

This year's teaching of STAR WARS was an incredible experience. I knew it was going to be something special from the moment I discovered that 40 of my 72 students had never seen a single film in the Saga. To put it mildly, I was a little surprised at that number, and it put the rest of the year up to that point in a new light as I had referred to elements of STAR WARS almost daily and had even arranged to have Ian Doescher, author of *William Shakespeare's Star Wars*, speak to my classes. To paraphrase Emperor Palpatine, only now, at the end, did I understand that many of my students had no idea what I'd been talking about. But 3 weeks and 6 films later, I'd remedied all that.

Now, I've taught the films in various orders over the years in an attempt to capture the imagination of the students while also emphasizing the mythic, poetic structure of STAR WARS I've always enjoyed. But it wasn't until I heard Sam Witwer espousing the virtues of the 4, 5, 1, 2, 3, 6 order on the "Full of Sith" podcast that I finally had a way to present STAR WARS in a way that not only made sense for first-time-viewers but also allowed for the kind of critical analysis I was looking for.

Beginning with *A New Hope*, my students were introduced to the universe of STAR WARS in much the same way the original audience had been back in 1977. And, believe it or not, they came to the film without many of the pre-conceived notions or opinions that often characterize critics and fans of our beloved franchise. They were simply enjoying watching the film and keeping track of the characters, plot, and other elements of the story and presentation. Consequently, my students expressed genuine surprise at twists that experienced viewers take for granted such as Obi-Wan's disappearance at the end of his duel with Vader and could observe without the slightest bit of irony that Imperial Stormtroopers have horrible aim.

Moving onto *Empire*, my students were captivated by the developing Han/Leia/Luke relationships and the dangers the characters faced. My first-timers expressed revulsion at the brief glimpse at Darth Vader's pale, scarred head and while all my students loved Yoda, there were some who were genuinely surprised by his reveal. As for Vader being Luke's father, while many had heard the infamous dialogue, not everyone believed that Vader was telling the truth and I was able to play up the possibility that he was lying—especially when they took into account Obi-Wan's version of the fate of Anakin Skywalker. Ultimately, I relented and showed them the early teaser poster for Episode One that portrayed a young Anakin with a Darth Vader shadow looming behind him.

(It is at this point that I should mention one of the many lessons I learned during this experience. Students who have seen the films will often want to share "spoilers" with their classmates to prove what they know. To combat this, I assured all of them that the real fun comes in watching those who haven't seen the films react to the various surprises. The next time I teach this unit, I will make this point at the beginning.)

As we progressed through the Prequels, a couple of things become very obvious. My students loved Jar Jar and absolutely bought into Hayden Christensen's portrayal of Anakin Skywalker. And although many were initially put off by the awkwardness of the beginning stages of the Anakin/Padme courtship, one class actually applauded during the wedding scene at the end of *Attack of the Clones*. Because they had not been inundated with negative reviews regarding the romantic aspects or "clunky dialogue," my students accepted the Skywalkers' relationship at face value.

What was more surprising, however, was how effectively many were able to compartmentalize the dual nature of the Anakin/Darth Vader character. Even knowing his eventual fate as a Dark Lord of the Sith, most of my students continued to root for Anakin and even excused many of his nefarious deeds as

being done for a greater purpose. But as we neared the end of *Revenge of the Sith* and saw him re-named Darth Vader and slaughter younglings, there was genuine shock and surprise. Still, the biggest reveal of that film for many was the birth of the Skywalker twins and disclosure that Leia was Luke's sister.

The same grace given to Anakin was seemingly extended to Luke Skywalker as we returned to the Original Trilogy with *Return of the Jedi* and witnessed the prospective Jedi engage in near-Sith behavior by Force-choking the Gamorrean guards and by threatening Jabba's life. At all turns, Luke was given the benefit of the doubt—even up to the end when he finally is goaded into rage by Palpatine and briefly taps into Dark Side power to defeat Vader and must make the choice whether to kill his father or not. It is not all that surprising then that some of my students actually cried when a redeemed Anakin Skywalker died at the end of the film or applauded when Hayden Christensen's Force ghost appeared alongside those of Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi. For these students, STAR WARS is one 6-part story—the story of Anakin Skywalker. And though some of us older viewers may still have attachments to earlier incarnations of the films, those without these attachments seem to love the current version just as much.

Finally, I was left with the undeniable conclusion that while many of the most vocal and appreciative new fans of STAR WARS were my female students, there was a great deal of concern and debate about the lack of female characters to this point in the Saga. I did share with them what I could about Episode Seven—including the recent casting of Lupita Nyong'o and Gwendoline Christie. My hope is that the filmmakers will continue to make strides in expanding the appeal of STAR WARS and give us a great story. Many of my students thought that STAR WARS was not for them before they watched it in my class. Having seen that it is, they are ready and eager for what's next.