

TEACHING TELEVISION: LAW AND ORDER, SPECIAL VICTIMS UNIT

Berna Mutlu, Brian Schaffer, Nicole Rosemeyer, Taven Bennett

Content List
Introduction
Police Procedural Dramas
Narrative Structure and Story Elements
Conventions of Police Procedurals
Common Plotlines
Possible Assignments
Educational Implications Regarding Literacy

INTRODUCTION

It is vital for teachers as well as students to realize and understand that new modes of communication demand a new kind of literacy. It is our responsibility to prepare students for a life saturated with media. Kubey states, "children throughout the U.S. ... spend an average of three hours each day watching television" (23). With our children dedicating this many years of their life to watching or listening to electronic media it is only right that in today's world we explicitly educate them on media literacy and teach them to be discerning readers and interpreters of this world in which they live.

In addition to the inherent benefits of teaching media explicitly, teaching narrative structure through television can also improve understanding of print narratives. If a teacher succeeds in scaffolding students into a more in-depth analysis of mediated story lines, then they have provided the student with tools to analyze written texts as well. Reaching reluctant readers through the use of media that they already take in (tv, movies, comic books, internet items, etc.) on an everyday basis is both effective and invaluable. It can open a doorway into analyzing and thinking critically about literature.

DEFINITION OF THE GENRE: POLICE DRAMA/PROCEDURAL POLICE GENRE

Police programs began in the late 1940s. The U.S. procedural police genre focuses on social issues with physical action presented in a variety of different ways. Police programs typically involve car chases, gun battles, and fist fights. The core issue is to protect the fabric of society: justice, social order, and law. The police program brings to attention the conflicts between individual freedom and social responsibility in a democratic society.

Police programs mainly focus on depicting the reality of the police force, the events they experience, how they find criminals among several suspects, and their battles in saving victims. Police programs strive to invoke realism and authenticity. Public interest in this particular genre is closely related with the degree of persuasiveness of the events, actions, and the scenes. Viewers are intrigued by the puzzles presented within each episode, and they enjoy putting together the clues that the police officers find.

Police force differs from private detectives in that they are employees of the state, and they are sworn to protect and serve individuals' freedom and rights. This obligates police officers to enforce law but also maintain order: they are unlike private detectives who can be more flexible in obeying the law. This particular aspect of police work is used as a source of conflict in different forms where police get caught between what the law entails and their own judgments of the situation. Ultimately, their duty is to enforce a higher moral code by obeying the law.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND STORY ELEMENTS

Police programs are usually presented in the “[closed](#)” [narrative](#) form, where the subplots B and/or C has a definite closure by the time the episode reaches its end, while the basic plot A keeps going on during the entire season. The [main plot](#) in the story world is always the same, and each episode involves different [subplots](#) that create multiple dangling causes that make the viewers curious about what is going to happen next. Dangling cause refers to a cause that results in an effect that turns into another cause which, then, leads to another effect (Pace, 2006). For instance, in *Law and Order SVU*, the focus is on investigating and prosecuting sexual oriented crimes. Characters include Detective Olivia Benson, a child of rape; Detective Elliot Stabler, a family man; Detective John Munch, an ex-homicide cop from Baltimore; Detective Fin Tutuola, a streetwise cop; and Captain Donald Cragen, their boss.



The stories of detectives Benson (left) and Stabler (right) make up Law and Order: SVU's plots B & C

Each episode starts with a sexual crime that has just been committed and has been reported by a pedestrian or a by-passer, and there are multiple suspects who could have committed the crime due to a variety of reasons. Each suspect is revealed within a certain context and is tied to the event with the available clues, but later we find out that we have been misled by these clues, and there are other clues revealed pointing at another suspect. At certain episodes, the story ends in a completely unexpected way where lawyers may not be able provide enough evidence to put criminals in jail.

CONVENTIONS OF POLICE PROCEDURALS

The core story elements in *Law and Order SVU* and other similar police programs are:

1. a quest (to find a missing person who could be a rape victim; to find the criminal who committed crime by raping and/or killing someone)
2. suspense (a question mark over the success of the quest: Will the criminal be found? Will the victim be saved?)
3. conflict resolution (The jury reaching a verdict about the criminal case: The criminal either goes to jail or he gets away with the crime due to lack of sufficient evidence.)

COMMON PLOT LINES IN POLICE PROCEDURALS

1. Victim gets involved in an unknown situation.
2. Victim is discovered as dead or alive
3. Investigators are assigned to take over the case with background information.
4. Investigators start their task of looking for the criminal.
5. Investigators gather partial clues by physically searching and/or by questioning informers/misinformers/experts.
6. Investigators identify a perpetrator/false perpetrator.
7. Investigators collect and question perpetrator/false perpetrator.
8. Perpetrator/False perpetrator provides partial answers.
9. Investigators elucidate the case identifying the perpetrator as true. (If the accused is turns out to be falsely accused, then the case is not resolved, and the narrative goes back to the phases of the investigation.)
10. Perpetrator is put into jail or perpetrator gets away due to lack of sufficient evidence.

EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

Police programs are an important part of popular TV culture reaching out to audiences of a wide range of age groups from different backgrounds. In educational settings, such programs can be used both for literary and educational purposes because students can exercise their problem-solving skills by using explicit and implicit clues in the episode as well as practice their critical thinking skills by studying the narrative elements that differentiate this particular genre from other TV genres.

In “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” by New London Group (1996), there are four cyclical approaches to teaching multimedia texts: Situated Practice, Overt Instruction, Critical Framing, and Transformed Practices. By teaching television programs within this framework, teachers can create multimodal learning environments that stimulate students’ critical thinking skills. For example, teachers can help students express their already existing knowledge through think-aloud and group activities where students feel comfortable to share ideas about police programs. Teachers can also introduce elements of the story world within Law and Order, such as characterization, setting, and narrative structures, and they can ask students to analyze each episode in terms of the social messages that are given. Students can also evaluate events and causes from a critical perspective and develop a media-literate outlook on police dramas.

Police dramas can also be used to support ESOL learners’ language development as well as their critical thinking skills. Teachers can design activities that are based on creative and collaborative work involving both ESOL students and the native speakers of English in the classroom. In these activities, ESOL students would have an opportunity to work on different elements that contribute to this genre and differentiate this particular genre from others, such as narrative structures, characterization, and production techniques. Another successful technique to assist ESOL learners would be dubbed versions of police dramas, such as *Law and Order SVU*. Other police programs presented in languages other than English would give native speakers an opportunity to learn from ESOL students and to empathize with ESOL learners efforts in trying to make sense of auditory input through visual cues and gestures and unfolding events. In other words, both ESOL students and the mainstream students can develop an understanding of TV program design and produce storyboards of their own TV shows based on this structure.

Educational Implications for Literacy <http://focuswest.org/learn/lands/story.htm>

TEACHING EXAMPLE

SAMPLE LESSON: Students create their own plot lines based on television conventions

Purpose / Goal: Apply the knowledge of television plot lines to authentic situations;
Classify events as Plot A, B, or C

Objective: Students will be able to create a basic plot outline which adheres to the conventions of the television narrative

Process / Procedures for Students:

Create a list of 5 things that are happening in your life right now. You may include goals, classes, jobs, and personal conflicts. Decide which of those things you want to be the main plot. Which one is most important, lasts longer, or will have the most effect on you? Label it A. Choose one minor thing happening in your life right now that is important enough to make it into a show about your life. This may be an obstacle that you have to overcome in relation to A. Label this second choice B. Choose a very minor thing in your life which could be resolved in one episode in a TV show about your life. This may be something like passing a test or completing this presentation. Label this C.

Process / Procedures for Teachers:

Direct students in the above activities. Offer personal examples.

Materials List: Power Point with written instructions for follow-up activity (optional);
Personal examples created with or without students

Assessment: Work collected / observed: Creation of a plot line consisting of A,B, and C
plot lines

Support Accommodation: Extensive explanation and background building prior to
individual work Visual support using video clips and written instructions

Challenge Accommodation: Students may work in pairs if necessary; Teacher available
for assistance during the assignment

ADDITIONAL TEACHING IDEAS & POSSIBLE ASSIGNMENTS

<http://www.sasked.gov.sk.ca/docs/ela20/teach4.html>

<http://www.col-ed.org/cur/lang/lang82.txt>

REFERENCES

Heinze, J. (1999). Supporting English Language Learners. Instructor. New York, N.Y.
114: 4.

Kubey, R. (2004). What is Media Literacy and Why is it Important? Television
Quarterly. 34, 21-27.

Mayer, R. (2005). Multimedia Learning. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

New London Group, The (1996) A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies: Designing Social
Futures. Harvard Educational Review, 66:1.

Pace, B. (2006). Teaching Narrative Media and Media Literacy. Gainesville, Florida:
University Copy & More.

<http://www.frogbritches.com/Harriss-UFVA-05.pdf>

http://www.mda.gov.sg/wms.ftp/writing_scripts.pdf

<http://www.museum.tv/archives/etv/G/htmlG/genre/genre.htm>

http://www.starpulse.com/Television/Law_and_Order_SVU/Summary/