

“The 21st Century Is When Everything Changes”¹⁰

Doctor Who as an Educational Program

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When *Doctor Who* premiered in 1963, its public service remit meant that the show must include an educational charter. Episodes should be entertaining, yes, but they should also have a hint of pedagogy within them. For the first few years, the series largely stuck with this formula: historical episodes mingled with the science fictional, emphasizing a peculiar sense of genre fluidity between what was considered educational and what was considered entertaining. Although the series stopped focusing on purely historical episodes after 1966/1967s “The Highlanders” (4.4), the educational remit stood fast, and episodes in the 1970s often focused on issues like religion, environmentalism, the post-colonial system, and philosophy running alongside Daleks, Autons, the Master, and of course, giant spiders.

In this chapter, I propose to look at the educational character of *Doctor Who* from a slightly different angle; namely, what happens when *Doctor Who* as a program is taught in the classroom as a historical, cultural, and meaningful document. I will explore how *Doctor Who* continues serve as an educational document, by focusing on the pedagogical markers within the series that can be taught in college classes, as well as how I’ve used *Doctor Who* in the classroom, both as an exemplar and as an object of study. Finally, I will offer some key pedagogical hints for teaching the series. Although *Doctor Who* may no longer feature pure historical episodes, as a document from history it can be a key text in exploring our world today.

I have taught a *Doctor Who*-themed college class twice, although both times have focused on different aspects of pedagogy. The first time I taught *Doctor Who* it was in aid of a larger project. The course was entitled “Teaching Television Criticism”, and the ostensive purpose was to teach students how both to be critical of television and to write television criticism for publication in venues like *The Onion A/V Club* and *The Huffington Post*. To that end, I’ve taught the course a number of times, and each time I’ve focused on a different television show as an exemplar (e.g., the last time I taught it, I used *Twin Peaks* for screenings and examples). In the first part of this chapter, I’ll detail some of the positive and negative aspects of using *Doctor Who* in this manner, as an exemplar rather than as an object of study, and will explore some of the consequences of this class. The second way I’ve taught using *Doctor Who*, and the focus of the second part of this chapter, was teaching *Doctor Who* as a historical/cultural text itself; the same way one might take a “Shakespeare” course, I taught a “*Doctor Who*” course. We explored different aspects of the series and delved into the cultural context that helped shape the show. There were also some positive and negative consequences of this focus, and I will discuss some of the downsides of this type of class as well.

Ultimately, I want to argue that, like with any cultural object, there is value in studying *Doctor Who* in the college classroom. Just as the public service remit of the BBC asks us to see *Doctor Who* as part of what media scholar Jonathan Bignell calls the “educative or improving programmes” (“The child as addressee...” 43) on the channel, so too can we see *Doctor Who* itself as providing a type of educational service. But instead of a textual public service, where elements within the show can be pointed to as a part of the discourse, the show can be used as a contextual guide to larger cultural, social, and historical changes in the media environment.

In his book *Teaching Popular Culture: Beyond Radical Pedagogy*, David Buckingham argues that teaching popular culture formally allows

instructors to approach the classroom “as an authentic part of students’ experience, and hence as something...to validate and even to celebrate” (*Teaching Popular Culture* 9). Scores of books have been published over the past few decades that speak to this shift in the academy, including *The Vampire Goes to College* (2013), *The Simpsons in the Classroom* (2010), and *Fantasy Media in the Classroom* (2013). Connecting with students through their own popular culture viewership not only helps validate students’ own experiences, but also encourages students to think more critically about those experiences. Giving a “critical read” to a particular popular culture text like *Doctor Who* asks students to reflect back on their own everyday viewership.

In my “Writing Television Criticism” class, for example, I eschew the traditional style of teaching “the canon” of television (i.e., the most important or critical episodes from the history of television) in order to delve into specific nuances of particular shows. *Doctor Who* works in this structure because the show has such a long and varied history. Indeed, the history of the program goes back to 1963, and for students in 2015, this is more a lifetime ago. Watching *Doctor Who* becomes akin to watching an historical document, which tell us not only about the content within the episode, but also about the historical context in which the episode was made.

For example, I use the episode “The Mind Robber” (6.2) to teach about industrial activity, and how the production of a television series can help to frame the content. “The Mind Robber” (6.2), a 1968 episode of *Doctor Who* starring Patrick Troughton, had originally been scheduled as a four-part serial. But due to a number of factors, including an earlier episode (“The Dominators” 6.1) ending after only five episodes instead of six, the four episodes as written had to be bulked out to five. The extra episode—which became episode one of the next serial—is notable for having no actors other than the main TARDIS crew, no sets other than the TARDIS, and no writer’s credit. Tat Wood and Lawrence Miles write about this in their *About Time* series, arguing that with no extra

money for the additional episode, Derrick Sherwin, the series producer at the time “had to provide a lead-in...using only the regulars, some stock costumes, and no payments to other writers. Hence the white void and the long scenes in the TARDIS” (*About Time 2* 218) Although on paper this sounds like a cheap load of rubbish, in actuality this episode is largely considered one of the most creative and celebrated stories of the series.

Thus, when I teach about writing television criticism, I use this episode as an example of the way that the *production constraints* on a series can affect the content/output of the episode itself. Although any particular episode of television can be used in this manner—production details always affect what’s on screen—” The Mind Robber” is a particularly visceral example. *Doctor Who* provides a useful and viable example here because (a) students have (probably) never seen “The Mind Robber” so it’s a fresh piece of work to them—they come in with few or no expectations; (b) it’s obvious how production constraints affected the content of the program; (c) it’s highly enjoyable; and (d) it has become an historical document for students. Studying television criticism’s not just about learning which are the most historically relevant episodes in television history, but rather in being able to critique the everyday television (Mills 1-16) that students are most familiar with. It’s easy to screen a historically relevant episode of television, something canonized like *I Love Lucy* or *Gunsmoke*, as a “unique” or special case. But when the lens is turned to a television text that many students already understand, are already fans of, like *Doctor Who*, than it also becomes a useful heuristic method for understanding students’ everyday media use.

There is a downside of teaching *Doctor Who* in this manner: students sometimes see *Doctor Who* as the exemplar of excellence and thus find it hard to think *outside* that paradigm. To try to assuage this downside, my assignments ask students to look at television that isn’t *Doctor Who*: they can practice their criticism on any other show. While this may help demonstrate the universality of television criticism, it does deter focus

from *Doctor Who* as an example of an educational program, and repurposes the BBC's public service remit more implicitly stated by teaching *Doctor Who*.

To more explicitly outline the educational properties of *Doctor Who*, the second class I've taught with it has been focused directly on the program itself *as a program worthy of study*. I designed this course to fit within my University's Liberal Studies curriculum: students take a number of required courses as freshman and sophomores in order to develop a more well-rounded education. The course that I taught is called "Focal Point Seminar," and is ostensibly a "welcome to college" class—freshman students learn different methodologies by investigating one cultural topic for the entire quarter. I taught *Doctor Who* and explored different aspects of media studies, cultural studies, and philosophy. Students sign up for the topic that interests them, so a topic like "*Doctor Who*" had quite a long waiting list!

The course takes an historical look at the program, starting in 1963 (actually, a bit earlier when we talk about genre antecedents), and moving to the present day. Students watch episodes of the Classic series in the classroom, viewed in a roughly chronological order. In addition, students watch episodes of New *Who* out-of-class that complement or complicate the ideas discussed in class. Partly, I assign the out-of-class screenings because of time restrictions: there simply isn't enough time in class to cover the full 52+-year history of *Doctor Who*, but there's a practical reason as well. Students have access to the new *Who* episodes via online streaming services like Netflix, while the Classic series are sometimes harder to come by (although Hulu Plus does carry all the available Classic *Doctor Who* episodes).

The focus of the class, though, is on the developing history of *Doctor Who*, both as an historical object and also as an "unfolding text", to use John Tulloch and Manual Alvarado's term. In the first book-length academic study of *Doctor Who*, the two researchers described the show

as a saga and as a text that “subtly shift[s] its ground in response to social and political pressures, yet vindicating television’s recipe for success: something different but something the same” (*Doctor Who: The Unfolding Text* 3). In the classroom, this means that we both explored Tulloch and Alvarado’s call for an “investigation...of the industrial, institutional, narrative, generic, professional and other practices which... have operated in different ways to shape” (*The Unfolding Text* 2) *Doctor Who*, and delved into the diegetic history of the series, or the “vast narrative” (*TARDISBound* 26), as it was described more recently by *Doctor Who* academic Piers Britton. Indeed, this means that we went beyond “just” the television series to focus on its ancillary products, following the ideas of Britton, who explored the different ranges of *Doctor Who*, including the Big Finish audio adventures and the novels (the relation of which was important to the television show, since at least one of the novels, 2007’s *Human Nature* [29.8], transitioned to the show as one of the most critically acclaimed episodes of the new series, and at least one of the audio adventures, *Jubilee*, was remade as 2005’s *Dalek* [27.6]).

There are two main goals of the class. First, we follow the history of the program, exploring the many ways narrative, genre, rhetorical studies, fandom, and issues of identity (gender, race, class) manifest within the program. The students learn to be critical about a text that they already love. Second, we follow the history of the series. Most of the students had never seen a Classic episode of *Doctor Who*, and of those who had, no one had seen more than the occasional serial. They all knew—partly because of the 50th anniversary special—that the program had a huge history, but they didn’t know much about it. Many of them measured *Doctor Who* from the start of the new series, and considered the Classic to be prologue (much the same way as newer *Star Wars* fans approach the prequel movies as the “first” trilogy).

The consequences of this teaching style were two-fold. First, students were exposed to a great variety of learning strategies and critical

methodologies *while focusing on something they had a vested interest in*. This is a crucial element, as it means that they were actively engaged in learning more about the text. For example, their reactions flew in the face of much “established” fan lore about the quality of particular episodes. My class loved 1983’s “The Five Doctors” (20.7), for instance. We screened this episode when discussing the importance of cultural studies as a methodology, so they were able to see the connections between our readings about gender representation and the overt feminism of Tegan (Janet Fielding). But moreover, they loved to watch it not because it was a fantastic episode, but because they recognized within it a similar “anniversary”-like affection that they experienced with “The Day of the Doctor” (33.14), a feeling Matt Hills has written about. I was also curious about how they would react the week we covered aesthetics and studied 1996’s *Doctor Who: The TV Movie*. I was particularly interested to see how they’d like the movie, as it’s one of my personal favorites; but unlike the students discussed by David Butler, who disliked it because it was “like every bad Hollywood blockbuster rolled into one”, my students loved the film (“How to Pilot at TARDIS” 36). (Not just liked it; they loved it.) I was surprised until I realized two things: first, they only knew the Eighth Doctor from his brief appearance in “Night of the Doctor”; the *TV Movie* filled in the diegetic gaps. Second (and gird yourself for this), all of them were born *after the movie had come out*. As freshman in 2015, they had been born largely in 1997 or 1998 (and the movie premiered in 1996). To them, *Doctor Who: The TV Movie* was an historical document, a relic from a time long past. It wasn’t just *Doctor Who*: it was a part of history.

The second consequence, however, was the fact that the students ended up becoming focused on the diegetic history, occasionally at the expense of the cultural history. For example, when discussing the appearance of the Time Lords and Daleks in 1975’s “Genesis of the Daleks” (12.4) in week four of the course, students were asking about whether this was the start of the Time War featured in 2013’s “Day of the Doctor”, which premiered 40 years later. It became a teaching moment when I explained

about the difference between “diegetic” (in-text) history and “non-diegetic” (out-of-text) history. Further, students were initially confused about the appearance of the Time Lords in the Classic series given, as they thought, they were all killed (or hidden) in the New series. The idea that the *Doctor Who* narrative developed gradually over 50 years and was never written down in a story bible was shocking to them, used as they are to fully authorized transmedia narratives like the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

In sum, teaching *Doctor Who* is a worthwhile enterprise. Popular culture is a useful tool with which to engage students, and from which they can start to become more critical of the media they view on a daily basis. As with any cultural object, there is meaning both within and outside the narrative of *Doctor Who*, with the context often becoming more usefully discussed than the text itself. Although the public service remit of the BBC encourages programming to be useful, educational, and engaging for its audience, I’ve found that additional pedagogical value emerges from studying *Doctor Who* in the college classroom.

¹⁰ “Everything Changes”, *Torchwood*, Episode 1.1

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