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Author(s)	Charlene Tan
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**DRAFT**

**Philosophical reflections from the silver screen:  
using films to promote reflection in pre-service teachers**

**Charlene Tan**

**Summary**

This paper studies the use of four popular films (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Matrix*, and *The Simpsons*) to promote philosophical reflections in pre-service teachers. Based on a study of 25 pre-service teachers in Singapore, the findings show that the teachers' reflections fall under five main categories: (1) question and modify personal aims, beliefs, assumptions (2) confront and solve personal and professional obstacles (3) apply the implications to the local context (4) consider the students' specific educational needs, and (5) review and change personal instructional goals, methods and resources. This paper explores how the four films draw out different types of reflection in the teachers, and how the teachers' reflections based on the films help to prepare them for the teaching profession in Singapore.

**Introduction**

Reflection is recognised as instrumental in preparing pre-service teachers for their teaching career. However, using films to help pre-service teachers reflect on philosophical issues in education is a novel idea. This paper studies the use of four popular films (*The Lord of the Rings*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Matrix*, and *The Simpsons*) to promote reflection to a class of pre-service teachers in Singapore. Through journal writing, the teachers reflected on key philosophical issues related to teaching and learning. This paper explores how the four films draw out different types of reflections in the teachers, and how the teachers' reflections based on the films help to prepare them for the teaching profession in terms of their instructional goals, methods and resources.

**Review of Literature**

***Reflective Practice***

A number of writers have pointed out the benefits of reflection for teachers (e.g., [Rudney & Guillaume, 1990](#); [Kottkamp, 1990](#); [Pultorack, 1993](#); [Leahy & Corcoran, 1996](#); [Risko et. al., 2002](#); [Florez, 2003](#); [Pedro, 2005](#)). Dewey 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" (1933, p. 9). 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](#)). Noting that a good teacher is one who complements technical expertise with reflective practice, [Schon \(1983, 1987\)](#) highlights the need for teachers to purposefully reflect on and formulate

a set of well-thought-out beliefs and assumptions to guide their practice. This means that the reflective teacher has to go beyond reflecting on his or her skill or strategy in a piecemeal manner, and systematically reflects on a lesson (Barry & King, 1998). Through an on-going process of reflection, the teacher can constantly discuss, analyse and improve on his or her teaching (Calderhead 1993; Brookfield, 1995; Thiel, 1999). Reflective practice is particularly important for pre-service teachers who have little or no teaching experience in schools. Dewey (1933) maintains that they should learn to be reflective so as to avoid being stymied by traditional practices in schools. This means that they need to acquire the habit of reflecting on their personal beliefs, passions, values, images, and prejudices by asking questions about the students, the curriculum, the institutional setting, and the larger social role of schools (Liston and Zeichner, 1990).

Based on the writings of various researchers, five main types of reflection have been identified for pre-service teachers:

- (1) Question and modify personal aims, beliefs, assumptions and actions
- (2) Confront and solve personal and professional obstacles
- (3) Apply the implications to the local historical, social, political and cultural context
- (4) Consider the students' specific educational needs
- (5) Review and change personal instructional goals, methods and resources

The first type of reflection focuses on the teacher's self-examination of aims, beliefs, assumptions and actions (Pollard & Tann, 1987). This is premised on the belief that the teacher's own experiences and knowledge are essential to reflection (Schon, 1983). This process of self-evaluation requires the teacher to be open-minded. Dewey (1933) 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. Secondly, the teacher should be able to confront and solve his or her personal and professional obstacles. This is linked to Dewey's (1933) idea of whole-heartedness which refers to the genuine enthusiasm to channel one's mental, emotional, and physical resources to resolve a problem. It is essential for teachers to examine, frame and attempt to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). In particular, negative experiences and issues of concern are useful in triggering deliberate and constructive reflection (Boyd and Fales, 1983; Boud *et al*, 1985; Atkins & Murphy, 1993). The third type of reflection concerns the social, moral and political implications of teaching and learning (Zeichner & Liston, 1987, 1996; Valli, 1993). An awareness of these implications will enable the reflective teacher to modify his or her actions in order to be more effective and skilful in teaching (Arrendondo *et. al.*, 1995; Fulmer, 1993). The fourth type of reflection focuses on the unique educational and emotional needs of students (Pollard & Tann, 1987). A reflective teacher is one who modifies his or her skills in response to the students' needs (Darling-Hammond, 2000). This enables the teachers to thoughtfully examine conditions and attitudes which hinder or promote student achievement. An awareness of the challenges faced by the students will guide the teacher in identifying, analysing, and solving the complex problems that characterise classroom thinking (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). Finally a reflective teacher is one who constantly reviews and changes his or her instructional goals, methods and materials. This is associated with Dewey's (1933) intellectual responsibility, defined as the consideration of the consequences of any proposed plan and the willingness to adopt these consequences (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). Such reflection empowers the teacher to connect the insights gained from the reflective process to changes they are making in the classroom (Farrell, 1998).

## *Using Films*

One effective way to promote reflection in pre-service teachers is to use films as the platform to interest, motivate and stimulate reflection. The use of films in teaching has become increasingly popular, although it is used predominantly in language teaching (e.g., Mejia, Xiao & Kenney, 1994; Braddock, 1996; [Stempleski, 2000](#); Stempleski, Tomalin & Maley, 2001; Garçon, 2001; Hasselbach & Dickel, 2003; Karpinski, 2003; [Sherman 2003](#)). There are several reasons why films are such powerful tools in promoting reflection, the main reason being that films are narratives propelled by images. Great writers such as Plato (analogy of the cave) Decartes (hypothesis of the malicious demon) and Thomas More (vision of a utopian society) have often used vivid pictorial images to introduce, illustrate and stimulate thinking. Falzon (2002) argues that films provide “a galaxy of representations of characters, events and situations, in which philosophical ideas, themes and concerns find concrete embodiment, and to which we can turn in order to illuminate and provoke philosophical thinking (p. 5). Secondly, the realism in films also offers rich contextualised and authentic cross-cultural information to the viewers (Summerfield, 1993; Summerfield & Lee, 2001; King, 2002). Rather than employing static images (as in a painting or picture book), films piece together the moving images in a coherent manner through a story or plot. By presenting complete communicative situations, viewers can identify with the characters, situations and dilemmas portrayed in the film. This can generate interest and motivation and lead to successful learning (Longergan, 1994; Guest, 1997). Adding to the above two reasons is the popularity and cultural significance of films; given that movies are accessible and prevalent in today’s culture, an exposition of the film will easily bring out the philosophical meanings to the audience (Porter, 2004).

In the context of teaching, there are interesting films on teachers and teaching which perpetuates certain popular perceptions of teachers and myths of teaching (e.g., [Swetnam, 1992](#); [Dalton, 1995, 1999](#); [Long, 1996](#)). Among teacher educators, Grant (2002) uses movies like *Dangerous Minds* and *Stand and Deliver* to guide her pre-service teachers to explore topics on teaching in an urban school. Nugent and Shauness (2002) suggest using popular film clips to educate pre-service teachers on issues relating to teachers of the gifted. Teacher educators could also use films to help their pre-service teachers explore the “great-teacher myth” – the idea that all the ideas and hopes a culture has about teachers reside in one dynamic character ([Gunderson & Haas, 1987](#); Heilman, 1991; Farhi, 1999). There is also a growing interest among philosophers to use films as a conduit to convey philosophical ideas. Falzon (2002), Litch (2002), Porter (2004) and [Tan and Crawford \(2006\)](#) have relied on films to expound broad themes in philosophy such as epistemology and ethics to readers. Philosophical books devoted to a particular film or television show like *The Simpsons and Philosophy* ([Irvin, Conrad & Skoble, 2001](#)), *The Matrix and Philosophy* (Irvin, 2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* (South, 2003), *The Lord of the Rings and Philosophy* (Bassham & Bronson, 2003) and *Harry Potter and Philosophy* (Baggett & Klein, 2004) have also proliferated. However, there has been no known literature focusing on teaching philosophical reflections through films, nor research studying the use of films to help pre-service teachers reflect on philosophical issues in education. This is a pity, given the potential of films to enthuse the audience, stimulate reflective thought and enhance learning. Boyd and Fale’s (1983) definition of reflective learning is especially relevant to guide the teacher educator in using films to promote reflective practice in the pre-service teachers. 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 which results in a changed conceptual perspective. Films, when appropriately chosen, are ideal in triggering the

pre-service teachers to reflect on an issue of concern, ponder on the meanings and implications for themselves, and finally change or modify their values, beliefs and actions.

### ***Using Reflective Journals***

Journal writing is one of the ways to promote and facilitate reflections after the learners have watched the films. A number of researchers like Holly (1994), Posner (1988), Goldsby and Cozza (1998), Collier (1999), and Thorpe (2004) have studied the usefulness of journal writing for reflective thinking and learning. Writing film response journals helps the learners to gain the most from films (Holden, 2000) and facilitates philosophical reasoning (Kent, 1987). A journal combines the objective data of a log with the free flowing personal interpretations and expressions of a diary (Holly, 1989). Learners write reflections about what concerns them, excites them, causes them to think, or causes them to learn (Posner, 1988). 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 formalised 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).

## **Method**

### ***Participants and Procedure***

The sample comprise 25 pre-service teachers who are mostly fresh graduates from the university. They are enrolled in the Postgraduate Diploma in Education and specialise in different subjects such as English Language, Literature, History, Biology, Chemistry and Mathematics. All of them have no formal training in philosophy but have signed up for the module entitled "Philosophy of Education through Films" due to their interest in films and curiosity about philosophy. The module concerned is a 6-week, 24-hour module where the pre-service teachers attend tutorials twice a week to watch films and reflect on philosophical issues in education. The module is structured in such a way that the first six tutorials are led by the tutor who introduces various educational issues of concerns to them through six carefully selected films. Each tutorial lasts about two hours beginning with a 30-minute viewing of a film, followed by a short lecture given by the tutor, class activities and discussion.

The six films shown to the pre-service teachers are (in order of appearance) (1) *The boy who Plays on the Buddhas of Bamiyan*, (2) *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring*, (3) *Dead Poets Society*, (4) *The Simpsons: When Lisa Gets an "A"*, (5) *Ghandi*, and (6) *The Matrix*. The first film serves to introduce general issues in education to the teachers through a documentary about the life of an eight-year-old boy Mir Hussain in post Taliban Afghanistan. He lives in a cave where the famous Buddhas of Bamiyan are, and although too poor to go to school, receives an informal education from his daily interactions with his family members and the community. From the film, the pre-service teachers generated issues of concern relevant to education, such as the meaning of education ("Is Mir receiving an education?"), the nature of teaching and learning ("Who should teach Mir?", "What should Mir be learning?"), the functions of school ("What is Mir deprived of by not going to school?"), moral education ("What are the moral values, if any, learnt by Mir?"), and the

social context of teaching and learning (“How does the political situation in Afghanistan affect Mir?”). Based on that preliminary study into broad philosophical issues in education, the next five films spotlight on a specific issue of concern. *The Lord of the Rings* focuses on the individual pursuit of happiness, *Dead Poets Society* focuses on the nature of teaching, *The Simpsons* focuses on the nature of morality, *Ghandi* focuses on the issue of patriotism, and *The Matrix* focuses on the nature of learning. These films are chosen for their popular appeal and ability to tease out philosophical concepts in education and provoke reflective thought in the viewers. This is crucial as many pre-service teachers have no prior background in philosophy, and therefore need a medium they are familiar with to trigger their reflections. It is also noteworthy that only two films (*Dead Poets Society* and *The Simpsons*) are set in the school context. The other three films comprise a fantasy story (*The Lord of the Rings*), a science-thriller (*The Matrix*), and a historical account (*Ghandi*). This wide selection of films is deliberate as the different genres and settings can provoke more reflections for the pre-service teachers. Each film is accompanied by prescribed readings expounding on key philosophical issues. The next six tutorials are for the teachers (who work in small groups) to take turns to present a film of their choice and demonstrate how they could use that film to teach selected philosophical ideas to their students in schools.

After the film-viewing, the teachers have to write two reflective journal entries based on any two of the five films: *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dead Poets Society*, *The Simpsons*, *Ghandi* and *The Matrix*. Two specific questions are given to guide the pre-service teachers in their journal writing. The two journal entries comprise 40% of their final grade for the module. They are asked to (a) reflect and share any one lesson that they have learnt from the film, and (b) explain how that lesson helps them to be better teachers. To ensure that the teachers can accurately remember what they have watched and learned from the film, they are given one week to complete each journal entry. The short duration is important as it ensures that the learners are able to recount the event accurately (Redfern, 1995). The study is guided by two research questions:

- (1) How do the films promote reflection in the pre-service teachers based on the five types of reflection?
- (2) How do the pre-service teachers’ reflections help to prepare them for the teaching profession in terms of their instructional goals, methods and resources?

### ***Findings***

50 journal entries were submitted at the end of six weeks. Table 1 (refer to the Appendix) shows that there is a fair distribution of journal entries written for all the films except for *Ghandi* (two journal entries). A plausible reason could be that the teachers were restricted to writing only two journal entries based on any two films, and they had found the other films and corresponding topics more interesting. As the sample size is too small for the film *Ghandi*, the study focuses only on the other four films. Table 2 (refer to the Appendix) shows the breakdown of the types of reflection manifested in the teachers’ journal entries. Two observations can be made. Firstly, it is evident that the teachers score the highest or second highest for (5): Review and change personal instructional goals, methods and resources. This is not surprising, considering that this is in response to the explicit guidelines for journal writing. As mentioned earlier, the teachers were asked to (a) reflect and share one lesson that they have learnt, and (b) explain how that lesson helps them to be better teachers. The second question is included so as to direct the teachers to make a conscious effort to reflect and apply what they have learned as beginning teachers. The second observation is that different films

emphasise different types of reflection. For *The Lord of the Rings*, the highest score is (1): Question and modify personal aims, beliefs, assumptions. For *Dead Poets Society*, the second highest score is (3): Apply the implications to the local context. For *The Simpsons*, the second highest score is (2): Confront and solve personal and professional obstacles. And finally for *The Matrix*, the second highest score is (4): Consider the students' specific educational needs. It will be instructive to take a closer look at each film and the corresponding issue of concern, and examine how they serve to guide the teachers in focusing on different types of reflection. It is also pertinent to understand how the teachers' reflections as seen in their journal entries prepare them for the teaching profession in terms of their instructional goals, methods, and resources.

## **Discussion and Implications**

### ***The Lord of the Rings and Happiness***

In *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring*, a young Hobbit Frodo Baggins was tasked to take the One Ring across Middle-earth to Mount Doom and destroy it forever. Accompanied by his Hobbit friends and others, Frodo has to stop Sauron, the dark Lord of Mordor, from possessing the ring which will allow him to rule Middle-earth and bring about evil upon all. Only the first 30 minutes was selected for viewing which focused on the life of the Hobbits. The issue of concern here is the individual pursuit of happiness. The objective is to prompt the teachers to reflect on their own state of happiness or the lack of it; this is important as one has to be a happy person before one can be a happy teacher who educates happy students. After the viewing, the teachers were introduced to the six keys to happiness from Tolkien's portrayal of the Hobbits: Delight in simple things (e.g., the film shows 144 Hobbits eating, feasting and having fun), make light of your troubles (e.g., Bilbo has a sense of humour), get personal (e.g., Frodo and Gandalf shares a close friendship), cultivate good character (e.g., the Hobbits lovingly cheer for Bilbo, Bilbo humbly accepts Gandalf's advice to leave the ring behind), cherish and create beauty (e.g., the Hobbits enjoy the woods, fields and rivers in Shire), and rediscover wonder (e.g., the Hobbits look at Gandalf's cart with wonder and excitement) (Bassham (2003). The discussion on happiness was given a further philosophical dimension with Aristotle's idea of happiness. Aristotle notes that our habits of desiring and feeling largely determine our view of happiness. Genuine happiness is obtained when our appetites (non-rational desires) are generally or habitually in accord with our wish (rational desire for happiness). According to Aristotle, happiness is intricately linked to virtue. He defines virtue as that state of character where the person is genuinely happy for doing just actions; it is feeling the right things at the right times, about the right things, towards the right people, for the right end, and in the right way (Reeve, 1998). It is therefore salubrious for the teachers to pursue happiness by living a simple and virtuous life, and to educate their students to do likewise.

The focus on the teachers' personal pursuit of happiness challenges them to question and modify their personal aims, beliefs, assumptions and actions. An analysis of the teachers' journal entries reveals two broad themes. The first is the realisation that happiness is not derived from material gains as commonly assumed. For example, one teacher writes: "I did learn something from this lesson, and that is to comprehend the old saying that "Money cannot buy happiness". Secondly, the teachers desire to be happy by learning from the Hobbits and appreciating simple things in life. One writes: "The discussion on the characteristics of the Hobbits that follows after the short viewing of the movie was an eye-opener. It brings many great insights as to how simple it could be for a person to achieve their dreams for happiness". The teachers also identify the specific keys to happiness that they

want to work on, such as getting personal, cultivating good character, and making light of their troubles. Many teachers also reflect on how the films and philosophical ideas learned help to prepare them to teach in terms of the instructional goals, methods and materials. The teachers express the desire to inculcate in their students qualities exhibited by the Hobbits so that their students can be happy in life. A teacher writes as follows:

This seminar reminded me of the need to educate students about the important things in life. Not good grades, not pursuing degrees after degrees. Rather, the important things in life cannot be bought with money. The development of an upright character, a caring soul, a sacrificial spirit; all these are far greater than any prestigious degree can bring.

In terms of methods and resources, the teachers are able to suggest practical and thoughtful methods to help their students to be joyful and moral. A number of them mention the need to get personal with the students by getting to know them better. For example, one writes that “we can make an effort to take a personal interest in our students and ensure that their learning process and growth as individuals, rather than the results they produce during examinations, is of utmost importance to us”. Others highlight the need to help their students cherish and create nature, and to rediscover wonder. It is noteworthy that a number also mention the importance of being happy teachers so that their example would influence their students positively. One puts it this way:

By being truly happy with what we do everyday (ie teach), our enthusiasm would rub off onto our students. This would in turn make them more willing to put in their best in their learning, as well as to make the learning process more enjoyable for them.

The teachers are able to give a number of relevant and creative suggestions to help their students lead happy and meaning lives. Some examples are encouraging their students to be involved in student-initiated activities such as reading to children in a nearby community library and participating in overseas volunteer expeditions.

### ***Dead Poets Society and Teaching***

The second film, *Dead Poets Society*, is about English teacher John Keating and his teaching experience in Welton, an exclusive and traditional school for boys. Through his unconventional teaching methods, he inspires his students to pursue individual passions and make their lives extraordinary. However, his unorthodox ways also incurs the wrath of the conservative school management and parents, and sadly leads to the death of one of his students. The pre-service teachers were shown 30 minutes of the movie where Mr Keating tells the students to rip off their textbooks and appreciate poetry for its intrinsic value. This film is ideal in bringing out the philosophical concepts of Romanticism and Realism. While Romanticism emphasises individuality, originality, imagination, emotional expression, freedom and idealism, Realism emphasises reality, objectivity, detachment, accurate observation and rejection of the impractical and visionary (Baker & Kemper, 2004). Mr Keating exemplifies the Romantic who exhorts 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 teachers then discussed Beiser’s (1998) article where he outlines the key features of a Romantic education. Essentially such an education views education as the highest good where the individual’s goal is self-realisation and self-

discovery. The two fundamental goals are to develop human powers through reason and emotion, and to develop one's individuality by thinking for oneself, own interests and passions. The teachers discussed whether they would like to be a Mr Keating, and if so, how far they could teach like Mr Keating when they are posted to the schools.

As the issue of concern is teaching in the context of the debate between Romanticism and Realism, the teachers reflect on how they see their role as teachers in the Singapore context. Many of them share about the dilemma they face in wanting to be a Mr Keating on the one hand, and being constrained by societal norms and pressures on the other. Others lament about how Romantic education will not work in Singapore due to the overarching Realist approach to education. One teacher puts it aptly:

I am convinced that the so-called romantic programme of *Bildung*, of aesthetic education will not work for our students. The paper chase craze and a hectic working environment in this world class nation will not allow opportunities to make these scholarly discussions and arcane theories come to pass. Realism dominates. Our ability-driven education is serious business, constituting meritocracy and pragmatism to breed the very best.

The teachers also draw parallels between the characters in the film and the different stakeholders of education in Singapore: the school leaders, parents, teachers, students and the Ministry of Education. Referring to the sad ending of Mr Keating who fails to get the support of the school administration, the teachers comment on how they may face a similar plight. One writes: "In the local context, a teacher can dare to be different but the school senior staff may be unable to accept the changes so readily. This might lead to 'condemnation' or the teacher being ostracised." A number also see the similarity between Neil's strict and ambitious father Mr Perry, and the typical parent in Singapore. One explains: "the 'love-hate' relationship between Mr Perry and Neil does depict Asian parenting communications where the father plays authority figure ... Mr Perry does mimic *kiasu* (a colloquial word for competitive) parents who are desperate to render ephemeral success for their sons and daughters in competitive Singapore." And as much as the teachers admire Mr Keating, they doubt that they can be such a one in reality due to the heavy workload teachers in Singapore schools face. They also highlight the result-oriented and exam-driven view espoused by many students in Singapore. One writes: "With so many of our students caught up in the paper chase, many argue that they do not have the time nor energy to develop their passions. In fact, more claim that they do not know where their passions lie". However, such concerns are balanced by their awareness that things may be changing for the better as the Ministry of Education in Singapore has been introducing more creative and student-centred teaching approaches to schools in recent years.

The gloomy albeit realistic sentiments expressed by the teachers in their reflections, however, do not mean that the teachers feel defeated in their aspiration to teach like Mr Keating. In their reflections on reviewing and changing their personal instructional goals, methods and resources, many of them share that all is not lost. The key is not to change the prevalent utilitarian mindset about education, but to strike an equilibrium between pragmatism and romanticism. Critical reflection is seen when one teacher asserts that "realism and romanticism need not be opposite ... (b)alancing their education with both the arts and the science is the path for moulding a rounded student". A number also point out the danger of excessive romanticism. This danger is alluded to in the film when Neil, driven by a new-found desire to pursue his passion and yet stifled by his overbearing father, commits suicide at the end. The teachers reflect on the need to monitor their students while encouraging them to be creative. One writes: "What I have learnt from the film is the importance of creativity in the classroom, and that such creativity has to be kept within safe limits. ... within safe limits of the school organisation and not pose any threat to the order of

the established system.”. The teachers also underscore the need to work closely with the educational stakeholders for the good of their students. Again, this is in response to the tragic example of Neil where Mr Keating is perceived to have failed to pre-empt it by working closely with Neil’s father and the school management. In terms of methods, the teachers favour innovative lessons using a variety of teaching strategies such as asking difficult and thought-provoking questions, inviting guest speakers to class, conducting excursions outside school, introducing student projects, and using films to teach. Others stress the importance of interpersonal skills and other life skills that beginning teachers need when they join a school. One pre-service teacher, sounding almost like an experienced teacher, writes as follows:

Mr Keating should learn how to network with his fellow colleagues... It is in the best interests that Mr Keating also learns parental counselling... check out the school’s website on their missions and values, the culture and standing in the district. ... Look at the school teachers’ guide and MOE (Ministry of Education) guidelines so that you know how to stretch the limits of your rights.

### ***The Simpsons and Morality***

This episode of *The Simpsons*, a television cartoon series, highlights the issue of ethics to the teachers. The episode (25 minutes), “When Lisa Gets an “A”” is about Lisa who cheated on a test. As a result of scoring A+++, her school was entitled to the state grant which would benefit the school. But a guilt-stricken Lisa confessed to her principal and insisted that the school should not take the money. However, the principal, school superintendent, and practically the whole school conspired to keep the money while keeping Lisa in the dark. Through the conflict between Lisa and her school, the pre-service teachers were introduced to the philosophical concepts of Kantianism (epitomised by Lisa) and Utilitarianism (epitomised by the superintendent). Kantianism is the belief that one should always act out of duty and do the right thing, regardless of consequences (e.g., Lisa: “But what I did was wrong. ... But we cannot accept the money; we cheated ... What’s even more important is the truth”). A Kantian’s morality arises out of personal reflection, not external factors; such a person faces the conflict between personal desires and a sense of moral duty (Lawler, 2001). On the other hand, a Utilitarian believes that happiness is the greatest and most obvious human good. Such a person acts to achieve the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people. In other words, the determining factor is the ends or the likely consequences of one’s actions (e.g., the superintendent: “Look around, Lisa, the grant money can do a lot of good ...for the good of your classmates and your school”). The pre-service teachers then discussed the four approaches to moral education as elucidated by Nodding (1998). Character education (ideas taken from Aristotle) emphasises teaching children to behave virtuously from young, cognitive developmentalism (ideas taken from Kant) which was started by Kohlberg emphasises moral reasoning and doing what is right, Utilitarian model (ideas taken from J.S. Mill) which was proposed by Wilson emphasises applying moral principles most likely to bring about the best effect, and finally Values clarification programme (ideas taken from Dewey) emphasises process and action. The moral education programme in Singapore has been described as utilitarian in approach ([Gopinathan, 1980](#); Tan, 1984; Chew, 1988). The teachers discussed whether they were Kantians or Utilitarians, and how they could teach moral values in the classroom.

The teachers’ reflections are based on their awareness that it is extremely challenging to teach moral values to students today. They reflect on the various obstacles which impede the effective transmission of moral values to the young. A number point to the moral relativism in a post-modern world. Others attribute the obstacle to the negative perception of moral education programme in schools. One writes: “I feel that moral education in Singapore has always been lacking. ...Moral education was no more than a social history lesson without

any real philosophical substance or activity.” Another teacher is more critical and opines that “(p)seudo-Confucian ‘Asian’ values are taught in a series of lessons that are more often than not seen as attempts at propaganda and groupthink”. The teachers also note the lack of enthusiasm on the part of the teachers and parents. Identifying with the struggles that teachers in schools face, one teacher writes: “Now as teachers, we most often than not usurp the curriculum time for moral education to make up for the time we lost for more important matters of education such as mathematics and other sciences”. But the cognisance of these challenges to the effective teaching of moral values is accompanied by the teachers’ own suggestions on how to overcome or alleviate them. Many of the teachers point to the need for the teacher to be sure of his or her moral values, and to serve as a role-model for the students. While the teaching of moral values is necessary, they realise that moral values have to be “caught” rather than “taught” explicitly. One puts it this way:

I need to be sure myself what I stand for morally. ... For impressionable minds, it may be that sincerity and way I live my life that will influence them on the correct path, more effectively than any dry lecture on values could.

Others aim at helping their students internalise the moral values, rather than imposing the values on them. The teachers propose a number of creative methods to promote moral reasoning and make moral education relevant, interesting and meaningful for their students. Their suggestions include openly discussing controversial moral issues with the students, introducing the theories of Kantianism and Utilitarianism to them, highlighting moral decision making, using films like *The Simpsons* and other pop culture platforms, and using newspaper cuttings to discuss contemporary moral issues with the students.

### ***The Matrix* and Learning**

*The Matrix* is a film about epistemology – the theory of knowledge. It is a science-fiction thriller about human beings being controlled by computers. The human beings live in the Matrix which is a virtual reality to make them think that they are living in a real world. The 30 minutes showed Neo being pursued by the agents, taking the red pill to search for the truth, breaking free from the Matrix, and learning the truth from Morpheus. The teachers explored the philosophical concept of scepticism which is the position that we cannot know with certainty that the external world exists. This is exemplified in Morpheus asking Neo: “How would you know the difference between the dream world and the real world?” The discussion on scepticism led to an examination of Descartes’ refutation of it in his *Cogito*: I think, therefore I am. Descartes argues that when he doubts, he knows that there is a thinking person who doubts. So at least he knows that the self exists. Erion and Smith (2002) aver that the demand for absolute certainty for knowledge is too strict; we only need the normal standard for knowledge in our everyday life. The class further explored the meaning of true learning. Garber (1998) points out that Descartes distinguishes false education from true education. False education focuses on the transfer of information, doctrine and dogma, and is based on the past, tradition and the authority of the teachers; it is teacher-centred as knowledge comes from the teacher as the master. True education, on the other hand, is the cultivation of the intellect; based on intuition and deduction, it is student-centred as knowledge is grounded in the individual alone. Descartes defines intuition as the indubitable conception of a clear and attentive mind which proceeds solely from the light of reason, while deduction refers to the inference of something as following necessarily from some other propositions which are known with certainty. The teachers discussed how they could promote true education and learning to their students in schools.

As the issue of concern is learning, the teachers' reflections centre on the students' specific educational needs. The teachers contrast Neo's persistent search for truth and knowledge with the perceived passivity and disinterestedness of many students in Singapore. One writes: "The reality is that many of our Singapore students are easily contented with what they see and perceive and many already have problems with the content that is delivered in the classroom and would be most unlikely to contest it to the extent that Neo probes his existence in the film". Another teacher thinks that the students in Singapore are more like Cypher in the film:

Just as much as Cypher is willing to return to a world where nothing is questioned and knowledge is accepted without hesitation, many students would prefer to have knowledge given to them in the form of textbooks and notes. Few students would prefer to learn through questioning, and even fewer would dare challenge knowledge that is presented to them by their teachers.

Others infer from Neo's use of sensory experience and reason to learn the lesson that different students have different learning styles. They also write that it is wrong for teachers to ignore their students' learning needs by making them blindly memorise formulas without understanding them. Some add that dogmatic teachers who only accept prescribed answers and belittle their students' attempts not only stifle the students' creativity but demoralise them as well. Guided by the students' educational needs, the teachers reflect on the kind of learning they want their students to have. Some see their role as Morpheus guiding their students to search for the truth. One writes: "I should teach my students how to search for the truth. Just as what Morpheus puts across to Neo just before he goes to see the Oracle, 'I can only show you the door ... you've got to find the truth for yourself'". Echoing this conviction, others write about the need to help students really understand the concept instead of getting them to merely memorise and regurgitate. They point out that the teacher must realise that education is a guided process and not a simple "receive and regurgitate" process. To promote true learning, they aim to cultivate their students' intellect and teach them to think for themselves. Interestingly, the pragmatism of the teachers again surfaces when quite a few clarify that being like Mr Keating does not mean that the traditional form of teacher-centred teaching is jettisoned; what is needed is to balance the teacher-centred approach with the student-centred approach. A typical view is as follows:

There has to be a transmission of facts to the students through the traditional method. This will give students some basis to work on. In the meantime, the mind can be further developed by introducing more high level thinking and analysis skills so as to prepare the students to deal with increasingly complex subject matters.

Other student-centred methods include recognising their students' talent, cultivating it by encouraging them to think laterally, encouraging them to question what they learn and not to accept things unquestioningly. Some of the resources cited include the use of poems, songs and movies in teaching.

## **Conclusion**

This study has shown that the use of four popular films helps to promote reflection in the pre-service teachers in the following five ways: (1) question and modify personal aims, beliefs, assumptions (2) confront and solve personal and professional obstacles (3) apply the implications to the local context (4) consider the students' specific educational needs, and (5) review and change personal instructional goals, methods and resources. By focusing on different issues of concern, the films guide the teachers to highlight different types of reflection. This in turn prepares them for the teaching profession as they reflect on their instructional goals, methods, and resources.

Based on the study, here are some recommendations for educators who would like to use films to promote reflection in their students:

- A variety of films from different genres and settings should be chosen in order to trigger more disparate thoughts and stimulate reflections in the learners. Some examples are drama, documentary, cartoon, science-thriller and comedy.
- Scaffolding in the form of short lectures given by the tutor, class discussions to clarify doubts and generate broad issues of concerns, and suggested readings should be given where appropriate. The above are particularly useful in the teaching of philosophical concepts which are perceived as abstract and esoteric to the learners.
- Journal writing is recommended as a useful tool for the learners to respond to the films. However, it has to be accompanied by clear learning objectives and explicit guidelines for the learners.
- Other modes of reflection such as self-reflection and verbal reflection can be used to replace or supplement written reflection. This is especially helpful for learners who have difficulty with the written language, or prefer oral communication and interaction.

There are many other ways to explore the use of films to encourage philosophical reflections from the viewers. Teacher educators could take a cue from Morpheus who tells Neo in the film *The Matrix*: “I can only show you the door ... you’ve got to find the truth for yourself”. Films, when appropriately chosen and well-incorporated into the curriculum, can be an exciting and powerful “door” to promote reflection in the pre-service teachers, leading them to arrive at the truth, both personally and professionally.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Number of reflective journal entries submitted for the five films**

Topic	Number of Reflective Journal Entry submitted
<i>The Lord of the Rings</i> and Happiness	13
<i>Dead Poets Society</i> and Teaching	15
<i>The Simpsons</i> and Morality	11
<i>Ghandi</i> and Patriotism	2
<i>The Matrix</i> and Learning	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>50</b>

**Table 2: Types of reflection corresponding to the four films**

Film/Topic	(1) Question & modify personal aims, beliefs, assumptions	(2) Confront & solve personal and professional obstacles	(3) Apply the implications to the local context	(4) Consider the students' specific educational needs	(5) Review & change personal instructional goals, methods and resources	Total
<i>The Lord of the Rings</i> and Happiness	9 (38%)	3 (13%)	2 (8%)	2 (8%)	8 (33%)	24 (100%)
<i>Dead Poets Society</i> and Teaching	9 (22%)	5 (12%)	12* (29%)	2 (5%)	13 (32%)	41 (100%)
<i>The Simpsons</i> and Morality	2 (9%)	6 (27%)	4 (18%)	1 (5%)	9 (41%)	22 (100%)
<i>The Matrix</i> and Learning	3 (12%)	3 (12%)	4 (15%)	6 (23%)	10 (38%)	26 (100%)