Mr. Keating’s unconventional approach to teaching in the movie ‘Dead Poets Society’

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‘Dead Poet’s Society’ (1989) film by Peter Weir was written by Tom Schulman and the central character is played by Robin Williams. The film belongs to the drama genre.

The backdrop is 1959, and the drama takes place in an elite conservative boarding school called Welton Academy. The drama is centered around John Keating, a progressive English teacher who teaches poetry. He encourages them to break free from the common norms and live life without regrets. Keating is himself a Welton Academy alumnus. The unorthodox methods of the English teacher catch the attention of the students and eventually goes on to inspire them in many ways. Among many of Keating’s unconventional methods, one that stands out is the act of standing on desks to illustrate to students that they need to view life from a different perspective. He urges them to try and make their own lives extraordinary and to take control of their life. He quotes the Latin expression Carpe diemwhich translates loosely to seize the day and the make the most of it. He always tells his student to look at poetry as an essential for life rather than another subject. The students call refer to him as ‘Oh captain, my captain’, taken the title from the Walt Whitman’s famous poem.

As the term progresses, Keating asks the students to take turns and stand on desks demonstrate first-hand the change in perspective. Unlike most teachers who provide critique and instruction on poetry to students, Keating asks his students to read poetry and try to understand it using their own experience rather than someone else telling them how to think and feel about poetry. He has a strong dislike for the introduction section to poems which tell readers what to think and how to think. In one of his classes, he discusses one such introductory sections called Understanding poetry which narrates the use of a graphical and mathematical method to measure the greatness of a poem. After explaining the section, he tells his students, “I want you to rip out that page”. A classroom full of surprised students who have never been asked by a teacher to tear textbooks look at each other in bewilderment. This is one of the instances which captures the unconventional nature of Keating’s teaching methods. Once one of the students complies and tears out the first page, Keating goes on to ask the students to rip out the entire introduction section. This scene also shows how Keating wanted to encourage students to think for themselves and feel poetry for themselves; he was a champion of original thought and conveyed this through dramatic illustration. Rather than going through the introduction of a poem and then coming to a conclusion of the poet’s idea, he gave students the freedom to make up their own style so as to recognize their true nature. His concept of understating poetry was as simple as walking in a courtyard which makes one more relaxed and open for new ways of thinking.

Keating’s unusual teaching methods draw some attention from his colleagues, but through his personality, he is able to keep an amicable relationship with the headmaster of the school. As a teacher of literature, Keating shows many ways to make lessons more interesting for students in the classroom.

1. Role playing

In the movie we see that Keating himself was formerly a member of Dead Poets Society which eventually become unsanctioned. However, this encourages his students to restart the club.

The activities here include, one in learning and reading out poetry and verse aloud students sneak off campus to a cave along with their own compositions. This role playing when incorporated in the classroom teaching encourages the students to live lives as their own terms. It also helps students to understand the text from the point of view of the subjects in literature. Role playing also encourages public speaking and removes stage fear.

2. Inspiring the students

Mr. Keating is well aware of the fact the primary function of the teacher is to inspire the students without sticking to any orthodox method. Unlike other teachers who always provide instruction to students, Keating repeatedly tells the students that they have great potential and that the students themselves have to be responsible for their future. Many students embedded in shyness with this attitude find the hidden talent in them. The exercises in the classroom help Todd to compose a poem in front of the class. Neil Perry, one of the students becomes passionate about acting, although his father intended that Perry should attend medical college. He explains the students that Dead Poet’s Society is a secret society formed for boys to discuss to read poetry and literature and revel
in the ideas of Romanticism and Transcendentalism. Mr. Keatings talks about learning and understanding poetry by taking a walk in the courtyard. Classes held outside the classroom encourage students to expand their mindset.

3. Story boards and Group Brainstorming

We are introduced to a very innovative idea of teaching literature by Mr. Keating. It can be called as the ‘story board method’ of teaching literature. Mr. Keating reads out aloud about Shakespeare and somehow gets his students to enjoy it. The act of standing on desks to get a different perspective; the students following suit and standing on their desks is a great illustration of both brainstorming and a story board. Though this does not involve the actual use of story on boards like a placard, it makes the student more conscious of the topic they are studying.

As the class ends Mr. Keating tells the students that they must write and read their own poem. This technique of teaching commonly known as group Brainstorming can be effectively used in classrooms, where group discussions are held to produce new ideas. Here each student can contribute his individual ideas on the concerned topic and it can be used to come to a common conclusion regarding the subject matter.

The concluding part of the movie is a bit disappointing. Keating, throughout the term, inspires the students in many ways and eventually the students gather and rebel against their parents and their teachers. Keating’s emphasis on original thought was at odds with the tradition of the Welton Academy which celebrated aspects like “Discipline” “Honor” “Excellence” which are referred to as pillars of the school. The students are finally summoned into the headmaster’s office and are forced to sign a document which stated that the students agreed that Keating corrupted them with his lessons of free thought and such lessons were the reason behind Perry committing suicide.

Keating is eventually fired from Welton and also barred from teaching for life.