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Living in a 'digital world': An ethnographic study of film and adolescent literacy education in rural secondary schools in America

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Abstract

This paper explores different ways in which teachers use film as a medium for literacy instruction in secondary settings across different content areas in the American public school system. Three educators participated in an ethnographic interview study serving as a pilot for further enquiry. Educators represented two sites in the southern United States, working in two different subject areas with students aged 12 to 16. Interviews were coded using multiple methods and five themes resulted from the data, focusing on the different ways in which teachers used film-based content, as well as what they observed about their students based on their experiences with film in the classroom.

Keywords: film; visual literacy; media studies; secondary pedagogy; adolescent literacy

Introduction

As a teacher in American public schools for nearly a decade, I encountered both students who were engaged with reading, and those who preferred visual texts and film. Among the personal and professional conclusions to which working with students in this capacity has led is the observation that, whereas students can at times resist traditional, written texts, they frequently tend to embrace visual media representations of story, including film. Based on my own classroom experiences, and arising from an interest in the ways in which theories of multimodality might be used to build reading practices (Bezemer and Kress, 2016; Van Leeuwen, 1999), I began a pilot interview study, focused on the ways teachers use film in secondary classrooms in the American public school system, across different content areas.

Theories of multimodality centre upon the notion that communication can exist in a variety of modes, or platforms for communication. Such modes or platforms may include gesture, image, sound or printed words, among other signs and symbols – all elements that are present within the composition of film. Recent commentators such as Bezemer and Kress (2016) and Serafini (2014) have suggested that the social bases of interactions and communication have undergone a fundamental change in transitioning to multimodal formats, and that processes of learning have subsequently been impacted by these sociological changes. It has further been suggested that readers who struggle with text may have a preference for reading with screens (Rowsell and Kendrick, 2013). Bezemer and Kress (2016) have suggested that all modes of signs be considered in the communication and learning process, following Van Leeuwen's (1999) earlier study of the affordances of individual modes, including auditory ways

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of communicating meaning. Following on from Van Leeuwen (1999), Burn and Parker (2001) have expanded upon the affordances of the visual by discussing images in grammatical terms. According to Burn and Parker (ibid.), there are two veins of grammatical consideration for images: the relationship of space and time within a single frame, and the affective and cognitive response of the spectator. The aforementioned preference for screen-based or image-based literacy indicates a potential pathway for literacy development among struggling or reluctant readers, and the research that has been done on the structure and nature of the image undergirds the complexity of this form.

Struggling and reluctant reading has been a concern in reading instruction for some time (Wilhelm, 2007), while the use of film historically has provided a medium for analysis and classroom engagement (Leestma, 1954). Rowsell and Kendrick (2013) note that some readers prefer reading screens to reading traditional paper texts and textbooks, while Alvermann (2008) has identified digital and non-traditional texts as providing a space for literacy practice among adolescents. Lankshear and Knobel (2011) noted changes in reading and communication that have occurred since the 1970s, and referred to digital and screen-based reading experiences as 'new literacies'. It is my hope that a study of film and its elements might serve as part of the conversation that revolves around improving the literacy practices of struggling and reluctant readers.

It is my intention that the present study serves as a pilot for further enquiry into the use of film as a means for addressing learning needs, in its consideration of the experience of teacher-educators who work with struggling and reluctant adolescent readers in rural and suburban settings in America. Specifically, I consider the current practices among these teachers for including film as a screen-based or image-based text in order to encourage students to engage with literacy.

I chose school locations I knew well so that I could enter the sites with an insider's perspective and emic understanding of the instructional programmes I wished to study. This background gave me the opportunity to focus more specifically on the particular dimension of practice I wanted to explore – namely, the instructional use of film for reading and writing.

For the purposes of this study, film included both clips and films in their entirety, and included educational films, clips included as part of a curriculum, and popular films. Serafini (2014: 155) has defined film as a medium containing 'image, movement, and sound', of which movement is a chief component, and I used this broad definition to approach the interviewing process so that participants could address a variety of materials and were not limited to a specific type of film in their responses.

The two central questions guiding this research were: (1) How and to what extent is film included as part of the curriculum for adolescent learners across different content areas?; and (2) What is the impact on literacy development that can be explored with the use of film in the middle school classroom?

Film as a space for reading and responding

While a wide range of literature has been published about the use of film in learning environments, a small, focal group of studies informed my thinking for the present study, in which my enquiry focused upon teachers who were using film in their classrooms with students from the ages of 12 to 16.

While film carries its own system of language and associated terminologies, film as a medium has also been used in American classrooms as a means of teaching a variety of concepts, including narrative elements, and as an instrumentalized means

of conveying content of other subject areas. For example, the way in which film allows for discussions of point of view and similar literary concepts has been explored by Gainer (2010) and Smilanich and Lafreniere (2010), and for discussion of social values by Russell and Waters (2014).

Interpreting film in classroom settings frequently involves engaging with aspects of symbolism, and 'reading' screens carefully often leads to social–cultural observations from learners, even from younger children. Tobin (2000) has described the reactions to watching film excerpts by children, aged 6 to 12 (N = 162). In this case, a study was completed at an elementary school in Hawaii beginning in autumn 1992, where 32 focus groups of children were interviewed following the viewing of 30-minute film clips. The focus groups were then repeated the following spring to 'see how the children's critical viewing skills had developed after a year of video production work' (ibid.: 8), leading Tobin to demonstrate the enhanced critical and reflective ways with which young children were then able to interact with the messages contained in film. In the current context, Tobin's work has assisted me in considering the use of film at both ends of the age spectrum represented in this study (age 12 and age 16), particularly Tobin's notion that concepts can be observed, read carefully, and then reappropriated by students after encounters with film.

In terms of methodology, my research took the shape of an ethnographic study, following the manner in which ethnographic practices have been previously adopted within literacy studies (Early and Shagoury, 2010). Both schools in which I conducted my research were locations I had visited before, and in one I had previously worked as a classroom teacher. Given this relatively emic perspective upon the two sites, I made sure to interview participants with whom I had not previously taught. I felt it was important to preserve a dynamic of difference, in order to avoid a situation whereby prior experience with the individuals interviewed led to any sense of bias in the data collection process.

The theoretical framework I adopted for the research was two-pronged: one area of analysis focused on the materials used in teaching film, while the other area focused on the thoughts and processes of the teachers using film in their classrooms. I used Bezemer and Kress's (2016) theory of multimodality in order to understand the ways the materials worked.

John Debes (1981: 187) writes that 'a new paradigm must, by including all human languaging, lead us to questions we presently fail to ask'. Discussing this notion of *languaging*, Debes makes explicit mention of visual languages (including television), defining *languaging* as 'the intentional, creative use of biologically, culturally, and technologically favored signs' (Debes, 1981: 188), further citing 'cartoon, video and photo-sequences' as a 'distanced' or 'frozen' use of visual language (Debes, 1981: 189).

This explanation of visual language usefully serves as a starting point in tracing a path to more recent considerations of multimodal literacy. Bezemer and Kress (2016) have suggested that terms such as visual literacy and non-verbal communication be subsumed into the broader theoretical category of multimodality. Multimodality, then, serves as a term encompassing all of these communication theories – a term with particular import for literacy studies, given the focus on literacy work bound up in conveying content across modes.

Burn (2013) has described the potential for multimodality to address the structural nature and semiotic relationships of a variety of visual media, including film. Echoing auteurist theories of film, Wexman (2003) has drawn parallels between the authorship of written text, and the function of the director in the realm of film. For Wexman (2003: 11), little if any distinction need be made in this consideration of authorship

and, by consequence, the role of text can be extended from written graphemes to visual products and process, including film: 'like lyric poems or abstract expressionist paintings, most such productions announce themselves as personal expressions of the filmmaker's innermost feelings'.

Elsewhere, Golden (2001) has outlined the aspects of film – such as mood, tone and theme – that tie the experience of film to the experience of reading a written text. Following on from this discussion of authorship, and the textual components of film, I here consider film to be a type of text. The experience of film can thus be referred to not simply as viewing, but as a kind of 'visual text' or 'filmic' reading experience. (Teasley and Wilder (1997) have made similar observations, suggesting a framework for exploring how watching film might be considered a reading process.)

My research has also been informed by the work of Turner (2009) and Jenkins (2010) within a more cultural frame. While neither author employs notions of multimodality specifically, their discussion of the popularity and possibilities of film has informed this study, particularly regarding moments in which interview participants discuss choices they made for specific titles to engage students. Turner (2009) has discussed the role of film as a cultural phenomenon, and the ways in which Western film culture has changed over time, particularly regarding the era of the blockbuster, in which successful film brands reach out towards other brands of cultural produce. This notion of multiple, intersecting brands is termed *convergence culture* by Jenkins (2010), who has discussed the ways in which readers interested in a particular brand (such as Harry Potter) are now able to explore similar concepts of characters and plots relevant to their area of interest across a wider landscape of media, including traditional written texts, digital texts and film. Mills (2011) has similarly positioned film as a culturally profligate medium, connecting image-based media to digital forms.

Returning specifically to the notion of multimodality, Bezemer and Kress (2016) locate multimodality in a variety of historical instances, including historical examples such as German storybooks, as well as laparoscopic surgery procedures, textbooks utilizing illustrations, and job interviews. For Bezemer and Kress (ibid.), contemporary communication occurs across a variety of modes, including picture, word, screen and gesture. Such shifting dynamics of communication also highlights questions of power relationships in traditional teaching settings, as well as questions of power dynamics in businesses that made use of customer-based improvements to existing products. Bezemer and Kress (ibid.) note that, with multimodal literacies, students, when engaged, do not necessarily need the comfort of the traditional classroom structure of teacher and student. Elsewhere, Serafini (2014) includes film in a discussion of multimodal texts that may serve as useful teaching tools, alongside graphic novels, traditional picture books, and wordless picture books. Schmertz (2016: 52) has described film as an 'inherently multimodal medium', suggesting that film could be an important link for building close reading skills, defined as 'a critical practice by which small details of a work are revealed to embody something of a text's larger whole' (Schmertz, 2016: 48).

Within the context of this study, I appeal to multimodal theory in order to discuss the nature of the signs of films themselves, and, in particular, the teachers who are working through the process of implementing specific film clips in their classrooms.

Methodology

The process of data collection I undertook in this study involved three 45–60-minute interviews, which were subsequently coded using in vivo and process coding. I adopted a semi-ethnographic approach to interviewing, as advocated by Spradley (1979).

Participants were selected based on their role as a classroom teacher in a particular content area (including mathematics, science, social studies and language arts (that is, grammar, reading and composition)), and included three teachers with experience teaching in secondary classrooms (middle school to high school). Participants were recruited based on recommendations from school administrators and leaders familiar with the classroom practices of the teachers. Participants were a high-school-level social studies teacher (referred to below as Harrison), a high-school-level administrator who had previously taught social studies (referred to as Dennis), and a science teacher at middle-school level (referred to as Jennifer). These participants allowed me to engage in discussions not only about film and broader notions of 'reading', but also about the way in which these discussions pertained across different content areas.

I coded the interview data first using in vivo coding, a coding method previously identified as being particularly useful in ethnographic work in educational contexts, and with young people (Saldaña, 2016). This first step of digging into the language and values of my participants was useful in helping me to set aside my assumptions and to focus on the words themselves. Next, I looked at the interview data using process coding (Saldaña, 2016). As I read my participants' descriptions of classroom interactions, I began to take note of a step-by-step process that was being articulated.

As described above, my findings in this pilot study were based on a group of three teachers. I purposely sought individuals that I had not taught with before, and who taught adolescents in content areas. The first of these, referred to as Harrison, taught at a high school where he was a recent transfer to the campus. Harrison spoke often of 'vision', beginning very early in the interview, and wanted his students to see stories 'played out'. The second participant, referred to as Dennis, was an administrator who had previously worked as a social studies teacher, who expressed an interest in participating in the study due to a stated interest in the topic. The final participant, referred to as Jennifer, was a middle grades science teacher who, like Harrison, was in a state of transition, having just recently moved to the school.

Five themes emerged from organizing the in vivo codes and process codes into tables, before proceeding to focused coding. The discussion below groups my observations under five headings: (1) Intentional planning/integration; (2) Caring also connection; (3) Digital worlds; (4) Invitations to story; and (5) Invitations to see.

Intentional planning/integration

Participants discussed the process of finding and using films as a thoughtful integration of materials. When asked about establishing a purpose for film in the classroom, Harrison said 'have to' five times in a row (Interview, 6 December 2016). For Harrison, using film was connected to sharing a greater story, as explored below. He expressed the idea of educating using film, rather than educating about film. While Burn (2013) has noted a wide range of grammatical terms that can be applied to film, Harrison was not focused on sharing these grammatical terms, but rather using film as a stimulus for discussion about historical content.

Each interviewee described the process of using textbook materials alongside film to a certain degree. They also described the importance of setting as giving purpose for a viewing. Viewing film held a specific place within the pacing of a lesson, and was not simply thrown in. Participants went through a selection and screening process, seeking a film that served as a complementary pairing with concepts taught elsewhere in a given class in order to meet the demands of state assessments.

Jennifer stated that she looked through numerous examples of film clips before selecting the one she felt would work best, and suggested that she did not want to

show anything she herself would not find engaging. Such a planning process reflects the types of lessons described by Serafini (2014), in which teachers were encouraged to create step-by-step processes for the purpose of teaching film, as well as recalling the work of Russell and Waters (2014), focusing on the selection process of using films appropriate to the content of a character education lesson.

Participants referenced selecting appropriate films based on age group. Harrison described moments in which he had shown films in the middle-school classroom in which he worked, and had realized during the screening that the films did not convey the meaning that he desired. He had selected the films on his own, but the meaning he wished for them to establish for his class did not occur at an age-appropriate level.

Issues of profanity in film excerpts were less of an issue for Harrison in high-school classrooms, than for Jennifer, who found that curse words provided a greater distraction for middle-grade audiences. Jennifer described the process of attempting to find the right materials for diverse audiences of students in her classroom. These audiences included both advanced students and students who were struggling with their classwork, as well as students who Jennifer considered to be not as mature as others. For struggling students, Jennifer suggested that there was simply not enough meaning conveyed from textbooks alone, and that other representations of information were necessary, reflecting Bezemer and Kress's (2016) discussion of the many ways in which teachers and students can communicate.

Dennis mentioned finding materials that were relevant to students, connecting them to the real world. He described his early days of teaching, before screening technologies were as prominent in classrooms, and how he went to the extent of purchasing his own laptop projector, which enabled him to create his own presentations integrating media in the classroom. Without these elements, he insisted, a teacher would 'drown' (Interview, 6 December 2016).

Each participant described film as having a specific place within a lesson, either at the beginning, in the middle or at the end, and the participants expressed disdain for simply showing a film without any developed sense of purpose or educational intention.

Caring connection

An ethic of caring connection was expressed by each of the three participants, who seemed to feel that it was not sufficient to simply discuss materials and students as participants in media; for every one of the participants, film was a way of establishing meaningful connections with students.

Jennifer described the struggle her students experienced in being 'jerked around' by new expectations in school standards (Interview, 15 December 2016). She went on to refer to the students as 'my little stinkers', and revealed that some of the students she was currently teaching in middle grades she had previously taught in elementary school, establishing a more longitudinal connection (Interview, 15 December 2016).

Dennis described the struggle of students who could not read well, an experience he shared himself. He spoke of how students expressed shame at not being able to navigate a given text, and how experiences with other media could build new connections that more traditional readings could not. Early in our interview, Dennis described attendance programmes on which he was currently working that would provide forms of recognition for students he felt were not ordinarily noticed within the school system, and spoke of providing opportunities for all of his students. Dennis connected the experience of struggling with reading with his own personal experience reading with his daughters at home. He described the process of allowing

his daughters to choose their own books, and spoke of how he tried to model the activity of reading for them. Dennis's approach to film as a classroom tool can thus be seen to be informed by a personal connection based on his own experiences and reader identity.

Harrison talked about finding characters in films that could be used as personal connections in times of struggle. He spoke vividly of how many of his students were experiencing very adult issues, including troubles with family members, pregnancies and loss of pregnancies. For Harrison, connecting these personal stories to film representations was one way of establishing a source of care for students. He articulated a sense that film could be entertaining and elicit engagement in the sense of a spectacle, but also that students and teacher could 'back up and talk' to build bridges between one another, and to establish rapport (Interview 1, 6 December 2016). This use of a film to construct meaning recalls notions of multimodality as a theory guiding interactions built around media.

Harrison and Dennis also reported using aspects of writing exercises as part of weekly interactions with film clips and longer segments. In particular, Dennis expressed the surprise his students experienced when they discovered he would actually read their comments and respond, creating a written conversation about the topics that students encountered in their viewing experiences.

Digital worlds

Each participant articulated a sense that changing technologies were impacting on the lives of their students, reflecting Lankshear and Knobel's (2011) discussion of the new literacies of electronic interactive media. Participants described their students as living in a digital world, one in which other forms of learning, such as the textbook, were not perceived to be as valuable or impactful. Participants mentioned the notion of an image playing 'in the background', so that students could have a visual to tie in with their learning (Interview 1, 6 December 2016); learning that, both figuratively and literally, took place in front of a green screen.

Harrison described screens as a daily presence in the lives of students, which formed part of his justification for prioritizing the use of film in his teaching. For Harrison, film had to be positioned in a certain way in the classroom or it became just another screen, another passive experience that would blend into students' daily lives, echoing Mills's (2011) observation about the ubiquity of film as a medium.

Dennis described adults as big kids who, like his students, are constantly looking at screens. During our brief interview, he made use of a laptop and mobile phone to work on other tasks that were demanding his time and attention. He argued that, if adults use these devices and methods, why should students not also be expected to utilize screens?

Jennifer stated that students are living in a 'digital world' (Interview, 15 December 2016). From her perspective, while textbooks could be used as references, and remained a daily part of the curriculum, they had necessarily to be supplemented and augmented with other experiences, including hands-on activities and viewing experiences. As Mills (2011) has suggested, film can be a site for making meaning and accomplishing a learning task. This use of the medium corresponded with Jennifer's incorporation of the moving image in her teaching, and there were moments when she referred to viewing a film as 'reading', particularly in the first interview.

These digital means are then used to portray stories that can be impactful, creating a sense of overlap with inviting students to observe and participate in the story.

Invitation to story

For the three participants in this study, film presented an opportunity to share stories with students in classroom settings. Golden (2001) has shared strategies for connecting filmic experiences to literary experiences, including levels of questioning that can accompany viewing activities.

In the experience of interview participants, students were not only invited to observe the story of others as a passive experience, but also invited to actually produce and create films. Harrison described the process of seeking film-making grants, and of having his students participate in the creation of practical film projects from storyboard to green screen to big screen. Harrison, in particular, referenced the elements of story contained in film, considering himself a literature and language teacher even within the realm of a social studies course.

Dennis discussed utilizing film alongside a reading of the book *Band of Brothers* by Stephen E. Ambrose (1992) to connect powerful elements of history with his students' lives. Other examples of the instrumentalized use of film in the service of topics from history included the screening of films based on the lives of Gandhi (which Dennis described as one of the 'greatest portrayals of human life' (Interview 1, 6 December 2016)) and Nelson Mandela.

Each of the interview participants mentioned the particular importance of story, whether this was storytelling activities taking place within the classroom, or sharing stories in film form. Some films were described as excellent portrayals, or representations, of human life (for example, *Gandhi* (Richard Attenborough, 1982)). This concept of bringing stories to life was also seen in the creation process that some teachers went through for their own materials, as well as one teacher's creation of materials with his students. By creating films, students are not only making meaning in a figurative sense, but are also engaged in the meaning-making process as an act of concrete, living construction.

Invitation to see

In addition to invitations that film provided into the world of story, interview participants also described how they felt film invited their students to take new perspectives on particular aspects of life and cultural and scientific activity. Jennifer described pairing classroom study of scientific method with representation of the same processes on film to allow students to see how the work of science played out in real life, thus illustrating how concepts within this content area are actually used in real life.

Dennis described the work of teaching as being entertainment-based, and discussed a science lesson he observed in an online video in which a teacher fills a bucket with water to explain a principle of course content. He described the feeling of his students when he showed them the video as involving initial confusion about the viewing experience, followed by making a connection with the lesson for the day, as students put the ideas together with the visuals to construct meaning.

Moments of agency-oriented language included examples in which participants described the classroom process, suggesting they were 'going to show' part of the content, or that they had 'showed' the students an idea (Interview 3, 15 December 2016; Interview 2, 6 December 2016). Film was thus discussed by the participants as a heuristic process, involving discoveries that the students were able to make subsequent to viewing. Visuals were discussed in terms of an offering from teacher to student, so that insight could be gained and content shared – a sharing of content that took place not only via more traditional textual forms, in terms of printed messages and materials, but that also made use of image, movement and sound.

Discussion and implications

During this study on the use of film within adolescent literacy instruction, participants described varying degrees of the implementation of film in the classroom, from almost daily inclusion of film clips to rarer usage of film. For each of the interviewees, traditional printed text continued to play a role alongside the media ensembles they used. Dennis described using film to accompany a particular text during a history class, but also mentioned that he would want to go back to revisit and further develop his lesson plans. This use of film alongside a written text here seemed to take place in a supplementary, or even substitutionary, relationship. Dennis seemed to locate film within a broader understanding of media in general, including mobile phones, PowerPoint and other screen experiences, and in these terms, his interview testimony was the best reflection in the three interviews of the new literacies ethos, as exemplified by Lankshear and Knobel (2011) and Alvermann (2008).

Jennifer described continuing to use textbooks on a daily basis, in part given that the school district had paid for the resources, while Harrison did not mention a textbook for his courses at all. For Harrison, film acted as a kind of curriculum all on its own, providing the clearest reflection of Bezemer and Kress's (2016) notion of equality in multimodal representation. For Harrison, film and text seemed more equal in representation. Unlike the other two participants, Harrison had more than one course to plan for, and came from a related arts environment in which he used film as a creative technique, based on grant work he had completed. Harrison also described moments in the teaching cycle when he felt the focus of his job was to prepare students for an exam, which shaped the reading experiences he felt he was able to employ in class time, and caused him to focus more specifically on traditional course materials. According to Harrison, the form taken by class work depended on 'what kind of reading' the students were doing (Interview 1, 6 December 2016). In this way, each educator tailored the use of film to fit their content and purpose.

Popular media were a common source of material, and participants described the process of sifting through films themselves to find a film that was 'just right' to communicate the meaning that they intended. Harrison also described being present in other teachers' classrooms where planning was not as evident. As referenced earlier, this notion of popular media as a locus for educational interaction corresponds with Jenkins's (2010) notions of elements of culture creating opportunities for interaction and participation. Teachers used aspects of images, text and sound when teaching with film, but they were also keenly aware of film's role as a popular medium that students themselves were engaged with.

In terms of tensions within content areas themselves, Dennis elaborated on the difficulties and tensions he had experienced with one subject area in particular (mathematics), and his view that this particular form of classroom content was more difficult to tie in with creative expressions. He seemed to view mathematical content as being especially difficult to connect with diverse pedagogical approaches, beyond call and respond routines in which teachers ask for closed responses. Jennifer, on the other hand, discussed how film contained the possibility for opening up understandings of both mathematical and scientific content for students who might otherwise struggle with these concepts. Film, in this case, acted as a point of connection to more difficult content, with more traditional written texts following initial interactions with digital media. In this way, the filmic representations acted as a kind of scaffold, in a manner that might be described as a more instructional use of the medium than a substitutionary use incorporated for the purpose of entertainment.

In terms of the materials themselves, the teachers interviewed seemed to use multimodal expressions to communicate meaning on a daily basis. They carefully chose materials that would provide visual elements to underscore their major points, and to serve as connecting points for students who they thought might require additional elaboration or experience with the content. This selection process did not appear to be easy, for when choosing material, teachers considered the lesson they were teaching, their own engagement with the materials, and the grade level they were planning for, as well as the different levels and descriptive elements of students within those grade levels.

Writing continued to be integrated as part of classroom encounters with digital media for all three participants, with Harrison and Dennis describing a process of weekly journaling to establish reflection and communication, and Jennifer describing written texts that were useful in the context of a science classroom, including a booklet about periodic elements constructed by students. This branching of writing into reading corresponds with the analytic techniques applied by both Golden (2001) and Serafini (2014) when considering using film in the classroom. For the teachers interviewed here, just as with exposure to traditional written text, film usually entailed a written response as well. Film in classrooms was thus used in parallel with traditional literacy practices, sometimes for engagement and sometimes to convey difficult content.

As above, teachers frequently looked to popular media for sources for classroom teaching material. While teachers used 'sanctioned' material, including Discovery Education videos and news media clips, segments from popular films (as well as popular films in their entirety) were included to demonstrate concepts of social change (for example, *Gandhi*) and scientific concepts (for example, *Osmosis Jones* (Bobby Farrelly, Peter Farrelly, 2001)).

The distinction between entertainment and education, particularly for Dennis, seemed blurred, and tied to the purpose of meaning-making for instruction. The notion of 'engagement', he said, was basically 'entertainment' (Interview, 6 December 2016). Here, film and other digital representations of content were seen as essential elements without which a teacher might 'drown' or even have the experience of having students want to 'murder' them (Interview 2, 6 December 2016). This prominence of the use of film and electronic media in classroom planning points to its increasing presence in wider fields of culture (Turner, 2009).

While the teachers interviewed viewed film as a tool that could help 'wake up' students, or serve as a 'hook', they also seemed to view film in certain instances as having more layers to be explored (Interview 3, 15 December 2016). For the teachers in this study, film was not merely a surface-level time-waster, but contained meaningful elements for learning and engagement.

Harrison described how students could connect themselves to characters in films to make meaning in their own lives – heroic figures from whom they could glean insights and build plans for their lives. Films in Harrison's classroom were chosen specifically to connect with certain aspects of content being studied, and he also took the time to have conversations with students beyond the realm of content to better understand some of the challenges they were facing. For Harrison, students' interaction with film went beyond writing down 'a fact or figure' (Interview 1, 6 December 2016). Involvement with film was described as a process of deconstruction. Elements of a film, or specific scenes, were described as 'significant to pull out' (Interview 1, 6 December 2016), conveying a sense of meaning that could be connected both to real life and to other forms of content. This use of film in the classroom also implies a decision-making process on the part of the teacher, in looking for a decisive moment that could be captured in order to highlight a particular concept.

This emphasis on real-life connection also occurred in the other two interviews conducted for this study. Within the context of a science lesson, Jennifer found it very important for film to demonstrate real-life uses of content, acting as a kind of mirror for what was seen in the textbook and discussed in class. For Dennis, the content of a social studies class was extended and elaborated upon to mirror the events occurring in the lives of soldiers during the Second World War, as represented in the film series, *Band of Brothers* (various, 2001).

Next steps

While film and media have sometimes been pushed to the side in academic settings as materials perceived as being less worthy of study, the experiences of the teachers in this study suggest film is a complex system of communication that has the potential to be used in a variety of ways for classroom purposes, such as maintaining a connection with students, and illustrating storylines and plots connected with learning targets. Moreover, the teachers in this study used films across content areas, illustrating that film also has specific implications for instruction in areas such as science and history, particularly in situations where teachers sought to recount processes and events with students in an understandable and meaningful manner. What may seem complex in words or print can be opened up and made newly accessible in a filmed representation. Teachers never completely abandoned traditional textbook reading or student writing practices; rather, film was used to accentuate these processes.

This pilot study thus forms the basis of broader enquiry into a range of filmic practices among teachers. In particular, it looked to explore a focus on classroom experiences in rural settings, an area otherwise relatively under-represented in literature on film in the classroom. It is my hope that this initial study will lead to further conversations regarding the use of film and other media in rural settings to meet the needs of students of adolescent age, as well as with younger students. In conclusion, it would seem as though multimodality, whether recognized as an agentive theory in instruction or not, guides and underscores the use of film in classroom practices. There remains much within such a notion to explore for what meaning-making shapes up to be across content areas and across age levels, particularly as new platforms for film consumption and composition emerge.

Notes on the contributor

Jason D. DeHart is an assistant professor of reading education at Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. DeHart is interested in multimodal texts, including film and graphic novels, and focuses his work in upper elementary literacy, as well as adolescent literacy. He taught middle-school English for eight years and completed his PhD at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

Filmography

Band of Brothers (US 2001, David Franke, Tom Hanks, David Leland, Richard Loncraine, David Nutter, Phil Alden Robinson, Mikael Salomon, Tony To)
Gandhi (GB/IN 1982, Richard Attenborough)
Osmosis Jones (US 2001, Bobby Farrelly, Peter Farrelly)

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