

The Potential Benefits of Using Film as Part of Literacy Lessons- An Introduction to the Bradford City of Film Media Literacy Scheme and PhD

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Research Note

Bradford has been at the centre of film production since the mid-nineteenth century, boasting a rich screen history as well as the National Media Museum. In 2009, Bradford was instated as the world's first UNESCO City of Film; a commendation which has further increased the area's potential to enjoy and make films. As part of the initiative, 15 primary school teachers in the area were trained to provide 'media literacy' lessons where children were encouraged to watch and produce films in school.

My PhD project discusses the impact of this film literacy initiative on motivation, attainment and other positive outcomes in ten Year Five classes. The scheme was originally founded on the premise that the use of film could increase both traditional literacy levels in multicultural Bradford as well as children's media awareness and understanding. While authors such as Guy Merchant (2009, 2013), David Buckingham (2003) and Burnett *et al.* (2006) have long argued for the importance of a balanced media literacy curriculum, their voices are quiet in comparison to the on-going debate about children's low literacy levels, which dominates the newspapers regularly (Johnston, 2013). This concern has shaped the PhD and its methodology.

One particularly innovative element of this study is its quantitative approach to measuring impact on learning. Although media and film have anecdotally been established amongst teachers as successful aides in the classroom, this study will present the first longitudinal research into the impact of the use of moving image media on attainment levels in writing. Focusing on quantitative research will contribute to answering the call of the British Film Institute (2012b), which argued that "we need to find out what's unique about

film, why use it, with the objective of showing how attainment levels can be raised by using film as a tool” (p. 12). Broadly – and rather more cynically – it also supports the demand of former Culture Secretary Maria Miller, who began her office in 2013 with the aim that ‘we must hammer home the value of culture to our economy’ (Gompertz, 2013).

The use of film in schools has shown to inspire a ‘high level of pupil excitement and engagement’ (Stafford, 2010, p. 3), to increase test results (Mills, 1936), improve critical understanding (Cates, 1990) and written communication (Film Agency for Wales, 2009). However, researchers have also voiced concern about the increased speed of information transmission (Cain, 2005) and students’ inability to critically engage with a medium they find pleasurable (Bassham & Nardone, 1997; Cates, 1990). No study as of yet has discussed *why* film can have a positive effect on students beyond the basic argument that students can use prior learning when connecting with films (British Film Institute, 2012a).

This vital psychological step between watching a film in class and seeing a change in the students’ output is at the heart of this PhD. Combining an analysis of motivation with a discussion of the ‘pleasure’ and emotional impact of watching films, it aims to answer four sub questions:

- 1) What emotional impact does working with films in the classroom have on students?
- 2) Is this impact connected to a motivation for writing and if yes, how so?
- 3) Does the students’ engagement with the film literacy scheme impact on their writing scores and if yes, how so?
- 4) What other potential benefits does the film literacy scheme have?

Overall, my research questions look at the chain effects from emotional impact (RQ1), motivation for writing (RQ2) and writing scores (RQ3), and other potential benefits (RQ4). They are based on the assumptions that students enjoy interacting with film and draw on previous research which has argued that children are more likely to write about the culture they engage in (Dyson, 1992, 1997). Moving images have also been shown to increase interest in the topic (Silvia, 2008), generate high level of satisfaction (Fails, 1988) and increase students’ academic achievement and feeling of fulfilment (Arrowsmith, 1971). Whether these potential positive effects also have an impact on attainment scores remains to be seen.

Research took place over the school year of 2013/14. Twenty schools were recruited to take part in the film literacy scheme, providing the opportunity to study ten year five classes which had access to the film program as well as eight control groups. The program was led by Bradford City Council and the Innovation Centre in Bradford with support from the British Film Institute. Teachers were obliged to attend three free training sessions throughout the year and were also given access to in-school support as well as a 'presentation day' for the children at the National Media Museum at the end of the year and a further evaluation day.

My investigation asked all children who were part of the film literacy classes to fill in two questionnaires which charted their interest in and experience with films as well as their feelings about writing. Drawing on Pekrun *et al.*'s (2011) Achievement Emotion Questionnaire, students indicated their opinions on a scale. The original questionnaire included scales of nine emotions: activity emotions (enjoyment, boredom and anger), prospective outcome emotions (hope, anxiety and hopelessness) and retrospective outcome emotions (pride, relief, shame). These had been tested in previous work and found successful (Pekrun, Goetz, Titz, & Perry, 2002; Pekrun, 1992) My questionnaire still used Pekrun's nine emotions, but categorised them in oppositions (such as happiness versus anger) in order to provide an easier way for children to situate themselves on a scale. Asking young people to categorise their emotions is a complex and difficult issue (Zeman, Klimes-Dougan, Cassano, & Adrian, 2007) and it was my hope that keeping the questionnaire short and concise would aid clear data collection and analysis.

In addition, I also collected the students' writing scores as assessed by the teachers at the beginning and at the end of the year. Control classes which were not part of the film literacy scheme completed the same Achievement Emotion Questionnaire and their writing grades were made available for comparison.

Students were involved in the project on an 'opt out' basis. All students were approached through the teachers. Students and teachers received letters, informing them about the research and its purpose. I had an ethical responsibility to explain my intentions and the research design as participants 'have a right both ethically and legally to be fully informed of risks and benefits' (Cowell, 2011). As the risks for these two groups were very low and the interaction between me and the children minimal, I felt that it was justified to

create an ‘opt out’ culture. This was also endorsed by the head teachers as well as the ethics committee of the University of Bradford

The PhD thesis seeks to understand whether using film as a tool in Year Five classrooms can make a difference to attitudes to and attainment in writing. It is grounded in the belief that learning about film should be a ‘universal entitlement’ (Bazalgette, 2007, p. 2) and that film is a medium which is loved by children. At its core, it is research *for* children (Woodhead & Faulkner, 2008) as much as it is *about* children. Data analysis will commence in the summer of 2014.

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