Lesson Plans for *Dead Poets Society*

Why do good students love atrocious movies? After years of using film for teaching, the best answer I can come up with is that bad movies are better than good movies for learning language because bad ones make you want to rant and good ones leave you speechless. There’s a lot to talk about in “Dead Poets Society”.

This is one of the most popular movies about teaching ever made, even though it’s about a teacher whose main goal seems to be making himself into a god. The characters are all one-dimensional. The problems are melodramatic. The message of non-conformity is illustrated by standing at attention, together, on top of instead of beside the desk while calling your hero by a military title. It’s a mess of meanings.

So get them talking about it.

Spend a lot of time at the beginning building letting the students be drawn in by the charisma of a comedian disguised as a teacher. Then, when the problems come, start asking questions that will knock him off his desk. And all the way through, focus on the poetry.

This is one of the films I’ve used with the most success. The brightest students grab onto the language. The mid-range students get into the discussions. The lower ones thing it’s a great movie about teaching. But they all learn from it.

Genre: drama

Rating: PG13, adult themes, suicide, brief nudity, under-age drinking

English: standard American, advanced

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**Part One**

**Time:** 6:20

**Summary:**
It’s opening day at an upper-crust private boy’s school in the 1950s. The ceremonies begin with great pomp and a rehearsal of the school’s traditions. The section ends after Neil and Todd meet.
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Vocabulary:
1. pillar: a column that supports the roof of a building
2. tradition: something that is done the same way consistently in a society
3. honor: respect from society
4. discipline: self-control
5. excellence: the best possible work
6. Ivy League: 8 universities that are usually considered the best in the USA

Comprehension Questions:
1. What are the “Four Pillars”? What would your “Four Pillars” be if you were designing a school?
2. Talk about an experience in school or a teacher who changed your life.
3. What adjectives could you use to describe the teachers at Welton? the students?
4. How is Welton different from other American schools? Is this difference good?
5. What values do you think are important to the parents of students at Welton?
6. Take quite a bit of time to introduce the cultural setting for the film with questions to build their background knowledge:
7. What different kinds of schools are there in your country? Do they have different purposes? Different populations?
8. What images come to your mind when you think of American schools?
9. What do you know about public, private, and prep schools?
10. What’s your opinion of the American educational system?
11. What was America like in the 1950s? What major historical or cultural events were occurring at that time? (society, politics, economy, religion, military, technology, etc.)
12. Where is New England? What is it known for?
13. Introduce students to some of the key people American or English icons who are referred to in the film: John Wayne, Marlon Brando, William Shakespeare, Henry David Thoreau, Robert Browning, Robert Frost, Walt Whitman, Walt Disney (Uncle Walt), Keats, Lord Byron, Tennyson.

Part Two
Time: 11:18 (elapsed time in entire movie – not segment time)

Summary:
The cast of boys is introduced. Each boy represents a certain type of student with basically one-trait personalities that make them easy to identify. They mock the school’s principles, trying to hide their nervousness about being back at school. Neil, the group’s social leader, has a confrontation with his authoritarian father regarding his extracurricular activities. The scene ends when the boys have attended almost all of their classes for the first day, and have just entered Keating’s room.

Vocabulary:
1. a stiff: a dead person (euphemism)
2. put one’s foot in one’s mouth: say something that embarrasses you
3. bootlicking: trying to make a superior like you by doing extra favors (slang)
4. valedictorian: the best student in a class
5. extracurricular: activities that are not assigned by a school

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6. dispute: disagreement  
7. travesty: terrible mistake  
8. horror: terrible, frightening  
9. decadence: choosing to live without self-control  
10. excrement: solid waste that comes out of the body (medical term)

Comprehension Questions:
1. Describe the situation between Neil and his father. What did they disagree about?  
2. Tell a little about each of the boys. List their names and a brief description of them.  
3. How do the boys act toward each other when they meet?  
4. What is unusual about Todd’s brother?  
5. Describe Neil’s conversation with his father. Why was Neil’s father upset? Why was Neil upset?  
6. What classes do the boys take?  
7. Describe the teachers at the school.  
8. Take a little time to discuss typical first-day-of-school activities in the native culture.  
9. Discuss body language in different situations, i.e. with peers vs. with parents, in friendly situations vs. in a confrontation. Focus on the use of eye contact in various settings.

Part Three
Time: 16:45

Summary:
The students attend Mr. Keating’s class for the first day, receive a lecture on the importance of living life to the fullest, and leave with various interpretations of his class, varying from intrigued to preoccupied.

Vocabulary:
1. captain: the leader of a group  
2. rumor: some information that may or may not be true that is passed from person to person usually in a secretive manner  
3. hymnal: a songbook that contains religious songs  
4. Carpe Diem: “seize the day!”  
5. lads: young boys  
6. invincible: unable to be harmed  
7. “the world is your oyster”  
8. one iota: a very small amount  
9. fertilizing: adding minerals to the ground to prepare it to grow a better crop  
10. daffodils: a yellow flower  
11. legacy: what people remember about someone  
12. spooky: scary  
13. suit yourself: do whatever you want

Comprehension Questions:
1. What is unusual about Mr. Keating’s English class?  
2. What does Mr. Keating ask the students to call him? Why does he ask them to call him this?  
3. How would students in your culture respond to someone like Mr. Keating as a teacher?  
4. How does Keating try to gain the boys’ trust?
5. Many cultures value poetry more highly than Americans do. Be prepared to take some time discussing the form, rhythm, rhyme, symbols, and general meaning of the poems throughout the film.

6. Many students will respond well to reading poems allowed if they are given time to prepare. Consider assigning the memorization of certain stanzas as homework.

7. With Russian-speaking students, focus especially on the way certain syllables are stressed in a poem and on the changes in vowel length and intonation to show emotion. (The Russian language tends to have shorter vowels and more abrupt intonation changes than English, tending to make native-English speakers perceive speakers with Russian accents as unusually angry or aggressive.)

8. When introducing himself, Keating refers to a poem by Walt Whitman (19th-century American Poet) called “O Captain! My Captain!” Whitman wrote the poem in memory of President Abraham Lincoln shortly after Lincoln was assassinated. In “O Captain...” Whitman talks to a “ship” and a “fearful trip”. What is he referring to through these images?

9. How did the Captain die?

10. While looking at the pictures, Keating refers to a poem by Robert Herrick (17th-century British poet) called “To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time”. How would you summarize the meaning of “To the Virgins...”? Do you agree with the poem? Is it optimistic, or pessimistic?

O Captain! My Captain!
--Walt Whitman

O Captain! My Captain!
Captain! my Captain! our fearful trip is done,
The ship has weather’d every rack, the prize we sought is won.
The port is near, the bells I hear, the people all exulting,
While follow eyes the steady keel, the vessel grim and daring;
But O heart! heart! heart!
O the bleeding drops of red,
Where on the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

Captain! my Captain! rise up and hear the bells;
Rise up—for you the flag is flung—for you the bugle trills,
For you bouquets and ribbon’d wreaths—for you the shore a-crowding,
For you they call, the swaying mass, their eager faces turning;
Here Captain! dear father!
This arm beneath your head!
It is some dream that on the deck,
You’ve fallen cold and dead.

My Captain does not answer, his lips are pale and still,
My father does not feel my arm, he has no pulse nor will,
The ship is anchor’d safe and sound, its voyage closed and done
From fearful trip the victor ship comes in with object won;
Exult O shores, and ring O bells!
But I with mournful tread,
Walk the deck my Captain lies,
Fallen cold and dead.

**Vocabulary:**
1. sought: to look for
2. port: a place where a ship rests
3. exulting: rejoicing
4. keel: the front part of a ship
5. grim: stern, serious
6. deck: the top of a ship
7. flung: thrown open
8. bugle: a military horn
9. trills: plays music quickly
10. bouquets: bunches of flowers
11. mass: large group of people
12. pale: white
13. pulse: heartbeat
14. victor: winner
15. mournful: extremely sad
16. tread: footsteps

To The Virgins, to Make Much of Time
--Robert Herrick

To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time
Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a flying:
And this same flower that smiles today,
Tomorrow will be dying.

The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he’s a getting;
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he’s to setting.

That age is best, which is the first,
When youth and blood are warmer;
But being spent, the worse, and worst
Times, still succeed the former.

Then be not coy, but use your time;
And while ye may, go marry:
For having lost but once your prime,
You may forever tarry.

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Vocabulary:
1. ye: you (old English)
2. rose-buds: unopened roses
3. glorious: wonderful
4. spent: used, having nothing left
5. succeed: follow
6. coy: playfully shy
7. prime: the best part
8. tarry: wait

Part Four
Time: 31:35

Summary:
Knox has dinner with friends of his parents and develops a crush on their daughter, Chris. Mr. Keating uses various dramatic techniques to build enthusiasm for poetry. The other teachers don't approve, but the boys like it. The boys discover a yearbook from when Keating was a student, and it identifies him as head of the Dead Poets Society. He tells them about the group and they decide to revive it without his knowledge. The section ends as they run back into the classroom.

Vocabulary:
1. spitting image: exact duplicate
2. like father, like son: the son does exactly what the father has done
3. engaged: promised to be married
4. jerk: someone who is mean and not well-liked
5. misguided: given bad information and made bad decisions
6. cynic: someone who thinks only negative thoughts
7. realist: only sees the reality of what could happen
8. hell-raiser: someone who causes trouble
9. amnesia: medical disorder where you forget all past memories or people
10. marrow: the material that is inside the bones
11. demerits: given when someone has misbehaved
12. swoon: to be overwhelmed with joy and possibly feel faint

Comprehension Questions:
1. Why is Knox upset after meeting Chris? What does he plan to do about it?
2. According to Mr. Keating, what is the difference between good and bad poetry?
3. What is the Dead Poets Society?
4. Why is Knox upset after meeting Chris? What does he plan to do about it?
5. In your country, what could a man do if he was in Knox's situation?
6. Why does Mr. Keating tell the boys to rip the pages out of the book? What does he want to teach them?
7. How do the students respond to Keating's teaching style?
8. How do the other teachers respond to Keating's teaching style?
9. What is the Dead Poets Society?
10. Why does Keating say that the school administration would not approve of the Society? Why would they object?
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11. Do groups like the Dead Poets Society exist in your country? If not, why not? If so, how are they treated by the school system? Why?
12. Many students have reacted very negatively to what they perceive as Keating’s flippancy and pride in disregarding tradition. If students disapprove, encourage a discussion among the students but be careful to avoid taking sides. The goal is to get the students to talk, not to get them to challenge their country’s educational system or values.

**Part Five**
**Time: 41:19**

**Summary:**
The boys sneak out at night for the first Dead Poets meeting and return unnoticed.

**Vocabulary:**
1. “I’ll second that.” I agree
2. jigsaw puzzle: cardboard pieces that when put together form a picture
3. get your goat: bother someone to upset them

**Comprehension Questions:**
1. What images does the film give as the boys go to the cave? What emotions does the film try to create during this scene?
2. Why did the costume designers have the boys wear coats that make them look like monks as they run through the woods?
3. What happens at the DPS meeting? Are these activities dangerous to the school’s values?
4. The boys refer to several popular “campfire tales”, short scary stories usually told by children or teenagers. Do you have stories like this in your country?
5. If you were a parent, would you want your child to be in the Dead Poets Society? Why, or why not?
6. If you were a school or government official, would you encourage groups like the DPS? Why, or why not?
7. The Dead Poets Society meeting begins with someone reading part of “Walden”, by Henry David Thoreau. Thoreau was a 19th-century American author who left mainstream society to live as simply as possible in the woods. Take some time to have the students analyze the portion from *Walden*. It’s very densely written, but they can probably work through it with some guidance and teamwork.
8. Why did Thoreau go to the woods instead of the city?
9. Does Thoreau believe that life is mostly good, or mostly bad?
10. Why does Thoreau use language about fighting to describe his study of life?
11. What is his goal for studying life in this way?
12. Is it possible to really study life objectively?
13. Consider having students prepare a short campfire-tale or urban legend to tell to the class as a warm-up the next day.

*from Walden*

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--Henry David Thoreau

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived. I did not wish to live what was not life, living is so dear; nor did I wish to practice resignation, unless it was quite necessary. I wanted to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartanlike as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proved to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it were sublime, to know it by experience, and be able to give a true account of it in my next excursion.

Vocabulary:
1. deliberately: with full concentration
2. essential: absolutely necessary
3. dear: important, precious
4. resignation: accepting something without hope
5. sturdily: with strength
6. Spartanlike: like citizens of Sparta in ancient Greece known for purposely choosing to have simple lives
7. put to rout: defeat
8. swath: path
9. sublime: wonderful, heavenly
10. excursion: journey

Part Six
Time:  57:56

Summary:
Keating has the students stand on desks to illustrate looking at the world differently. There’s a sequence of scenes about school life on the weekend. Neil decides to try out for a play, in spite of the fact that he knows his father won’t approve. Todd tries to write a poem for his homework, but he gives up. Neil teases and encourages him. When Todd refuses to recite his poem in class, Keating calls him to the front of the room and almost violently rips a spontaneous poem from him as he stands in front of the class. The section ends as Todd realizes he has succeeded.

Vocabulary:
1. woo: to seek affection of someone with the intent of romance
2. huddle up: athletes gather to discuss their plans for the game
3. butt out: get out
4. twerp: annoying person (possibly little brother or sister)
5. amoebae
6. root canal: removing bad tissue around a tooth and replacing it with good material
7. mole: small, mouse-like animal
8. barbaric: activity that is loud, rude and even harmful
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**Comprehension Questions:**
1. Since this movie is about poetry, why does it spend so much time showing sports? What’s the relationship between sport and poetry?
2. Why does Neil decide to be in the play?
3. Is Todd a poet? Why is he so afraid of the poetry assignment? Why does Keating give the assignment if he knows it will scare Todd so much?
4. Describe the friendship between Todd and Neil.
5. How does Mr. Keating handle the “bad poems” that some students read? Is this effective?
6. Have students tell about a time when peer pressure or intimidation had positive results in their lives.
7. Discuss the images and camera work through this section, particularly the scene in which Todd creates the poem.
8. Discuss Todd’s poem:
   9. Who is the “madman”? What does this word symbolize?
   10. Why does he say “choke” instead of “beat”, “attack”, “stab”, or some other violent word?
   11. What message does this poem give about “truth”? Do you agree?
   12. Have the students write a poem to recite for the class or bring in a poem (in English) to recite.

**Todd’s Poem**
I close my eyes, and this image floats beside me,
a sweaty-toothed madman with a stare that pounds my brain.
His hands reach out and choke me,
and all the time he’s mumbling, mumbling, “Truth,”
like a blanket that always leaves your feet cold.
You push it, stretch it. It will never be enough.
You kick at it, beat it. It will never cover any of us.
From the moment we enter, crying, to the moment we leave, dying,
It will just cover your face as you wail and cry and scream.

**Vocabulary:**
1. floats: rests softly, as on water
2. pounds: hits again and again
3. choke: to stop something from breathing
4. mumbling: saying softly, hard to understand
5. stretch: try to make something longer
6. wail: cry loudly and without control

**Part Seven**
**Time: 67:45**

**Summary:**
The boys begin, as a group, to act more individualistic. and more daring. They invite girls to the DPS, and Charlie writes a satirical letter for the school paper. Knox calls Chris and is invited to a
party. Keating continues using unexpected teaching means and is challenged by a fellow-teacher. Todd receives a disappointing birthday gift.

Vocabulary:
1. sonorous: having or producing a sound
2. at stake: what depends on the outcome
3. take a stroll: calm walk
4. bro: slang for brother or friend
5. reprimand: scold or correct
6. conformity: trying to be like everyone else
7. unorthodox: changing tradition or doing it differently
8. impressionable: easily influenced

Comprehension Questions:
1. What makes Knox decide to call Chris?
2. What lesson does Keating want to teach through the activity in the courtyard? How do the boys respond? Is the lesson effective?
3. What is the other teacher’s attitude toward Keating? Why does he feel this way?
4. Describe Todd’s relationship to his family. How do these relationships affect his personality?
5. How do the other students respond to Charlie’s actions?
6. What does the administration do about Charlie’s actions?
7. How does Keating respond to Charlie’s actions?
8. Mr. Keating refers to a poem by Robert Frost (20th-century American poet) when beginning the lesson in the courtyard.
9. What time of year is it in the poem? What time of day is it? What does this symbolize?
10. What difference does the author see between the roads?
11. Where do the roads lead?
12. When Charlie brings the girls to the Dead Poets Society, he quotes part of a poem by Lord Byron (British poet, 18th/19th-century).
13. Why does the author capitalize “Beauty”?
14. What opposite things does this woman combine?
15. What are the main characteristics that the poet values about the woman?
16. How have each of the boys changed since the beginning of the story?

The Road Not Taken
--Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both and be one traveler, long I stood
and looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth:

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that, the passing there
Had worn them really about the same.
And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

Vocabulary:
1. diverged: separated
2. wood: forest
3. undergrowth: short plants in a forest
4. fair: beautiful
5. wanted wear: wanted to be used
6. trodden: walked on
7. ages and ages: many years
8. hence: from now, from here

She Walks in Beauty
I.
She walks in Beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that’s best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellow’d to that tender light
Which Heaven to gaudy day denies.

II.
One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impair’d the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o’er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear their dwelling-place.

III.
And on that cheek, and o’er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!

Vocabulary:
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1. climes: climates
2. aspect: behavior and appearance
3. mellow’d: become softer
4. gaudy: drawing attention to itself
5. shade: difference in darkness
6. ray: small amount of light
7. raven: black
8. tress: hair
9. serenely: peacefully
10. brow: forehead
11. eloquent: able to speak well
12. tints: small differences in color

**Part Eight**

**Time: 98:25**

**Summary:**
Neil’s father tells him he can’t be in the play. Neil asks Keating’s advice, and tells Keating that he followed the advice with positive results. Knox almost stalks Chris but she ends up accompanying him to play and she agrees. The section ends as Neil goes on stage.

**Vocabulary:**
1. virility: masculine ability
2. infuriating: makes very angry
3. absurd: crazy, hard to believe
4. deliberately: on purpose

**Comprehension Questions:**
1. How does Neil’s father find out about the play? Why is he angry?
2. Why does Neil’s father want him to quit the play? Are these good reasons?
3. What advice does Keating give Neil? Is it good advice?
4. How does Chris react when Knox reads her the poem? How would a woman from your culture respond to this?
5. Why does Chris come to see Knox?
6. Have students work in pairs to create the conversation between Neil and his father and then act it out.
7. This section’s fairly short, and the next one is long. Consider having students read and discuss the selection from “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” before watching the next section. Of all of the possible plays to choose from, why did the filmmakers choose this one to be referred to in the movie?

**Part Nine**

**Time: 117:28**

**Summary:**
Neil gives his performance. His father appears and clearly has not given approval. Neil’s father takes him home. Neil still refuses to talk to his father, and ends up committing suicide. Keating
is blamed. Cameron says that Keating’s unorthodoxy pushed Neil to suicide. One by one, the boys sign papers saying that they agree. The section ends with Todd being called into the room with his parents and the administrators.

Comprehension Questions:
1. Describe Neil’s parents. What are their personalities? What is their relationship to each other?
2. Why is it so difficult for Neil to talk to his parents?
3. Did Neil learn what Keating wanted him to learn? Why, or why not?
4. What does Cameron do? Why?
5. How do the boys respond to Cameron? Why?
7. What happens to Keating? Why?
8. Who is responsible for Neil’s death? Why?
9. What would you do if you were in Knowlin’s position? Why?

For Further Discussion:
Neil plays the part of Puck (also called “Robin Goodfellow”), a fairy in Shakespeare’s A Midsummer Night’s Dream. The play is a comedy about how supernatural and natural worlds interact to bring lovers together. Puck’s final speech, which ends the play, is shown below. This section may affect students strongly. Be prepared for a lot of discussion in a limited time. Carry the discussion over to the next day, before the final section of the video, if necessary. Have students write the ending to the film.

from A Midsummer Night’s Dream
--William Shakespeare

If we shadows have offended,
Think but this, and all is mended—
That you have but slumb’red here
While these visions did appear.
And this weak and idle theme,
No more yielding but a dream,
Gentles, do not reprehend.
If you pardon, we will mend.
And, as I am an honest Puck,
If we have unearned luck
Now to ‘scape the serpent’s tongue,
We will make amends ere long;
Else the Puck a liar call.
So, good night unto you all.
Give me your hands, if we be friends,
And Robin shall restore amends.

Vocabulary:
1. shadows: illusions, dreams (or actors
2. offended: made anyone angry
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3. mended: repaired
4. slumb’red: slept
5. theme: message
6. yielding: having meaning
7. Gentles: kind people
8. reprehend: become angry
9. pardon: forgive
10. scape: escape
11. make amends: repair, fix everything
12. ere: before

Part Ten
Time: 123:20

Summary:
Knowlin takes over Keating’s class, going back to the beginning and praising the essay that Keating had despised. Keating returns to gather his belongings, and Todd leads the boys in standing on their desks to salute him.

Vocabulary:
1. scapegoat: someone who gets blamed for everything
2. fink: someone who tells on someone for doing something wrong
3. blow over: calm down

Comprehension Questions:
1. What did Cameron do? Why did he do it?
2. How do each of the following characters change during the film?
3. Why does Todd act the way he does? Is it guilt or courage?
4. Are there any heroes in this movie?
5. Is the ending of the movie appropriate? Does it fit the message of the movie?
6. Could this story happen in your country? If now, why? If so, how would it be different?
7. What’s your opinion of this film?
8. What does the movie say about friendship, the purpose of education, men and women, parents and children, individuals and society, or the source of happiness?
9. Have the students make and fill out a chart like the one below showing the ways in which the students changed during the film.

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<th>character</th>
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<th>end of movie</th>
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<td>Neil</td>
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<td>Knox</td>
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<td>Todd</td>
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