

Television: The Shifts and Changes in Prime Time Families

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INTRODUCTION

My work with students in public schools has spanned prekindergarten through sixth grade. After ten years of teaching students from very diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds in Houston's public schools, I continue to be concerned about my students' abilities to question what they see and hear on television, in films, and through advertising. I have come to the conclusion that dialogue is not a natural occurrence in families today after viewing films and television programs, even though visual entertainment is a daily part of their lives.

As a part of the language arts curriculum in my district, I have taken students to the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston to participate in a program called "Screening America," which is a curriculum-based education program "that uses films and television programs to assist in the teaching of high school English, social studies, and English as a second language" (Draigh and Marcus, 12). Films, such as *I Love Lucy* - "Job Switching" and Chaplain's *The Immigrant*, were viewed by students as historical artifacts. My students always enjoyed the Lucy episode the best. What was surprising, though, was the discussion held after the viewing because my students were very reluctant to participate. Knowing that middle school students love to talk about anything, I began to think about why. I asked students very specific questions about character traits and actions in the film upon their return from the trip to the museum. What I found consistently was that students could talk about the characters and the action of the story; however, they could not connect those traits and actions to the historical context of families in general in the 1950s. I realized that my students needed more background knowledge than I was giving them prior to the trip. I also came to the conclusion that most of the problems centering around the lack of discussion by my students rested in my hands.

My experience with middle school students in these film discussions has created an opportunity for a curriculum unit focusing on the shifts and changes within the family as portrayed on prime time television. My goals are to develop a unit of five lesson blocks using research skills, writing creatively, writing to compare and contrast, and thinking critically about the history of mainstream American family life through a study of prime time television families from the 1950s to the present.

OBJECTIVES:

Sixth grade students will use viewing and representing skills teamed with writing for research to examine the shifts and changes in families as portrayed on prime time television during the last five decades. The five blocks begin with a focus on research skills, using a variety of reference sources through a one-computer classroom format. Cooperative learning activities and oral reporting are incorporated to bring a wide variety of background knowledge to the students. Graphic organizers are used to create products for each lesson by documenting and organizing information for writing and reporting. The final block allows students to select a current program to bring to their group study.

PURPOSE:

The purpose of this unit is to give students the tools to begin to think critically about television in general through a historical study of the shifts and changes in prime time families. Students will experience the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate what they view on television on a daily basis by working in cooperative groups through the five blocks of the unit.

This unit is designed for sixth grade gifted and talented students. However, through modifications in the block presentations and use of teacher-directed materials, this unit can be easily adapted for diverse student populations as well.

STRATEGIES:

The blocks are outlined in five separate units of study: The History of Television; An Introduction to Prime Time Families of the 1950s; Analyzing Shifts and Changes in Prime Time Families of the 1950s and 1960s; Evaluating Non-Traditional Families of the 1970s and 1980s; and A Reflection on Prime Time Families of the 1990s. Each block includes materials, activities, and suggested evaluations. Readings and films to be used within each block are also listed. Students need access to the internet for the beginning block which introduces and/or reviews research skills in a cooperative learning format.

The unit is divided into five blocks which can be presented as a six-week unit or used as independent blocks, depending on the dynamics of the students and classroom. Time allotted for each of the five blocks will vary depending upon the ability levels of the students. Each block is estimated to take approximately four to five hour sessions. Evaluation projects and presentations will extend that time. The blocks are designed to be presented chronologically; however, each block can be adapted to stand alone, depending on curriculum goals and objectives.

UNIT OVERVIEW:

Television viewing today is predominantly a passive experience in front of a set within the home. Many homes have more than one set so that even passive viewing is done in isolation from other family members. Because visual images today are a major source of gathering news information and entertainment, it is only fair that students develop visual literacy skills as a part of their language arts curriculum in order to critically evaluate the visual messages they receive on a daily basis. As Connor points out, “we tend to watch it (television) more frequently, and therefore the repetition of TV messages...may have more cumulative impact...and must necessarily influence the ways in which people ‘make meaning’ about the world around them” (Connor, 22). Student development of visual literacy skills allows students to become lifelong learners, “alerting them to characteristic ways in which popular film and television productions often manipulate and trivialize historical issues” (Connor, 24).

Connor suggests that there are three basic areas viewers should question about moving image documents: the document's content, production, and reception. Historians also ask these same questions of historical documents or artifacts being investigated.

Content questions focus on the image on the screen. When questioning a visual image's content, the viewer must recognize that filmmakers manipulate time and space, thus allowing the reshaping and manipulation of reality. Connor suggests that "addressing the language of images" (12) is an important component in acquiring visual literacy skills. The visual language of the filmmaker includes the duration of a shot, camera angle, camera movement, lighting, and color. Dialogue, music, and sound effects can also influence the meaning of a visual image. In addition, viewers should consider the point of view of the story.

Production questions deal with how and why images got on the screen. Collaborative efforts by producers, directors, screenwriters, cinematographers, editors, actors, and publicists all come together to create a visual image. The technological limitations of the time the image was produced should also be considered. A special aspect of the golden age of television was the live television audience, encouraging actors and directors to be innovative, but limiting the types of programs attempted at that time (Conner, 17-19).

Questions about reception address the impact a visual image has had upon society. Because each viewer brings a unique background of cultural, racial, sexual, and political predispositions, "every viewer...sees a unique version of a film" (Connor, 20). Time is also a consideration when questioning the reception of a visual image. Technological advances in television editing may make some film images appear too slow. Also some images may be so closely tied to cultural situations of the past that they lose their point with present day audiences (Connor, 21).

By incorporating questions about a moving image document's content, production, and reception, the viewer becomes an active viewer, better able to think critically about moving images today.

BLOCK 1: THE HISTORY OF TELEVISION

Overview:

Visual entertainment has become a primary source of gathering information as Americans approach the 21st century. Today, ninety-eight percent of American households own at least one television set. Over 67% subscribe to cable television. However, television as a major source of entertainment is only a little over 50 years old.

On September 7, 1927, at the age of 21, a man named Philo Farnsworth developed the first electronic television picture. He conceived the idea several years earlier at the age of 14. His high school science teacher, Justin Tolman, was recognized by Farnsworth as the man who provided the inspiration and essential knowledge he needed to develop his idea. However, RCA

challenged Farnsworth's invention in patent hearings and continued litigation hearings long after the U.S. Patent Office's decision in 1934 that the invention belonged to Farnsworth.

During World War II, the sale of television sets was suspended and at the end of the war, Farnsworth's patents were expiring. RCA quickly took over the production and sales of television sets, crediting their scientists as the "fathers of television." (Postman, 94) According to Kent Farnsworth, his father felt he had "created kind of a monster, a way for people to waste a lot of their lives." Farnsworth's view of the value of television in the home was "there's nothing on it worthwhile, and we're not going to watch it in this household" (Postman, 94).

Student Readings:

Postman, Neil. "Electrical Engineer Philo Farnsworth." *Time 1000. The Century's Greatest Minds*. March 29, 1999. pp. 92-94.

Materials:

Current almanac.

Current newspaper or *TV Guide*.

"Brief History of Film, Video, and Television Technology." *A/V History*. <http://www.soundsite.com/history/filmhis.html>, (21 June, 1999).

"History of TV Advertising." *Advertising Age*. http://adage.com/news_and_features/special_reports/tv/, (21 June, 1999).

Activity:

Using a jigsaw format for cooperative learning, groups of four students select a research area of study. Areas include the internet, almanac, periodical, and newspaper or *TV Guide*. Students work in their assigned research area to collect information to form a summary that all in the group agree to communicate back to their original groups. Students report back to their original groups so that all four members have access to the information from each of the four research areas.

Evaluation:

Working cooperatively in their original groups, students create a visual to communicate the information gathered on the history of television. Examples can include a scroll television, dramatization of a news program, or a story board using text and illustrations. Presentations by groups can be video taped and assessed using rubrics designed to meet each project's criteria. Project criteria can be submitted by student groups and agreed upon by both teacher and students.

HISD Goals/Objectives:

ELAV.6.1.b. Interpret important events and ideas gathered from a variety of media.

ELAV.6.1.c. Use media texts to explore ideas, cultures, and points of view.

ELAV.6.3.a. Produce visuals to enhance and extend oral and written presentations.

ELAV.6.3.b. Experiment with design (use of shape, color, lines, texture, proportion) to effect and change meanings.

BLOCK 2: AN INTRODUCTION TO PRIME TIME FAMILIES OF THE 1950s

Overview:

After World War II, women's roles began to change dramatically. Because jobs were needed by the soldiers returning home, women who had previously held those jobs during the war were sent back home. Society changed its mind about working women and looked down on women who wanted to pursue a career. Fewer women went to college than in the 1920s and 1930s and jobs that were available to women in the 1950s were much lower paying than jobs available to men.

Because the war had interrupted family life in America, few people complained about these changes. With a strong post-war economy, homes became more comfortable and suburbs began to flourish. Families could afford refrigerators, cars, air conditioners, and televisions. Life was good.

Television after World War II became the “uncrowned queen of popular entertainment” with 4.4 million people owning television sets in 1950. By 1960, 50 million sets had been sold (Taylor, 20). Television programs in the 1950s were modeled after radio programs in forms such as comedies, game shows, variety shows, and anthologies. Episodic series emerged in the late 1950s to include *I Love Lucy* and *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (Taylor, 24), and America's best selling magazine became *TV Guide* (Draigh and Marcus, 10-11).

Student Readings:

Draigh, David, and Gail S. Marcus. “*Program Guide for Screening America.*” American Museum of the Moving Image. New York: Alexander Isley Design, 1991.

Materials: (Suggested Film)

I Love Lucy. “Job Switching.” Directed by William Asher. Produced by Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. (September 15, 1952)

Activity:

Students develop interview questions for topic, “The Day the Television Set Arrived.” Interviews should focus on memories from the late 1940s or early 1950s. Students interview grandparents

to obtain personal responses to the first time they watched television in their homes. Student interviews can be written, taped, or video taped in Draft 1 stage.

Evaluation:

Students produce a final draft of their interview with a focus on point of view. Students can write creatively from the point of view of their grandparents or from the television's point of view.

HISD Goals/Objectives:

ELAV.6.2.c. Evaluate how different media forms influence and inform.

BLOCK 3: ANALYZING THE SHIFTS AND CHANGES IN PRIME TIME FAMILIES OF THE 1950s AND 1960s

Overview:

Most major television families of the 1950s, like *Leave It to Beaver*, *Ozzie and Harriet*, *Father Knows Best*, and *I Love Lucy*, were happy middle-class families living in the suburbs or working towards that goal. Commercials during these early days enhanced the affluence these families portrayed by advertising in the homes and even the kitchens of these television families, showing the viewers “perfect consumers and, by extension, perfect families” (Taylor, 25-26). These family sitcoms also “articulated not so much the realities of postwar affluence...but a harmonious society in which the conditions for social conflict would disappear because there would be plenty of everything to go round” (Taylor, 26).

Television families of the 1950s offered moral guidance based on clear cut rules through the love and respect they had for each other and their children. Television families also portrayed children as loving and obedient, growing up to follow in the footsteps of their parents. At the same time, “ethnic” comedies of the early 1950s, like *Amos 'n' Andy*, were rapidly disappearing as race was becoming a major source of social conflict.

However, in the early 1960s, television families began to change. Even though the networks felt the viewing audience was not quite ready for a divorcee as a central character, Lucy returned to a new series during this time in the role of a widow following her divorce from Desi Arnaz. During the 1960s, sitcoms used the role of the widow to open up “the lives of characters to romance and increased contact with the outside world without risking the stigma of divorce” (Taylor, 28). *The Brady Bunch*, one of the last “happy” television families, brought together two widowed parents and six children. This program introduced viewers to the “instability of marriage and the fracturing of the nuclear family” (Taylor, 28) in an acceptable way. However, widowed characters were not just limited during this time to females. *The Andy Griffith Show* became the fourth most popular show during the 1964-1965 season. The main character, Andy, was a widower raising a young boy with the help of his aunt.

Materials:

Evidence and commentary t-chart.

Suggested Film:

The Andy Griffith Show . “The Rivals.” Directed by Bob Sweeney. (April 8, 1963)

Activity:

Students collect evidence and produce commentary after viewing the *I Love Lucy* and *The Andy Griffith Show* sitcoms. Evidence can focus on roles of male and female characters within the television family unit. Teacher should model evidence/commentary t-charts in a whole group setting using the previously viewed *I Love Lucy* episode as an example prior to the viewing of *The Andy Griffith Show* film. Students, working with a partner, then complete a second t-chart, selecting evidence and producing commentary on *The Andy Griffith Show* episode.

Evaluation:

Using a timed paired discussion format, allow students to review their evidence and commentary t-charts with a partner. At the completion of the timed discussion (5 minutes) students come together in a whole group discussion initiated by the teacher (opening question only) using group discussion procedures (one person speaks at a time, all ideas are valued, etc.). Focus of the discussion should center around the roles of male and female characters within the television families of the 1950s and 1960s, looking specifically at their similarities and differences.

HISD Goals/Objectives:

ELAV.6.1.a. Describe how illustrators’ choice of style, artistic elements, and choice of media help to represent or extend the text.

ELAV.6.1.b. Interpret important events and ideas gathered from a variety of media.

ELAV.6.1.c. Use media texts to explore ideas, cultures, and points of view.

**BLOCK 4: EVALUATING NON-TRADITIONAL FAMILIES
OF THE 1970s AND 1980s****Overview:**

A new ratings game began to develop during the early 1970s and continued through the 1980s that focused on demographics to break down the viewing audience by age, sex, income, and other variables for advertisers. Shows were grouped by the type of viewing audience and their spending habits. As stated by Taylor, women between the ages of eighteen and forty-nine were the most profitable sources of revenue since they remained the chief buyers of consumer goods

for themselves and for their families. Advertising, however, still remained geared to the whole family.

A new technique also developed during the 1970s called the spinoff. Characters that had become popular with their audiences were “spun off” into their own series. The top-rated family show during that time, *All in the Family*, was followed by spinoffs like *The Jeffersons*, *Maude*, and *Good Times*. In the early 1980s, *Archie Bunker’s Place* and *Gloria* also developed.

Television families of the 1970s were quite different from those of the 1950s and 1960s. Families like the Bunkers in *All in the Family* became a place to talk about and act upon the social conflicts of the time. Many series offered their audiences families that were experiencing spouse or child abuse, divorce, teenage pregnancy, and a variety of marital conflict. As Taylor states, “social trouble was increasingly being defined as family trouble” (Taylor, 65). However, Archie’s exaggerated physical and verbal quirks can be viewed as traditional elements of comedy, relating to the vaudeville kinds of routines that were central to the humor found in the *I Love Lucy* episodes of the 1950s.

As television sitcoms entered the early 1980s, the most popular show looked back on an earlier theme of successful suburban life. Produced in 1984, *The Cosby Show* focused on a black family living in a wealthy neighborhood that appealed to the whole family again. Themes for small children, teenagers, and adults appealed to a mass audience. The Huxtable family became much less adversarial than that of the Bunkers. Surrounded by material success, the Huxtable’s radiated the wealth and style of a successful professional family. Many critics felt *The Cosby Show* was a return to the 1950s style of domestic comedy where everyone basically resolved their problems and got along.

The Cosby Show also drastically changed the content of mainstream television with its departure from accepted racial stereotypes. However, many critics felt that the Huxtable family represented only a small minority of black people and in many ways also produced “a deterioration in the social conditions of most black Americans” (Jhally and Lewis, 6). Social statistics outside of television showed that advances made by black Americans during the 1960s and 1970s were actually reversing during the 1980s and 1990s. Television, once again, was creating a gap between social realities and the lives of television families. The *Cosby Show* was viewed by some to “sustain the harmful myth of social mobility” (Jhally and Lewis, 7) and to fail to acknowledge the discrimination that prevented most black Americans from reaching the Huxtable’s level of success.

Materials:

Evidence and commentary t-chart.

Suggested Films:

All in the Family. “Archie and Edith Alone.” Directed by John Rich. Produced by Norman Lear. (CBS 1971-1979)

Choice television rerun of *The Cosby Show*. Videos unavailable for purchase at the present time.

Activity:

Students continue to collect evidence and produce commentary using the t-chart format from Block 3. Teacher should continue modeling evidence and commentary t-charts. Students produce a t-chart for each of the two programs viewed, either independently or in pairs again.

Evaluation:

Timed pair discussion and whole group discussion should be retaught and repeated as in Block 3 evaluation. Teacher may want to develop a rubric for the final whole group discussion format and video tape student participation. Students should be allowed to complete a self evaluation reflecting participation, contributions, etc.

HISD Goals/Objectives:

ELAV.6.1.a. Describe how illustrators' choice of style, artistic elements, and choice of media help to represent or extend the text.

ELAV.6.1.b. Interpret important events and ideas gathered from a variety of media.

ELAV.6.1.c. Use media texts to explore ideas, cultures, and points of view.

BLOCK 5: A REFLECTION ON PRIME TIME FAMILIES OF THE 1990s

Overview:

Television families have changed dramatically from the 1950s to the present. Norman Lear, producer of the series *All in the Family*, *Sanford and Son*, *Maude*, and *The Jeffersons*, has been credited with the ability to bring to television families "highly charged issues as racism, sexism, sexual preferentialism, economic uncertainty, the generation gap, and a wide array of subjects that had previously seemed beyond the ken of situation comedy" (Marc and Thompson, 49). Television series are even looked upon in the 1990s as being historically "pre-Norman Lear" or "post-Norman Lear" shows, even though his current projects do not always obtain the necessary ratings to become a series (Marc and Thompson, 59).

Television continues to tell stories. As television families approach the end of the twentieth century, they can be called "less conservative or more liberal versions of reality" (Lichter, Lichter, and Rothman, 289). However, as students begin to incorporate questions about a moving image document's content, production, and reception, they will become active viewers, better able to think critically about moving images.

Student Readings:

Current *TV Guide Magazine*.

Materials:

Television diary form.
Students' favorite half hour prime time "family" program.

Activity:

A whole group discussion is initiated by the teacher asking the students if there are any television families that they would like to be a part of today. Students should explain their choices. Listening and speaking skills are reinforced through a whole group discussion format.

Students are then given a "television diary" to take home and fill out for a period of seven days. Students chart names of programs, dates and times programs are aired, and total time spent viewing television for the seven day period. Using this data, students select their favorite half hour prime time "family" program and plan a viewing time for the coming week. Students should then record specific data from the program (i.e., main characters and their roles within the family, setting, plot, and solution). Teacher collects "television diary" at the end of the selected viewing and creates homogeneous groups based on programs viewed. Students then generate a group t-chart including evidence and commentary from their group's discussion about the television program.

Evaluation:

Students use evidence and commentary from their current program to compare and contrast with a choice program from one of the previous lesson blocks (*I Love Lucy*, *The Andy Griffith Show*, *All In the Family*, or *The Cosby Show*). Students produce a compare and contrast graphic organizer and draft one of the classificatory writing assignment. Using process writing, this piece may also be chosen to take to final draft stage.

HISD Goals/Objectives:

ELAV.6.2.a. Analyze the various ways visual image makers (illustrators, film makers, cartoonists) represent ideas in different ways.

ELAV.6.2.b. Analyzes purposes for which media is created and produced.

ELAV.6.2.c. Evaluate how different media forms influence and inform.

ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

“Brief History of Film, Video, and Television Technology.” *A/V History*. <http://www.soundsite.com/history/filmhis.html>, (21 June, 1999).

This link source provides a brief time line focusing on the major developments of television and film from 1872 to 1994.

Brokaw, Tom. *The Greatest Generation*. New York: Random House, 1998. 139-173, 233-257.

In this text, Tom Brokaw offers personal reflections from interviews during his career as a journalist. Specific pages cited allow the reader to develop insight into the feelings and emotions of men and women in post World War II America.

Draigh, David, and Gail S. Marcus. “Program Guide for Screening America.” American Museum of the Moving Image. New York: Alexander Isley Design, 1991.

This program guide gives the reader information about life during the 1950s in relationship to the development of the *I Love Lucy* television series. This guide specifically summarizes the episode entitled “Job Switching.”

“History of TV Advertising.” *Advertising Age*. http://adage.com/news_and_features/special_reports/tv/, (21 June, 1999).

This link source allows the reader access to information on television advertising from the 1940s to the present. Each decade is presented individually.

Jhally, Sut, and Justin Lewis. *Enlightened Racism*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1992. 1-14.

This text looks at race in the post-Civil Rights era through a study of audience reactions to *The Cosby Show* in relationship to television as a cultural form in America.

Lichter, Robert S., Linda S. Lichter, and Stanley Rothman. *Watching America*. New York: Prentice Hall Press, 1991. 51-79, 287-301.

This text offers insight into the ways in which television acts as a reflection of viewers’ lives. Reference is made to the private lives, working world, crime and punishment, and public issues reflected in specific television series.

Marc, David, and Robert J. Thompson. *Prime Time, Prime Movers*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1992. 49-60.

In this text, the authors chronicle Norman Lear's contributions to television and relate his successful series to a historical look at comedic sitcoms.

O'Connor, John E., ed. *Image as Artifact: The Historical Analysis of Film and Television*. New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Co., 1990. 10-26.

This text defines and describes three specific areas of questioning traditionally asked by historians when analyzing a document or artifact. O'Connor suggests that moving image documents can also be analyzed using this historical approach.

Postman, Neil. "Electrical Engineer Philo Farnsworth." *Time 1000: The Century's Greatest Minds*. March 29, 1999. 91-94.

This article gives biographical information on the development of the television set during the first half of the twentieth century. Patent rights and corporate power struggles are described briefly in relationship to television.

Taylor, Ella. *Prime Time Families: Television Culture in Postwar America*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

Taylor offers a detailed historical perspective on the development of episodic television from the 1950s to the early 1990s. Research on advertising trends, audience demographics, and programming strategies are also presented .

STUDENT READING LIST:

“Brief History of Film, Video, and Television Technology.” *A/V History*. <http://www.soundsite.com/history/filmhis.html>, (21 June, 1999).

Current Almanac.

Current *TV Guide* Magazine.

Draigh, David, and Gail S. Marcus. “Program Guide for Screening America.” American Museum of the Moving Image. New York: Alexander Isley Design, 1991.

“History of TV Advertising.” *Advertising Age*. http://adage.com/news_and_features/special_reports/tv/, (21 June, 1999).

Postman, Neil. “Electrical Engineer Philo Farnsworth.” *Time 1000. The Century’s Greatest Minds*. March 29, 1999. pp. 92-94.

VIDEOGRAPHY:

All in the Family

I Love Lucy

The Andy Griffith Show

The Cosby Show

CLASSROOM MATERIALS:

Computer with internet access.

Television and VCR.

T-chart form.

Television diary form.

Example

Television Viewing Diary

Program Title:

Date Viewed:

Time Viewed:

Brief Synopsis:

Program Title:

Date Viewed:

Time Viewed:

Brief Synopsis:

Program Title:

Date Viewed:

Time Viewed:

Brief Synopsis:

**(Students continue documentation of additional viewing
over a seven day period.)**