How to Start a Rebellion
Using Film to Engage Social Studies Students

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Abstract: History teachers face the obstacle of connecting content about the past to their students living in the present. Research in the fields of film, psychology, and education suggest that the use of narrative film in the social studies classroom actually more effectively engages students in the class itself, as well as the historical material. When they are more engaged, they grow cognitively, as well as in terms of their meaningful learning and preparation to become citizens of our society. This article explores the views of experts in these fields, as well as the implementation of film as a teaching tool in an urban high school history class.

Introduction

> *A solemn gathering in a town square. Teenagers stand dressed in their best clothes, stone-faced and on edge as they face the stage. They view the government's film through glazed eyes looking at the giant screen up front, but not really watching. A vibrantly dressed, earnest woman steps to the microphone; far too happy for such a grim occasion. She wishes the crowd a "Happy Hunger Games!", before choosing the two tributes, children really, who will represent District 12 in this year's games. Tributes to fight to the death on national television; a mandatory viewing. Tributes who are up for slaughter at the hands of their own government.*

That scene that I described above is bleak, dark, and probably thought provoking. It makes the reader, at the very least, sympathetic to the plight of the tributes. Readers of the novel The Hunger Games by Collins (2008) and viewer of the movie version by Brissell and Ross (2012) likely know this scene well, and yet it is unlikely that one might experience it without any kind of emotional reaction regardless of how many times they have experienced it. Perhaps a viewer of the film would feel for Primrose, the Everdeen sister whose name is chosen at this Reaping Ceremony. Perhaps they begin to wonder what the nation of Panem's citizens generally think of their government's enforcement of yearly Hunger Games. Viewers might have a different emotional reaction entirely, but ultimately they are engaged in what they are watching. They consider the world of the film to be true in this moment and authentic as involuntary reactions to the events unfolding in front of their eyes.

What if a history teacher showed this scene in class? What if viewing similar scenes helped a history teacher to better fulfill the goals of a lesson? What if it engaged the students more fully in the content? As history teachers, it should be our goal to meaningfully teach the events that shaped our world and our society. It is through the incorporation of film as a supplemental teaching tool that we are better able to achieve student engagement and ultimately contribute to our students' growth as future citizens. The use of film in the classroom is often viewed as a crutch: something that replaces "having to actually teach." However, the research and discourse in the fields of psychology, film, and education suggest that the use of narrative film in a social studies classroom can contribute to the cognitive development of students, refine their critical thinking skills, and engage them in the content material on a deeper, more meaningful level. Engaging students in historical empathy removes them from their own world and places them in closer relation to the time and place which they are learning. This article will operate using Endacott and Brooks (2013) definition of historical empathy:

> Historical empathy is the process of students' cognitive and affective engagement with historical figures to better understand and contextualize their lived experiences, decisions, or actions. Historical empathy involves understanding how people from the past thought, felt, made decisions, acted, and faced consequences within a specific historical and social context. (p. 41)

The matter of narrative film in the classroom is relevant to members of the educational community in that a priority of education is the achievement of meaningful long-term learning and connection to the real world.

Psychological and Film Theory Factors

Psychological research and the study of empathy lay the foundation for the overall justification of using narrative film in a social studies classroom. Elements of psychology are also evident in the study of film theory, as well as the application of narrative film in the classroom. Empathy itself is "the feeling that you understand and share another person's experiences and emotions; the ability to share someone else's feelings" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Psychologists Eisenberg and Fabes (1990) state that "Empathy, sympathy, and related vicarious emotional responses are important concepts in developmental, social, and clinical psychology" (p. 131). This demonstrates the benefit to the growth of each individual when they display and practice an emotional response. Furthermore, empathy is not the same as sympathy, although the two terms are often misused interchangeably. Empathy requires one to take on the emotions of the person or people they are watching, while

sympathy only requires pity for them. The spectator therefore never has to actually feel the way the subject feels, but rather they only need to acknowledge it.

Film theory often explores the connection between narrative film and emotion while incorporating the elements of film production techniques. Coplan (2006) of Emory University agrees with others in the field that film evokes an "automatic, involuntary [reaction] because of the viewer witnessing the characters' emotions coming to fruition, and refers to this process as emotional contagion" (p. 26). Emotional contagion "requires direct sensory engagement and...is unique to our experience of audiovisual narratives" (Coplan, 2006, p. 26). This would mean that a student will have a unique reaction to a film as opposed to reading the order of historical events out of their textbooks. The reaction comes to them more naturally. Furthermore, in film theory there is the foundational understanding that viewers suspend what they know of reality and accept the truth being shown to them on screen. Coplan (2006) adds

> ...because emotional contagion responses do not involve beliefs or the imagination but are based on automatic and involuntary processes, spectators' experiences of emotional contagion will be virtually identical to real world experiences of emotional contagion. (p. 26)

Coplan (2006) would advocate for film in the classroom as a means to a meaningful activity; practicing caring about the plights and successes of other people. Film theorists would also argue that techniques such as extreme close-ups, shallow focus, and point-of-view are the director's way of manipulating and dictating viewers' emotional response, regardless of if the viewer personally enjoys that director's style or not.

Classroom Application

In Dr. Stuart Foster, lecturer of social studies education at the Institute of Education at University College London, notes in a piece by Bryant and Clark (2006) that students should be transparently primed on the content of both the historical material and the film. He notes that teachers need to, throughout this process, also "address the inaccuracies transparently with students and use those inaccuracies as learning opportunities about bias, production time/place, and so on" (p. 1058). Foster also advises that "students form research teams to investigate relevant contextual information [and] encouraged to ask critical questions of their sources" (quoted in Bryant & Clark, 2006, p. 1058).

One teacher in an urban high school used the book The Hunger Games while teaching a unit on the Civil Rights Movement to her 10th grade honors American History students. First, she taught the content itself, particularly focusing upon the early days of the movement. Then, in preparation for the film, she distributed the writing assignment rubric with these instructions:

> After watching The Hunger Games, break down the beginning of the movement in the story according to the aspects of a social movement that we discussed in class (leader, methods, message, etc.). Then choose one civil rights group from your text and compare/contrast it with the movement in the film. The focus of your work should be on how movements begin and develop, so any focus on the end results of a movement should be minimal but is certainly useful. (Jones, 2016)

Students then participated in a discussion about what elements of a social movement would likely be present or necessary regardless of mission and social issue. Students made suggestions such as purpose, symbol, leader, and action. While the educator facilitated the instruction in that she provided areas of discussion such as those just listed, there was otherwise minimal prompting from her for the students. This conversation laid out the context for watching The Hunger Games by giving students elements to watch for while also checking for understanding of the state-mandated material.

Transparent discussion also took place in which students noted the people who write their textbooks and those who make curriculum policy, as well as when The Hunger Games was made and released and by whom. They understood that ultimately, no matter how important a film's story might be, studios ultimately want a financial return on their investment. Questions were posed asking students to identify the goal of the film and allowed students to come to their own conclusion about financial success. These are all steps of engaging in historical empathy that are essential to its function. It was with these elements in mind that students viewed the film over the next three days.

During the viewing, the teacher did not interrupt the film so as not to interrupt the emotional momentum for the students. At the conclusion of the film, most of class time of was spent outlining the facets of social movements as displayed in The Hunger Games and the Civil Rights Movement. In this discussion, which followed the same model as the pre-viewing discussion, students demonstrated deeper understanding for the events of the South in the 1940s and 1950s than they had prior to viewing the film. For instance, they picked up on the negative relationship between government and the masses and were even visibly upset by it. They also noted who controlled the media in both circumstances: white men in the South and the Capitol in Panem. Students further demonstrated enhanced knowledge and engagement through their writing assignments that were due the following week.

Final writing products varied in a couple of different ways. First, students who were more familiar with The Hunger Games series were permitted to include information from beyond the first film, and as a result they were able to build even stronger cases for their observations. Second, students were able to draw similarities and differences between the film and any Civil Rights organization they wanted such as

Student Nonviolence Coordinating Committee or Congress of Racial Equality. Struggling writers were also given graphic organizers to help prepare for the final assignment. These accommodations also follow best practice as shown through the National Center on Universal Design for Learning (2016) because they "help students to organizer their thoughts and establish relationships between ideas" ("Why UDL?," para. 2).

Written products also displayed varying levels of achieved historical empathy. While there was deeper understanding of the Civil Rights Movement across the board, most students demonstrated more advanced understanding of the connections between the Civil Rights Movement and The Hunger Games. Many were able to step beyond the content at face value and make personal assertions and observations. Students who wrote at this caliber often included their own emotional reactions to portions of the film and how the individuals in the southern United States must have felt given their own experiences. Students who went through the motions of the assignment, made little to no assertions beyond regurgitating facts and making basic connections, and rarely writing with much emotion. It soon appeared that while both the class discussions and written assignment during this lesson were successful, the discussions demonstrated more emotional engagement and historical empathy in this circumstance than the writing assignments. This, however, is likely a result of the many student complaints that they "do not like writing" and not against the purpose behind the assignment. This is the limit of every teacher's abilities; ultimately, the students need to want to do the work and stretch themselves emotionally. Be that as it may, each student at different junctures of this process clearly engaged in and demonstrated historical empathy and emotional engagement with the Civil Rights Movement through the lens of The Hunger Games.

So, what could be improved? What worked well with the best practices of education? In what Colby (2008) calls the "historical narrative inquiry model", the primary goals for student achievement include advances in

> ...a renewed interest in and attention to the past...the development of procedural knowledge...the development of the ability to analyze and critique authentic historical documents...the acquisition of interpretive skills for historical narratives...formation of historical perspectives based upon evidentiary history…[and] the articulation of those perspectives through student-authored historical narratives and argumentative essays. (p. 2)

These goals highlight the fact that assessment for historical empathy and emotional engagement are somewhat subjective, but can still be demonstrated in ways that are individualized while being supported by the content. This can be done through assessment tools such as rubrics, which dictate what is to be demonstrated, but not necessarily how.

Colby (2008) like others in her field, also emphasizes the importance of in-depth questioning upon using less traditional historical texts. The teacher in this 10th grade social studies room did that both before and after viewing, although the writing prompt itself could have urged beyond content information. It could have gone beyond third-person and endeavored into first in order to practice what Endacott and Brooks (2013) call perspective taking which focuses on understanding "another's prior lived experiences, principles, positions, attitudes, and beliefs in order to understand how that person might have thought about the situation in question" (p. 43). Students are not always told in a traditional school setting to let their emotions come into play, and to expect them to do so without explicit help from the teacher may have been why there were students who held back emotionally. Endacott and Brooks (2013) also suggest the use of role-playing debates and reflection activities in order to achieve this. Additionally, Brooks (2008) notes in her own work the importance of transparency with students, stating that the ultimate goal of this teaching practice is "a balance between careful analysis of historical evidence with creative, inferential thinking, both of which are necessary to understand and explain the past on its own terms" (p. 145).

Conclusion

Film, when used appropriately, can be incredibly beneficial to teaching the social studies curriculum. The psychological and developmental research indicates that growth in these areas of the human experience are necessary to becoming a well-rounded, well-developed individual. As teachers, using the psychological, film theory, and classroom application evidence should be encouragement to venture outside of our possibly traditional methods of teaching. There is a stigma attached to using a film in class; that it essentially is not teaching and is not a productive use of time. However, I argue that teachers are charged with not only teaching our pupils the subject matter, but also preparing students for the world outside the classroom. Film allows history teachers to do both.

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