “If you can’t reach ‘em, you can’t teach ‘em,” works both ways here: Our middle school teachers need to understand their young adolescent students, and as their professor, I need to consider the immediate needs and anxieties of the teachers I’m teaching. This course tends to do a nice job of addressing both ends.

Because this column features teaching ideas, I thought I’d use it as an opportunity to share some of my favorite opening assignments from this course with you. My hope is that you will find something of value for your own students here. Should that happen, then take it and freely use it. We’ll call that teaming at its best. Have a great semester!

Jeanneine

Adolescent Development through the Lens of an Adolescent

Though the course includes major research and relevant curriculum components, it is the opening exploration of the adolescent’s world that most intrigues my teacher-students. Many are closer to mid-career than not, and so like me have forgotten just what it’s like to be 14 (and like me, find it wa-a-y too hard to even think about going back to!). More than anything, I want my candidates to immerse themselves in the world in which their early adolescents live, and so I provide them with several vehicles by which to do so. We read adolescent novels and popular non-fiction, we interview community employers about their field’s requirements and expectations for job candidates, we set up an in-class middle grades task force to study our state’s resources, we watch documentaries and discuss pop culture, we immerse ourselves in on-going research, and in the end, we redesign some of our classroom curriculum units to better match the needs and interests of our adolescent students.

Before any of that, though, I open the door that leads my candidates to a better understanding of just who the contemporary kids are that they’re teaching during this new year. To ensure this, I like to begin with, among other things, these five assignments (that are written here as I present them in my course materials):

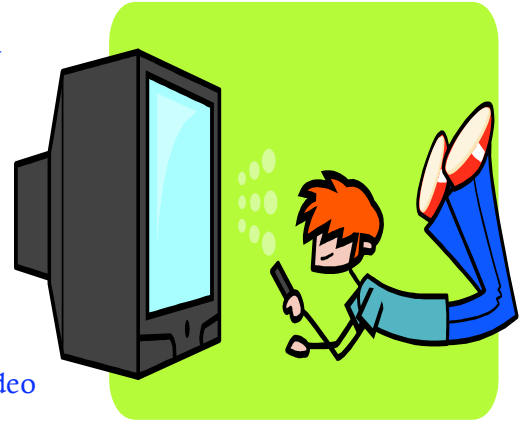
Survey (copy below) your middle school students about their television, movie, and gaming habits. Use the results to select two shows, one movie, or a video game to watch or play. Critique each by considering these two questions: If you were to watch this show regularly, or movies of this type often, or play these games regularly, what would you learn about yourself if you were the same age as the students you teach? As a teacher, how does this information impact your classroom instruction? (Want to see last year’s results? **See Below** for interesting reading!)

The survey:

[Administer the television survey to two or more of your middle school classes. Compile your students’ responses and bring both your compilation and the raw data to class, where you’ll add your students’ reports to those of your colleagues. We’ll immerse ourselves in](#)

the results (and learn a lot about the ways in which your students spend their time and the effects that they report this has on them).

1. How much television do you usually watch on a single weeknight?
2. How much time do you spend playing video games on a single weeknight?
3. How much television do you watch Friday night through Sunday night (total hours)?
4. During the same period, how many hours do you spend playing video games?
5. What is your favorite television show?
6. What is your favorite movie?
7. What television shows would you say are most popular among teenagers your age?
8. How do television and movies affect your life?
9. With whom do you usually watch television?
10. If you play video games, what is your favorite?
11. How do video games affect your life?
12. What are your personal criteria for choosing a video game to play?
13. List three or four things that you think television, movies, and /or video games teach you.



- Informally ask at least 20 of your students where they like to hang out. (Bring these responses to class.) Go to the most popular place or to a similar place in another town. As any researcher would, be as invisible as possible. Try not to interact with the adolescents around you, but instead become a part of the environment so that they don't notice you. Listen and watch carefully.

The details:

Spend a minimum of 45 minutes hanging out as your students do. Record your observations and reactions in a free-flow fashion using a comfortable format, like a listing or a chart of your design. Focus on all aspects of adolescent development, but primarily observe their social interactions (or lack of). Submit your notes with a detailed reflection that discusses what you've learned about young adolescents and how this information will impact your classroom.

- Critically examine two or more issues of a periodical read by your school's or community's adolescents using the guiding questions below. (You might try hanging out at the magazine rack in your local store to see what teenagers flip through when they wander up to browse.) Use the following informal guide while you explore the magazine individually. Later, when you're ready for a formal review in our class with your colleagues, you'll follow the directions with the questions provided below.

Individually consider:

What would this magazine teach you about yourself if you were the age of the students you teach? If you were a girl, how would this impact your opinion of your growing body? If you were a boy, what would you internalize about how young women must look and act? Does this fit with what research says about healthy young adolescent development? How and why do these magazines appeal to teens? Feel free to ask your students to help you with this! (In fact, this could be a teaching lesson in the making...)

With two colleagues during our designated class time:

Just what are these kids reading??



Select a periodical to that it's a favorite review, confirming with your students among them. Spend several minutes looking through the magazine (and perhaps two or three issues of it), considering such things as body images, products advertised, topics covered, multicultural perspectives represented, and stereotypes perpetuated. Finally, discuss (and answer) the following questions with two colleagues from the perspective of the age child you teach.

1. Would you read this periodical on a regular basis?
 2. What is the magazine's basic appeal for you?
 3. Describe the body images (male and female).
 4. What types of scenes and events are photographed?
 5. Which of these products would you want to buy?
 6. What multicultural perspectives are represented?
 7. Fiction: Skim one story and comment on its appeal (or lack of) for you.
 8. Nonfiction: Skim one article and comment on its appeal (or lack of) for you.
 9. What values would you learn if you read this publication regularly?
 10. If you were a middle school girl, what would you learn about yourself from reading this publication regularly?
 11. If you were a middle school boy, what expectations would you form about middle school girls?
 12. Would you ask your parents for a subscription?
 13. In summary, how would this magazine help shape your world?
- Talk to your school's guidance counselor, resource officer, and other colleagues about community agencies that are available, helpful, and/or frequently used by the adolescents and/or their parents at your school. Select an agency of interest to you and then use the Internet to obtain some basic background information on its work. Once done, contact the agency for permission to observe their community outreach. Spend about four hours on site interviewing the professionals there, observing if this is not invasive, and generally coming to better understand this agency's work and how it might benefit your school, students, and families. Finally, develop a poster that shares your findings. Plan to display this for the class now, and then later in a common space in your school that your colleagues frequent. (Are brochures or other literature available that you can offer with your poster?)
 - Get to know your students' parents and caregivers! Send home a survey to a random sampling of your students' parents (minimum 30) in order to gather information about your students' lives when they are away from you. We'll design the survey as a class and will

compile the data into a common description of our community's early adolescents. Start thinking about what you'd like to know! I'd suggest topics like homework habits, time spent with electronics like TV and video games, household rules concerning the student's social parameters, reading habits, and strengths and concerns that the parents have about their child, school, and community resources. A sample introductory letter and survey are provided below, and we can use these as a starting point. Want to see some of the results? Then **See Below** - scroll to the bottom.

Dear Parents:

As a middle school teacher, I can certainly understand the celebrations and worries that you experience as you parent teenagers! Like you, I feel that same burden of responsibility for their safe and productive entry into the world of adult life. Because of my desire to do my very best for your child, I've enrolled in a Masters of Education program at UNC Charlotte, where I am focusing my attention on better understanding young adolescents in general, and those in our school specifically. Since we share the common goal of your child's healthy future, I'd like to ask you to help me by answering a few survey questions that I'm distributing for one of my UNC Charlotte classes. I'll be happy to share the results with you if you'd like, and there's no need to sign your name. Thanks in advance! I'd appreciate you returning your responses in the morning.

Sincerely,

SIGNATURE

Please answer each question with as much detail as you can, and return this page in the morning. Again, many thanks!

My child's grade: ____ Male or female: ____

1. How many televisions are in your home and where are they located?
2. Do you restrict specific video games, musical artists, television shows or television channels that your child is exposed to? If yes, please give examples.
3. What organized activities does your child participate in, if any? (For example: sports, church groups, scouts, private lessons in art or music, that sort of thing...)
4. List the events that would be included in a typical night's schedule for your child, including a specific bedtime.
5. Where does your child complete homework and approximately how much time does s/he spend on this on an average school night?
6. Do you monitor your child's social contacts in any way? If yes, how?
7. If you use a system of rewards and punishments, please share highlights of that system here.



Dear Parents:

Our graduate class, *MDSK 6220: Adolescence and Learning*, conducted a brief and very informal survey of our students and a sampling of their parents. We were, and remain, interested in learning as much as possible about our young adolescents and their development, and particularly the ways in which their social and emotional development drives our academic classrooms.

The very informal data analysis from these surveys is shared here in an attempt to let you know what we now know about television habits among our region's young teens. We invite you to mull this over as we're doing and then share your thoughts and suggestions with us!

The survey results are provided below.

____SIGNATURE____

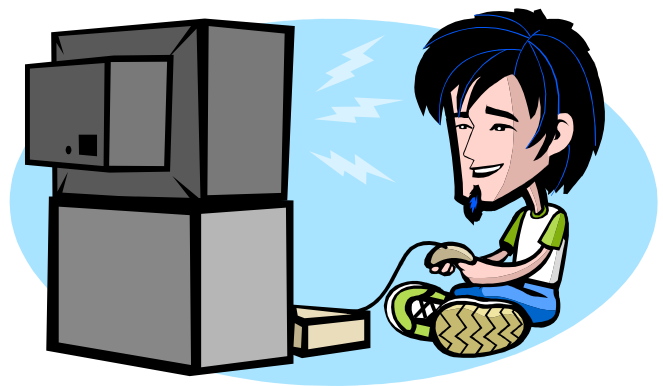


Student Surveys

Sample size: 366 middle school students

- Averaged 2 $\frac{1}{2}$ hours of television watching on weeknights
- Averaged 1 hour of video game playing on weeknights

- Averaged 7 hours per weekend day of television viewing



- Averaged 4 hours of weekend video game playing per day
- Favorite TV shows revealed a common core of popular shows, with the most frequent responses including: Hannah Montana (majority); MTV, Family Guy, and DeGrassi: The Next Generation
- Favorite movies including, among others: High School Musical and High School Musical 2 (majority), Scary Movie, and Rush Hour 3, with votes for Stomp the Yard in distance upper half
- Shows perceived to be most popular among teens in general included Scrubs, Family Guy, South Park, and MTV (overwhelming majority)
- Students reported that they normally watch TV alone (overwhelming majority), with a very small number reporting that they watched TV with other family members
- When asked how television affects their lives, they responded with answers that we categorized as negative and positive. These are among the most frequent of these answers:
 - Negatives: helps me kill time, makes me lazy and fat, makes me stupid, tempts me to curse, provides role models
 - Positives: provides role models, relaxes me, if I'm bored it's fun, teaches me new things, entertains me
- These are things that television teaches our children, according to them: World events, social skills, about pop culture, life lessons, music, what makes people laugh, survival skills, how to fight, celebrity mistakes

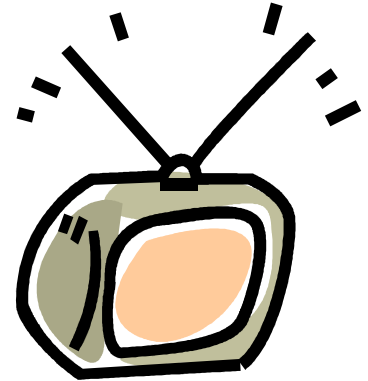


Parent Surveys

Parents shared strong voices and opinions also, specifically:

The most frequent restrictions that they used for television viewing:

- No R or M movies
- No MTV or HBO
- Nothing violent
- Nothing inappropriate or with sexual content
- Put blocks on shows
- Dad must approve
- Doesn't monitor child's viewing
- Disney only
- No disrespect to adults



Homes averaged 4 televisions, with up to 9 reported in one home

Most common locations: bedrooms, den or family room, kitchen

A typical night's schedule included expected events like homework with snack, sports, showers, dinner, and set bedtime, with some homes allowing TV and telephone time.

Homework is typically done in the kitchen or bedroom, and averaged about 1.25 hours per night.

All parents who responded said they monitored their child's social contacts by doing such things as meeting friends and their parents, screening phone calls, checking email and computer websites visited, and monitoring video games and TV shows

After school activities included a variety of sports, church, school band, family dinner, music and other lessons, church groups, homework, with some mention of TV

Parents reported using a set system of rewards and punishments, with video games, television, and movies appearing in every response but two;

Also: shopping, dinner out, friends over, mall, allowance, spending the night, grounded, loss of privileges, extra chores

About the Author

Jeanneine P. Jones taught for fifteen years in a nationally acclaimed middle school in Alamance County. She is now a professor of middle grades education and the program's coordinator. Her primary accomplishments include two teaching awards, recognized service to more than 125 schools and districts, and more than 75 professional publications and presentations.