

# EDUCATION: WATCH AND LEARN, KIDS: Why are Hollywood films taking over high school math, history, even geography class?

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Struggling to decipher a Shakespeare play has been a long-standing rite of passage for students in high school. Today that chore has been eased somewhat. Rather than plod through the text, Grade 9 students at some Canadian schools instead watch a movie in class. *Romeo + Juliet*, with Leonardo di Caprio and Claire Danes, is a popular choice.

It's certainly easier on the eyes. But not everyone is happier. "When I found out my son was watching a movie rather than actually opening a book and reading the words on paper, I was shocked," says Karen Huff, the mother of a Grade 9 student at a high school in Waterloo, Ont. "They seem to watch an awful lot of movies in school these days."

And not just in English class. Movies -- big-budget Hollywood-style movies -- now occupy a significant place in Canadian classrooms. With teachers claiming film is the surest way to engage students, celluloid teaching moments are popping up everywhere, from math class to geography.

School boards typically purchase blanket public viewing rights to show commercial movies to their students. The list of the 50 most popular films shown in high schools provided by Criterion Pictures, one of two copyright licensors in Canada, reveals approximately 2,000 showings of Hollywood movies in the month of February alone. And this is just a portion of the national total.

Literary adaptations are strongly represented on Criterion's list -- *Romeo + Juliet* is number one, and four of the top 10 are movies of Shakespearean plays. However, the list is quite diverse. The slacker comedy *School of Rock* was shown 23 times nationwide in February. *The Bucket List*: 26 times. *Transformers*: 21 times. *Star Trek*: 22 times. It's not readily obvious why these movies are relevant to any curriculum, as parents such as Huff complain.

A recent survey of approximately 20 Grade 9 students in Waterloo revealed a great array of celluloid curiosities. French teachers frequently show English-language movies such as *Spider-Man*, *Back to the Future* and *Elf* to their classes. Even with French subtitles activated, the pedagogical value of this is not clear. One math class watched the science-fiction movie *Jumper*. An English class sat through *Muppets in Space*.

The Waterloo survey also revealed a surprising propensity to screen movies in geography. During the current school year, Grade 9 geography students in the Waterloo Region District School Board watched *The Core*, *Unbreakable*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, all three *Jurassic Park* films, *Volcano* and *The Perfect Storm*, among many others. While most of these movies have some tenuous connection to the physical sciences, the educational value of watching Tommy Lee Jones save Los Angeles from a river of lava in *Volcano* seems slight.

One class watched the John Candy and Steve Martin comedy *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* as an example of the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of transportation. Another student saw five movies in one term; that's nearly 10 per cent of the provincially mandated 110 hours of instruction time.

"These movies are garbage, basically," snaps Michael English, chair of the geography and environmental studies department at Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. "They don't represent anything that has to do with reality or science."

English loudly laments the overall quality of geography instruction in high school as preparation for university, and suspects feature films have become a "time-killer and treat given to students to please them and keep them happy." The fact students often report movies are shown in serial fashion during the final 20 minutes of