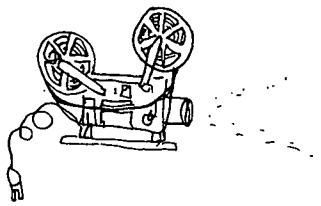
Transformation and Teaching in the Movies

Do the stories we tell ourselves about teaching through the movies reflect anything significant about what teaching is really like? James Rhem argues that the stories movies tell reflect some of the most profound, indeed archetypal, truths of teaching and the subtleties of transformation for both teacher and student which teaching brings about.

by
James Rhem

James Rhem is Executive Editor of *The National Teaching and Learning Forum*, a periodical on college teaching, and a freelance arts writer.



Almost everyone likes a happy ending even if it seems a tad implausible. Difficulties arise. We understand that. We expect that. But we like to see them worked out. Yet, as much as we like harmonious resolution, we also insist on change. Something must happen or seem to happen or we are not a happy culture. These two desires help explain the importance of the story in our lives. They also highlight the dilemma of education. We want new information, but we'd like it—new research findings, for example—to make sense and not rock the boat of what we thought we knew—at least not too much.

Over the long haul, understanding is the only thing likely to satisfy both our desire for "harmonious resolution" and our desire for "the new." Few vehicles of discourse serve our deep need for understanding better than the story, for the story continually reforms old knowledge in the light of new. And stories do this by persistently asking the same old, open questions that have preoccupied humankind from the beginning: What is "the good"? How do we "know"? What are we here for? Our new stories carry our old questions along with them and transform our understanding of them within the present world. Things "happen" in stories, and the primary thing that happens is that our understanding of the world changes and keeps pace.

It is for understanding and challenge, not for information, that we read stories. Thus, to speak of "stories of transformation" is, to me, to speak of all stories, not just of stories in which someone or something changes (usually for the better).

I've come to this view of the story in an odd way—through the movies. Last year I prepared and gave a keynote address at the annual meeting of the POD Network on "The Teacher in the Movies." In it, I traced the view of "the teacher" found in the almost 60 years of film history from *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939) to *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995). A doctorate in English Literature had prepared me to view the movies as stories. (Indeed, movies are not only one of America's most profound contributions to the arts, but also probably the most powerful mode of modern storytelling.) But I did not imagine how alive my understanding of the way stories work in our culture would become as a result of studying several dozen "teaching" films.

When we set out to tell a

story, we are participating in something much larger than ourselves; something with a larger history: more power, and greater importance. However modest our efforts, whether we are telling a bedtime story, recounting family history, or producing King Kong, we are releasing a work of imagination into the world. However new they seem to us, our efforts are the continuation of something very old. Almost inevitably they juggle archetypes, ideas we humans carry deep within us, and keel weights of stability in our navigation of new experience. Is there an archetype of "the teacher" in the way that there surely is of "the healer," "the advocate," and others? There seems to be. Ask yourself, "Who were the greatest teachers of all time?" For most people, a handful of names quickly comes to mind, and the list almost always includes Socrates and Jesus. These were the most frequently given names when I asked the question on the POD Listserve a few weeks before I spoke to that group. But the list of great teachers went on to include figures as humble as Mom and Dad.

To me, the confirmation that we carry an archetype of "the teacher" in our collective unconscious is almost as important as the characteristics of the archetype. We will argue endlessly in any one decade about what a teacher "ought" to be, but the fact that we keep coming back to the notion of the importance of teaching as a part of living is vitally important. It's not unimportant, of course, that all of these archetypal figures have in common lives of complete, life-giving sacrifice, but I think they would all agree that the learning to which their lives were dedicated is much more important than the parts they played in it.

But that claim seems to leave me talking about learning more than teaching, doesn't it? Interestingly enough, the more one studies teaching, the more one comes to see that it really can't be understood apart from learning. Learning may occur without formal teaching, but the proof of real teaching lies in learning. Learning is primary. It's no mere trendy twist that many campuses are calling their faculty development units, centers for "learning and teaching" rather than "teaching and learning."

When we look at serious (if necessarily simplified) portrayals of the teacher, we can't avoid seeing this shift from teaching to learning; it's part of the archetypal story of teaching. It's what teaching is about, and it isn't a thing a teacher does to someone else. Transformation isn't sorcery; it's the unavoidable magic in lifelong learning. In the movies, good teachers are not simply figures who facilitate transformation in others, but also figures willing to change in response to their experience. figures who learn, often as unwillingly as their students. Think about the two bookend figures in the history of movies about teaching—Mr. Chips and Mr. Holland. Setting aside, for the moment, the various forms of sentimentality and over-simplification in these films, why have they proven such popular and welcomed images of teaching? It's not the sentimentality. Both *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* and *Mr. Holland's Opus* are biographies, and in them, the central figure, the teacher, holds our attention and wins our sympathies because he is also, profoundly, a student. Within the context of a whole life story, we see the teacher learning, often openly, confessionally, and through the kinds of mistakes and misjudgments we might make.

Open learning stands as a reliable index of good teaching in movie portrayals. We don't find it in essentially bad teaching films like *The Paper Chase* (1973) or *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (1969), for example, but we do find it in good teaching films like *Stand and Deliver* (1987) *Educating Rita* (1983), *Blackboard Jungle* (1955) and *Apartment for Peggy* (1948). Learning is primary, and when the movies reflect that, we know they are being true to the archetype whatever else they may be saying about teaching.

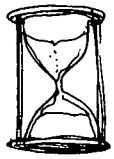
Learning is the form of change most accurately described as transformation, as well as being the only meaningful evidence of good teaching.

If learning is central to the archetype of the teacher as seen in the movies, a consistent characteristic of the archetype's story centers on the struggle to balance the masculine and feminine, the animus and anima. We think of this as a very modern struggle, something we've just discovered. *Women's Ways of*

Knowing, to cite the most influential recent book, has (when paired with William Perry's 1970 study of Harvard males, *Forms of Intellectual and Ethical Development in the College Years: A Scheme*) been popularly received as evidence that men and women think and "know" differently. It, together with the women's movement and a widespread discussion of diversity in general, has helped us remember that certainly we need at least these two fundamental perspectives to achieve a coherent understanding of our human experience. But the archetypal understanding of good teaching reflected in the movies has grasped this insight very firmly all along. In the movies, when the anima and animus are out of balance, the teaching is consistently flawed and the learning environment seriously compromised. When they are in balance, the opposite is true.

We can see all of this laid out very clearly in *Goodbye, Mr. Chips* (1939). The movie (based on the James Hilton novella) tells Charles Chipping's story in one great flashback. As the film begins, "Mr. Chips," now 84, is running to convocation at the start of school. He's been ill, but he's never missed an opening convocation and doesn't want to miss this one. But he does. He arrives too late. His story, his life as a teacher, is over. But the story of a new teacher's life is just beginning. The headmaster introduces Chips to this new teacher, and they have a brief conversation in the courtyard of Brookfield School.

Chips offers only one piece of advice. He tells the young teacher not to be afraid as he stands before his class. He reminds him that many have stood before where he will be standing. The young teacher, awed by the legendary Chips and eager to discover what he knows, says, "But surely in all these years you've found the secret [to good teaching]?" And Chips replies dreamily, "Oh, yes . . . but it took time, too much time, and I didn't 'find' it, you know. It was given to me."



Goodbye, Mr. Chips opens by dangling the bait before us. What is "the secret" and what does he mean it was "given" to him? To answer the question, the movie tells Chips's story, and it is a familiar story at first. Mr. Chipping starts off full of idealism and a desire to do well, but he lacks skill. He loses control of his classroom, and the headmaster has to step in and restore order. Counseling Mr. Chipping later, the headmaster tells him that "above all it takes authority, moral authority" to be a teacher. But he doesn't tell him what "moral authority" really means, and Chips doesn't really understand. He goes back and clamps down with strict discipline, keeping his students in for a special session that keeps the star cricket player from playing in an important match against a rival school. Brookfield loses the cup and from the mouth of a distraught student who blurts out, "Perhaps you don't mind being hated." Chips learns that a teacher's authority isn't centered in the kind of power he's resorted to. He sees it immediately, and in a wonderful moment of open learning, he says to the class: "Boys, my judgment in the first instance was hasty and ill-advised... If I've lost your friendship, there's little else left that I value."

What?! Can Chips value the "friendship" of a bunch of schoolboys more than the Latin he's there to teach them? He seems to be saying as much, but we have to let the story unfold for Chips himself to learn just what he means.

Chips's teaching improves in the next ten to fifteen years, but he's passed over for a house master's appointment which he dearly wanted. To salve his wound, his colleague, the German teacher, prods him into getting out of his rut and coming along on a vacation to Switzerland. There at the center of the movie on a mountain top in the mist above the clouds, he meets Kathy (Greer Garson)—the woman he will marry, the woman who will give him the nickname "Chips," the woman who, by her example and through her effect on him, gives him the "secret" of good teaching. It's a symbolic meeting of anima and animus in every way and a juncture of complete renewal for Chips. He's feeling tired, defeated, middle-aged. She speaks of not being able to see how one could ever grow old "in a world that's ever-new."

The boys are the future, ever-present, fixing the teacher in a timeless and important role. Chips and Kathy laugh, giddy in the sense that it's all "positively heroic." "We're gods," she says.

It's only after they marry and Kathy begins inviting Chips's students over for Sunday tea that Chips softens into using his innate compassion—the thing that led him to affirm the importance of their "friendship"—as part of his teaching.

Even in a simple story like this, we see that becoming a good teacher is more complicated than acquiring some classroom management skills and getting in touch with one's feminine (or masculine?) side. One of the important lessons of "Mr. Chips" (a point he stresses at the beginning of the film) is that it takes a long time to become a really great teacher.

That point (again in company with an emphasis on the importance of balance between anima and animus in one's perspective) recurs in *Mr. Holland's Opus* (1995).

In a way Mr. Holland is himself a very modern student. Unlike Mr. Chipping, who starts off full of dedication and eagerness, Mr. Holland doesn't want to be in this class at all. He doesn't want to be a teacher; he wants to be a composer. Teaching is his day job, not his career. This difference matters not at all because Chips and Holland (and perhaps all of us) follow similar patterns in learning. They learn the important lessons the hard way, through loss and reconciliation. They have to give something up in order to grasp something larger. Chips loses Kathy (and their baby) in childbirth, but wakens on his deathbed to rebut the colleagues he overhears saying, "Too bad he never had any children of his own." "What's that you say?" he says. "You're wrong; I've had thousands of them."

In *Mr. Holland's* big, sappy ending, Mr. Holland learns that he's touched thousands of lives too, but he wouldn't have if his anima hadn't also led him to grasp an important lesson. Ironically, as in Chips's case, it's one he "knew" but didn't understand. The heart of Mr. Holland's story of transformative learning emerges in the scene that follows his wife, Iris, telling him they're going to have a baby. He doesn't react well to the news because it seems to throw a monkey wrench into his career plans, and Iris runs off to the bedroom in tears. Holland goes in to her and, getting a grip on his feelings, tells her a story. It's the story of his most important learning to date, his learning that music is all that he wants to do in life. In a nutshell it's another story of his thinking that he hates something only to discover later that he loves it. In this case it's the music of jazz great John Coltrane. Holland tells Iris that assimilating the news that they're going to have a baby is like learning to listen to John Coltrane all over again, something so powerful and transforming that it will take him a long time. Indeed, when the baby, Cole, is born deaf, the deafness intensifies Holland's learning struggle. From Holland's point of view (one he carries in martyred silence), Cole is not just different, he's less than he should be. Cole is imperfect. He's a living reminder of Holland's life which he also sees as compromised, unable to live in music as he'd dreamed.

The Coltrane scene where Holland consoles his wife with the story of his learning to listen to jazz is like the scene where Chips declares to the boys that if he's lost their "friendship" there's little else left that he values. In that scene, Chips intuitively grasps that the importance of the bond of trust in the teaching and learning dynamic transcends the importance of specific subject matter. Here, Holland knows, but does not understand (and is not at peace with the fact), that the security of old formulations has to be abandoned in order to welcome the life of new ones. Moreover, new ones have to be welcomed or the vitality goes out of the process, whether it's the process of music or teaching or simply living.

Although Holland has

learned through Coltrane's music that there are different ways to hear and that vitality demands a quality of improvisation, he hasn't applied the lesson deeply enough in his own life. In the scene in which Holland begins to understand, the movie almost screams the lesson at us. Holland is walking home, weary in the knowledge that John Lennon, a voice of musical hope in his generation, has been killed. Cole is literally "tuning" a car engine in the garage. He places one end of a rod against the engine and the other against his ear to hear how it sounds. Seeing his father's dejection, he asks what's wrong, and Holland responds that he wouldn't understand. How could Cole understand since he couldn't have heard John Lennon's music? The reason Holland feels such sorrow has to do with all the meaning that transcended Lennon's melodies, and Cole angrily confronts Holland with the knowledge that he has other ways of understanding that. He has seen it. He sees it now on his father's face.

In a sense the dance of anima and animus in *Mr. Holland's Opus* is carried out as a dialogue between sight and sound. Iris is a photographer. Her occupation underscores the meaning of her name and the way it symbolizes constant adjustment to new contexts. Right up until the point where he will no longer be allowed to do it due to the music program's having been eliminated, Holland's blind and probably misguided ambition keeps him from seeing that teaching is all he really wants to do. If the mawkish ending didn't distract us so powerfully, we would see that *Mr. Holland's Opus* is almost a tragedy. The thing that keeps it from being one is not his students' coming back to play his symphony so as to extol him as a wonderful teacher, but the fact that he finally comes to understand and accept himself as a teacher. That has been his lesson, and it has taken him a lifetime to learn it.

Perhaps all the important lessons, all the important transformations, take a lifetime. It isn't easy work, fleshing out an archetype. And it isn't easy for teachers to accept what they already know: that the fundamental legacy they have to pass on is the burden of inquiry itself. Perhaps that's where Chips's "friendship" comes in. It's not just how we ask the questions, but why that gives meaning to the process. Finally, our stories always tell us that it is not what we know, but who we are that matters most. As teachers, that's what we have to give and that's what invests the transformations we unleash (and undergo) with a sense of purpose. What, if not our "moral authority," makes learning itself seem positive evidence of life's puzzling but persistent value? □