

Using Films in Teaching

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Preamble

I am a core member of the Humanities Programme and I teach interdisciplinary, cross-cultural and bilingual courses. Humanities courses frequently deal with discussions of human nature, values and meanings in life and developments of humanity in various historical and political situations. Thus narrative texts from different cultures and historical periods have a substantial presence in the materials used by humanities teachers. One challenge for humanities teachers in Hong Kong, if using predominantly texts in English (or English translation), is to carry out meaningful discussions with students who may have to struggle to finish reading some of these lengthy texts. Another challenge for us is to enliven the learning experience of students even when dealing with theory-based knowledge transfer. On the other hand, we realise that the new generation of young people are exposed to a much more visual-dominant world than previous generations, and so this project aimed to explore the potential of film as a useful medium to reach our students and to facilitate teaching and learning in the humanities classroom.

Abstract

Petrarch, a 14th century pioneer of humanistic education, promoted the idea that to study humanities is to study the principles which make us human, and a humanistic education is the education for a moral self. As a humanities teacher, my teaching aims not only at transferring to students the knowledge of the major great works in literary, philosophical, and artistic fields, but more at inspiring students' reflective and critical consciousness towards these great works. In the attempt to find ways of engaging the students in class, I proposed to use films to facilitate the teaching of literary masterpieces and possibly for further use in different humanities courses. After the acquisition of relevant film adaptations of literary masterpieces and the design of new in-class and take-home teaching and learning activities, I discovered that film is not only an effective tool to enliven teaching and learning of literary masterpieces, but also excellent teaching materials for a multitude of Humanities courses such as Gender Studies, Language and Humanities, and special topics in humanities. A collection of useful films for various purposes was built from the funds of this project and several very successful credit-bearing courses were commissioned by the Education Bureau and the Hong Kong Academy of Gifted Education.

Keywords

Adaptation of masterpieces, interactive class activities, film masterpieces, creative writing, values and meanings in life, moral decisions, humanities

Introduction

Since joining the Humanities Programme of HKBU, I have been assigned to teach interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and sometimes bilingual courses such as the following: *HUM 1110 Introduction to the Humanities*, *HUM 1150 Humanism and the Individual*, *HUM 1140 Human Self Discovery*, *HUM 2170 Research Methods in the Humanities*, *HUM 2160 Gender Studies*, *HUM 2180 Great Works in the Humanities*, and *ENG 3770 Literature and Film*. A common feature among these courses is a strong reference to the traditions of humanistic texts across different cultures and times. That means course materials used frequently include a substantial amount of lengthy narrative texts, as well as philosophical essays and theoretical discussion papers in both English and Chinese. This is usually not a major problem for highly motivated students, but with a relatively large class (ranging from 40-80 students) and also mixed student background (most Humanities courses are open to students from all other disciplines), a more interactive and feasible way communicating these lengthy narrative and theoretical texts is needed.

In the spirit of a 14th century pioneering humanistic scholar, Petrarch, to study humanities is to study the principles which make us human, and a humanistic

education is the education for a moral self. The courses offered by the Humanities Programme aim not only at transferring the knowledge of traditional and contemporary humanities masterpieces, but also inculcating in our students an ability to make moral decisions. In this light, it is of utmost importance that teaching and learning should engage students' intellectual, emotional and spiritual abilities. In an attempt to achieve an active communication with the students, I proposed to explore the film medium both as a tool and a context to maximize the teaching and learning experience. An initial choice of films to be used included film adaptations of major literary works as they might attract students to approach the written originals of the masterpieces. As the project went on, different types of narrative films were found to be useful, and also other ways of using these narrative films had been discovered.

The application for this grant therefore aimed at a more systematic and thorough exploration of the visual medium of films in order to identify suitable items for teaching various courses in the classroom. It was hoped that at the end of the project, a set of films would be identified for classroom use, and relevant teaching materials would be developed in relation to various courses within the humanities.

Aims and Objectives

The project sought funding for the following intentions:

1. the acquisition of suitable resources, especially films, for various courses that I am teaching for the Humanities Programme;
2. development of course materials based on the acquired films for the various courses I am teaching; and
3. exploration of new ways of using films in the Humanities classroom, including possible design of new courses.

Methodology

The first stage of the project was the acquisition of films to serve as additional materials for in-class interaction and discussion when teaching narrative texts of different historical periods. Criteria for selection depended on the actual course materials chosen, the availability of film adaptations of the chosen texts, language of the films, quality and focus of these film adaptations, as well as their potential to enhance relevant teaching and learning experience.

After the initial acquisition of films, the next stage was devising course materials using these films to enhance the particular learning outcomes at course, lesson and individual student group levels. At this early stage, as the film choices were mainly adaptations of masterpieces, a lot of attention had been put on comparing and contrasting the narratives in the films and

the original written pieces. This comparative approach could draw students' attention to the overall plot development as well as the specific details in various texts. Selected scenes from these films were chosen for illustration in class to highlight the similarities and/or differences from the original for in-class activities including discussion, short writing tasks, debates and role-playing.

The attempt to use mainly film adaptations of literary masterpieces for illustration purpose and focusing on major theme, characterisation, narrative approach, critical interpretation was a success as it added value to the teaching and learning experience in terms of increasing students' participation and interest in the process. Showing scenes from films successfully engaged students' attention and increased their desire to approach the original texts in order to have a better understanding of the materials and specific points of discussion. Films such as *The Crucible* (1996), *Kiss of the Spider Woman* (1984), *The Color Purple* (1984), *Orlando* (1992), and the *Sherlock Holmes* series were useful adaptations to assist in enlisting student discussions concerning various issues of the literary texts. This was particularly obvious when dealing with more traditional narrative texts such as those featuring in *HUM 2180 Great Works in the Humanities* and *HUM 1150 Humanism and the Individual*.

With an experience of using film adaptations of literary masterpieces, the

project moved on to another stage, which involved choosing more contemporary narrative texts not necessarily related to any traditional literary masterpieces. In this second stage of the project, a variety of films of different narrative types were chosen not to illustrate written pieces, but to be used as teaching materials. Films such as *Some Like It Hot* (1961), *Tootsie* (1982), *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), *Citizen Kane* (1941), *The Alien* series, and *The Terminator* series, to name but a few, were very interesting narrative texts and could be used for illustrations of multiple areas of interest. Criteria for choice included discussion of important values and meanings in life, human nature, culture and differences, gender, language and communication, the human body and our mind, and other issues relevant to what Humanities as a programme is teaching.

This stage was an exciting experience because of the active student participation in class. Students were receptive to seeing these film narratives as talking about issues of their lives, how human beings are relating to their changing world in changing ways, and also how these films, though being part of the popular culture, can be interpreted as texts seriously discussing phenomena in our world. Again, short sections of these films were screened in class to be followed by individual and small group in-class activities such as role-playing, presentations, games, debates and short writing tasks.

A project assistant had been hired for a few months to assist in the acquisitions of

films and books. The assistant also helped to do some online research of certain films and their production background, and was responsible for word processing of some of the teaching materials I designed.

Results/Findings

The project has produced results in different aspects:

1. A collection of different film types which are useful for the teaching of various Humanities courses and which can also be used as a foundation for future new course designs. (The collection includes film adaptations of literary masterpieces as well as great films discussing important and relevant issues taught under different courses in the Humanities programme.)
2. Teaching materials based on these films, which had been used in the teaching of *HUM 1110 Humanities Study and Research Methods*, *HUM 2160 Gender Studies*, *HUM 2180 Great Works in the Humanities*, and *HUM 2150 Language and the Humanities*.
3. A newly designed course, *HUM 3130 Special Topic in the Humanities: Human Beings and the Monsters they Create*, was constructed using many films purchased with the funds of this grant.
4. Some of the films purchased inspired new teaching designs which were the basis of course projects sent to the Education Bureau (EDB) and

subsequently Hong Kong Academy of Gifted Education (HKAGE). As a result, I designed, coordinated and taught several EDB-commissioned courses for gifted students in Hong Kong. These courses included *Film Art and Culture*, *Mentorship Scheme: Drama as Human Experience*, *Credit-Bearing Course for Exceptionally Gifted Students: English Creative Writing*, *Mentorship Scheme in English Creative Writing and Drama*, and *Credit-Bearing Course in English Creative Writing: Frankenstein's Monster*.

5. I wrote *Film English* and it was later published by a local publisher Sing Tao. This book is a discussion of eight masterpieces in films in the last 80 years for teachers and students who are interested in reading films not only as stories, but also as carriers of interesting information and sites of meaningful intellectual discussions.
6. Trained as a literary comparatist, I am now much more familiar with using films alongside written texts, as well as handling films as a specific kind of text. Now I can respond to films with ease in turning them into useful teaching and learning materials.

Although the grant was not requested to improve the teaching quality of a particular course, in the teaching evaluation done at the end of the semester, students often referred to the excellent choice of texts in the various courses I taught, and they were particularly impressed by the very

interesting audio-visual materials included in the otherwise reading-oriented courses. Many students of *HUM 2180* remarked on the interactive and interesting in-class activities I designed in relation to the film texts. I believe this showed that the students enjoyed the teaching and learning experience resulted from a successful incorporation of these films.

Discussion

Stam stated in his book *Literature through Film* that the study of film adaptations of masterpieces is “beyond fidelity”. Films can be studied for the “multicultural nature of artistic intertextuality, the problematic nature of illusionism, the wealth of ‘magical’ and reflexive alternatives to conventional realism, and the crucial importance both of medium specificity – film as film – and of the migratory, crossover elements shared between film and other media” (Stam, 2005, P.3). In the course of the project, I had plenty of experience to feel the truth of what Stam wrote about film adaptations and also that the film medium indeed is a very good teaching material. Human beings are naturally attracted to narratives, and narratives in images become important carriers of messages, reflections of our world, and means of fulfilling human imaginations and desires. It has therefore a rich potential to be used in the classroom in many different ways. In this project, I started with adaptations of great literary works and extended to films of other genres and types, using them as objects of study and stepping stones for other cultural and historical issues within the study of the

Humanities. I hope in the future to engage in other research projects using films for more specific purposes, such as designing a new course to teach creativity using films as the main means of support.

Enhancement on Teaching and Learning

Responses from students during in-class learning activities, as well as their performance in tutorial discussions involving films showed that this is a medium that speaks to them. Films also frequently featured in students' presentations. I believe therefore that the project has been very much relevant to the needs of the Humanities programme and any teaching aiming at creating a reflective human being.

In HUM 2180 Great Works in the Humanities, film adaptations served the purpose of guiding students in their reading of the original written texts, and helped to focus the teaching and learning on specific issues and contexts more easily as scenes were chosen to be screened in class. Compare and contrast between the written and the film texts often became good starting points of discussions about the major issues and themes in the texts.

In HUM 3130 Special Topics in the Humanities (Human Beings and the Monsters they Create), a film-based course discussing humanity and its fears and dreams, many students came to audit the course because the texts chosen and the issues for discussion were felt to be relevant to their very existence. Seeing the power of

the visual image and the narrative mode, I have confidence in adopting more filmic materials for future classroom teaching to create an interactive and engaging teaching and learning experience.

The use of films also has an additional dimension – while the students respond to the films as students studying assigned texts, at the same time they are also individual human beings responding to films which may or may not be in line with their values and beliefs. Very often after the class, students approached me to talk about parts and aspects of the films which they liked or disliked, not necessarily related to the lecture. I think this is a very good proof that the films have become a good site for a genuine exchange of ideas and feelings among human beings, and this is also one of the ultimate goals of a humanistic education.

Limitations/Difficulties

Films, like other texts we deal with in the Humanities, have their own contexts and histories. In using a film for teaching purpose, the instructor has to judge how much of the contexts and histories should be introduced into the classroom discussion. To the humanities students (or students of any discipline apart from those of Media Studies) who are not equipped with the knowledge of film language, sometimes it can be difficult preparing them for discussions which may involve many technical aspects of the film medium.

When using a film for illustration of certain cultural phenomena, very often the discussion would be taken over by the actual plot development of the film, and the many interesting artistic manifestations of the form. When designing the teaching materials, time was often spent on taking just the relevant bits and pieces from the film for the specific purposes of the lessons. Films dealing with historical and cultural background which students were not familiar with also needed extra guidance (which might mean sometimes shifting the focus of a lesson to something else). Older films (even in the case of masterpieces of cinematic production) which show different ideologies, ways of behaviour, even ways of acting might also alienate students.

Conclusion

The project enabled me to purchase some films in DVD form to be used for various courses that I have taught and I am still teaching for the Humanities programme. It also enabled me to extend the use of films from being a parallel example for illustrating certain literary masterpieces to substantial teaching materials which contain relevant cultural, historical and philosophical issues discussed in various courses (*HUM 2160 Gender Studies*, *HUM 2150 Language and the Humanities*, *HUM 3130 Special Topic in the Humanities: Human Beings and the Monsters they Create*) within the Humanities programme. On top of this, the experience of using these films enabled me to apply films in teaching in other contexts to provide multi-disciplinary learning experience for students other

than the university undergraduates. These experiences of using films for different age groups and student backgrounds give me confidence in exploring further use of films in more systematic ways in the Humanities classroom – I will be exploring how to use films to teach creativity/creative writing in the near future.

References

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