

## Using Pop Culture to Teach Youths Conflict Resolution, Healthful Lifestyles, Disaster Preparedness, and More

### Abstract

Adolescents learn sustainable production techniques, civic engagement, leadership, public speaking, food safety practices, conflict resolution, disaster preparedness, and other life skills through Extension programming. Educators can increase participant interest in such programming by applying a creative pop culture twist, such as a zombie apocalypse theme. A pop culture take on a traditional topic infuses the educational experience with excitement and fun, which researchers stress increase motivation and learning. Who knew that understanding the U.S. government's structure and recognizing the importance of voting could thwart development of a biological weapon that might spawn a zombie apocalypse? Creative thinking such as this can engage learners and increase registration numbers in youth development programs.

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The zombies are coming! The zombies are coming! Are youths in your programs prepared? Do they have what it takes to survive a zombie apocalypse? When youths are excited about a topic, they tend to take in information with ease. Injecting fantasy and fun into sound teaching models could rejuvenate your lessons.

Developing and teaching programs on the importance of voting, food safety, conflict resolution, disaster preparedness/response, and plant/animal production are areas in which 4-H professionals are well versed. However, Warnock (1985) noted three decades ago that Extension's future depends on creativity—it did then, and it does today. Creatively repackaging topics through a twist such as a zombie apocalypse theme can attract hordes of adolescents to Extension youth development programs. For example, teaching teens how they can use "Structure of the U.S. Government" to avoid a zombie apocalypse gives new life to an old program. After all, government spending gone awry is a leading cause of zombie outbreaks in movies.

### Use of Humor in Education

Using humor in education is an effective practice. Lomax & Moosavi (2002) found that humor as a pedagogical tool could be used for engaging students and fostering concept development in teaching

statistics. Others have applied the use of humor to instruction in life skills. For example, in 2001, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention personnel found that using a zombie apocalypse platform to teach emergency preparedness skills—an approach that began as a tongue-in-cheek campaign to engage new audiences—was so effective that they continue with the approach today (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, n.d.).

## Why Zombies?

It is well documented that motivation and learning are linked to engagement and dopamine production in the brain (Adcock, Thangavel, Whitfield-Gabriel, Knutson, & Gabrieli, 2006; Willis 2007). Dopamine is a major chemical neurotransmitter associated with attention and decision making. Because dopamine also is released at the anticipation of pleasure (Nader et al., 2002), youths will be open to learning before a program even begins. Additionally, Jensen (2005) emphasized that learning works best when an activity is intrinsically meaningful to an individual. What is being learned has to be behaviorally relevant to the learner because the brain will not adapt to senseless tasks. So how are zombies relevant? The rise of the zombie phenomenon in pop culture has spanned from George Romero's 1967 horror movie *Night of the Living Dead* to a myriad of outlets. *The Hollywood Reporter* noted that an episode of the 2014 mid-season run of the TV show *The Walking Dead* topped the Winter Olympics in the Nielsen ratings (O'Connell, 2014). In addition to TV shows, there are big-budget movies, video games, cos play opportunities, and zombie survival runs. Michael Jackson's 1982 video "Thriller" even taught adolescents to dance like zombies. This phenomenon is relevant to the learner because it captures the imagination and fuels the burning question "How would I fare if this really happened?"

## Zombies Invade Extension Programming

In both Rutgers Cooperative Extension and Oregon State Extension, we have used the zombie apocalypse theme to invigorate youth programming. Rutgers Cooperative Extension found use of the theme to be an engaging method for teaching teens at its annual North Jersey Teen Conference, where opening-night events included engaging zombie skits and "Minute to Win It" activities. Over 100 teens from 10 counties were captivated for hours as presenters addressed healthful lifestyles, food safety, conflict resolution, and the importance of civic engagement. Oregon State Extension found that during its 4-H summer camp program, disaster preparedness activities with zombie themes held teens' attention and made them more engaged. 4-H professionals in Madison County, Georgia, replicated and expanded on these ideas. Increased participation in 4-H healthful lifestyle programs allowed them to reach 300 middle school youths as a result of using the zombie theme in relation to sleep deprivation. They created a "Person or Zombie" game, whereby campers had to look through sleep deprivation glasses from a distance to determine whether a picture was of a person or a zombie (C. R. Varnadoe, personal communication, February 29, 2016).

Through our years of using zombie-focused activities, we have developed various ideas for practical applications of the theme. Here we present options for using the theme to teach life skills and topics related to homesteading, healthful lifestyles, disaster preparedness, and food safety.

## Life Skills and Zombies

Ask movie goers who they cheer for to get eaten by a zombie and they will say "the bad guy!" Conflict resolution and leadership skills become of pressing importance when individuals are vying for leadership of a

ragtag group of survivors. The reasonable, level-headed person with the group's best interests at heart possesses the behaviors that should be modeled. Lessons around "I statements," character education, persuasive speech, and motivating others become much more relevant to participants when zombies are scraping at the door and there is a common ground for survival. Ironically, using a zombie theme can bring a sense of realness to intangible life skills.

## **Sustainable Food Production, Healthful Lifestyles, and Zombies**

With the occurrence of a zombie apocalypse, shortages in food and clean drinking water become realities. After all, the fall of civilization can create disruptions of food networks. Hoarding of food by those struggling to survive makes procuring prepackaged goods from stores or warehouses difficult. Anyone who has watched the movie *Zombieland* understands how hard it will be to find even a Twinkie. Learning how to raise chickens, goats, and rabbits and grow fruits, vegetables, and grains becomes more relevant, and more fun. By engaging in sustainable food production to develop a self-reliant food economy—a necessity during a zombie invasion—teens not only become prepared to survive an actual natural disaster but also are encouraged to form lifelong healthful eating habits. Moreover, because it takes muscles time and conditioning to be up for the task of fighting the undead, the onset of a zombie apocalypse is not the time to start eating right and exercising. The zombie apocalypse scenario emphasizes the importance of both learning basic homesteading skills and being healthy and physically fit. Critical thinking skills can be added to lessons through questions such as these: On the basis of current resources, which is better for my small community's needs—goats or cows? Which animal has more demanding needs? Which is more versatile? What other resources can we use? How do we get syrup from a tree or honey from a hive? How is potable water made?

## **Disaster Preparedness, Food Safety, and Zombies**

Knowing one's community and surrounding areas is helpful in a crisis. The prospect of facing a zombie apocalypse forces teens to consider important questions: Where do people tend to gather when there is an emergency? What supplies should I have; that is, what goes into a preparedness kit? What is my family's plan in an emergency? Whether a disaster takes the form of a zombie invasion, a storm, or a fire, being prepared is essential. Applying a zombie theme to disaster preparedness education can make it more interesting for youths to plan for something that they might be inclined to think will not happen to them.

Food safety is another area that can be associated with zombie encounters. For example, a relatively new cause of zombie apocalypses in movies is the presence of uncooked meat. Teaching adolescents how to ensure that meat has been fully cooked, whether they are using a microwave, a stove, or an outdoor grill, could save civilization. In this scenario, a pertinent zombie survival kit item would be a meat thermometer.

## **Takeaway Message—Expansion and Practical Application**

Research has shown that the brain accepts and retains information when dopamine is released. Fun and laughter release dopamine. A zombie apocalypse is just one of the pop culture phenomena that can be used to engage teens as they learn important life skills. The practical applications of using pop culture are multitudinous. Identifying a trend that captures the attention of adolescents and capitalizing on it will increase your registration numbers and engage your learners.

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