

Chalking the Profession

Unintended Lessons about Teaching

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PPROMOTING ITSELF with the slogan “Real Teaching Leaves its Mark,” the 2006 mockumentary *Chalk* attempts to uncover, perhaps facetiously, why 50% of teachers quit within the first three years. The premise of the film is simple: a documentary crew follows three teachers and one newly-appointed assistant principal throughout the year at a Texas high school. Two of the teachers are male history teachers: Mr. Stroope is in his third year and Mr. Lowrey, an alternatively certified teacher, is in his first year. The other two protagonists are female: Coach Webb, a second year physical education teacher, and Mrs. Reddell, a former choir teacher who is in her first year as an assistant principal. The film incorporates the teachers’ interviews with the documentary crew, the teachers’ web diaries, and, at times, rough footage of the school and its students. Mike Akel and Chris Mass, who co-wrote and directed the film, posit that educators, new to the profession, do not necessarily suffer the traumatic events often portrayed in fictional films and documentaries about teaching. They maintain that another reason for their hardships may be a result of the culminating effects of a mundane, absurd, even humorous job.

Before *Chalk*, the body of high school films never truly captured the complexities of teaching, particularly from the teacher’s point of view. According to Dalton (2010) “there is a level of ambiguity about teachers and teaching in this film that is seldom seen on screen” (p. 33). Cinematic portrayals of schools generally feature prescribed paths for teachers. Teachers in movies tend to be male (Beyerbach, 2005), are successful when they are charismatic (Ellsmore, 2005), and serve as educator-heroes, who follow the prescribed curriculum, which is almost overwhelmingly Euro-centric (Ayers, 1994). The type of school setting also delineates the film's plot: urban schools are portrayed as run down, graffiti riddled institutions (Beyerbach, 2005), while suburban schools are as beautifully appointed as the characters portrayed in them (Bulman, 2005). White teachers can usually transcend both urban and suburban settings; teachers of color are generally relegated to working in urban schools (Beyerbach, 2005). Finally, teachers in many films transform into change agents for their schools or communities (Paietta, 2007). While these

films tend to focus on the extreme situations teachers may face, very rarely do they suggest that teachers might be troubled in their professions by ordinary tasks, such as grading papers, getting evaluations, and attending faculty meetings. They choose to focus on rouge teachers, those who challenge the system (Giroux 1997). Nobody even thinks to challenge this system in *Chalk*.

Chalk employs the post-modern strategies of the mockumentary to challenge the notion that teachers in the cinematic world quit, are fired, or persevere in the profession because of one, or a series, of life-changing events. Just as post-modern curriculum theory tries to dislodge education's adherence to modernist teaching strategies (such as the tendency for desks to be arranged in rows facing the teacher, whole group lectures led by the teacher, or the strict following of a mandated curriculum), a mockumentary relies on post-modern cinematic strategies, such as the use of professional actors in scenes with non-actors, to subvert the status associated with documentaries. In this paper, we argue that *Chalk's* use of the mockumentary to examine the teaching profession complicates traditional representations of teachers. Intended to mock the "real" teaching profession, this film also mocks the educators portrayed in many Hollywood films—the alternatively certified teacher, the female physical education teacher, the overworked administrator. *Chalk's* engagement with the mockumentary strategies, especially in blurring the lines between real and reel by using actual students and teachers as actors and not adhering to an actual script, offers an alternative answer to the statistic that 50% of teachers quit in their first three years of teaching.

The Mockumentary Tradition

The term mockumentary (mock-documentary or pseudo-documentary are other terms used to describe this type of film), "is commonly associated with films that are formally constructed as documentaries, but whose subject is utterly fictional; they are usually satires or, at least, parodies" (Rascaroli, 2005, p. 188). In their book *Faking it: Mock-documentary and the Subversion of Factuality*, Roscoe and Hight (2001) are careful not to characterize a mock-documentary as a separate genre but as a way of using discourse. In other words, mockumentaries rely on similar strategies as documentaries; however, the ways in which they portray their subjects engages different types of humor. Roscoe and Hight define mock-documentaries (their preferred term as it reflects and retains both the "mock" and the "doc" aspects) as "...fictional [their emphasis] texts; those which make a partial or concerted effort to appropriate documentary codes and conventions in order to represent a fictional subject" (p. 2). Rascaroli (2005) credits one of the first uses of "mockumentary" to Rob Reiner who used the term to describe his film *This is Spinal Tap* (1984). Other noteworthy mockumentaries include the satirical work of Christopher Guest, such as *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *A Mighty Wind* (2003), and arguably, Daniel Myrick's *The Blair Witch Project* (1999). These fictional texts, which employ non-fictional elements (such as in *Chalk* the use of actual students and teachers with professional actors) are compelling because they gain an authenticity not found in fictional films or, perhaps, even documentaries. *Chalk* achieves authenticity by providing its cast of both actors and real students and teachers with loose direction and scripts in order to portray exacting situations without the extraneous detractors of real life or the need to dramatize situations to please audience's expectations.

Mockumentaries challenge not only the "privileged status" of documentaries but also the "tensions within the genre, in particular where different codes and conventions appeal to competing, often contradictory, cultural understandings of how 'reality' can be represented" (Roscoe &

Hight, 2001, p. 4). Roscoe and Hight identify three degrees of mockumentaries which reflect the intentions of the filmmaker(s), the construction of the text, and the role constructed for the audience. The first two degrees are parody, films which mimic other types of film such as horror films, and critique and hoax, which are films that critique either culture or the genre itself or serve as hoaxes that generate a reflexive stance on the genre. *Chalk* falls under their third degree of “Deconstruction.” At this degree, a mock-documentary “examine[s], subvert[s] and deconstruct[s] factual discourse and its relationship with documentary codes and conventions” (p. 73). Mock-documentaries at this degree also feature a reflexive stance toward “factual discourse,” and suggest “the *potential* [their italics] of the mock-documentary form to serve as a site for the active subversion of factual discourse” (p. 161). Paramount to mockumentaries is playing with conventions, even within its own tradition.

Juhasz (2006) argues that fake docs “copy, mock, mimic and gimmick documentary style” (p. 7), and “are a special breed of parody in that they accomplish something different, something extra; they do manage a ‘link to the real’” (p. 2). Akel and Mass, who were teaching during the writing of this film, intended for *Chalk* to portray another side of their profession; “We wanted to tell a story from inside the world of teaching,” (Akel, 2006, p. 3) reflected the writers on their collaboration. *Chalk’s* directors adopted many of the strategies employed by mockumentaries and heavily based their direction on the improvisation tradition. The film’s press kit describes several techniques they use to recreate this “realistic” examination including actors improvising based on narrative arcs rather than a completed script, a strategy which accumulated over 60 hours of footage. From this footage, they mined new narratives and situations which they admit resemble the reality show *Cops* and go against the documentary tradition. However, in this film, the characters are not caricatures of actual types of teachers, as one might expect to find. In actuality, their decision to “mock” teachers turned them into more realistic representations. *Chalk* never claims to provide the answer to the statistic which opens the film, but the answers it does provide are antithetical to some of the other “answers” found in school films. Furthermore, Akel and Mass choose to represent the marking of time by counting down the days left in the school year rather than a celebration of accomplishments, like taking high-stakes tests. In order to be convincing, Akel and Mass choose to depict what other school films, particularly those which focus on teachers, neglect or oversimplify. *Chalk* not only “mocks” the types of teachers in school films identified by Ayers (1994), Trier (2001), and Dalton (2004) as the “teacher hero” but also the conclusions audiences may make about the challenges of teaching based on the representations of the profession found in other films, including documentaries.

Chalk as Mockumentary Teaching Tool

Stoddard (2009) encourages teachers to consider using films, especially documentaries, as alternatives to the “textbooks and other common classroom sources” (p. 429) in order to engage students in conversations about controversial historical events. While he remains neutral on whether the documentary is the “best” source to teach history, his study demonstrates the importance of teachers to reflect on their reasons for choosing a particular film and what values they hope to promote to their students. Like the use of documentaries Stoddard troubles, mockumentary’s strategies, and the reason to use them, demand particular attention. The post-modern strategies of the mockumentary (self-reflexivity, playfulness, and their attempt to “undo” the

documentary genre) are often those qualities curriculum theorists hope to include in the classroom.

Teacher educators who write about films often turn to pre-service and practicing teachers to discuss how these films shape their perceptions about students and schools. According to Britzman (2003), when students enter teacher education programs they are often unprepared for the realities of teaching because they think they know so much about education after being a student for so long. Their perceptions are rooted in teachers' "public image" (p. 27) and part of that image comes from cinematic representations. Observing secondary teachers as audiences of teacher films, Ellsmore (2005) notes that "According to their experience and construction of reality there will be differences in how each person receives a text, and how they perceive the overlap between the real and *reel* life (p. xiv). She then argues that real life teachers are positioned better to assess the *realism* of their cinematic counterparts. Ellsmore, who analyzes the responses of two focus groups of teachers who watch school films, reports that her participants felt that these films did not portray the monotonous, mundane, aspects of teaching as well as the importance of stamina. More tellingly, one of her participants observes "Who would watch the truth?" (2005, p. 130). Ellsmore concludes that "film is a poor medium through which to portray the work of a teacher" (2005, p. 130). However, this depiction is exactly what *Chalk* tries to capture.

The "truth" also extends to a realistic depiction of the contemporary modernist approach to teaching. In spite of its many transformative possibilities for the high school movie genre, the teaching strategies in *Chalk* are disappointing and portray a more modernist approach to teaching. More often than not, the students at Harrison High School sit in desks, in rows, facing the front of the classroom (with the exception of Stroope's class in which the classroom is divided to provide a "cat walk" for him to walk up and down). There is an unspoken contract between students and teachers, and in *Chalk*, the students serve as a panel of judges for the various teachers' pedagogical approaches, as they shake their heads at Lowrey's ineptitude or laugh at the absurd activities they willingly participate in Webb's class. The teaching Mrs. Redell confesses to miss appears to be the kind which has students bent over books, busily working quietly on their own, while she circulates the room offering individual help. Mr. Lowrey's own attempts to improve his pedagogy consists of relating history to his students and their lives, a practice educational research supports, telling jokes, which is entertaining but questionable, and checking out a book on classroom management from the school's library.

The best teaching in *Chalk* comes from two unconventional sources. First, Coach Webb incorporates her and her students' interests (albeit somewhat awkwardly and embarrassingly at times for her students) into her physical education lessons. The second example comes from the students themselves who coach Mr. Lowrey to victory at the spelling hornet. One illustration of how students are able to see what their teachers cannot about good teaching occurs when Meeka, one of Lowrey's students, introduces the concept of a spelling hornet to Lowrey. In a twist on the traditional "Spelling Bee," a Spelling Hornet requires students to coach a teacher in the spelling of slang words. She explains that in the Hornet he must spell contemporary slang words and offers the word "Whoadie:"

Lowrey: How do you spell it?

Meeka: W...H...O... How do you think it's spelled? That's the point of a Spelling Hornet.

It is disappointing that a film which so eloquently explores an important issue in a postmodern way still portrays the modernist mechanisms our educational system embodies.

For Chennault (2006), a film's "curriculum" is more than just the "images, sounds, and emerging from the screen. . . it is constructed through the manner in which these elements are configured by the film's writer, direction and producers (and performers) to create final product" (p. 151). Similarly, for curriculum theorist Doll (1993), a post-modern "curriculum is a process—not of transmitting what is (absolutely) known but of exploring what is unknown; and through exploration" students and teachers "transform both the land and themselves" (p. 155). Because *Chalk* begins with a statistic (50% of teachers quit within the first three years of teaching) and turns that fact into a question to explore not necessarily answer, this work can potentially transform the genre of high school films in a number of ways. As one of the ubiquitous posters (in this film and in "real life" classrooms) proclaim "Life—it's a journey, not a destination."

But Nobody Taught Me: Mr. Lowrey

In high school films, the teachers who face the most problems tend to be those who choose teaching as a second profession. For example, Lowrey, the newest addition to the history faculty, represents those brand-new teachers who face a difficult beginning at the start of the film. Lowrey is having a hard time adjusting from his career in computer engineering. He confesses that he became a teacher after he took two aptitude tests which suggested that he should either teach or practice veterinary medicine. During the first semester, Mr. Lowrey loses control of his classroom, his chalk, and his temper. While there are many similarities between Mr. Lowrey and his cinematic counterparts (think Sydney Poitier as Mark Thackeray in *To Sir, With Love*, Michelle Pfeiffer as Lou Ann Johnson in *Dangerous Minds*; and Richard Dadier in *Blackboard Jungle*), he differs from these educator-heroes in a number of noticeable ways, the first being that he begins his career with relatively "benign" students. At the beginning of the film, Mr. Lowrey chalk in hand, tie neatly tied, his back to a lined chalkboard divided into well-organized sections, begins his lesson in this manner:

I'm just going to start. You're going to say your name and then I want you to tell me what comes to your mind with history, right, and I'd like you to start [he points to a boy in the middle of the class, who remains silent, mouth open, and the girl next to him snickers from behind her hand]. Anything? Okay, well, that's why we're here.

About 10 minutes into his lesson, the female student from the opening shot timidly raises her hand and asks Lowrey how long he has been teaching. After stumbling through the non-teaching experiences he has had in computer engineering which he claims have prepared him for this position, Lowrey admits that it's been about 12 minutes. Lowrey is reminiscent of another cinematic engineer-turned-teacher, Mark Thackeray (played by Sydney Poitier). Lowrey shares a similar experience in his first year of teaching as Thackeray; however, his troubles are minimal when compared to Thackeray's; Lowrey's students steal his chalk and argue in class. Lowrey's character at once reincarnates and renews Thackeray's to demonstrate the ongoing experience of alternatively "trained" teachers. Lowrey's students, with the exception of one, are all actual students, and their behavior seems mild when compared to other students' behaviors found in

school films. They, too, challenge the real and reel notion that they might be the primary reason for teachers wishing to leave the profession.

When new teachers make mistakes early, students typically take advantage of the teacher's ineptness, and their performances in the classroom quickly spirals downward as they lose confidence in themselves. However, students in *Chalk* treat their teachers with respect and often restrain their laughter at the naivety or quirks of these teachers. Unlike Thackeray, who "saves" his students, Lowrey's students "save" him many times throughout the film. By the middle of the year, Lowrey's students "save" him when they invite him to represent them in the annual "Spelling Hornet." When Lowrey wins by spelling "shawty," the slang word for shorty (or an attractive woman), he pumps the air with his fist—an action which signifies to the audience a turning point in his teaching.

However, this victory does not seem to instill enough confidence in Lowrey's perceptions of his skill as a teacher. Lowrey announces, in one web diary, that teaching is a gift and that maybe it is something that can be taught, but "No one taught [him]." In one of the faculty's lunches, Lowrey is asked by Reddell if he plans to resign his contract. He responds, in one of the most painfully honest confessions from a cinematic teacher, "I don't know if I like it [teaching] that much—to be honest." Mr. G., another teacher, follows Lowrey's comment with his own confession, "I wish I had the guts to leave." The juxtaposition of these two nearly neutral reflections about teaching contradicts the public's expectations of teachers committed to their jobs and more importantly, their students.

Like Thackeray, Lowrey faces a difficult decision at the end of the year. At the end of *To Sir, With Love*, after sending several applications to engineering jobs, Thackeray has been offered one. After two students who are scheduled to be in his class next year run in and disrupt a pensive moment, Thackeray rips the piece of paper containing the offer. At the end of *Chalk*, Lowrey also contemplates a piece of paper; however, it is a contract to continue in his position at Harrison High School. Both films play homage to those who become alternatively certified to teach. The final scene shows Lowrey pondering whether to sign a teaching contract for the next year and then leaving his classroom, carrying his framed poster of Sitting Bull. In this final scene, Lowrey's actions invite viewers to replay his final exit several times to determine for themselves whether or not he signed the contract. As in a post-modern curriculum, there is never a fixed or "right" answer.

"Mr. Stroope is My Name, History's My Game:" Mr. Stroope

If Mr. Lowrey is a tribute to those teachers who learn the importance of respecting one's students and representing all of those cinematic teachers who grow into their professions, Mr. Stroope (a name which conjures the image of the young, hip, laid-back English teacher, Mr. Shoope, from *Summer School*) represents those teachers who persevere through non-growth. Stroope's character resists the assumptions of what it means to be a good teacher; he misdirects his intentions onto a contest rather than his classroom practice. He addresses his students on the first day with the line "Mr. Stroope's my name, and history is my game," a line which sets Stroope up a teacher-as-performer. Stroope visits with his mentor teacher who tries to refocus him on the three goals he set for himself last year (less sarcasm, cleanliness/organization, and turning in lesson plans on time). However, it's clear that his mind is on the teacher of the year competition, and he spends more time enlisting the help of his students (who paint campaign

posters for him) and the winner from last year, rather than actually addressing the goals he had previously set. *Chalk*'s contribution is directed toward what Bulman (2005) sees as the normal expression of good teaching in Hollywood's high school films. Good teachers in these films, argues Bulman, are mainly white middle class people who portray a teaching style rooted in "autonomy, a capitalist work ethic, personal ambition, faith in meritocracy, and free expression" as normal (p. 166). *Chalk* demonstrates that these characteristics do not necessarily result in outstanding teachers, especially in the case of Stroope.

Instead, Stroope sees teaching as more of a corporate-type job in which hard work, determination, and even underhanded tactics can mean success. Stroope's strategies for winning Harrison High School's teacher of the year contest demonstrate his misplaced dedication and determination. Stroope clearly enjoys his job, but it is not necessarily because of his students. In order to prepare for the teacher of the year competition, Stroope interrogates last year's winner, who tells him it's all about the students. He tells her "That's the biggest bunch of crap I've ever heard." All of these actions point to Stroope's misguided idea of what it means to be a successful teacher. He also brings into question what it means to be a "good" teacher because he takes to the extreme what it means to be interested in students' lives, how to design student-centered discussions and activities, and be seen as an outstanding professional. Dalton's (2010) contention that "Hollywood's good teachers in the movies are often presented as 'radicals' who challenge the system while they are, in fact, not in the least bit radical and win only the occasional symbolic victory, while effectively changing nothing" (p. 26) is a description that fits Stroope's role in the film. On the other hand, the outstanding teachers in this film are the "real" ones—his opponent, the previous winner, the math teacher who bends the rules according to her students' needs.

Stroope offers to speak during a faculty meeting in an effort to win support from his colleagues. During this meeting, Stroope once again displays a misguided assumption about teaching ethics. He begins by jokingly asking how many of them have used the copier machine for personal business or "borrowed" money from a club's treasury for happy hour. After eliciting a few laughs and a few hands, Stroope announces "Well, that's gotta stop." Stroope's actions demonstrate that he cannot move beyond the notion that hard work and honesty are essential to a successful career; however, his willingness to bend the rules in order to win the teacher of the year contest reifies that teaching for Stroope is not about the students but himself.

During the candidates' Teacher of the Year debate, Stroope adopts politician style hand gestures and microphone techniques. Not unlike those cinematic students who run for class president, he makes outrageous promises like giving every teacher his or her own copier machine for their classrooms—with their own codes. In his final web diary, Stroope confesses that he "wouldn't follow someone like me" a statement he seems to direct not at his students but his colleagues. According to Ellsmore (2005), the teaching profession faces a consumer-oriented society in which discourses of competition and pay do not seem as suspicious as they would have in earlier times. In her discussion of British and American teacher films, Ellsmore observes: "Because in postmodern society money talks louder than service and status, the idea of teaching as a vocation rewarded by societal respect has been replaced by being just a job with an emphasis on pay" (p. 26). Stroope, perhaps believing in status more than pay, is not ready to function in this post-modern paradigm, and his archaic beliefs result in a ridiculous attempt to win what has become an almost meaningless award in a society which equates teacher success with students' scores on tests.

“I’m an AP, I’m not a Teacher Anymore:” Mrs. Redell

In a post-modern approach to teaching, educators and students engage, rearrange, and integrate a curriculum (Doll, 1993, p. 179) which causes them to relate to the disciplines in new ways. Reddell, who has recently accepted the position of AP, finds that her new position requires her to relate to her colleagues, students, and family in new ways. In her opening interview with the documentary crew, Reddell reveals that the position for which she was recommended opened after Mr. Fletcher was “found guilty,” and even though she had not really considered becoming part of the administration so soon, she accepted the offer anyway. The newly appointed Reddell’s first scene takes place, ironically, in the principal’s office; and she assumes the position of the naughty student sitting across the desk from the principal. It is her first day, and she is seeking advice for handling a rude student. Reddell avoids the two paths available to most cinematic administrators who are cast either as bumbling fools who are unaware of what goes on in a classroom or as figures who lead their schools to triumph over adversity (Dalton, 2010; Schull, Reed, & Peltier, 2007). Instead, she represents the complex relationships administrators, who served as former teachers, endure.

Chalk’s administrators, like their real and cinematic counterparts, are overworked and break up the occasional fight; however, Reddell emphasizes how they must straddle the worlds of teaching and administration, and she questions that separation. Reddell learns that being an administrator means facing long hours at school away from her husband and dealing with the less “desirable” students nearly all of the time. As an administrator, disciplinary issues consume most of her time and her relationships with students and teachers are now skewed. No longer a teacher herself, she is once removed from her students and acts as a mediator between teachers and students. In one of her web diaries, she chronicles the number of times she has come home after ten o’clock at night, neglects her family, and ultimately doubts her decision to move out of the classroom. At one point in the film, she confides the realities of her job to the documentary crew:

The toughest part of this job right now is dealing with teachers constantly complaining about other teachers. Being a teacher before, I mean, the teachers are my peers, my friends—now I still, of course, have those friendships, but now I’m in a position of power and so I feel that they are trying to manipulate that a bit.

Reddell does spend quite a bit of time managing an unruly faculty, including her best friend, Coach Webb. Tired of Webb asking her for help and then having to defend her from the other teachers who think she is a little rigid, Reddell blows up. She tells Webb that she *is* “pushy” and that she is the “only one willing to tell [her].” Blurring the line between her responsibilities as boss and friend, Reddell also tries to mediate teachers’ personal relationships.

A relation often overlooked in high school films, which is covered frequently in research on teachers’ identities, is the separation between professional and personal identities (Alsup, 2006; Atwell-Vassey, 1998). In *Chalk*, teachers muse on how the profession often stagnates their personal relationships. Not only is Reddell’s marriage straining, Lowrey, who becomes aware of his own attraction to Webb, meditates on how little time teaching leaves for a personal life. Lowrey reveals in a web diary entry:

I’ve been divorced for almost two years now, and uh, I find that, you know, uh, the

subject of dating, the idea of going out with someone, keeps coming up at work, I mean teaching's hard enough for me right now—it's taking all my life. I can't imagine having time for a personal life.

Reddell is the one character who pulls together all of the other teachers' and students' experiences to rearrange them in a way that makes sense, and when she does so, she realizes the absence of relations with the students' home life. At the end of the film, Reddell, once again engages in the process of “doing” and then “reflecting on doing” (Doll, 1993, p. 179) concluding that “we [teachers, the school] can only do so much” and that the home plays the largest role in the success of a student.

“Not All P.E. Teachers Are Gay”: Coach Webb

Chalk continues to interrogate the stereotypical representations of teachers in many Hollywood films including the female physical education teacher. Webb, like Lowrey and Stroope, continues her relationship with real and “reel” (Ellsmore, 2005) counterparts. For example, female P.E. teachers in films are often portrayed in extremes—either as sexy females or females with masculine attributes “butch” (Duncan, Nolan, & Wood, 2002; McCullick, Belcher, Hardin, & Hardin, 2003). Webb openly addresses the popular narrative represented by Hollywood and, some of the public (Cahn, 1998), who hypothesize that female P.E. teachers are lesbians. Webb, aware of this belief, seeks to challenge it as well as complicate it.

In her opening interview with the documentary crew, Webb, who refers to the myth that female gym teachers are lesbians (as perpetuated by high school films like *Clueless*), both addresses and separates herself from this notion, by explaining that it is assumption that possibly keeps men from asking her out:

I find that as a PE teacher...I've had a few instances where students or, uh, teachers have assumed I was gay and I, uh, think it's a mixture of I'm a PE teacher, my hair's short. I don't know if that, uh, affects the way, uh, guys see me—I don't know...but not all PE teachers are gay.

Webb feels the need to claim her sexual orientation because she believes that men assume she is a lesbian which must be the reason they, including Lowrey to whom she is attracted, are not asking her out on dates. Instead, it is probably because, like her colleagues, they find her confrontational, somewhat pushy behavior (atypical of female teachers) off-putting. According to Dalton, “the portrayal of lesbian teachers continues to rearticulate the timeless message of all women teachers: their personal life cannot flourish if they express their sexuality” (2010, p. 129). Webb does not wind up in the arms of Lowrey, even though he fantasizes about the two of them dancing together.

Chalk's underlying commentary seems to be that it would be all right for Webb to be gay, if she were, but she is not. What is missing from the film is who else other than Webb actually makes that assumption or on what they are basing their generalizations about P.E. teachers. To the viewer, only Webb seems to consider how others regard her sexual orientation. In her final web diary, she confides that “teachers are extra sensitive,” but it is unclear as to whether she

identifies with her conclusion. Webb's character shows how powerful normative assumptions can be and the ways in which a mockumentary can both parody and leave questions unanswered.

"Well, That's Why We're Here:" Conclusion

Just as this country's educational system continues to rely on modernist teaching strategies, so too does the mainstream high school film continue to dominate national theaters. According to Bulman (2005), high school movies which "break the Hollywood mold do not often have wide audiences" (p. 66). Rejected by the major independent film festivals like Sundance, *Chalk* received a lukewarm reception from critics, mainly because of its failure to make a "stronger" commentary on this staggering statistic which serves as the inspiration for the film. In one of the most critical reviews of the film, Sarris (2007) accuses it of not "beginn[ing] to address the literal life-and-death issues of education in the schools of the nation's inner cities" (§ 3). However, these movies, often set in inner city schools perpetuate the problematic "teacher-as-hero, students-need-saving" narrative that distorts the public's narrow perceptions of what can "save" our educational system.

By far the most frequent criticism concerns *Chalk's* subtlety. Kennedy (2007), referring to the Morgan Spurlock "banner" comments "But it's hardly supersized. Instead the movie offers some modest, amusing and true lesson about an honorable profession" (§14). Referring to the unique performance by a real-life administrator, Burr (2007) notes that the movie "might have been funnier and more penetrating as a real documentary" (§8). On the other hand, Wiegand (2007) observes "most of these people [the teachers] are ready to go over the edge at any minute. Maybe if they did, the film would be more interesting" (§7). These critics seem to long for the hyper-reality of fiction, whereas *Chalk* clings to the ordinary of reality. Indeed, it seems as if *Chalk* is deemed just to become a "cult classic among educators" (Weitzman, 2007, §1).

Chalk's use of the mockumentary to comment on real teachers and "reel" teachers has not gone unnoticed by film critics. For critic Rich (2008), *Chalk's* "willingness to view teachers as more than wage slaves or Hollywoodized heroes is practically revolutionary" (§7). Our own preservice teachers who view this film in our classes appreciate the focus on the seemingly mundane: the eternally broken copy machine, the happy hours on Fridays. Chennault (2006) suggests that teacher educators use school films with their students to discuss the various layers of meaning presented by a film or how these films are representations of the larger cultural context in which they exist. In the midst of preparing our preservice teachers for a career riddled with test preparation, direct instruction, comprehensive curriculums, and literacy standards, not to mention important issues of race, class, and gender, teacher educators do and should turn to film as one way to discuss what it means to be a teacher. *Chalk* might be too real because it does not mock teachers enough. Many of our students do not have enough experience to recognize the difference between reel and real, at least crafted in the subtle way of *Chalk's* representations. *Chalk's* reliance on the mockumentary form, which blurs the line between fiction and reality, presents an alternative viewpoint on the hardships of teaching—one not found in Hollywood or documentary films about teachers.

The final scene of *Chalk* leaves the audience with a sense of ambiguity as to the fate of Mr. Lowrey's teaching career. Will he decide to return to Harrison High School or will he leave the profession altogether? This ambiguity is similar to what many real teachers feel when their students leave at the end of the school year. Students are evolving as learners, and what they

learn with a particular teacher may not be realized until years later. Post-modernists would argue that accepting this ambiguity is necessary in order to continue as a teacher. Lowrey becomes that student for the audience who must accept that they will never know what his future holds for sure.

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