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Reflections on Teaching with Films in British Secondary Education

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Keywords

British secondary education, teaching with films



REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING WITH FILMS IN BRITISH SECONDARY EDUCATION

Antony Mullen

Abstract

Little research has been done into the effectiveness of using film as a teaching tool. This article reports on a three month research project which examined the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of student learning outcomes of students between the ages of 14-16 years of age, in a British secondary school. The report aligned the findings with Bloom’s Taxonomy and Kolb’s Learning Cycle to explain the empirical observations of colleagues in the English teaching profession. While the report does not fill the void in the film pedagogy research entirely, it does offer an in-depth look at three intended learning outcomes for a personal, health and social education lesson and how films help students meet the projected learning outcomes.

Introduction

The relationship between film and education is one which is widely acknowledged with films such as “*Bad Teacher*”, depicting the practice of showing a film as being commonplace. In particular, the implication here, and in other media, is that it is an incompetent teacher who shows films to their classes. However, while it is in short supply, there is emerging academic research into film pedagogy which contradicts this notion. The research project behind this paper sought to address the gaps in the research in film education and did so by identifying that very little of the published work related to British secondary education. As a result, the action-research project’s data collection took place in Sandhill View Community Arts School, a specialist media school in Sunderland in the North East of England. With just under 1,000 students, both male and female, on roll, Sandhill View is situated in a deprived area of the country and the vast majority of students are from working class backgrounds. The school is also a failing one, with the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) deeming it merely Grade 3: Satisfactory in 2012 and the school’s most recent self-assessment suggesting that, when next inspected, it is most likely that OFSTED would declare is Grade 4: Inadequate due to ineffective teaching, poor progress made by its students in the long term and ineffective leadership by its senior staff. In the British education system, this would lead to the school being placed in special measures, a process whereby another successful school’s management team would oversee the work of the school’s current senior leadership team.

In need of fresh and innovative pedagogical approaches, the action-research project would examine the effectiveness of film as a teaching aid and establish how and why learning takes place when film is used: uncovering this and aiming to fill part of the film pedagogy void is the main purpose of the research. The lesson took place as follows and was taught to eight

classes of high, mid and low ability status over a three month period. Each class experienced the lesson only once meaning that over 200 students were involved in the project. The lesson was designed to fit into the school's Personal, Health and Social Education (PHSE) curriculum and would take on the central theme of drugs education.

Research Design

As discussed below, the research lesson was conducted as follows:

Step one: students' prior knowledge is established using a Likert-scale survey; no assumptions are made.

Step two: students are introduced to the intended learning outcomes and criteria for success.

Step three: students are shown the first clip and must answer questions on their task sheet.

Step four: students engage in class discussions with extended questioning.

Step five: repeat step three and four for the other three clips.

Step six: students fill in a final Likert-scale survey to demonstrate the progress they feel they have made.

At the opening of the lesson, the intended learning outcomes were explained and students rated their prior knowledge on a Likert-scale survey. This was a suggested data collection method and was particularly effective because students understand it due to its simplicity, thus leading to accurate feedback. However, to further validate the responses, extended questioning was used to confirm the responses that students had given. The research, therefore, not only indicates how much students actually learn but also notes how much they perceive themselves to have learned. This is of critical importance in the British education system as the OFSTED lesson observation criteria expects that students should be able to confidently assert that they have made outstanding progress and evidence this. Using four differing clips from mainstream cinema, the students would be expected to view the scene, answer the questions on the worksheet provided and then engage in group and class discussions following the clip. The clips were thus: Mia Wallace overdoses and is taken to Vincent's dealer in *Pulp Fiction*; Renton goes 'cold turkey' and hallucinates in *Trainspotting*; Laser is hyperactive as a result of taking cocaine in *The Kids Are All Right*; and, a student catches her teacher, Elizabeth Halsey, smoking marijuana but Miss Halsey claims that it is "medical marijuana".

As two of these films are rated by the British Board of Film Classification, a letter was sent to parents to gain their permission to allow their child to view the clips. This is common practice in the school which uses film on a regular basis due to its specialist status in media. At the end of the lesson, the students filled in a second Likert-scale survey to demonstrate their progress against the intended learning outcomes. The overall lesson which was delivered by me and witnessed by a colleague also provided opportunities for empirical observations of how much students progressed; all empirical observations in this paper are the result of a critical and thorough discussion of what my colleagues and I observed as opposed to my own unchallenged observations. This was a particularly necessary process to incorporate into the research as it gave both quantitative and qualitative feedback.

The use of a specific set of students in one school has two major implications. Firstly, it was possible to ascertain what prior teaching and learning had occurred in relation to drug abuse. For these students, there had been next to no formal education provided by the school in either the social or medical side of substance abuse, meaning that no assumptions had to be made about students' prior knowledge. As all students were beginning with a similar level of understanding, it was easier to measure progress as students shared a starting point and were measured against shared criteria of success, regardless of their educational needs. The second implication is that

the results are limited and the study represents only these students, but, as I come to discuss, they can also be representative of learners of a similar age in other contexts.

Analysis

First, data were provided in response to the main thinking behind the intended learning outcomes, and following this, the observations were explored using Kolb's Learning Cycle to explain why learning occurs overall. For the three intended learning outcomes, discussions on the relevant part of the lesson are reported under a subheading which states the outcome in the same language as presented to the students. Bloom's Taxonomy posits a pyramid-like scale which, at the bottom, categorized the actions and abilities associated with low order thinking skills. The further the pyramid advances upward, the higher order the thinking skills. The theory has been revised by educators and scholars over the years to reflect changes in education, but ultimately the model is one preferred by teachers. The model used for carrying out empirical observations for this project was Lorin Anderson and David Krathwohl's 2001 revision (Krathwohl, 2002). Anderson and Krathwohl suggested that the skills in the pyramid from bottom to top are (a) remembering, recalling knowledge from the films and repeating facts; (b) understanding, taking meaning from the films; (c) applying, using newly learned information from the films in different situations; (d) analyzing, selecting a part of the film specifically to detract meaning and evidence a claim; (e) evaluating, critiquing the films through a specific lens or comparing two or more clips; and, (f) creating/synthesis, whereby students put information together in a new coherent way. In analyzing how the intended learning outcomes are met, definitions and terms from the taxonomy were used to explore the learning process.

David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Jerling, 1996, p.135) looked at the process of learning and was something used to discuss the ways in which students learned following the research lessons. Kolb theorized that learning occurs in a cyclical structure and students can enter the cycle at any of its four points, as long as they completed the circle that leads to successful learning. The four points of the cycle are: (a) concrete experience, having an emotional response; (b) reflective observation, watching something occur; (c) abstract conceptualization, thinking about what has they have experienced; and, (d) active experimentation, doing something in response to their thoughts. For film pedagogy, this model is flawed from the beginning. It is, for example, not possible for students to feel or think about the film before they have actually watched it. In light of this, the end of this paper will consider how this model can be revised to accurately reflect the process that occurs when students learn from film.

Under of the subheadings below, the intended learning outcomes of the lesson are discussed with relation to Bloom's Taxonomy and the limitations of the investigative research methods are also noted. The Likert-scale surveys could suggest three possible outcomes. First, they can demonstrate an improvement in student knowledge if the second survey has a lower number associated with the intended learning outcome than the first survey. Number 1 on the scale was associated with a wealth of knowledge about the topic and number 10 was associated with no knowledge of the topic whatsoever. So if the student first selected 8 it would suggest relatively little knowledge was held prior to the filmic intervention, but if the second survey by the student shows that they have chosen number 2, then a significant amount of progress is indicated. This outcome is named 'progress' in the report. Secondly, the opposite could happen, whereby a student may choose a higher number on the second survey which would suggest a decline in progress, thus leading the researcher to refer to this outcome as 'no progress'. Finally, there could be no movement on the scale at all. This occurred mainly when students felt that they

had a great deal of perceived knowledge about a topic and this was reinforced by the lesson, for example, choosing number 1 on both occasions would suggest that the student still had to validate what they thought they knew with what was taught. This is labeled 'no change'.

Intended Learning Outcome #1

To understand the mental and physical health issues caused by drugs abuse

For the purposes of this intended learning outcome, students were expected to gain an insight into the negative health implications of drug abuse, both physically and mentally. The Likert-scale surveys showed that 87% of students felt that they made progress in relation to this, 6% did not and the other 7% began with a lower number on the scale and remained on that low number. The skills used here, in terms of Bloom, would typically be low order thinking skills as students would typically only need to recall the information given by their teacher. However, this information was not clearly presented to them. The result of using film however was that synthesis was required. To give a specific example of this from the *Pulp Fiction* clip, the scene was divided into two, the overdose and the adrenaline injection; students were asked to consider alternatives to Mia Wallace being resuscitated. The responses encompassed discussions of the dangers of amateur medical practice, instant death following the overdose and the risk of being unconscious and choking on one's own vomit. Rather than merely recalling facts, students made progress because they were asked to create new alternatives to the climax of the scene. It is likely, from what was observed that the 6% of students who made no progress were not equipped with the media literacy needed to achieve the higher order thinking skill. Beyond the scope of this paper, research into the advantages of an intrinsic knowledge of how to read a film benefits students' creative thinking would be another welcomed attempt to address the gaps in the film pedagogy research canon.

However, to suggest that the 'no progress' students made no progress in that lesson whatsoever would not accurately reflect what colleagues observed. The facilitated class discussions and questioning meant that all students were at least able to recall the medical issues that could be caused by drug abuse. So while these students did not achieve the higher order thinking skills, all students achieved the lower order thinking skill related to recalling information. The benefits of using film were clear: first, the majority of students did achieve the use of higher order thinking skills, and second, the level of engagement of each class was much higher in comparison with these classes' previous PHSE lessons, a point noted by colleagues and I. Once again, while we can generally assert that film is known to be an engaging medium as shown by the popularity of cinema-going in Britain and the USA, an unexplored area of film pedagogy would be an exploration into why film is engaging as a teaching tool and the benefits of this, something which is beyond this paper's scope.

Intended Learning Outcome #2

To understand how viruses can be caused by drugs use

This objective was centered on a specific medical understanding of viruses and the drugs that cause them and was taught using the *Trainspotting* clip. In relation to this point, 93% of students showed that they felt they had made progress while 7% chose number 1 on the scale both times. None of the students felt like they did not make any progress in relation to this objective. However the observations aligned the learning process with low order thinking skills. The film presents a quiz show in which Renton's parents are questioned about drugs related viruses. While the delivery of the information is clearly flagged to indicate that the information is about to be shared, students are only required to recall this information. They are not required to

analyse or create anything in relation to this. However, the basis of this project was not an aim to replace the teacher with film but rather to find ways that film can be used as an educational tool. This being the case, the extension task which follows this clip, as set by the teacher, could easily lead students to do something with the information that demands higher order thinking skills be developed and used. For lesson, students were required to use specific elements of the information to answer questions in a class discussion. In doing this and selecting specific evidence to back up their claims, students move to the middle of Bloom's pyramid. The limitation that other practitioners may find imposed on their post-viewing task is time. The clip used will possibly last longer than it would take a teacher to state the facts, but in losing time, other advantages gained is student engagement.

Intended Learning Outcome #3

To analyze the representation of drugs abuse and users to understand their severity

The final intended learning outcome required students to watch the clips from *Bad Teacher* and *The Kids Are All Right* comparatively. In doing so, they were asked about their perception of drug users and substance abuse, something which was very much intended to develop their social awareness and citizenship, having had two aims which were based around fact. The nature of the task asked students to use thinking skills from the middle of the pyramid, simply by making comparisons across texts. 69% of students felt they made progress against this criterion while 20% had firm views which were reaffirmed and did not move from 1 on the scales. 11% of students felt they made no progress. However, in relation to this point it is also clear that the Likert-scale survey is perhaps too simplistic and flawed when measuring opinion. For the 11% of students who feel their perception of drug abuse became less serious, it could be the case that they analyzed the films and compared them, developing the same skills as the students who made progress, but decided that the sensationalist representation of the film, or merely the fact that the films are works of fiction and was less serious than their original perception. Certainly from empirical observations it was noted that students had different emotional responses to the films at different extremes. It serves to show the ambiguity in attempting to measure progress with quantitative data alone; qualitative data is necessary to understanding the students' thinking behind their feedback. While empirical observations allows for this to some extent, it is advisable to educators repeating the research to include one-on-one interviews.

To return to the extension tasks set post-viewing, students were asked to reverse the representations that had occurred in a film of their choice and depict this in a storyboard. The results were that the process outlined by Bloom's Taxonomy was repeated: students recalled how the drug abuse was represented, they compared this to a differing representation, and they synthesized this information to create a wholly new representation.

In summary of the three intended learning outcomes, it is clear that the use of film in this case study allowed for improved teaching and learning. The students agreed they were more engaged than in lessons when film was not used, and as a result, took part in the learning more actively. In doing so, the students were offered some of the distinct advantages of film pedagogy: (a) developing higher order thinking skills when low order thinking skills would have been the alternative without film, (b) comparing and contrasting texts, (c) synthesizing information to create new interpretations of the texts, or (d) creating new alternative endings to the scenes. In doing this the application of knowledge and demonstration of learning and progress was clearer, a point noted by colleagues during observations.

The Learning Process: Reflecting on the Whole Lesson

So, based on empirical observations and using Kolb's Learning Cycle, how did learning occur in this lesson? Based on the structure of the lesson and the processes which occurred, it becomes clear that Kolb's cycle must be revised. First, the practice of using film, as already identified, requires that students first see the clip. This means that we must reject Kolb's notion that the cycle be entered at any point. Secondly, the clips shown were deliberately varied. From comedy to violence, psychedelic to teenage anxiety, the four clips were intended to offer a variety of emotional responses. Anecdotally, it can be said that students both vomited and laughed when the dead baby crawls across the ceiling in *Trainspotting*. Equally, while some laughed at *Bad Teacher* and Elizabeth Halsey's explanation for smoking marijuana, some thought it unlikely that a teacher would do such a thing and rendered the scene ridiculous. It becomes clear that the next step in the cycle is what Kolb classed as two steps. Students both think and feel at the same time.

When dealing with questions of representation, it is safe to say that students' feelings usually guided their thoughts, but their thoughts and comprehension of what they were watching affected them emotionally. This leaves us with a revised theory whereby students watch, then think and feel, and finally they 'do', before, in the case of this lesson, repeating the learning process. The doing element of the cycle reinforced an earlier made point: film is not a replacement for the teacher. The 'do' at the end of the cycle will be decided by the related extension task that is set and the assessment of learning that takes place. In using a variety of extension tasks, this research showed that the thinking skills developed varied depending on the nature of the task. Where the activity was confined by time, the extension was shorter and so did not allow for the highest thinking skills to be developed.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the investigation concludes the worth of teaching with film is vast and allows for higher order thinking skills in students of both special education needs and higher ability levels. However, the role of the teacher is not made redundant but still a necessary part of film-based lessons. The viewing of the film is where higher order skills can be demonstrated. While this action-research is representative of a select group the process can easily be replicated by other educators but it is suggested that interviews are used after the lesson to further validate students' responses to the Likert-scale survey. Overall, film proves to be an engaging and powerful medium. Using this teaching tool in education, tends to improve the quality of teaching and learning in secondary education and enhances classroom engagement by facilitating the development of high order thinking skills. Importantly, it should also be noted that students' perceptions of their progress was significant, with the vast majority claiming to have made progress; this is something which is monitored closely by OFSTED.

The only disadvantage is time and planning, while a teacher could make a point within seconds, the process of setting up a film and then showing the clip can potentially take up more time than most teachers are willing to spend. However, this research has shown that using film is time well spent, as students develop skills by watching films at a rate higher than being told the same information by the teacher. Unfortunately however, film pedagogy remains an unexplored area of educational academia but suggestions for research into film and engagement, practical filmmaking, and film and media literacy have been made, but were beyond the scope of this paper.

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