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Using the film Crash to Promote a Multicultural Identity in Students
Richard P. Long

This review demonstrates how the film Crash can be used in the classroom to show students a non-threatening way to reconsider stereotypical views of racism.

Keywords: film; multicultural; prejudice, racism

Introduction

Until the film Crash was released in 2005, Hollywood timidly made movies such as Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner? and To Kill a Mockingbird, in which the underlying theme was that other people are racists, not us. Crash, literally and figuratively, questions that stereotypical view of racism. Crash suggests that each of us is indeed racist and, when placed in a threatening situation, these prejudices control our behavior. Using selected scenes from the film, students have the opportunity to define or redefine their multicultural identity as they explore the dependent, independent, and interdependent relationships of a carefully portrayed, culturally representative cross-section of human interactions and reactions in 2005 Los Angeles.

Research on Using Film to Promote Multicultural Identity

Loewen (1991) states that “our students construct much of their understanding of race relations from visual material” (p. 88). For many Caucasian-American students, information found in feature films informs their world view about people of color. People of color also form opinions of society and themselves through the movies they watch.

In a similar study, Valdez and Halley (1999) explore the connections between personal problems and social issues in teaching Mexican-American experiences using film. They contend that what we comprehend is the product of a relationship among our own experience, how we give meaning to that experience, and how we understand ourselves. Bakhtin (as cited in Valdez and Halley, 1999) sees interpretive understanding as being interwoven with self-understanding.

As they watch the film, students can engage in a critical dialogue about it and their own multicultural experiences. The pedagogical task is to illuminate connections between what is viewed and who the viewers are as a multiculturally educated people.

Metaphors for Interconnectedness: Fender Benders and Snowflakes

Crash contains both literal and metaphorical elements to present the issue of the nature of duality in humans. The film, directed by Paul Haggis, begins with a fender bender on Mulholland Drive between an African-American police detective accompanied by his Latino girlfriend and an Asian American woman (literal). Mulholland Drive is a dividing line between the have’s and have not’s of Los Angeles (metaphor). The film continues with portrayals of multicultural and socio-economic encounters on both levels. Between the beginning and the ending of the film are twenty-one scenes that show the lives of seven pairings and what happens when they intersect. Finally, a softer, ethereal-like metaphor of snow falling in Los Angeles closes the film.

Two overarching themes interplay throughout Crash. On one level the film explores the interconnectedness of human beings—a sense of community. This is not played out so much at a surface level, but at a higher level. For example, viewers get the idea that the Caucasian police officer is dependent on the African American social worker to provide medication to his ill father. The African-American wife of a movie director is dependent on the Caucasian police officer to rescue her from her car that is about to explode. They don’t
have an agreement to take care of each other and in fact may not care for each other, but at some point in the movie they do so despite racial differences. At still another level, there is the discovery that regardless of connectedness, there is racism within each of us due to cultural and familial influences. Racism surfaces in just about every character in the film.

In order to make the optimal impact on learning using the seven pairings, these scenes should be viewed in combinations to illustrate that the duality of racism and humanity are inherent in our nature. For example, to make the connections that deal with Officer Ryan, scenes 4 and 13 need to be viewed sequentially. In “Sobriety Test” (Scene 4) Officer Ryan, Caucasian-American, takes out his anger on an African-American Health Management Organization executive who isn’t responding fast enough to his father’s medical problem, and on an African-American entertainment industry couple, during their ride home from a social occasion. Then in “Trust” (Scene 13) Officer Ryan risks his own life to save the wife from a soon-to-explode Lincoln Navigator. We are asked to question his duality through the juxtaposition of events.

In another example, “A Personal Problem” (Scene 7) a young white policeman, asks to be transferred after watching his partner mishandle an African-American entertainment couple. In “Breaking Point” (Scene 15) the young white cop shows his civility by issuing a strong warning to the black entertainment executive instead of arresting the man for breaking the law. Then, in “Miscommunication” (Scene 19) the young white cop shoots and kills an innocent African-American young man.

These point-counterpoint scenes demonstrate, according to Hunter (2005), that “racism and nobility can exist in the same man, hate and love in the same woman, fear and loyalty, compromise and idealism, all the ying-yang dichotomies that make the human species so utterly confounding, yet so utterly fascinating” (p.1). As we raise expectations to increase students’ competencies in interacting effectively with diverse individuals, these vignettes challenge students to ask themselves, “Have you identified not only your humanity but also your inhumanity?” Equal time should be given to both the promise and problem of diversity.

**Classroom Applications**

Five of 21 scenes are referenced here to help instructors incorporate *Crash* into their lesson plans. After viewing the film, instructors can select these or identify and select others to incorporate into their particular courses.

*Crash* can be useful for graduate courses such as in Columbus State University’s College of Education – Integrating Multicultural/Global Studies throughout the Curriculum, Foundations of Education, Human Development, Motivation, and Learning, and Cultural Perspectives in Counseling, among others. The development of a discussion guide and/or self-reflection exercises will enhance students’ ability to get beyond the surface impressions of the film. In addition, students could deliver classroom presentations focusing on what the research says about the ethnic groups represented in the film and then compare and contrast what they find in the film’s depiction of the group. Another idea would be to direct students to identify multicultural concepts in the film, point out their own origins, and then to make connections to their own multicultural identity.

**Conclusion**

Using scenes from *Crash* can give students a non-threatening way to reconsider stereotypical views of racism. Despite the limiting factors of demographics and nonparticipation, students will be able to relate to one or more of the ethnically diverse pairings.

Instructors who provide students an opportunity to explore connections between what is viewed and their students’ multicultural identity will find not only an enriched classroom experience, but also students with a more fully informed view of the world.
References


Dr. Richard P. Long is a Professor of Counseling at Columbus State University in the Department of Counseling, Educational Leadership and Professional Studies and a member of the College of Education Diversity Committee. He wishes to acknowledge the research assistance of Jennifer McGhee and the assistance of the editorial board for their help in preparation of this review.