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<th>Reel life teaching: Nurturing reflective learners through film in initial teacher education</th>
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<td>Charlene Tan</td>
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Abstract

Films can serve as triggers for trainee teachers to focus on an issue of concern, ponder on the meanings and implications, and finally change or modify their values, beliefs and actions. This study examines the responses of 243 trainee teachers enrolled in a module in an institute of education where films are used to promote reflective learning. An analysis of the trainee teachers’ survey responses reveals that while the trainee teachers find the films interesting and useful for their reflective learning, there is a need to scaffold the issues raised in the films with appropriate lectures, readings, and guidance from the instructors.

Introduction

This study examines the responses of 243 trainee teachers enrolled in a module in an institute of education where films are used to promote reflective learning. Teaching using films is still a fairly novel pedagogical tool in institutions of higher learning. Films, when appropriately chosen and well-incorporated into the curriculum, can be an innovative and effective means to promote reflective learning in students. Given that movies are prevalent in today’s culture, Porter (2004) argues that an exposition of the film will easily bring out the philosophical meanings to the audience. By presenting complete communicative situations, films can generate interest and motivation and lead to successful learning (Longergan, 1994; Guest, 1997). The realism in films also offers rich contextualised and authentic cross-cultural information to the viewers (Summerfield, 1993; Summerfield & Lee, 2001; King, 2002; Tan & Crawford, 2006).

The idea of using films as a platform to stimulate reflection is linked to Boyd and Fale’s (1983) definition of reflective learning. They see reflective learning as the process of internally examining an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and results in a changed conceptual perspective. Films can serve as triggers for students to focus on an issue of concern, ponder on the meanings and implications for themselves, and finally change or modify their values, beliefs and actions. A number of writers have also pointed out the importance of nurturing reflective learners (e.g., Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1983, 1987; Kottkamp, 1990; Leahy & Corcoran, 1996; Spalding & Wilson, 2002). Dewey (1933) defines reflection as the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends. It involves a cycle of paying deliberate attention to one's own action in relation to intentions so as to expand one's options and make decisions about improved ways of acting (Kottkamp, 1990; Calderhead 1993; Thiel, 1999).
Dewey (1933) identifies three characteristics of a reflective learner: open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and intellectual responsibility. Dewey views open-mindedness as the freedom from the prejudice, partisanship and other such habits as close the mind, and the willingness to consider multiple or novel ideas. It focuses on the learner’s self-examination of aims, beliefs, assumptions and actions. This is premised on the belief that the one’s own experiences and knowledge are essential to reflection (Schon, 1983). This process of self-evaluation requires the learner to be open-minded. Whole-heartedness refers to the genuine enthusiasm to channel one’s mental, emotional, and physical resources to resolve a problem (Dewey, 1933). It is essential for the learners to examine, frame and attempt to solve the dilemmas that one faces (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Finally, intellectual responsibility refers to the consideration and adoption of the consequences of any proposed plan (Dewey, 1933). A reflective learner is one who constantly reviews and changes his or her goals and actions. Such reflection empowers the learner to connect the insights gained from the reflective process to changes they are making in real life (Farrell, 1998; Arrendondo et. al., 1995; Fulmer, 1993).

Journal writing is one of the ways to promote and facilitate reflection after the students have watched the films. A number of researchers such as Holly (1994), Posner (1988), Goldsby and Cozza (1998), Collier (1999) and Thorpe (2004) have studied the usefulness of journal writing for reflective learning. A journal combines the objective data of a log with the free flowing personal interpretations and expressions of a diary (Holly, 1989). It records the individual’s practices and reflections on those practices, weaving together accounts of the private and the professional in an ongoing manner (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994). Learners write reflections on what concerns them, excites them, causes them to think, or causes them to learn (Posner, 1988). Holden (2000) notes that writing film response journals helps learners to gain the most from films while Kent (1987) adds that it facilitates philosophical reasoning. Redfern (1995) explains that the process of writing ensures that one’s thoughts and recollections of events are given a certain degree of structure, and such a permanent record of professional practice can be used to gain further insights at a later date. Critical thinking is also encouraged as the learner is required to discuss and integrate different ideas in the drawing of coherent conclusions (Wilkinson, 1999). Bringle and Hatcher (1999) suggest that the desired learning objectives need to be formalized and fully articulated prior to initiating any journal activity. This can be achieved with the help of explicit guidelines to guide the learners in their reflective thinking (Norton, 1997).

Methodology

The sample comprised 243 trainee teachers who are working towards a diploma in education at a university. The module aimed to introduce them to social issues of teaching and learning through films within one semester. Five main social issues and the corresponding films were chosen for the module:

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<th>Film</th>
<th>Social Issue</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) <em>Children of Heaven</em></td>
<td>The aims of education and functions of schooling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) <em>To Be and To Have</em></td>
<td>The desired outcomes of education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) <em>A Class Divided</em></td>
<td>Issues of inequalities in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(4) <em>Get Real</em></td>
<td>Working with stakeholders in education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(5) <em>Dead Poets Society</em></td>
<td>The passion to teach</td>
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The films were deliberately selected from different genres, settings and languages. Of the five films, two were in English while the other three were in foreign languages with English subtitles. *Children of Heaven* is a dramatised film in Farsi about the lives of two school children in Tehran, Iran. *To Be and To Have* is a film in French about a dedicated teacher Mr Lopez in France. *A Class Divided* is an online American documentary on the effects of discrimination in the classroom ([http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/etc/script.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/etc/script.html)). *Get Real* is an English-Chinese documentary about behavioural problems of teenagers in Asia. Finally, *Dead Poets Society* is a Hollywood film about the innovative teaching methods of English teacher Mr Keating in England. Trainee teachers in the module watched the five films over a period of five weeks and learned about social issues from online lecture notes, prescribed readings and weekly tutorials. The lecture notes were uploaded onto the trainee teachers’ portal and they were free to access them anytime; this replaced the usual live lectures where the lecturer physically delivered a lecture in a lecture theatre. Each set of online lecture notes made brief mention of the film and focused on introducing and elucidating the social issues and their implications. For example, the lecture notes for *To Be and To Have* focused on the desired attributes teachers would like to see in their students and instructed students to identify these attributes from the film. The prescribed readings served to help trainee teachers gain a deeper understanding of the social issues but made no direct references to the films. The weekly tutorials aimed to reinforce the ideas learned from the films, lecture notes and readings through trainee teachers’ presentations and class discussions. After watching the films, the trainee teachers were asked to write three journal entries (or what we called “response papers”) based on specific questions set by the tutors. The journal entries accounted for 40 per cent of their total grade while the trainee teachers’ presentation during the tutorials made up the other 60 per cent.

A survey was administered at the end of the semester and 243 out of 289 survey forms (84 per cent) were returned. Qualitative data analysis was used to locate the meanings the students place on the events, process, and structures of their lives and connect these meanings to the social world around them (van Manen, 1977). Using the steps recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), the data were coded and remarks were noted in the margins. The focus was not just on the words used but the meanings conveyed by the students (Bliss, Monk & Ogborn, 1983). Similar phrases, patterns and themes were identified and isolated. After the codes were revised and new codes were added (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), they were placed into appropriate categories. This process of coding and recoding was repeated until when all of the incidents were readily classified, the categories were saturated, and sufficient numbers of regularities emerged (Mile & Huberman, 1994). The anonymous survey consisted of the following four questions:

1. How useful was this module to help you understand the social context of teaching and learning?
2. What do you like about this module?
3. What do you like the least about this module?
4. What are some suggestions to improve the module (mode of delivery, selection of films, content, assessment, feedback from tutor etc)?

**Findings**

An analysis of the trainee teachers’ survey responses reveals four themes:
• Films are effective in generating interest, presenting reality and inspiring the trainee teachers.
• Films promote reflective learning by encouraging the trainee teachers to focus on an issue of concern, ponder on the meanings and implications for themselves, and finally change or modify their values, beliefs and actions.
• The use of films is particularly appropriate for trainee teachers who prefer or are comfortable with independent learning.
• The issues raised in the films need to be supplemented by appropriate lectures, readings and guidance from the instructors.

(1) Films are effective in generating interest, presenting reality and inspiring the trainee teachers

Most of the trainee teachers found the films enjoyable and engaging. Adjectives such as “interesting”, “inspiring” and “innovative” kept recurring in the trainee teachers’ survey responses. Used to the more conventional way of teacher-centred, lecture-style type of teaching, the trainee teachers found the use of films in teaching a refreshing and welcomed change.

Based on movies and its issues covered instead of run-of-the-mill lectures and tutorials.

[I like the] videos and movies as I can learn better through these teaching tools.

They also found the films helpful in portraying real issues that teachers faced in everyday life.

Very enlightening. It actually opens the window to what it is like in the real world when we go teaching.

Able to link to present situation in education, not just talk on paper.

The trainee teachers’ responses echo the fact that films are useful in presenting realistic and communicative situations to the viewers. For example, the trainee teachers can easily relate to the conservative, results-oriented atmosphere in the exclusive boys’ school at Welton in Dead Poets Society, the poverty-stricken lives of the two children in Iran, and the warmth, love and firmness of real-life teacher Mr Lopez. The choice of different settings for the films (Iran, France, America, Singapore and England) also offers valuable contextualised and authentic cross-cultural information to the students. For example, the trainee teachers were aware of cultural differences which play a major part in education, such as the conservative lifestyle of Iranian girls who had to wear headscarves to schools as contrasted with the liberating lifestyle of Singapore girls who visited night clubs. At the same time, they were reminded of universal themes in teaching that transcend cultures, such as the need for passionate and caring teachers like Mr Jafari in Children of Heaven, Mr Lopez in To Be and To Have, or Mr Keating in Dead Poets Society.

(2) Films promote reflective learning by encouraging the trainee teachers to focus on an issue of concern, ponder on the meanings and implications for themselves, and finally change or modify their values, beliefs and actions
Trainee teachers commented that the films served as triggers to direct their attention to various issues of concern. This is linked to Dewey’s idea of whole-heartedness where the student channels his or her mental, emotional, and physical resources to resolve a problem. The social issues - be it the lack of equal access to education in *Children of Heaven*, the case of discrimination in *A Class Divided*, or temptations faced by teenagers in *Get Real* – all function as problems teachers today face.

*Understand each difficulty of the stakeholder (parents, teachers and students). Understand how important environment and background affect each student.*

*Ijt not only describes problems faced in school, it has proven to be an eye opener to teachers on how part is crucial in the school environment.*

These issues of concern in turn led the trainee teachers to ponder on the meanings and implications for themselves. This is linked to Dewey’s idea of open-mindedness where the student is willing to consider new ideas and examine his or her aims, beliefs, assumptions and actions.

*Films and readings gave me an opportunity to explore my personal values and opinions rather than to listen to what the ‘official’ stand is on these issues.*

*We are able to share our thoughts. Think of ways that we can solve the problems that we faced during teaching.*

The trainee teachers also noted that their reflections were facilitated by the journal entries they had to write.

*The individual response paper gives ... opportunity for each of us to share our views.*

*The weekly reflective essays – gives an avenue for students to pour their thoughts and feelings.*

The final stage of reflective learning is when the trainee teachers change or modify their values, beliefs and actions. This was evident also from the students’ survey responses. This is associated with Dewey’s intellectual responsibility where the trainee teacher considers and adopts the consequences of any proposed plan. This is important as the reflective learner is able to make the connection between one’s thoughts and changes one will carry out in real life.

*This module has helped me by inspiring me to be a passionate teacher by having the correct attitude towards teaching.*

*It allows me to prepare myself for the actual teaching job, the expectations and other requirements.*

(3) The use of films is particularly appropriate for trainee teachers who prefer or are comfortable with independent learning.

The students’ responses also reveal an interesting divide between trainee teachers who prefer a more student-centred, independent form of learning, and those who prefer a more teacher-
centred, teacher-directed form of learning. Trainee teachers who belong to the first group were pleased with the module structure where teaching was done primarily through films and assisted by online lecture notes and readings.

An innovative way for self learning without the lectures.

Learning at our own pace and catered to us.

But the majority of the trainee teachers actually belong to the latter group. They prefer a more structured, teacher-directed and guided form of learning where the lectures and readings are directly linked to the films. Their discomfort with the new mode of learning was palpable as they wrote about the difficulties they faced in researching into and writing their journal entries.

We have to do a bit of research on our own.

No lectures and no teaching from tutors. We have to read everything ourselves.

Just to watch a movie. There is no introduction, no teacher led discussion.

No much sharing from tutor.

(4) The issues raised in the films need to be supplemented by appropriate lectures, readings and guidance from the instructors.

The trainee teachers’ suggestions for ways to improve the module all centered on the need for scaffolding to help them understand and reflect on the issues raised in the films. Most trainee teachers suggested replacing the online lecture notes with live lectures where the lecturers could make explicit references to the films. They also wished that their tutors could reiterate the learning points from the films during the tutorials.

Scaffolding in the form of lectures given by the tutor, tutorials to clarify doubts and generate broad issues of concerns, and appropriate readings should be given.

Not only show the video, but also add in real lecture for about 15-30 minutes.

A short lecture based on the online lecture notes prior to the film viewing could make the topics clearer.

Teachers can tie in the movie viewed with the course, discuss it during tutorial briefly.

**Recommendations**

This paper shows that films are effective in helping trainee teachers learn reflectively in initial teacher training. However more support is needed to guide the trainee teachers in their learning. The following are some recommendations for instructors who wish to incorporate films into their teaching.
• Selection of films

Choose relevant, interesting and powerful films as visual triggers to prompt the trainee teachers in their reflections. Educators may wish to select films from a wide spectrum of genres, languages and settings to stimulate more disparate thoughts and emotions in the learners. There are a number of useful websites to help instructors select and prepare suitable films for their students. For instructors who wish to focus on issues related to language and culture, the website The English Learner Movie Guides (http://www.eslnotes.com/) is recommended as it includes a summary of the plot for each film, a list of the major characters, an extensive glossary of vocabulary and various cultural references, and questions for class discussion. The website The Film and Philosophy Database (http://arts.anu.edu.au/PhilosophyandFilm/videodata/) has a collection of 500 films, with each film containing a plot summary, key scenes and philosophical themes. Another website Movies by Philosophical Theme (http://www.u.arizona.edu/~brennan/movies.htm) includes recent popular movies such as The Matrix and Bruce Almighty and highlights social and moral issues educators could focus on. There are also websites devoted to film transcripts such as Simply Scripts (www.simplyscripts.com) and All Movie Scripts (www.allmoviesscripts.com). Providing these film transcripts or excerpts of them to students will further guide them in understanding key issues from the films.

• Scaffolding

The instructors could scaffold the film-viewing with lectures, readings and class discussions which are directly linked to the films. An example is the film Dead Poets Society. There are a number of internet resources that the lecturers and tutors could tap on to help their students learn reflectively from the film. For example, students could read the film synopsis from the website The English Learner Movie Guides before watching the film. This information will help them understand the cultural and contextual background of the film. The website also contains a list of words and expressions that would benefit the trainee teachers, especially trainee teachers whose first language is not English. Examples from the film are Latin words such as “carpe diem” which means “seize the day”, and references to “Byron” who was a great 19th century British poet.

Instead of providing lecture notes which make scant references to the film, the lecturer could highlight and elaborate on specific concepts, theories and themes from the film. For example, a relevant focus could be the debate between the realist and the romantic view of education. A useful website is Dead Poets Society (http://www.deliriumsrealm.com/delirium/movies/dps_philosophy.asp). While romanticism emphasizes individuality, originality, imagination, emotional expression, freedom and idealism, realism emphasizes reality, objectivity, detachment, accurate observation and rejection of the impractical and visionary. The lecturer could inform the students that Mr Keating exemplifies the romantic who exalts his students to live the life that they want, to fulfill their dreams, and live life with no regrets (e.g., “carpe diem, seize the day boys, make your lives extraordinary”). He inspires his students and sets an example for them (e.g., “You can call me Mr Keating. Or, …Oh Captain, My Captain”), and spurs them on to appreciate the arts (e.g., “We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race, and the human race is filled with passion”). The lecturer could also incorporate relevant readings such as the article by Beiser (1998) who explains what a romantic education consists of.
To encourage reflection in the trainee teachers, questions specific to the films could be provided by the lecturer or tutor. For example, the website *The English Learner Movie Guides* furnishes a list of questions which could be used as discussion questions during the weekly tutorials as well as guided questions for their journal writing (http://www.eslnotes.com/movies/html/dead-poets-society.html):

1) Was "Welton" the type of school you would want to attend? Why or why not?
2) What was good about the school? What was bad?
3) Do schools like Welton exist in your country?
4) If you were attending Welton, and Mr Keating was your poetry teacher, how would you describe him to your parents?
5) Why did Mr Keating tell his students to rip out the introduction of the Poetry book?
6) Why did the students decide to create a Dead Poet's Society?
7) Why was Neil's father so upset when Neil decided to try and be an actor?
8) Why did Neil decide to commit suicide?
9) Why did Mr Nolan and the school administration force the boys to sign the paper blaming Mr Keating for Neil's death?
10) Was Mr Keating an admirable person? Was Mr Nolan? Neil? Neil's father?

One final recommendation concerns the mode of assessment. Although this module adopts written reflection to facilitate reflective learning, this is by no means the only way. Other modes of reflection such as self-reflection and verbal reflection could be used to replace or supplement written reflection. This is especially helpful for trainee teachers who have difficulty with the written language, or prefer oral communication and interaction.

**Conclusion**

This paper shows that films have the potential to enthuse the audience, stimulate reflective thought and enhance learning. However, the films have to be appropriately selected, well-incorporated into the curriculum and supplemented by relevant lecture notes, readings and guidance from the instructors. This is particularly crucial for trainee teachers who are accustomed to the traditional teacher-centred mode of teaching, and feel insecure about learning on their own. With proper scaffolding and reinforcements, trainee teachers will be able to draw from the film critical reflections to maximise their learning and effect changes in their lives, both personally and professionally.

**References**

*A Class Divided* (1985)  


[http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_199704/ai_n8769753](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3673/is_199704/ai_n8769753) [accessed 12 March 2005].


