



## AIDS: A Pop Culture History

VH1 Music Studio  
Cable in the Classroom

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Note to Teachers: The programs viewed in conjunction with these educational materials may include references, consistent with the eras portrayed, to substance abuse, violent acts, and topics of a sexual and/or political nature. Because this may be considered inappropriate for classroom use in some communities, you are encouraged to review the programs before presenting them to your students, and if necessary, choose those sections that enhance your lesson and are acceptable for use in your classroom.

### Making a Difference

This section provides suggestions for extending the learning beyond the documentary and for becoming further engaged in the subject of HIV/AIDS. You will notice that many of the lesson ideas and activism ideas link to additional content (such as interactive timelines, graphs, primary source media files, authentic art) that should enhance understanding and engagement. Linking to any of this supplemental content will open a new window in your browser, so this page (and this website) will always remain open.

Below are synopses of the ideas. Click on them in order to get a more thorough explanation.

#### **Examine the role/influence of pop culture (including celebrities) on behavior, especially among adolescents.**

As methods of spreading popular trends developed, such as movies, magazines, television, and the Internet, history became filled with examples of pop culture (including celebrities) affecting behavior, especially among adolescents. As one example, Elvis, the Beatles, and Michael Jordan all greatly influenced the hair (or lack of hair!) on men and boys. After John F. Kennedy performed his inauguration ceremony without a hat, hat sales plummeted, and when Oprah Winfrey selects a book for her book club, sales of the book skyrocket.

The documentary spotlights numerous examples of pop culture's influence on the public's perception of HIV/AIDS. Explore current examples in which pop culture influences trends and behaviors. Identify the examples and organize them. For example, you might categorize them as being positive influences, negative influences, or neutral. Also, examine WHY and HOW such influences spread. Finally, as a way to extend this idea, you can look at historical and/or cultural examples from outside the U.S., and compare them with those identified and examined in the first part of the activity.

### **Explore ways in which art reflects and affects cultural attitudes and behaviors.**

Upton Sinclair's novel *The Jungle* (1906) painted a disturbing picture of the meatpacking industry, leading directly to changes in food laws. Pablo Picasso's masterpiece *Guernica* (1937) reflected and simultaneously affected anti-war sentiments during the Spanish Civil War (and beyond). The alien and zombie movies that were popular in the 1950s resulted largely from a fear of communist infiltration and resulted in amplified fears of communism. While hardly considered a masterpiece, the play *Oh! Calcutta!* (1969) was performed completely in the nude, reflecting a free spirited yet vulnerable mood of the time. More recently, the musical group Run DMC pioneered rap and hip hop in the early 1980s, relying on sparse sound created from sampling and spinning older albums and on lyrics that spoke to an urban experience.

The documentary cites the impact of artist Keith Haring's work, the AIDS quilt, and the film *Philadelphia* (among other influential examples of art with AIDS as a central motif). Using current examples of works of art, (including films, television shows, music) identify ways in which art reflects and affects cultural attitudes and behaviors. Examine whether there are instances where the art seems to reflect more than affect, or vice versa. Because of a widening feeling of complacency regarding HIV/AIDS, come up with some ideas for works of art that might reflect that and/or affect complacent attitudes and behaviors.

### **Identify "tipping points" within the history of HIV/AIDS and apply that understanding of a tipping point to other issues/points in history.**

A "tipping point" occurs when a disease or a movement reaches a critical mass, thereby greatly accelerating its spread. The term was popularized by Malcolm Gladwell's book *The Tipping Point* (2000), a book that he was inspired to write after his work as a reporter covering the AIDS epidemic. Epidemiologists view epidemics in tipping points in order to help identify how a disease can go from small numbers of infected people to astronomical numbers in a relatively short period of time. Malcolm Gladwell's book builds on that idea and focuses on tipping points that change public attitudes and behaviors, and its subtitle is "How Little Things Can Make a Difference."

The history of the public's awareness and understanding of HIV/AIDS reveals a slowly-rising increase in the early years, followed by some periods of rapid growth in the percentage of people aware of the disease and possessing a basic understanding of it. As more people become infected, it's natural that more people become aware of it, but are there moments in the history of the disease that we should consider as tipping points? Using the documentary and the link below, identify any tipping points within the history of HIV/AIDS (including possible tipping points that have led to the current state of complacency). Explore why these points likely tipped the scales in a particular direction. And by recognizing tipping points within the history of HIV/AIDS, it becomes likelier to be able to identify and analyze historic tipping points.

### **Strategize methods for breaking people out of complacent attitudes/behaviors regarding HIV/AIDS.**

The documentary ends on a somber note, pointing out that many people have become complacent about the risks and dangers associated with contracting HIV/AIDS. It is an attitude that belies the fact that the number of infected people continues to explode worldwide, and the fact that recently there have been some sharp increases within the U.S.

One challenge in fostering changes in attitudes and behaviors among adolescents is that those usually in charge of encouraging those changes are adults. Develop a plan that will have an impact on peers' attitudes and behaviors regarding HIV/AIDS. Brainstorm the types of messages that will affect peers, as well as methods for getting those messages out. Share those ideas with those who might be able to help those ideas become a reality! The Resources section of this website can help identify some of the organizations working to build greater awareness and understanding of HIV/AIDS.

### **Develop a service-learning project centered on HIV/AIDS.**

Service-learning takes community service a step further by linking service to academic subjects. HIV/AIDS is a topic with numerous connections to service and academics. Learning how the disease spreads from person to person (and the science behind transmission) might be linked to a public awareness campaign centered on changing people's behaviors to minimize the risk of infection. Investigating side effects of the drugs used to treat HIV patients and learning the physiology behind those side effects can lead to developing ways to help patients better deal with the side effects. Looking into the degree to which local governments support efforts to tackle HIV/AIDS problems might culminate in a letter-writing campaign to government representatives to encourage more support from them.

To develop an effective service-learning project, it is important to reflect on what interests you among the many facets of HIV/AIDS and to begin by surveying and evaluating the community for the areas of need regarding HIV/AIDS. After establishing interests and needs, identify how those areas might overlap within science, social studies, art, language arts, and so on. Brainstorm service projects and link elements of the projects to academics. An important element before, during, and after project completion is reflection. For example, examining preconceived notions, changing views, and personal growth are all excellent topics for reflection.

### **Identify community organizations that are working to increase awareness of HIV/AIDS, decrease HIV/AIDS infection rates, etc., and create a community guide on HIV/AIDS resources.**

*AIDS: A Pop Culture History* documents some of the efforts of Elizabeth Taylor to mobilize the film community to work to increase awareness of the disease and to fund research for a cure. The documentary also spotlights the work of ACT UP and other organizations that strive to make a mark in the fight to stop the HIV/AIDS epidemic from spreading further. Those featured in the film are among hundreds and thousands of community organizations with similar missions. People in your community, however, may be unaware of the AIDS/HIV resources within the community.

Research the area's organizations to discover what resources are available to everyone. The resources might include non-profit organizations, medical clinics, government agencies, for example. Create a short description of the services that each organization offers, contact information (including web addresses), any costs associated with the services, and so on. In the end, create a community guide on HIV/AIDS resources.



These materials are provided through a partnership with Cable Positive. This curriculum was created in collaboration with Cable Positive, Cable in the Classroom and Topics Education.