
Social Studies in the Dark: Using Docudramas to Teach History

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Feature films, once restricted to entertainment in theaters and homes, have found their way into classrooms. Teachers now often use mainstream entertainment films as a substitute for books and sometimes as a supplement to textbooks. Teachers also use films as a source of information and as material to be critically analyzed. Weinstein (2001) points out that classrooms today cannot be isolated from the cultural environment, and we cannot overlook the pervasiveness and influence of mass media. Using film to engage students in the study of history is a way of meeting students on their own turf. For example, Rebhorn (1987), an instructor of history, asserts that her students have a preconceived idea that history is boring and insipid because it deals only with events that have happened long ago and far away, making the history discipline irrelevant. She claims that the use of Hollywood feature films has enriched the discipline of history and fostered her students' interest in historical events.

In this article, I discuss the rationale for using films, specifically docudramas, for teaching social studies and pre-

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sent guidelines and resources for helping teachers to do so. I include several Web resources that assist teachers in the selection and use of specific films to complement classroom instruction. I have incorporated the comments of a classroom teacher in Logan, Utah, who uses films or segments of films in most of his history units. I selected Mark Dewey, a teacher at Mt. Logan Middle School, because parents, students, and colleagues consider him an excellent history teacher, especially because of his creative use of film to engage students in historical study.

Types of Films

Teachers use several types of films to engage students in the study of history. Documentaries, docudramas, and historical fiction are the three most common types.

Documentaries are films that represent a real world, with performances by social actors rather than professional actors (Godmilow and Shapiro 1997). Examples of documentaries are *Thin Blue Line* and *Bowling for Columbine*. Docudramas, which are a hybrid between documentaries and dramatic film, are designed to persuade the viewer to accept a certain interpretation of

historical events that actually did occur. They have a basis in truth but are greatly influenced by the writers' and directors' desire to envelop the audience in the story and to entertain. Lipkin (2002, 10) states that docudramas "operate as artistic perceptions of history." Examples of well-known docudramas are *Thirteen Days* and *Schindler's List*. Historical-fiction films involve fictional plots that are situated in a historical context. The characters of the story are either entirely fictional or they are based loosely on a real person or persons in history (Hawes 2002). Hawes suggests that historical fiction movies provide an explanation of how history could have developed. Examples are *Gone with the Wind* and *Lawrence of Arabia*.

In this article, I focus on docudramas because they have a historical basis and they have been designed to engage the viewer by presenting a persuasive argument. Thus, the teacher has an excellent opportunity to discuss such concepts as historical accuracy, perspective taking, and revisionist history.

Why Use Film?

One rationale for considering docudramas an appropriate and relevant

tool for social studies instruction is that they focus the visual and auditory senses of a student on the subject being studied. Because docudramas have a forceful impact on the senses of the students, they engage the interest of the learner. For effective and efficient learning to take place, such engagement is critical.

Bailey and Ledford (1994) state that because film engages the visual senses of the students, more senses are involved than with the traditional lecture. They further state that the process of gaining the attention of students leads students to greater retention and commitment of ideas and information to long-term memory. Retention is also stimulated by the viewers' emotional involvement in the film. When our emotions are activated, information is more likely to be retained.

Studies support the importance of getting students' emotions involved in the learning process. For example, neuroscientists have established that the storage and strength of memories can be increased if learning is done both at the emotional and at the cognitive level (LeDoux 1997). When the amygdala, the principal site where emotional signals go, is aroused, a signal is sent to other parts of the brain to strengthen the memory of what is happening (Goleman 1995). The amygdala and its connections to the association area of the visual cortex are a part of the key brain circuitry underlying empathy (Brothers 1989). Thus, docudramas, with their audio and visual impact, have the ability to arouse the emotions of the students leading them to understand better and remember the central theme of the film.

Docudramas also serve as a historical narrative to the students. Weinstein (2001) quotes historian R. J. Raack in his argument for films as an important medium for instruction in history. Raack believes that film is unparalleled in its capacity to provide a powerful reconstruction that tells how historical people witnessed, understood, and lived their lives.

Greg, Hosley, Weng, and Montemayor (1995) also have contended that feature films help to decrease the monotony of lectures and stimulate interest.

They argue that feature films can be more enjoyable than educational films that tend to present information in a documentary format. Moreover, films have gained popularity and have thus become a source of interest to students and history teachers.

Mark Dewey, a middle-school instructor in history, says that, most important, films help the students to achieve historical familiarity. There are times when students' cultures differ from the culture that surrounds certain historical events. Films help the students to get acquainted with the historical culture. He also adds that it creates enthusiasm, raises the interest level, and increases the comprehensibility of the topic taught by the teacher. He says that students being able to visualize significant events changes their thoughts and attitude about various historical events.

Cautions in Using Film

Both teachers and students need to take the time to discern the relative quality or value of historical information conveyed through film. Staiger (1997) opines that docudramas are subject to controversy regarding their presentation of historical information through story telling. She highlights the three reservations that are popularly ascribed to using docudramas. The first is "dramatic license." Writers use dramatic license (creation of materials not established as historical facts or even the violation of known facts) in order to create a drama that adheres to the tradition of mainstream storytelling. These distortions include created dialogues among characters, meetings of people that never happened, and events reduced to two or three days that actually occurred over weeks.

The second reservation is that the audience may not be able to distinguish between facts and speculation. This argument does not suggest that viewers are incapable of such discrimination but that the docudrama may not adequately point out the distinction between established facts and hypotheses. Even if the docudrama does mark the differences, studies of human memory suggest that viewers may be unable to discern the

distinctions while viewing the program or remember the distinctions later.

The third reservation emphasizes the tendency toward simplification. Critics note that docudramas tend toward simplification to condense the historical material into a short drama. "Complex social problems may be personalized so that complicated problems are domesticated" (Staiger 1997, 516). It is critical for students to recognize that the movie industry is about entertainment. Selling the story will always take precedence over historical thoroughness and accuracy.

Selection of Films

There are three steps to selecting a film for use in the classroom. First, identify the concepts you want to teach. Dewey selects films that help teach concepts from the required state curriculum. Second, identify possible films that could be used to enhance students' understanding of these concepts. There are various ways to find such films. For example, suggestions of students and colleagues, film guidebooks and CDs, film reviews in newspapers and magazines, and online movie reviews. Several excellent Web sites may be of great help, such as <http://www.teachwithmovies.org/>, <http://www.moviesintheclassroom.com/>, <http://www.eduscapes.com/seeds/bookmovie.html>, <http://catalog.socialstudies.com>, and <http://www.pbs.org/history/>. Be aware that some of these sites charge for the use of the film curriculum on their Web sites. Dewey recommends that the history teacher always keep his or her eyes and ears open for possible good films. He uses the words "seek and ye shall find." In other words, if a teacher has a mindset for looking for films to use, he or she will certainly find them. The third step is to watch the film, identify where the connections to the curriculum goals are to be found, and then judge the appropriateness of the entire film or selected clips for your students.

Entire Films or Clips?

A teacher may choose to show an entire film or just show clips from the

film. Given time limitations, film clips, contextualized by the teacher, may be most appropriate. Dewey states that he prefers to use clips because it allows him the freedom to use particular scenes, stop and discuss them, and then connect them conceptually. For example, to teach about civil rights, a teacher might show clips from *Mississippi Burning*, a film that tells about the murder of three civil rights workers. Dewey teaches about the horrors of the slave trade by showing scenes from *Amistad*. Most often Dewey uses one film, but if he uses more than one film, then the thematic connections are made as each film clip is shared. For example, Dewey has used a variety of film clips to explore the theme of weapons use over time with his students.

Showing an entire film takes a lot of time and may also lead the students to become preoccupied with the trivialities of the film instead of focusing on the concepts the teacher wants to explore. For example, when the author showed the film *Norma Rae* in a college class, even some of these older students focused on Norma Rae's personal behavior and language, rather than her fight for labor rights. Clips also provide teachers the opportunity to use films that could not be shown in their entirety because of age-inappropriate material. When clips are shown, if appropriate, students can also be encouraged to watch the entire film on their own.

Home Viewing as an Option

When a whole film is appropriate for inclusion in the curriculum, it may be best to ask students to view the film as an out-of-class assignment because of the time commitment required. Students also can be given a choice of films to view if they are studying a common movie theme such as World War II. Later, after home viewing, group presentations and discussions of the films can be scheduled. Although home viewing can save on the teacher's class time, the teacher is then not in a position to direct the viewing patterns of the students. That may influence the quality of discussion in class. Furthermore, out-

side viewing may not be a fair request because some students may not have a television or VCR and/or may not have the financial ability to rent a video.

Before Showing the Film

Although mentioned earlier, enough cannot be said about the absolute necessity of viewing a film with great attention to detail prior to sharing it with students. Sensitivity to the audience is of utmost importance regardless of the age level. Dewey keeps the following points in mind when selecting a film:

- age of the audience
- language of the film
- consistency with the values that are promoted in the home and community
- degree of violence

He says that he carefully selects scenes, avoiding film segments that include overly graphic violence, swearing, and sexual content scenes that are age inappropriate.

If a film is rated for an older audience (for example, the teacher plans to use an R-rated film, such as *Schindler's List* or segments of an R-rated film, with middle schoolers or high schoolers), it would be proper to have permission slips for parents to sign. An explanation of the rationale for showing the clips or film can be shared and questions answered, thus greatly decreasing the likelihood that parents will express concerns after the fact.

Additional precautions are necessary before showing the film in class. Dewey asserts that it is critical to know the school district's policy. It may be important for a teacher to get the approval of the school administration prior to using a feature film. Notification of parents and school administrator ahead of time should take care of any unpleasant situations that might otherwise arise after the showing of the film.

Before showing the film, the teacher also should be aware of copyright laws that exist regarding the use of feature films in educational settings. For example, there should be a direct relationship between the film and the content of the course, and it should be shown only in a

classroom or a school location devoted to instructional purposes. Another fair-use rule to be followed is that the film showing must occur in the course of a face-to-face teaching situation and must be presented by the instructor. Finally, the film must be a legally acquired copy.

Before showing the film teachers should consider preparing a short question guide to help students focus on the essential educational points in a film. Students may even be asked to prepare notes based on a few questions given by the teacher. Dewey says that it is essential that the students know why they are viewing a film. He does not want his students thinking this is simply a fun break from history class. They discuss the background of a film and then critically view segments of the film looking for factual and fictional components. To make the viewing effective, the instructor must clearly define the objectives in advance. Weinstein (2001) in his article "Movies as the Gateway to History: The History and Film Project," shares questions that teachers may want students to reflect on. For example: Are the events in the film accurate? Are events chronologically correct? Does the overall look of the film reflect the period? Do the characters speak and act as people in their time, situation, and class did?

Showing the Film

When showing the film, create an environment that assures that each student can both see and hear the film well. The teacher also may want to be seated so that that she or he can observe students' reactions to the film. Dewey says that the times when the students are totally attentive are the times when the teacher knows the students have really been captured by an event being portrayed in a film. For example, when he shared the courtroom scene from *Amistad*, after having shared other segments of this film about slavery, his students were quiet and still, conveying to him that this scene was indeed as powerful as he had hoped it would be.

To Interrupt or Not to Interrupt a Film

There are pros and cons to interrupting a film while viewing it. The pros are that a teacher can discuss a scene when it is still fresh in the students' minds, emphasizing or illustrating a point that a film has made. The teacher might even rewind the tape back to the beginning of

Students may be asked about which scenes and sounds are most powerful, thus leading the way to a lively and enriching discussion about both film and history. What made the scene powerful? Did this really occur? Is the scene misleading or is it consistent with at least the spirit of the real event? This method will stimulate class discussion of historical events while also helping

with documentaries on sweatshops. Later, they may be asked to write about how labor conditions have been portrayed by different forms of media.

Keeping a Record of the Film

A teacher should record students' comments and reactions for later use of a film. Feedback can be assessed in various ways. Dewey suggests that students be asked what impressed them the most in a particular film, what concerned them about a film, and how much the film interested them. Technical information should be recorded, for example, title and production date, the time taken for the film, availability of the film, specifics regarding the segments of the film shown, and where to find the films on the tape. Most important, the teacher should note the instructive value of the film regarding the objectives selected.

It is essential to compare a film used for instruction in social studies with historical records. Teachers need to point out that film directors often use dramatic license.

the scene so that the students may view it again with the teachers' instruction in mind. Interruption of the tape, however, is a distraction that disengages the class from the film, perhaps lessening the emotional impact of the film. A teacher should make a conscious decision as to whether or not it is best to incorporate discussion during the film viewing or to hold such discussions to the end.

After Showing the Film

It is essential to compare a film used for instruction in social studies with historical records to help students differentiate between fact and fiction. Directors often use dramatic license and teachers should be careful to bring that to the attention of the students. For example, after Dewey's students view several scenes that are supposed to depict an historical event, students are then asked to go to various high quality Web sites to read historical accounts of the story. The students then discuss how the film and the historical accounts differ. This strategy can be used for many films, particularly docudramas. For examples, films such as *Apollo 13*, *Thirteen Days* (the story of the Cuban missile crises), and *JFK* are excellent films for getting students to explore history in more depth and to understand how feature films can both inform and mislead audiences.

the students to be critical viewers of docudramas.

In some cases, where the lead character plays an important role, students may be asked to prepare a character case study. For example, in the films *Gandhi* and *Norma Rae*, students can be asked to write a character sketch of the lead actors of the films. This exercise can help students to understand better the distinguishing characteristics of eminent people.

Students may also be asked to relate the film to their own experiences, thus helping them to translate their film experience to reality. For example, students could be asked in advance to write out the scenes from the film *Hoop Dreams* that portray race discrimination. Later, they could share with the class their own experiences with racial discrimination. The question guide given prior to viewing may serve as a starting point from which the teacher can invite students to participate in the class discussion.

Comparison of film with other forms of media is an important way to enhance the critical thinking ability of students. Students can be guided to see how different events are portrayed in different media. For example, if the teacher shows clips from the movie *Norma Rae*, the students can compare what they saw with both current and historical newspaper articles on sweatshops in the United States. Students can compare the movie

Conclusion

The watching of an historical film should not be an idle task but a task in which students are trained to use their eyes and mind to translate visual images into information for comparative and critical analysis. My purpose in this article is to provide teachers with a rationale for using feature films, particularly docudramas, in the teaching of social studies. I offer suggestions for doing that effectively. There can be pitfalls associated with using docudramas, but with care and attention, teachers can find feature films that are great tools for engaging students in the study of history.

Key words: docudramas, films in the classroom, films in social studies classes

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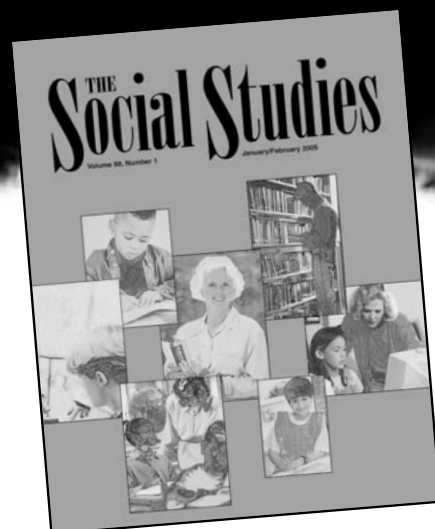
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