



Dr. William Wilcox, philosopher and creator of the 'Star Trek' class; **Dr. David Shear**, biochemist



STAR TREK

Adventure in the Classroom

By Anne Baber

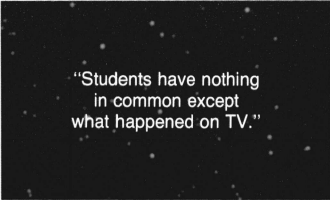
College students who don't like "Star Trek" are as hard to find as students who don't wear bluejeans. "Star Trek," of course, is the science fiction television series about the voyages of the starship Enterprise and its officers—Captain Kirk; Mr. Spock, with the pointy ears and logical mind; McCoy, the ship's doctor; and Scotty, the engineer. A Mizzou Honors College class, called

Space, Time and Logic: Star Trek, capitalizes on student interest in the TV show and uses it to spark discussions about the future.

Dr. William Wilcox, associate professor and chairman of the philosophy department, heard of a similar class elsewhere, proposed the class to the Honors College and rounded up three other interested professors to help with the innovative course. Dr. David Shear is associate professor of biochemistry and author of the science fiction novel, *Cloning*. (The *Alumnus* published an excerpt from the book in March-April 1973.) Dr. Timothy Materer is associate professor of English and has taught a class on science fiction as literature. And Dr. Robert L. Carter is professor of electrical and nuclear engineering. All the teachers donate their time. They have full teaching loads in their own departments.

This is the second year the class has been offered. It meets for seven weeks. No grades are given: students receive only a pass or fail mark. A pass is worth one credit toward graduation.

Almost three times as many students as can be ac-



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commodated sign up, and only the first 80 are allowed to enroll. All must have B averages. The students, just like the profs, are an interdisciplinary group. They have in common their interest in "Star Trek." The series consists of 79 episodes, made from 1966 to 1969, which are now being rerun all over the world. Some of the students have seen a single show as many as eight times. Others have collections of books, models and other paraphernalia. This devotion to the TV show is widespread among college students; it's a cultural phenomenon on campuses all over the country.

"The 'Star Trek' episodes we see get the students enthusiastic. No other thing is as likely to produce learning as enthusiasm for the topic," Shear believes.

The students' enthusiasm is obvious. Rod Simmons, a junior majoring in broadcasting, wore to class the first day a yellow T-shirt with black lettering that informed his classmates he had attended the International Star Trek Convention in Philadelphia last year. "I'm a Trekkie," he says, using the term fans have created to identify themselves. "But

I'm also interested in the show as good commercial TV. I want to be maybe an actor or a producer or director."

He grew even more enthusiastic about the class when he found out that "Star Trek's" creator and producer Gene Roddenberry would be guest lecturer on Campus in February and would also address the class and show them a reel of out-takes from the series.

Materer has some theories about why the show is so popular. "Science fiction," he says, "is the most popular form of fiction among the young. 'Star Trek' looks forward and says we can handle the future—it's optimistic. But the ultimate appeal of the series is the sense of community aboard the Enterprise. Young people are afraid that the future holds for them jobs with no sense or purpose. They appreciate the camaraderie and loyalty aboard the starship. Finally, people like Mr. Spock. Perhaps it's that we all feel that we are aliens, but we identify with him."

Howard Rea, a senior in marketing, said, "I signed up for the course because it sounded like an adventure."

On Tuesdays, class members and gatecrashing Trekkies fill the room which seats 100 people to watch an episode or a part of an episode for half of the two-hour class period. Then the discussion begins. Sometimes everyone participates and sometimes students divide into smaller groups led by the four professors.

The discussions cover a wide range of subjects from technical to biological to theological to ethical and moral questions raised by the show.

Wilcox and the other teachers carefully choose episodes to provoke the discussions. "The list is endless," Wilcox says. "What is an alien? What is rational man? Is Spock the model of the rational man? Can there be conflicts between one's loyalty to the institution he serves and his fellow man? Could one make a transporter? Is traveling faster than the speed of light possible?"

One episode Wilcox planned to use this year is a show titled "Requiem for Methusela" in which Captain Kirk falls in love with an android. Last year, the discussion following this show was particularly stimulating, he says. "We discussed a variety of topics. Is she really alive? Is one's humanity based on one's mode of manufacture? Can she be human if she is created and not born? Can machines think? Can man create artificial intelligence?"

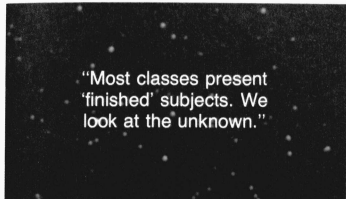
Wilcox explained why the TV show episodes were used. "We have here in 'Star Trek' an instance of art that we can examine to discover something about our lives," he said.

Even within the Honors College there are some raised eyebrows about the intellectual respectability of the class. Is 'Star Trek' really an "instance of art," and can one justify using a TV show as a jumping off point for a course?

"Science fiction has never been very respectable,"

Wilcox notes. "And, of course, it's less respectable on TV." He acknowledges the bias against commercial television in academia. "Some professors, and students, say with great disdain, 'I never watch TV.' But the indiscriminate *not* watching of TV is as bad as indiscriminate watching.

"We have the impression that books are for learning and television is for entertainment. That's



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not valid. TV can be dealt with intellectually," Wilcox says.

Carter agrees that the class is not superficial. "We need to talk about tomorrow's world," he believes. "Thinking about the future stimulates my imagination. It shakes me loose. Some of the ideas that the show deals with contain the germ of possibility. I like that."

Materer, who was not a Trekkie before he started teaching the course, says, "I didn't expect much out of 'Star Trek.' And most of the programs are bad. They are 'space operas.'"

But, he believes that "Star Trek" is a part of popular culture and is therefore important. "In this University," he says, "students have nothing in common. I wish that everyone would read a few books—the Bible, the *Odyssey*, Shakespeare—but they haven't and they won't. The one thing students do have in common is what happened on TV. I hope people don't think this course is a waste of time. It bridges a cultural gap, and it also bridges the gap between disciplines. Professors so rarely talk to people in other departments. An English prof talks to other English profs and to English students. An interdisciplinary course like this is important to all of us."

"My reading of science fiction when I was a boy was the best educational experience I had," says Shear. "Most public school curricula destroy the imagination. We are trying, in this class, to encourage people to be imaginative, but not frivolous. We don't want them to leave their critical faculties behind. Really, there is an enormous amount of excitement in academic inquiry. To understand the world and to contemplate worlds beyond our own is a very exciting adventure. Most school subjects are presented as 'finished.' All the student has to do is to master what is known. What I like to do is shake stu-

dents up and get them to think, to apply what they do know to the unknown."

"Colleges teach that you have to specialize and get narrower. You can't be good at everything. But I believe in the Renaissance person. I am a scientist, but I believe that science is a humanistic activity. We, the scientists and the humanists, should be one intellectual community," Shear believes.

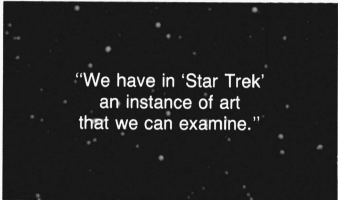
In the classroom on the first day of class there was a sense of community, a feeling of belonging to an in-group. Some students flashed Spock's hand sign to each other and laughed.

But Wilcox cautioned them, "We are using scripts as instruments for getting to a problem. They are the means to an end, not just entertainment. We are not interested in who wears what colored shirts on the Enterprise. We are interested in how people cope with problems."

Materer steers the students away from an uncritical "We love 'Star Trek' attitude" and alerts them to looking at the show as a product of the sixties.

"We will see sexism in many of the episodes. We will see vestiges of the manifest destiny idea and latent imperialism. Even though the Enterprise's prime directive is 'Do not interfere with other planets,' we will see that they do interfere. The Klingons, who are bearded and somewhat Oriental-looking, might be stereotypes of the Red Scare era. As Kirk triumphs over the computer and makes it destroy itself in one episode, we might wonder if the show is trying to allay our fears about the computer. The show does reflect the culture of the sixties," he concludes.

Wilcox points out that the episode in which the Enterprise violates Romulan space was based on the Pueblo incident.



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Trekkies know by heart the statement of the mission of the Enterprise that begins each show, "To explore strange new worlds, to seek out new civilizations, to boldly go where no man has gone before."

The four professors believe that declaration also makes good sense as a statement of the class's educational mission. □