

CASTL FELLOWSHIP FINAL REPORT

Using Narrative Films to Develop Critical Thinking Skills

Combining Narrative Film with Reading Assignments
to Enhance the Development of Students' Critical Thinking Skills

by

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Project Description

Instructors have used a combination of conventional techniques, particularly reading, writing, discussion, and lecture, to develop their students' ability to think analytically. Currently, with media and technology capturing students' attention on every side, many instructors are revamping ways to present their material to engage students more effectively. Educators in a broad range of disciplines are extolling the value of integrating films within course curricula to contribute to the development of students' critical thinking skills.

To that end, this current CASTL research project coupled two main goals. The first was to determine whether the use of film can indeed enhance development of critical thinking skills. Two classes were taught in two different semesters. The first, taught in fall 2006, was the control group, twenty-five students who received assignments as a readings-only class. The second, taught in fall 2007, was the study group, the film-enhanced class in which twenty-two students read the same readings assigned to the readings-only class, but in addition, watched films related to those readings.

The second goal was to devise an instrument that could measure outcomes objectively. This was achieved with a rubric that placed five criteria on a four-point scale (See Fig. 1: "Rubric for Evaluating and Scoring Critical Thinking."), enabling the instructor to evaluate and plot student skill levels in an equitable and consistent way. Despite restrictions in the scope and size of the samples, the study produced findings that are encouraging because they validate the merits of this objective assessment method and they establish a basis for future study that can provide more decisive evidence on the merits of using film to enhance critical thinking.

My methodology for this study depended on an approach to critical thinking proposed by Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder, co-authors of *The Miniature Guide to Critical Thinking: Concepts & Tools* (2005, 4th ed.), who develop critical thinking skills by having students apply eight separate "Elements of Thought" to whatever they read. The eight elements are as follows: 1) Purpose of the thinking, 2) Question at issue, 3) Information, 4) Interpretation and Inference, 5) Concepts, 6) Assumptions, 7) Implications and Consequences, and 8) Points of view.

Using Paul and Elder as a model, I adapted their eight elements to a class I had taught before, a first-year course, Advanced Reading and Study Skills, a title that defines its main purpose. The textbook *Elements of Literature*, edited by Scholes, Comley, Klaus, and Silverman (4th edition, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) served as the text in both the readings-only and film-enhanced classes. This book contained readings in several genres, essays, short stories, poetry, and drama. The development of students' critical thinking depended on their understanding of the eight criteria adapted from Paul and Elder's *Miniature Guide* and on their application of these eight criteria to the assigned readings.

Students were assigned random numbers, one through twenty-five, which they were to use in place of their names to identify their assignments. This was intended to maintain some degree of anonymity and to augment the objectivity of the grading. The strategy worked well for the first few assignments, but as the semester progressed, circumstances (such as the need to discuss specific assignments with individual students) enabled me to link many of the numbers with the names of the respective students.

Originally, two questionnaires were devised. The first, applied to essays, followed the scheme suggested by Paul and Elder's eight criteria for developing the ability to think critically (See Fig. 2: "Applying Critical Thinking to an Essay."); the second, applied to literature (poetry, short stories, drama), was a modification of these eight criteria (See Fig. 3: "Applying Critical Thinking to a Literary Work."). Students wrote responses to each of the eight criteria. Their answers were evaluated according to the rubric which condensed the eight criteria into five categories as follows:

- Category 1, "Identifying the main purpose and the question at issue," combined "Purpose of the thinking" and "Question at issue."
- Category 2, "Comprehending the content and central concepts," combined "Information" and "Concepts."
- Category 3, "Analyzing the content and literary elements to interpret the material and draw inferences," focused on "Interpretation and Inference."

- Category 4, “Recognizing alternative points of view and identifying assumptions,” combined “Points of view” and “Assumptions.”
- Category 5, “Determining implications and consequences,” focused on “Implications and Consequences.”

My evaluations of the students’ work were translated into two graphs as a visual reflection of the tabulated outcomes. (See Table 1 and Figures 4-5: “Readings-Only Class Averages” and “Film-Enhanced Class Averages.”) These results are discussed below.

Major Findings of This Project

By comparing the evaluations of students’ work in a readings-only class and in a reading class enhanced with film viewings, I had hoped to determine what effect, if any, film might have on the development of critical thinking skills. Now that the study is completed, I feel that the samples were not large enough to provide significant differences between the two classes. However, I am also feeling very positive about the results, because the approach shows merit and encourages further study. Despite the indefinite conclusions, there are several outcomes worth noting.

First, in the final evaluations, the rubric shows that the averages of the major components of critical thinking in the readings-only class nearly duplicate those in the film-enhanced class, suggesting that using film may be equally as effective as not using it. And yet, although differences between the two classes are minimal, the film-enhanced class, in two of the higher-level thinking areas (interpretation and point of view), shows a slightly greater improvement over the readings-only class (which did better in the third higher-level thinking area, implications). This is a small indication that film may contribute to some aspects of critical thinking in a way that readings alone do not. (Again, this must be said as an observation based on the limited results offered here, not as a conclusive axiom learned from the project.)

A second consideration comes from looking at the relative peaks and valleys of the progress each class made over the semester. We see that there are some remarkable parallels. Both classes ended higher than they began, improving by about a half-point (from between 1.0 and 1.9 to between 1.7 and 2.6 for

the readings-only class; from between 1.2 and 1.8 to between 1.7 and 2.5 for the film-enhanced class). Noticeable too are the comparable dips with Assignment 5, which required an evaluation of Swift's essay "A Modest Proposal." The reading proved difficult, especially because of the ponderous language, syntax, and style. The content (shocking as it is, proposing cannibalism to solve the poverty problem in Ireland) failed to engage them, and they had trouble deciphering the satirical tone.

The overall scores for the readings-only group peaked with the eighth assignment (comparative analysis of a poem and short story), then declined noticeably with the last two assignments. (It appears that students failed to sustain their motivation to do their best work for the last two assignments.) The overall scores of the film-enhanced group show a more complex mix of highs and lows. *Purpose* peaked with the seventh assignment (Eiseley's essay, "The Bird and the Machine"), declined slightly, and then maintained a consistent level to the end. *Content* peaked with the sixth assignment, declined slightly, and also held steady to the end. *Interpretations* did not peak until the ninth (penultimate) assignment (analysis of a poem), and *Point of View* peaked with the tenth (final) assignment (Chopin's short story, "The Story of an Hour"). Like *Content*, *Implications* peaked with the sixth assignment, tapered off considerably (from 2.3 to 1.8), then maintained a steady level to the end.

Based on these statistical readings, it appears that the film-enhanced class maintained a steadier growth at the finish, and was at least able to sustain that development rather than fall off as the readings-only class did. The implication here is that film may have helped to maintain students' interest, so that even if we cannot, based on our limited sample, determine whether film has an instructive value over readings alone, we may conclude that film possesses some attractive properties that can protract students' engagement in the subject matter.

Arising from this study are several considerations that didn't occur to me at the beginning of the project, but whose significance has since made me wonder whether they have a critical function in the process. Two related considerations are when and how to implement film in the class. The brevity of this pilot project, which incorporated film during only one semester, did not give me time to try alternate approaches, but I note my observations here as considerations for future study.

In respect to the “when,” I followed my original format, namely, to have students read the material and then view a film after they had developed some ideas and opinions on the related issues, an approach which parallels that of Anderson (1992). However, as the semester continued, I wondered if it might be more efficacious to show the film first, discern its themes, and apply those themes to the readings, an approach followed by Sturma and MacCallum (2000). It may be that both approaches work equally well, but this would have to be tested and verified.

The second consideration, “how” the films are shown, relates to whether they need to be viewed in their entirety or whether excerpts, specific passages relevant to the discussion, can be used. The advantage to the first approach is that students see interconnections among all the issues in the single work. The drawback is the time it takes to show an entire film. The second approach, viewing isolated excerpts, has an opposite benefit-drawback—time is saved and relevant concepts are brought to the fore, but it may limit students’ understanding of issues that are taken out of context of the complete work.

How and when films are implemented in a course may produce more effective results for one reason or another. The different approaches would have to be tried and compared to determine whether one produces better results than the other, or if both are equally effective.

For the sake of adhering to a strict comparative approach in this study, I gave the same quizzes and assignments to the film-enhanced class that I did to the readings-only class. (The one exception was the final quiz, #10: the readings-only class dealt with Shakespeare’s *Othello*; the film-enhanced class dealt with a short story.)¹ The reason for using identical quizzes was to judge what students in both classes learned primarily from what they read, and to see in what ways film may have influenced the critical thinking of the film-enhanced class in analyzing the same readings.

This raises questions for future approaches to studies of this kind. One approach may be to teach a readings-only class and a films-only class and to compare what differences exist in the development of students’ critical thinking skills in the two discrete classes. (The objective of most of the writers in my literature review is to show that film by itself is a viable means to teaching critical thinking skills. They do not concern themselves with comparing the effectiveness of film against the effectiveness of reading.

My present study, and my intention for further study, is to see whether film offers special advantages to the development of these skills, or whether the traditional way, readings without film, is preferable.)

Another approach is to combine films with the readings (a film-enhanced course) and then to give assignments that specifically address the films to determine more precisely what impact the films themselves have on the development of students' critical thinking skills. The rubric used in this current study can be applied to these alternate approaches.

Contributions That This Project Will Make to the Campus Community

A literature review of seventeen articles written by instructors who have used narrative film in their classrooms reveals unanimous and enthusiastic support for incorporating film in course curricula. Instructors' findings denote a number of practical benefits to a film-enhanced course. Their general assertions and assumptions, confirmed by my own experience, contain some overlapping and instructive commonalities.

1. Film viewing generally improved critical thinking skills, especially analytical skills, the ability to acknowledge diverse points of view, and the capacity to devise extended implications—(All seventeen articles: Anderson, Bassham & Nardone, Bluestone, Eken, Guista, Hayward, Kirsh, Kubey, Leland, Lieberman, Pacino & Pacino, Remender, Seyforth & Golde, Sturma & MacCallum, Tipton & Tiemann, Waalkes, Weerts)
2. Dramatic scenarios of “real-world” issues enabled students to see practical applications of the concepts under discussion—(Anderson, Bluestone, Eken, Lieberman, Pacino & Pacino, Seyforth & Golde [specific student issues], Tipton & Tiemann, Weerts)
3. Students' enthusiasm, engagement, and active learning were evidenced. (Familiarity with the medium of film expedited student involvement in the subject matter, an important first step in the development of critical thinking.)—(Anderson, Bassham & Nardone, Bluestone, Eken, Guista, Hayward, Kirsh, Kubey, Leland, Lieberman, Seyforth & Golde, Tipton & Tiemann)
4. Film supplemented reading assignments as a practical teaching instrument—(Anderson, Bassham & Nardone (implied), Bluestone, Hayward, Kubey, Lieberman)
5. Communal viewing enhanced group learning experience and fostered immediate interactive responses—(Seyforth & Golde [implied, although not discussed or the advantages noted], Waalkes [comments on it, but does not elaborate on specific benefits or outcomes])
6. Media Literacy was strengthened. If film ranks with literature as a powerful means of telling a story, and if students spend much of their time watching film, it is to their benefit to learn

how to “read” a film with an active critical eye instead of with passive acceptance—
(Bassham & Nardone, Bluestone, Eken, Guista, Kubey, Seyforth & Golde)

My close evaluation of the effects of film have led me to at least three reasons, tangential to those above, for films’ enhancing learning and critical thinking when it is used creatively and deliberately.

First, films offer an alternate approach to the subject matter that not only benefits students who learn more effectively from visual presentations, but helps all students in general. The concrete images seen with the eyes reinforce and exemplify the abstract concepts represented by the written word, thus making it easier to comprehend the written material.

Stated another way, films lend a visual and dramatic aspect to abstract concepts, which may make such concepts easier to grasp and discuss (See above, No. 2, “Dramatic scenarios.”). For example, concepts such as tradition and nonconformity become more real and meaningful to students when they see such ideas operate in the context of a film like *Dead Poets Society*.

Second, “student enthusiasm” (No. 3 in the outcomes above) was apparent in my own students, who on the whole admitted a favorable response to watching film. Enjoyment contributes to learning; students who are enjoying the subject tend to participate more extensively in the class, mentally and physically, which produces greater comprehension and retention of the material.

Third, and most important, is to recognize the value that film can have from the instructor’s viewpoint, which will directly impact on the students’ learning. If the instructor is one who relishes using film to communicate information and ideas to the students, then using film can enhance the instructor’s teaching style and increase his or her effectiveness in making the material more accessible to the students.

This last was something I realized after I started the project. While I was teaching the readings-only group, I was already looking eagerly ahead to teach the subsequent film-enhanced class. It suddenly occurred to me that the reason I was so keen on using film was that, for me, film provided a more effective vehicle for getting the material across to the students. It was not that I couldn’t do the same thing with the readings alone—I’ve taught many classes without using film—but there is something comfortable and magical about using film to teach the same ideas, something like a hidden power that is

unleashed when film becomes the medium for the material. In my specific case, I enjoy teaching film, so that my teaching becomes more effective in general because film augments my approach to the subject in a way that works better for me than if I used readings alone. Other teachers may or may not feel the same. For those who do, film may enhance the instructor's approach, so that the students will reap the rewards of a more effective teaching style.

The literature suggests that more and more instructors are turning to film as a supplement to their teaching curricula. I believe this project contributes to that literature, verifying and reinforcing their findings and offering additional reasons to explore film as a means for developing critical thinking skills.

Professional Benefits Gained from the Fellowship

I've been using film in my reading and writing classes for many years. Films have served a useful purpose and students have always responded favorably to them. The difference that the fellowship had for me is that it forced me to approach my use of film in a more deliberate manner and in a more organized way, with greater attention to its impact on the students and on me.

I never thought to measure the effects of using film in the classroom, to try to validate using it. Like the educators who wrote the articles in my literature review, I believed, without explicit evidence, that film had a positive impact on students and enhanced their learning. The CASTL fellowship inspired me to set out to obtain more convincing data on the value of using film, particularly as a tool for developing critical thinking skills.

Having taught two classes in order to amass some evidence of film's usefulness, I realize that more study needs to be done. I plan on doing further evaluation in my classes where I use film. I'm also completing a textbook that I can use in a humanities course that uses film as its primary content. The rubric can be useful in this class to measure the effect that film viewings have on critical thinking.

Notes

1. The purpose of using the Shakespeare play as a final quiz was to see how far students' critical thinking skills had progressed by having them apply those skills to a reading that most of them would claim was difficult. (Although Shakespeare's dramatic poetry does not lend itself easily to students' analysis, most teachers know that student perception of the difficulty is often exaggerated.) In the film-enhanced class, the film viewings took up time and prevented our study of *Othello* at the end of the semester. In giving the short story as a final quiz, I realized the advantage to this was that it mirrored the first assignment and might be a better gauge of how well the students progressed in their critical thinking skills. This format will be considered in future studies.