

Exploring Workplace Diversity on Screen: Tracing Representation Through Media



Class size: 15-40 students

Level: Undergraduate/postgraduate

Time: 50 minutes in-class + independent research + 20 minutes presentation (following week/assessment)

Class setup: seminar room for group formation and research planning

Materials needed: student access to streaming services/film databases for independent research



How This Embodies Teaching Otherwise

This practice connects to all three core commitments of Teaching Otherwise by turning popular culture into a critical lens, not just a backdrop. Students learn to read media as evidence, tuning into how stories about work shape professional norms, expectations, and exclusions. Care as curriculum appears through honouring students' diverse perspectives and creating space for examining how different groups experience workplace belonging. Criticality as method emerges through examining how EDI narratives in media serve specific power structures and whose stories get told or centred. Collective imagination as essential work happens when students move beyond accepting existing representations to envision alternative workplace cultures.



Step-by-Step Instructions

Step 1: Focus Selection and Group Formation (20 minutes)

Students choose one protected characteristic to explore: age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, or sexual orientation. Form groups of 3-4 students who will all focus on the same characteristic throughout their research. Groups discuss why they chose their focus and what they already know about workplace representation for this group. You'll notice some initial hesitation as students consider their choices, but this creates investment in collaborative inquiry while ensuring coverage across different characteristics.

Step 2: Research Planning Using Three-Step Method (25 minutes)

Groups develop their research plan using the three-step method:

Surface: identify 4-5 workplace films/TV shows spanning different decades and notice patterns in how your chosen characteristic is portrayed, what roles they occupy, what assumptions are made, what language is used.

Contextualise: research the historical context when each example was created, what social movements, legislation, or economic pressures might have influenced these representations.

Imagine Otherwise: identify counter-narratives that existed alongside dominant representations and imagine how workplace stories could be told differently.

Groups decide which decades to cover and how to divide research tasks. They'll make their own choices about which examples will be most revealing for their chosen characteristic and develop collaborative research skills while applying the analytical framework independently. For detailed guidance on this method, see [From The Office to The Circle: Reading Workplace Culture Through Popular Media](#).

Step 3: Resource Sharing and Coordination (5 minutes)

Groups share potential examples with the whole class to avoid duplication and create a collective resource list. This generates excitement as groups discover examples they hadn't considered and builds collective knowledge while preventing overlap.

Independent Research Phase (Between Sessions)

Groups conduct their cultural archaeology over the following week, applying the three-step method to analyse their chosen examples. Rather than examining workplace situations in isolation like traditional case studies, students trace how cultural narratives about their chosen characteristic have evolved, revealing deeper assumptions that still shape organisational life. Groups draw on relevant theoretical frameworks to analyse what they're seeing rather than simply describing representations. They prepare a 15-20 minute presentation or create materials for assessment submission that weaves together their media analysis with theoretical insights, focusing on patterns discovered across decades and what this reveals about how workplace "common sense" gets constructed through popular culture.

Presentation Session (Following Week)

Groups present their findings in 20-minute slots, using theoretical frameworks to analyse patterns rather than describing what they watched. Presentations should demonstrate how course theories help explain the cultural construction of workplace belonging for their chosen characteristic. Other students ask questions and make connections across different protected characteristics, building collective understanding of how theoretical insights apply across different identity experiences.



What to Expect

Initial resistance: Some students may feel discomfort engaging with a characteristic they don't personally identify with, or worry about "getting it wrong." That discomfort is part of the learning. Frame it as an opportunity for care, not perfection. Encourage respectful risk-taking, and remind them that analysis doesn't require lived experience, only responsibility and care.

Dominant identity discomfort: Students from dominant groups may initially treat inclusion as something that happens to "others." Gently challenge this by asking how their own identities are constructed as default or unmarked in workplace media.

Group dynamics: Groups will need to negotiate their research approach and may initially gravitate toward obvious examples before discovering more complex patterns.

Research quality: Students often start with surface-level "good vs bad" representation analysis but develop more sophisticated understanding through the historical contextualisation.



Common Issues and Fixes

"We can't find many examples with our characteristic"

Response: This scarcity is itself significant data. What does this absence reveal about whose workplace experiences are considered worth exploring?

Students focus only on "positive" vs "negative" representation

Response: Guide them toward questions of complexity and agency. Are characters driving their own stories or existing primarily to support other characters' development?

"These are just old films, things have changed"

Response: Ask what makes representations feel dated and what current examples might look strange in 30 years. Push students to use theory to explain patterns rather than dismissing historical examples as irrelevant.



Quick Adaptations

Online: Use breakout rooms for initial group formation and shared documents for collaborative research planning.

Large classes: Limit to 6-8 groups maximum to allow adequate presentation time.

Short sessions: Focus on just two time periods (1990s vs now) rather than spanning multiple decades.

Solo option: Students work individually on a characteristic of their choice and produce a short analytical blog post or zine spread using the three-step method.



Success Indicators

- Students move beyond surface-level representation analysis toward understanding how cultural narratives shape workplace expectations and "common sense" about who belongs

where

- They connect media representations to broader organisational cultures and practices, seeing how popular culture functions as informal workplace training
- They develop more nuanced understanding of how different identities are constructed as "professional" through cultural repetition rather than neutral assessment
- They begin questioning whose stories still aren't being told and what workplace futures might be possible

This exercise shifts students from passive consumers of workplace stories to critical readers who understand how cultural narratives shape professional norms. Unlike traditional case studies that focus on isolated incidents, this method traces the deep grammar of organisational life, the unwritten rules about who belongs, what counts, and what futures are imaginable.