

By Chantal Chandler and Elizabeth Reckker

# Using Media to Broaden Students' Knowledge About Career Choices

"A SIMPLE TOOL EXISTS THAT RESEARCH INDICATES CAN BE MORE INFLUENTIAL THAN ANY OTHER WHEN SHAPING THE CAREER ASPIRATIONS OF ADOLESCENTS, YET IT IS RARELY INCORPORATED INTO CAREER EDUCATION CURRICULUM. THIS TOOL IS MEDIA."

## WHY DO SO MANY TEENS SAY "A PEDIATRICIAN"

when asked what they will be when they grow up? Students list a variety of reasons: to make a lot of money, to help people, or to take care of children. However, the most important reason is one that will rarely, if ever, be articulated by a young person: "because I see them at work and I know what they do." Other than finding a way for every high school student to have an engaging experience with a highly skilled employee from a technical career path, how can high school teachers begin to broaden their students' knowledge about career choices and encourage them to pursue courses offered in career and technical education (CTE)? A simple tool exists that research indicates can be more influential than any other when shaping the career aspirations of adolescents, yet it is rarely incorporated into career education curriculum. This tool is media.

### The Media's Influence on Young People

Media studies have observed that television serves as a highly popular pedagogical resource (trumping parents, peers, teachers and even part-time work) during an adolescent's search for answers about the meanings, experiences, rewards and challenges of many careers. As they see representations of the world of work, adolescent viewers piece together information they will reference as they make decisions about future career choices. This gathering of information (from a multitude of sources) to determine future careers is called *adolescent occupational socialization*.

Examples that career interests are influenced in some way by television are visible in American high schools today. Educators have witnessed rising interest in the culinary arts as reality cooking and baking programs have garnered larger shares of the teen viewing audience. The "CSI" TV series resulted in stronger interest in law enforcement careers, and counselors have even seen more students claiming a career path toward musical theater since "Glee" began its primetime reign. Additional research indicates that teens report knowing more about occupations they see on television, regardless of having any other contact or experience with that occupation, and know considerably less about those jobs that are infrequently featured in programs.

### Media Stereotyping

Considering television's role in adolescent occupational socialization, why aren't we paying closer attention to what ideas our students construct as they interpret these portrayals? Status quo messages about occupational prestige and the personalities of workers that resound through television programming are likely to be perceived as truth by teenagers. Since we do not teach students how to critically analyze these messages, which are often comprised of stereotypical traits, they can be easily incorporated into an adolescent's understanding of the characteristics of work and workers.

Stereotyping is a key strategy used in television because it helps viewers instantly identify and engage with characters. While we incorporate stereotypes into our daily lives as a shortcut to understanding



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complex ideas, the media's use of it can create messages that provide misleading information about many occupations. On television, historical and iconic characters in blue-collar careers easily demonstrate how such workers are *framed*; that is, how stereotypical characteristics are repeatedly and collectively used to identify them. Consider these characters: Ralph Cramden, Archie Bunker, JJ Walker, Fred Flintstone, Fred Sanford, Al Bundy, Rosanne, Doug Heffernan, and Homer Simpson. While diversity in race and gender were present in each of the programs featuring these characters, the identifying blue-collar traits shared among them, or their *frames*, remain constant. These characters are often lacking in education and/or intelligence, they lack initiative and a drive to succeed, their homes are poorly kept, they struggle financially and their parenting skills are often questionable. All of these traits add up to what Richard Butsch, a professor and author from Rider University, termed the “working-class buffoon.” Because the careers engaged in by these individuals are so often associated with the trades, it’s not difficult to understand why we continue to struggle with declining interest in such fields among adolescents.

### Studying the Media

A recent study attempted to understand how such blue-collar portrayals may be interpreted by young people on the verge of solidifying their career paths. Conducted at a small Midwestern university in 2010, the study first analyzed four television programs: “The Simpsons,” “The Office,” “Scrubs,” and “Family Guy,” and then recruited a diverse group of college freshmen to participate in viewing focus groups. The programs were chosen using a pilot study in which participants (adolescents ages 17 to 19) were asked to list some of their favorite and frequently viewed sitcom and reality programs.

Results of the analysis confirmed previ-



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ous research about the characteristics used to define these workers. Four *frames*, or collection of traits, emerged: the Child or Bully, the Idiot, the Valueless Employee, and the struggle to move up and out of the blue-collar world. No positive frames were observed in the analysis.

Before each post-viewing focus group discussion began, participants were asked to write down some key words they would use to describe the working character featured in the program. A selection of the traits they listed follows: overlooked, slow, unappreciated, low self-esteem, unmotivated, bad work ethic, and irresponsible. These terms dovetail with the first analysis perfectly, demonstrating how easily such stereotypical traits are recognized and brought together as a collective *frame* defining blue-collar workers. Participants projected other negative beliefs into their interpretations of each portrayal. This was noted frequently in their comments, most often by using the qualifier “just” before each occupation discussed, such as “He’s *just* the warehouse guy and no one

takes him seriously,” or “He’s *just* a janitor and the doctors are the more important people.” One never hears “just” prior to the word “lawyer” or “doctor” or “professional football player.” In spite of their media savvy, these students determined that negative portrayals of working people were based in reality and the traits used in the portrayals were simply exaggerated for comedic effect. These findings should serve as a warning to those of us in CTE, and prompt us to call for a new approach to opening up adolescents’ minds to career possibilities—one that challenges a media-saturated world with the power of critical thought.

The key to this approach lies in a pedagogical strategy that can be implemented across curriculum areas, but is not often used in CTE or even traditional classrooms. This strategy is media literacy, a field of study that teaches students how to deconstruct the messages they receive through TV, Internet or advertising—in order to evaluate their validity. The Millennial Generation is immersed in media

from traditional television shows (which now can be viewed via mobile devices and personal computers) to social networking sites (where their conversations contribute to disseminating the stereotypical portrayal of particular careers). In order for students to think critically about the information they consume through the media, they must be taught how to deconstruct the messages, and to understand the motives of those who create them. This is why media literacy is a crucial element in an adolescent's toolbox as they develop ideas about the world of work.

### A Sample Lesson Plan to Foster Media Literacy

For example, using a lesson plan based on the focus group study mentioned previously, a teacher could show seg-

ments from a popular television series in which a character's work is featured. Homer Simpson at the nuclear power plant in "The Simpsons" would be a good example. The teacher could then ask students to reflect on what the character's job is, what characteristics are associated with that job, and whether those characteristics would be considered positive or negative. The instructor should encourage students to research exactly what qualifications a nuclear power plant operator must possess (or if that is a job that exists). Finally, a teacher could lead a discussion about why the creators of "The Simpsons" chose that occupation for Homer. (Perhaps it was done for comedic effect to juxtapose a position requiring a high degree of responsibility to a crass, middle-aged father.) This helps students create a model for deconstructing mes-

sages they may otherwise take as fact.

Overall, the lesson encourages them to bring their own skepticism to the portrayal in order to build a more informed personal opinion. In order for young people to master the practice of questioning what they see and hear through media—especially as it relates to their perception of careers—many other activities promoting critical thinking must be incorporated into their education from an early age.

### The Role of CTE

CTE instructors should make it a priority to combat the negative connotations that young people may gather and internalize about many valid career fields. We must eliminate those biases that become barriers to pursuing rewarding and satisfying careers in the "trades" and other falsely portrayed industries; in order to do so, we must use the resources frequented by young people.

If we ignore the media's influence, we risk another generation of students developing false notions about careers that could be rewarding for them, and a continued labor shortage in several sectors of the job market in the United States. By using a media literacy curriculum to promote critical thinking skills, we can open up adolescents' minds to a more comprehensive and realistic view of the world of work. **T**

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