

# Importance of Using Film in Social Studies Education

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**Abstract:** The COVID-19 pandemic forced educators to rework their entire delivery method for instruction to students. It has allowed technology and media, such as film, to take a forefront. Film is a key component to the successful delivery of social studies content to students. Utilizing film to deliver content in social studies provides many different benefits for students. This article explores several ideas including the importance of utilizing film to teach content within social studies, the types of film to use, different concepts to be taught using film as well as the cautions of using film.

## Introduction

Imagine being a student in a history class where the teacher talks for 60 minutes every day, five days a week. There are a few slides in a presentation with notes to be written about the topic at hand. The class follows the same routine every single day. There are only notes with lectures, quizzes, and tests. Nothing exciting or engaging is ever occurring. Next, imagine being the educator in that room. Lecturing for 60 minutes while most students sleep through the information. Quizzes and tests over said information result in many students failing.

Some social studies classrooms are stuck in a pattern of disengagement like the one described above. Virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic has taught educators and students alike that utilizing technology and media in education is no longer avoidable. Many students today are tech savvy in ways that could never be thought possible. In this sense, the field of education has to be adaptable too. Teachers have had to adapt their teaching styles to compensate for the ever-changing world around them. The way educators teach students has to be consistent with the way students comprehend information best. “The importance of the use of visual technology in education is more noticeable, especially considering that the new generation spends most of their time in front of audio and video communication devices such as computers, internet and television” (Icen & Tuncel, 2019, p. 231). The days of paper and pencil notes are becoming less frequent. One of the ways that educators can adapt to this need is by the use of films in social studies classrooms. The utilization of film is a key component to the successful delivery of social studies content to students.

## Importance of Instruction by Film

Films are the most influential of visual materials (Icen & Tuncel, 2019, p. 231). Films provide viewers with images, motion, and sounds that immerse them into a storyline. This storyline is able to “transfer more information to individuals in a simpler and more comprehensible manner than written texts” (Icen & Tuncel, 2019, p. 231). The utilization of written texts is important, so students are able to build

written comprehension skills. However, if this is the only mode of delivery, students may easily become bored. The incorporation of films into lessons help to decrease the monotony of lectures and help to stimulate interest of the students (D'sa, 2005, p. 10). Films are a modern luxury that students are easily able to relate too. By using these methods to deliver content, students tend to enjoy the class as well as increase the comprehensibility of the content being taught more than traditional lecture methods (D'sa, 2005, p. 10).

Films are also able to convey social aspects and emotions of events more than any written text could (Icen & Tuncel, 2019, p. 231) more accurately. There is research to support the importance of using students' emotions when learning. According to D'sa (2005), "neuroscientists have established that the storage and strength of memories can be increased if learning is done both at the emotional and at the cognitive level (LeDoux, 1997, as quoted in D'Sa, 2005, p. 10). Films, with the visual and emotional immersions they provide, can lead to an increase in retention and comprehension of content within the students (Icen & Tuncel, 2019, p. 231; D'sa, 2005, p. 10). By tapping into the emotions of the students, educators can activate retention and comprehension within the student which will lead to an increased storage time for the memories created during the lesson.

It is clear that films increase the comprehension of content. However, films also help students to build key skills while comprehending the material. Films to teach social studies content can also aid students in the building of primary and secondary sources skills. Films used as primary sources are analyzed as an information source regarding the time of the film's creation (Gunn, 2010, p. 647). The utilization of films as a primary source allows students to form generalizations about the subject matter within the film when comparing multiple sources including written text (Gunn, 2010, p. 648). For example, the film, *Bonnie and Clyde*, is a primary source for studying the 1960s, not the 1930s (Gunn, 2010, p. 647). Students will use the film to study the time that the film was created the 1960s, not when the time of the setting, the 1930s. Students can use this information about the 1960s to form generalizations about that time in history. Students can compare the generalizations formed from watching the film to those read about in their history text books. This comparison is a critical skill that students must possess. Another key component to using film as primary sources is the development of historical film literacy. Historical film literacy are the skills that allow students to view and critically analyze movies, set in the past, as historical documents (Gunn, 2010, pp. 647-648). The utilization of film is one way that allows students to develop higher level thinking skills beyond analysis. They could begin to develop synthesis and evaluation skills as well (Icen & Tuncel, 2019, p. 231). The development of these skills ultimately leads to the promotion of students' interpretive competency, autonomy, and engagement with social studies content (Gunn, 2010, p. 648). Students are provided the opportunity to go beyond just memorization of dates and key historical figures. They are expanding higher order thinking skills that are useful later in life. Films as primary sources provide many benefits, but films can also be used as secondary sources.

Most of the time films are used as secondary sources of information when used in a social studies classroom. As a secondary source, films are used as sources regarding the time period they depict (Gunn, 2010, p. 647). Films used as secondary sources provide details of the time the setting is taking place. For example, the

film *The Alamo* can be used as a secondary source to discuss Westward expansion (Gunn, 2010, p. 647). Films as secondary sources are more effective when students are provided the opportunity to “reflect on or become aware of their nature as interpretations” (Gunn, 2010, p. 648). Students, given various interpretations of the events, can result in cognitive dissonance which motivates students to use higher-order interpretation skills to form their own interpretation of the event (Gunn, 2010, pp. 648-649). In the example of *The Alamo*, students are able to discuss Westward expansion and when given the opportunity to reflect on interpretations, they are able to use higher order thinking skills to create their own interpretations.

## Concepts to be Taught Using Film

The social studies discipline is an extremely large content area that contains many different subsets. The use of film in this area can encompass any of the areas within social studies. The different types of film can also help to teach different concepts in social studies. The main area discussed in this manuscript is history and how film can assist in teaching different concepts within history.

Gender equity is at the constant forefront of discussions across the globe. In history class, much of the focus ignores the female perspective (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, p. 221). This may be because social studies standards do not demand inclusion for the female perspective or even multiple perspectives (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, p. 221). For example, The National Council for the Social Studies only contains one standard that mentions gender and each state’s standards are also similar in nature (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, p. 221). With this lack of representation, films can be used to provide gender equity and historical education through the use of multiple perspectives. For example, the film, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, can be used to in a unit centered around World War II (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, p. 224). *Anne Frank* can be inserted into this conversation as well as the conversation of religious intolerance when discussing World War II (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, p. 224). Another film that can be used to present content while providing gender equity would be *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, p. 224). This film can be used in a unit centered around the 1920s. Many history curricula already include units on the roaring 20s. However, this film can provide a differing view on American culture during that time (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, p. 224). It shows the American culture in the south, specifically Florida (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, p. 224). This film also would provide information on what it was like to be African American during this time in American history and could provide students with valuable information (Schiener-Fisher & Russell, 2012, 224).

Racism is a major controversial theme that is woven into the history of the world. Many educators shy away from this as it could be considered too controversial (Buchanan, 2016, p. 139). Film could provide a way for educators to explore this theme in a safer format. As mentioned previously, films are a great way to provide multiple perspectives on the same topics. When discussing racism with students, teachers can provide multiple perspectives which can lead to a democratic conversation space within the classroom (Buchanan, 2016, p. 139). Educators could show films that provide more context on the U.S. Civil Rights Movement and by showing

these films, students are able to use higher order thinking skills to interpret the film (Buchanan, 2016, p. 139). While film should not replace having a conversation, as there are limitations, it can be a conversation starter into those difficult conversations with students. It can allow students to have discussion points without being too controversial.

History education contains many different topics and can lead to interesting discussions. The previously mentioned topics are just two examples of historical content that can be taught using film. Many other historical events and time periods can be taught with the utilization of film.

## Types of Films to be Utilized

There are many different types of films available to educators. However, there are a few types of films that can provide maximum benefits for students in the social studies content area. Documentaries, docudramas, and historical fiction are the three most common types of film for this purpose.

Documentaries are films that represent a real-world with performances by social actors rather than professional actors (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). Documentaries can be found on many different topics including national tragedies. *Bowling for Columbine* is an example of a documentary based on the Columbine shooting (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). Documentaries are readily available on many streaming services that teachers more than likely already subscribe to, including Netflix and Hulu.

Docudramas are a type of crossover film. This type is a hybrid between a documentary and a dramatic film (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). These types of films are designed to persuade the viewer to accept a specific interpretation of historical events that actually occurred (D'sa, 2005, p. 9).

Docudramas are generally based on truth but have a strong influence by the writers to help pull in the viewers (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). One very popular example of a docudrama used in history classes is *Schindler's List* (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). Docudramas are also readily available on many streaming services.

The third type of film that is most common for educators to use are historical fiction films. These types of films are based on fictional plots that are set in historical contexts (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). The characters are entirely fictional or loosely based on a real person from history (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). Historical fiction films have many examples. One older example is *Gone with the Wind* (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). A more contemporary example would be the musical *Hamilton* by Lin Manuel-Miranda. Historical fiction films can be used to help students understand how history could have developed (D'sa, 2005, p. 9). Many historical fiction films are readily available very similarly to the other types of films most commonly used. Each type of film presents its strengths and weaknesses when presenting content information to students. However, they can be mixed and matched to provide the best learning experiences to the students depending on the type of content being taught.

## Cautions in Using Film

Film in a social studies classroom provides many benefits to students. However, there are also cautions to be considered. The first caution is the amount of time

that showing whole films takes from other instruction time. This can be solved by showing clips of movies. Another caution is dramatic license. Dramatic license is used to create drama in the story line of docudramas and historical fictions. The added drama can create dialogues, meetings of people as well as distort the amount of time that specific events take place (D'sa, 2005, p. 10). Another caution is that the audience, the students, may not be able to determine what is fact and what is fiction or speculation (D'sa, 2005, p. 10). A final caution of using film to teach social studies is that the films can lean toward simplifying complex historical material into a short film (D'sa, 2005, p. 10). When events are turned into film, they lose historical thoroughness and accuracy (D'sa, 2005, p. 10). These cautions are all to be considered when deciding to utilize film as a means to teach social studies content to students.

## Conclusion

When it comes to the idea of using film to teach social studies content, the research suggests this is a best practice for the students. The research also indicates that there are many benefits to the students for proceeding with this style of education including development of higher order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis and evaluation as well as increasing comprehension and retention of content. Film can be used to explore many different areas of social studies including history. The research suggests that film provides a way for educators to explore controversial topics with students that allows students to be informed and make their own interpretations. While there are cautions to consider, there are many benefits to students. All in all, it can be said that utilizing film for social studies education can create a better classroom environment for both educators and students alike.

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### About the Author

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