



TEACHING TV

What *Breaking Bad* tells us about modern America

Like many with Netflix subscriptions, Michael Denfeld (Col '14, Educ '16) binge-watched *Breaking Bad*, the AMC drama about Walter White, a high school chemistry teacher turned meth producer. "I didn't take it too seriously as a piece of art," Denfeld says. But when he found out that his favorite UVA professor, William Little, of UVA's Media Studies Department, taught a class on the show, he quickly signed up for it. "Professor Little has a certain way of being patient with discussion and teasing out students' best," he says. "I also had a sense that there was a lot under the surface in *Breaking Bad* and wanted to explore that."

UVA students have been flocking to courses like these in recent years. Media Studies also offers a course on HBO's *The Wire*, as well as classes on broadcast news, and women and television. This fall, Media Studies—which didn't even exist as a department until 2006—will have 500 majors, more than English, history, government or foreign affairs. What accounts for this surge in popularity? "Media has a demonstrative influence in our lives," says Siva Vaidyanathan, media studies professor and former chair of the department. "For example, you can't understand the 2016 election without understanding *The Apprentice*."

Little's class is called *Breaking Bad: Once Upon a Time with the Pests* (a play on the Western *Once Upon a Time in the West*, which greatly influenced the show's creator, Vince Gilligan). The show, which ended its run in 2013, is bleak and addictive, like the meth Walter cooks. It is also "a remarkably sophisticated, nuanced, challenging work of art," says

Little. All students in the 30-person class need to have seen the entire series before the semester begins. Over the course of the seminar, students discuss specific episodes in conjunction with political theory, history, sociology and psychology readings. "In many ways I learned more about American politics in that class than I did in my some of my actual politics classes," says Lena Richards (Col '15), a media studies major who took the course in her third year.

"*Breaking Bad* is a rewriting of a very early American story," Little says. Students in his class read *The Real American Dream: A Meditation on Hope* by Andrew Delbanco, which traces the idea of the American Dream to the Puritans. "He argues that for all their elitism, the Puritans embraced this idea of a very mysterious, transcendent God," Little says. "That's the real American Dream, this idea of investment in something larger than yourself."

At the start of the series, Little says, "Walter White is a Puritan. He wants to cook pure meth. He wants to escape the corruption of Albuquerque and so goes in the desert, just as the Puritans moved to the New World." But Walter ultimately becomes a living embodiment of the corruption of the American Dream. "The American Dream has become very materialistic and self-oriented; it involves commitment to prosperity for the aggrandizement of self. And you can see in the show that that's what happens to Walter," Little says. "The show illustrates contemporary socioeconomic anxiety and a modern world in which people are separated, isolated, disconnected."

Class discussions are similar to those in literature or art history courses; students analyze clips as they would books or paintings. They examine everything from Walter's ranch house in the suburbs (a sanitized version of the American frontier) to spots and stains on characters' clothing (which identify people as contaminated).

"I think there's a fundamental shift happening where video media is going to outmode textual media in a lot of areas," says Denfeld, who plans to become a high school teacher. "I used Netflix for the *Breaking Bad* course, replaying scenes over and over to analyze them, as if I were flipping back and forth between pages. Television media can be just as conceptually rich as some of the best pieces of literature."

—Molly Minturn