

Text for presentation on
“Teaching Culture Using Popular Films”

By Dennis White and Scott Wisner

The CD containing the presentation on popular films is extremely large, and cannot be transmitted easily electronically. This is the word by word text for presenting this session. If you do not have the CD, contact Dennis White at dkwhite@itol.com. He will send it to you for the cost of shipping.

(slide 1) This text and the accompanying PowerPoint presentation may be used in two different ways. First, to train YEOs about how to use films as teaching materials when training Youth Exchange students and their parents. Second, it can be used directly as a teaching tool, using the film “Dances With Wolves” as an example. To use it as a training tool for YEOs, start at the beginning. To use it as a presentation for students or parents, start on page 2 of this text and slide 31 in the PowerPoint presentation. The complete text I am using today may be found at www.yeoresources.org. The PowerPoint presentation is too large to post there or to send electronically. I have it on a CD and I have brought about 100 copies with me for anyone who wants one. Basically this means that if you have a copy of this text and the CD you can give this exact same presentation that I am giving today, word for word, starting now.

Youth Exchange Officers are always looking for better ways to orient students and parents to understanding culture and cultural differences. Popular films are a rich source of material about culture, and can be of great assistance if used properly. (slide 2) Why use popular films? Well, they are popular. By that we mean, they are usually entertaining and people enjoy watching them. People will watch a film when they might not bother to read a book. Popular films are readily available, and can be rented or purchased by students or their families almost anywhere. And finally, popular films allow students and parents to watch these films, then study and analyze the material as homework, not taking valuable time away from orientation meetings. As you will see, there are many different ways to use these films as training devices.

But first, a few examples from several different films which demonstrate various aspects of crossing cultures. These are just brief examples which might encourage you to go back and watch the entire films from the viewpoint of cultural understanding. (slide 3) We always try to orient students to the culture they will be visiting. Here, in the film *Moscow on the Hudson*, some Russian circus performers from the old Soviet Union are being warned about what to avoid when visiting New York City. It turns out, the tour guide is warning them to stay away from just about everything. (slide 4). (slide 5) Next, we see how “outsiders” can create an unintended first impression, even when they try to fit in. In this scene, from *My Cousin Vinnie*, two New Yorkers arrive in a small southern town. Does this remind you of any newly arrived inbounds who stick out like a sore thumb? And watch the reactions of the local townspeople. (slide 6). He thinks cowboy boots will make him fit in in Alabama! (slide 7) Most of us know how our students are often treated as special, particularly when they first arrive. Here we see a scene from *Joe vs. The Volcano*. The two travelers have been expected, and when they are correctly identified, the celebration begins. Sort of like what happens at the airport! (slide 8). By the way in this film, the island people are called the Wapuni, and they have two distinct cultural

characteristics. First, they have a terrible sense of direction. Second, they are addicted to Orange Crush soda.

(slide 9). We also know that sometimes our hosts like us, and sometimes they may not. When we don't know the language very well, we are dependent on interpreters, who may try to protect us from people who say negative things about us. *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* has many humorous examples. Here Tula, the Greek daughter, interprets her father's rather harsh assessment of non-Greeks. Ian is just trying to be nice, the father can't get out of his ethnocentrism. (slide 10). (Did you hear that? He likes you! when what he said was, when my people were writing philosophy, yours were still swinging from trees.) Again, (slide 11) from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* we see how important gifts are when crossing cultures, even when they are totally misunderstood. (slide 12). Bundt cakes have holes in the middle – they later solve the problem by putting a potted plant in it.

(slide 13) We also know how important pronunciation can be. Some words have totally different meanings if mispronounced. Here we see this in a courtroom scene from *My Cousin Vinny* where people from two different regions of the USA pronounce words very differently. (slide 14). (slide 15) And speaking of interpreters, sometime we shouldn't trust them because they may be playing tricks on us. Again from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*: You also have to know that the Greek father, in addition to being very ethnocentric, believes that Windex, a window cleaner, cures any ailment. (slide 16). In case you did not understand that the word "boobs" is an American slang expression for a woman's breasts. (slide 17) When learning a new language, we all know how sometimes we can practice a phrase over and over, only to say it wrong when the time comes. Here we see Tom Hanks playing a person who is stuck in JFK in *The Terminal*. He is trying to memorize the phrase "a bite to eat". (slide 18). And as you might expect, when he does see her he says, Ameila, would you like an eat to bite? (slide 19) And again from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* we see that we really should be careful trusting our language instructors. (slide 20).

Now these are just a very few examples. Here is a list of popular films that have interesting presentations of culture and cultural differences. (slides 21, 22, 23). You may find this list posted on yeoresources.org, or by clicking on these hyperlinks if viewing the PowerPoint on line. The list is in no way complete, it just represents some of my friend Scott Wisner's and my favorites. (slide 24). This is how I recommend you use these films. First provide some theoretical information on culture, then provide the participants with study guides, such as some I will show you, then assign the students to watch the film, followed by completing whatever tasks you wish. For example, you might want to have them send you written answers to the study guides. Or you might have them develop an online discussion of one of the films using a study guide. Yet another option is to have them submit responses to you, then have them discuss their answers at an orientation meeting.

(slide 25). Here are some of the articles that present some theoretical background information. You can find all of these on yeoresources.org, or if you view this CD when online, you just click on the hyperlink. The articles include theoretical information such as (slide 26) the typical stages of culture shock. Or (slide 27) the typical cycle of culture shock experienced in the course of a year. Or, (slide 28) information about how people move from ethnocentrism to ethnorelativism when developing cultural competence. (slide 29) here are study guides I have written for four of the films on the list. You can write your own for these films, or other you may think appropriate. (slide 30) Here are the first three questions in a set of 17 for *Dances With Wolves*. (read first three)

(slide 31) I will now present an analysis of *Dances With Wolves*. It is a great example of how people cross cultures, and one that has many similarities to an exchange year. This is where you would begin if you were going to do a presentation to students or parents. But the best way to start is to have them read the theoretical material, watch the films and then discuss and answer questions. In the film *Dances With Wolves*, a white American army officer chooses to be stationed in the American west in an outpost near the Lakota Sioux Indians. When he arrives, there are no other soldiers there and he has to manage on his own to interact with the Indian culture, foreign to him. (slide 32) It begins with a scene similar to those when we interview prospective students. Here the character John Dunbar is telling his commanding officer why he came out west. (slide 33). (slide 34) Many of us encourage students to keep journals of their experiences. The journal becomes the narrative device throughout this film. Here we hear his first impressions. (slide 35). (slide 36) We know the first contact can leave some lasting impressions, whether we want it to or not. John Dunbar's first encounter comes when an Indian tries to steal his horse – which is a test of manhood in the Lakota Indian Nation. Unfortunately the encounter comes when he is bathing in the river, and has no clothes on. (slide 37). I imagine neither of them was very impressed with the other in this first encounter.

We also know (slide 38) that our first interpretations are always ethnocentric – because at first we can only interpret the behavior of the other culture from our point of view. Listen to John Dunbar's ethnocentric choice of words (slide 39). “wild”, “enemy”. But all cultures are ethnocentric (slide 40) as we witness the Indians' ethnocentric view of the White man (slide 41). It is also interesting in this scene that the angry Indian, names “wind in his hair” eventually becomes John Dunbar's best friend. Sometimes, when we try to look at things from another point of view (slide 42) we can develop ethnorelativism. Here, one Indian sees the possibilities (slide 43).

(slide 44). When we prepare students to go abroad, one of the first things we tell them is – (click) take the initiative. After waiting and waiting, John Dunbar gives himself that advice. (slide 45). (slide 46) and when we have that first formal contact, what we need is a good interpreter, or at least some good first night question! (slide 47). (slide 48) And who hasn't depended on sign language from time to time. See if you can figure out what he is trying to communicate. (slide 49). (slide 50) When we are struggling to communicate, the slightest breakthrough can be very satisfying. (slide 51).

(slide 52) We also know that in early encounters, food, drink and gifts are very important – but often misunderstood or not appreciated. (slide 53) (slide 54) But with repeated encounters, slow progress can be made. (slide 55) Often we seem to be making mistakes, (slide 56) but slowly, we find ourselves challenging our first impressions. (slide 57). What a different point of view.

(slide 58) We also are reminded how important pronunciation is, especially when it is our own name. (slide 59). Every good YEO also encourages their students to try everything once. (slide 60) We don't want to offend our hosts, even if we find the food distasteful. Here John Dunbar is given the great honor of eating the raw heart of a buffalo he has just helped kill. (slide 61) One YEO I know tells the students, try it, you can always throw up later! (slide 62) We begin to see that the exchange is going well with the exchange of possessions – pins, hats and other articles of clothing. Here is the first such exchange. It's sort of like pins on a youth exchange blazer. John Dunbar and Wind in His Hair make the first exchange. (slide 63). That's a good trade!

But we also know it is not all smooth progress. (slide 64) Sooner or later, we find that the honeymoon is over and we become irritated by the local customs and behaviors. Here we see John Dunbar being confronted with a very different concept of personal property. He dropped his hat on the prairie during the buffalo hunt, and an Indian found it. The Indian interpretation is that he must not have valued it very much – he left it on the prairie. (slide 65). Notice another cultural value in this scene. Wind in His Hair suggests a compromise – trading possessions. But before going ahead, they all look to the tribal elder for his approval. When he nods, ever so slightly, it becomes a “good trade”. (slide 66) But eventually we adapt. Sometimes we become so accustomed to the new ways of doing things that we miss them when they are taken away. After spending weeks with the Indian on the buffalo hunt, he returns to his home, and tries to re-enact what he has come to appreciate. (slide 67).

(slide 68) In the progression of culture shock, there is a long, slow stage called adaptation, which almost always goes hand in hand with language acquisition. In this next clip, there is a mixture of English and Lakota, but you can see he is able to function fairly well on his own. (slide 69). We also know (slide 70) that students tell us that they begin to understand themselves better as they begin to understand the new culture. In this scene, John has helped the tribe fight off an enemy that wanted to destroy them. While I don't recommend going to this extreme to identify with the host culture, the scene is a wonderful example of how he learns about himself. (slide 71).

When we truly begin to integrate into the culture, (slide 72) we start to look, feel and act like we belong. In this scene, John is discussing things with his Indian friend, who I see as something like a host parent. John has married into the tribe, and they are trying to have a baby. Once again, I don't recommend that our students go to quite this extreme to fit in, but here we see how he is dressed, what his “host” father has to say, and how the entire conversation is in the host language. (slide 73). But sooner or later, we have to go home, whether we want to or not. (slide 74). And students usually do not recognize how much they have changed, or that they may not even be recognizable. Here he is returning to his fort, only to find that soldiers have arrived – but they think he is a hostile Indian. (slide 75).

(slide 76) We know that reverse culture shock can be profound. Sometimes we are so shocked by our own native cultures, and dismayed by them, that we do not even try to re-integrate, as we see here. (slide 77). And when we have to say goodbye, it can be painful. (slide 78). Once again there is usually an exchange of gifts. Notice in this scene how the conversation is in English – meaning that the Indian “host” father has changed, too. (slide 79). And if you have heard stories of some of those goodbyes, you know that they can sometimes be (slide 80) as strange as they are moving. And it is Wind in His Hair who makes us all feel tearful with his anguished “goodbye”. (slide 81).

(slide 82) So, there it is. This is an approximation of an exchange year. By studying this film and other films like it, students, parents and Rotarians can better prepare for their new cultural experience. There are dozens of films like it that can be used efficiently and entertainingly to make all of us more culturally aware and sensitive. I hope it is a useful approach for you to use. Thank you.

(You are welcome to as many of the CDs as I have. If there are several of you from the same area, I would encourage you to share. The CDs can be copied rather easily from a computer.