

Volume 29 Issue 1

cjsae

the canadian journal for the study of adult education

la revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes

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For Adult Education

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*The Canadian Journal for the Study of Adult Education/
La revue canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes*
Editor-in-Chief: Donovan Plumb
www.cjsae-rceea.ca

29,1 January/janvier 2017, 37-48
ISSN 1925-993X (online)

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L'Association canadienne pour l'étude de l'éducation des adultes
www.casae-aceea.ca

USE OF CINEMATIC FILMS AS A TEACHING/LEARNING TOOL FOR ADULT EDUCATION

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Abstract

This study explores the utility of cinematic films as an adult learning/teaching tool for cultivating an appreciation of moral and ethical values among graduate-level university students. In 2013 and 2014, film courses were offered to first-year medical students at Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan, as part of the Humanities and Social Sciences module. At the end of the module, a questionnaire-based survey was administered to the students to evaluate the effectiveness of films as a learning tool. The majority of participants considered films to be more effective as a learning tool than the Internet or newspapers. They viewed films as an effective learning tool primarily because they provide a human connection and give insight into human psychology. After participating in the course, the participants appreciated films as a resource for learning. We conclude that cinematic films can be used as an effective supplementary adult learning/teaching tool.

Résumé

Cette étude se penche sur l'utilité des œuvres cinématographiques comme outils d'apprentissage/d'enseignement d'adultes visant à favoriser la reconnaissance des valeurs morales et éthiques parmi les étudiants universitaires des cycles supérieurs. En 2013 et 2014, à l'Université Aga Khan, à Karachi (Pakistan), des cours de cinéma ont été offerts aux étudiants en première année de médecine dans le cadre du module des humanités et des sciences sociales. À la fin du module, les étudiants ont rempli un questionnaire pour évaluer l'efficacité des films comme outils

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d'apprentissage. La majorité des participants ont affirmé que les films constituent un outil d'apprentissage plus efficace qu'Internet ou les journaux. Ils percevaient les films comme outil d'apprentissage efficace principalement parce qu'ils fournissent un lien humain et donnent un aperçu de la psychologie humaine. Après avoir participé au cours, les participants ont reconnu les films comme ressource d'apprentissage. Notre conclusion est que les œuvres cinématographiques peuvent être utilisées comme outil d'apprentissage/d'enseignement supplémentaire pour les adultes.

Background

Several studies have reported the efficacy of films as a teaching and learning tool for adult education. The idea of using film as a teaching/learning tool stems from the scientific evidence that emotional memory lasts longer and can be recalled more readily (Knight & Mather, 2009). The formation of emotional memory has been attributed to an important region of the brain called the amygdala (Cuff & Vanselow, 2004; Shigemune et al., 2010). This evidence is the basis of the hypothesis that memories formed through an emotional experience, as happens while watching a movie or hearing a moving piece of music, should be stronger than those formed by reading a book. This notion advocates the idea of using films as a teaching method for adult education.

In schools, knowledge is more easily assimilated when it is served in an integrated, holistic manner. Applying innovative learning strategies, such as the use of films, makes the process of learning integrative, stimulating, and interesting (Gallagher, Wilson, & Jaine, 2014). This teaching strategy is especially effective for students of humanities and social sciences. In medical schools, as well, watching cinematic, character-oriented films can allow students to learn not simply about diseases but also about patients' social, emotional, ethical, and cultural associations. Similarly, watching a movie about a character that goes through a social/ethical dilemma, for instance, will allow a more effective integration of knowledge by taking a psychology or sociology student through a vicarious experience of the thoughts, fears, and feelings associated with such scenarios (María & Ibáñez, 2007; Self, Baldwin, & Olivarez, 1993). Film is already being employed as part of mainstream teaching at several institutions (Alexander, Hall, & Pettice, 1994; Ber & Alroy, 2001; Blasco, Moreto, Roncoletta, Levites, & Janaudis, 2006; Pavlov & Dahlquist, 2010). In certain medical schools and teaching hospitals, for instance, film has been used as a medium to explore common stereotypes and myths about patients with addiction disorders (Cape 2009; Castaldelli-Maia, Oliveira, Andrade, Lotufo-Neto, & Bhugra, 2012). Additionally, films have been successfully used as a tool for portraying various psychiatry-related issues to psychiatry medical residents (Kalra, 2011) and to teach professionalism (Klemenc-Ketis & Kersnik, 2011), communication skills (Wong, Saber, Ma, & Roberts, 2009), and medical ethics (Wenger, Liu, & Lieberman, 1998) to senior-level medical students. This paper presents outcomes of a study of the impact of using cinematic films to raise awareness of social and ethical issues among medical students. For this study, particular films were chosen that highlighted social and moral dilemmas in diverse scenarios.

Rationale and Research Question

The World Health Organization defines health as a state not only of physical, but also of mental and social well-being (Huber et al., 2011). A substantial mass of published research and clinical experience have reliably and repeatedly showcased that the determinants of health cannot be conceptualized alone; they can be understood with utmost accuracy as biosocial phenomena, in which disease and health develop through the interaction between biology and the social environment (Westerhaus et al., 2015). Today, cinematic films are being used as a tool for teaching various disciplines in universities and in schools, ranging from humanities and social sciences to economics and medicine. In this regard, Law, Kwong, Friesen, Veinot, and Ng (2015a, 2015b) published a literature review on pedagogical application of media/television in medical education, arguing that television/media can be used in medical education to attain knowledge and skills, enhance learning, provoke emotions, and, more importantly, to motivate debate, discussion, and reflection. Similarly, another study that explored the utility of films as a teaching aid in the emergency room reported video clips to be helpful in teaching professionalism and other aspects of being a physician (Shevell, Thomas, & Fuks, 2015). Yet another study highlighted the importance of films as a teaching aid in biomedicine, emphasizing that films can help students learn about some difficult subjects that might otherwise be hard to understand with traditional teaching approaches, because films can showcase disease, along with suffering, emotions, ethical dilemmas, or social conflicts (Bañosa & Bosch, 2015).

The objective of our study was to explore the utility of cinematic films as a teaching/learning tool for cultivating an appreciation of moral and ethical values among graduate-level university students. The design of the study took into account recommendations by Bañosa and Bosch (see the Methodology section).

The research questions were as follows:

- Can participants appreciate films as an aid to medical education in addition to existing traditional tools, such as books and the Internet?
- Can participants appreciate films as a resource for inculcating concepts of morality and ethics?

Methodology

Course Organization

At Aga Khan University, Karachi, Pakistan, medical students are required to take arts and humanities courses in their first year as part of the Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS) module. The HASS module offers a diverse collection of courses from which students make choices based on their interests and aptitudes. In each of 2013 and 2014, a six-week elective film course was offered from the HASS platform of 18 arts and humanities courses. Each film course was facilitated by four faculty members, one of whom was an invited film expert. The rest of the course faculty had a background in either biological sciences or education and had a strong interest in films as a teaching/learning tool. The 2013 and 2014 courses comprised 28 and 26 students, respectively. The students comprised both genders almost equally and represented diverse economic and ethnic backgrounds. This was a pass/

fail course, and students were considered to have passed if they attended all the sessions and completed the course assignments.

Class Structure

Each year, the students were shown five to six films from American and British cinema. These films included *Philadelphia* (Demme, 1993), *Wit* (Nichols, 2001), *Awakenings* (Marshall, 1990), *Wag the Dog* (Levinson, 1997), *Dead Poets Society* (Weir, 1989), *Groundhog Day* (Ramis, 1993), and *About Time* (Curtis, 2013). The course faculty first shortlisted a number of films relevant to the course objectives, viewed the films, and shared independent reviews with each other. The course faculty summarized and discussed key points from each review, then finalized the film selections based on their effectiveness to deliver messages about ethics and morality.

Each week of the course comprised three cyclical sessions. In the first session a cinematic film was screened for the students, followed by a 20-minute interactive brainstorming session to get the students thinking about the underlying messages in the film. On the following day, in the second session, the invited film expert dissected different aspects of the film, including the script, the characters, and the directorial approach. After this, the students were given four days to prepare for an interactive session in which they were supposed to highlight the underlying ethical and moral messages in the film using a combination of methods. For this session, the students were encouraged to put together activities that provoked debate and discussion and helped bring out contrasting points of view on the issues addressed in the film.

Administration of Survey

At the end of the 2013 and 2014 courses, participants were required to complete a questionnaire-based survey before their pass/fail grades were announced; the survey evaluated the effectiveness of films as a learning tool for exploring moral, social, and ethical issues.

The survey questions were developed keeping in mind the research questions for this study. Questions were devised to collect information on (1) participants' pre-existing preferences for films, (2) the types of films participants considered effective for learning, (3) participants' views on how films compared to other learning resources, (4) participants' views regarding the efficacy of films as a learning tool, (5) participants' views regarding the efficacy of films as a tool for inculcating moral and ethical values, and (6) how participants' perceptions about the efficacy of films as a learning tool may have changed after attending the film course.

The ethical approval for this study was obtained from the Ethical Review Committee, Aga Khan University, Pakistan.

Data Analysis

After the data collection, each survey form was given a number and the data were entered in Microsoft Excel software, where responses were added against matching form numbers. The first set of questions primarily asked about participant preferences for film genre and their criteria for film selection. The second set of questions concerned participants' views on the use of film as a teaching/learning tool, especially after attending the film course.

The participant responses were graded as no opinion, strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree. Excel software was used to plot bar charts from the collected numerical data.

Results

As discussed earlier, participant responses were divided into the following five sections: (1) participant preference for film genres, (2) types of films considered best for learning, (3) comparison of films with other learning tools, (4) efficacy of films as a learning tool, and (5) post-participation experience.

Participant Preference for Film Genres

This part of the survey explored participant preference for film genres and their criteria for selecting movies. The majority (96%) of participants preferred to watch comedy films, followed by mystery (93%), thriller (89%), and thought-provoking (89%) films (Table 1). The main criterion used by participants to select a movie was suggestions from

Table 1: Preference for Film Genre

Film Genre	Number (%) of Participants Expressing Preference for Genre
Comedy	52 (96)
Mystery	50 (93)
Thriller	48 (89)
Thought-provoking	48 (89)
Drama	44 (81)
Adventure	44 (81)
Controversial	38 (70)
Musical	32 (59)
Political	31 (57)
Documentary	31 (57)

Table 2: Criteria for Selecting Films

Criterion for Selecting Films	Number (%) of Participants Using Criterion
Suggestions from friends	52 (96)
Reviews	46 (85)
Trailers	43 (80)
Cast	42 (78)
Director/writer	31 (57)

friends (96%); however, a considerable number of participants also relied on reviews (85%) and trailers (80%) to select a movie (Table 2).

Types of Films Considered Best for Learning

The majority of participants (63%) strongly agreed that thought-provoking and political movies could be best used for learning (Figure 1). The other genre of film that participants agreed could be used for learning was mystery (46%).

Comparison of Films with Other Learning Tools

A substantial number of participants strongly agreed that films were less effective learning tools than books (39%), classroom teaching (22%), and group discussions (22%; Figure 2). Further, 52% participants agreed that films were a less effective learning tool than conversation with friends or experts, followed by group discussions (41%). Conversely, participants found films to be a more effective learning tool than the Internet (41%) or newspapers (31%).

Efficacy of Films as a Learning Tool

Participants strongly agreed that films could be an effective learning tool in medical education because they provide human connection with the issues being explored in the film (37%) and give insight into human psychology (37%; Figure 3). Another important reason why participants agreed that films could be an effective learning tool in medical education are because films show a disease in its social context (24%).

Post-Participation Experience

An important objective of the film course was to help participants appreciate films as a resource for learning about a wide range of topics. The post-course survey was carried out to evaluate if this objective was achieved. The overall feedback about the course was very positive, and the course appeared to have helped its participants appreciate films as a resource for learning (Figure 4). The majority of the participants agreed that the films helped them gain more insight into human psychology and that after attending the course they began to think more about the underlying moral/ethical themes in films. Judging from the participants' feedback, the course also appeared to have helped students realize the importance of films as a learning tool. Additionally, a majority of the students (25% strongly agreed and 50% agreed) reported that they had become more analytical about films after attending the course. Furthermore, a majority of the participants agreed that after attending the course they had learned a lot about the difference between right and wrong and about life in general.

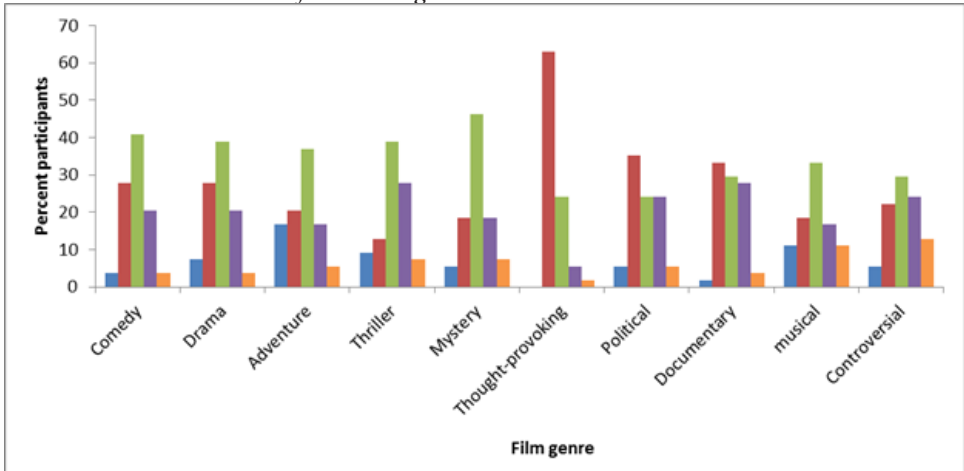
Discussion

In this survey-based study, we evaluated the use of cinematic, mostly Hollywood, films as a teaching/learning tool for adult education. Specifically, we evaluated the educational value of film in cultivating an appreciation of moral and ethical values among graduate-level university students.

The main criterion used by the majority of students to select a film to view was suggestions from friends (Table 2). When asked which genre of film could be best used for learning,

Figure 1

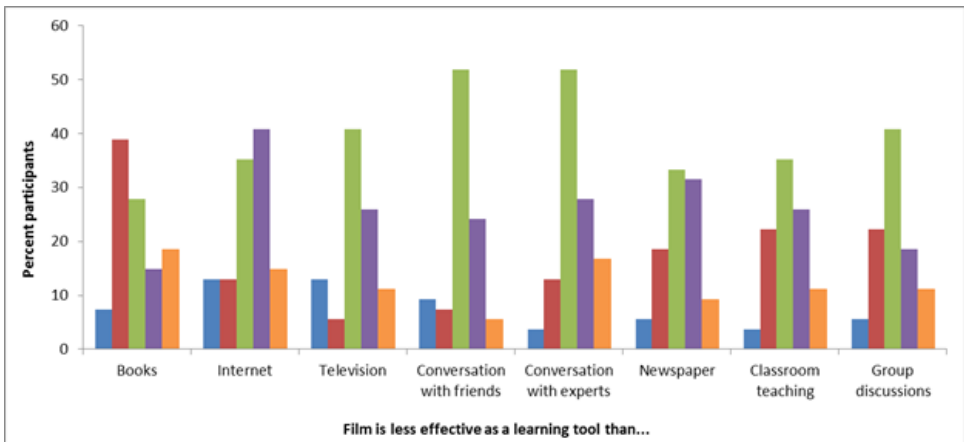
Film Genre Considered Best for Learning



Legend: Participant responses of no opinion, strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree are represented by blue, red, green, purple, and orange bars, respectively.

Figure 2

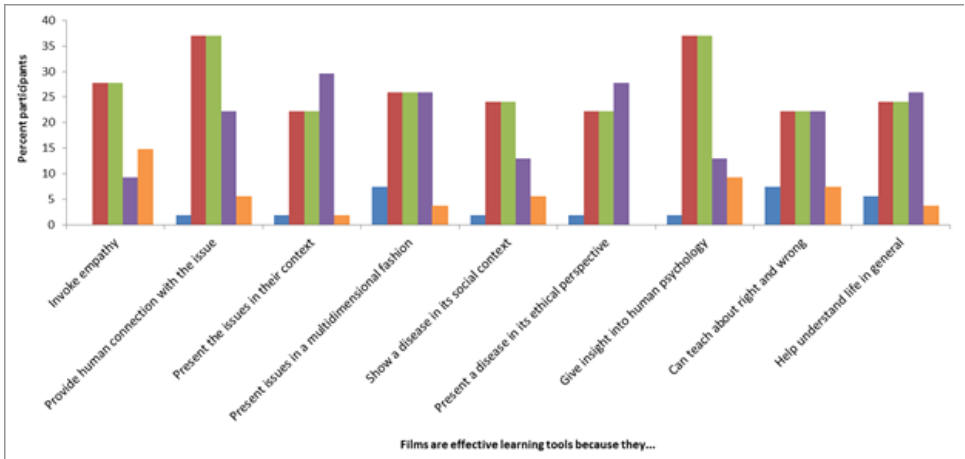
Comparison of Films with Other Resources as a Learning Tool



Legend: Participant responses of no opinion, strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree are represented by blue, red, green, purple, and orange bars, respectively.

Figure 3

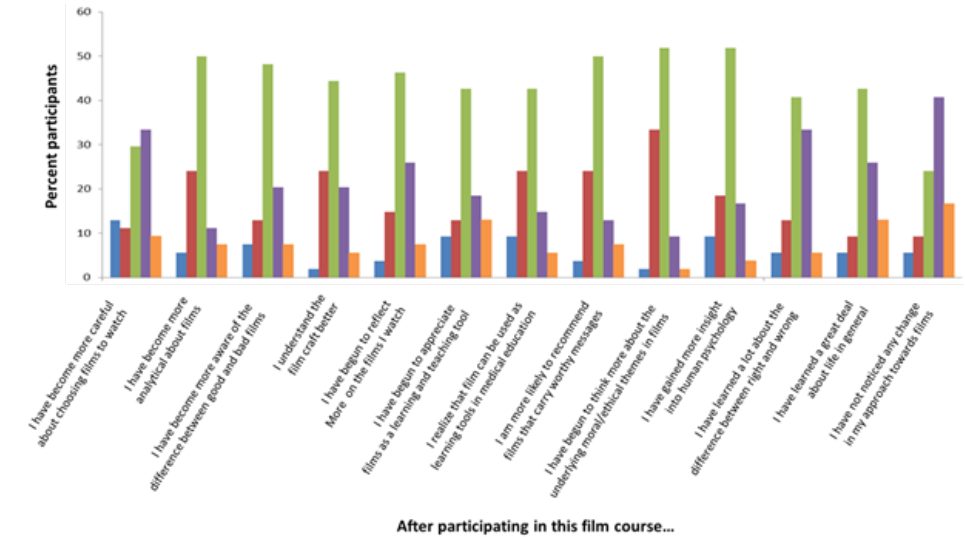
Efficacy of Films as a Learning Tool



Legend: Participant responses of no opinion, strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree are represented by blue, red, green, purple, and orange bars, respectively.

Figure 4

Appreciation of Films as a Learning Tool



Legend: Participant responses of no opinion, strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree are represented by blue, red, green, purple, and orange bars, respectively.

The majority of the students participating in this course reported that they prefer to watch comedy films, followed by mystery, thriller, and thought-provoking movies (Table 1). The majority of students reported thought-provoking movies (Figure 1). Since both course groups of survey participants comprised graduate-level medical students, it was important to determine their existing criteria for the selection of films and the factors that informed that criteria. This information provided a baseline at which the students entered our course. Using these data, it was then possible to draw inferences regarding how the participation in this course might have influenced their decision making when selecting films to watch.

Our study participants found films to be a more effective learning tool than the Internet and newspapers, but less effective than books, classroom teaching, and group discussions (Figure 2). On a related note, the majority of participants also agreed that films could be an effective learning tool in medical education because they provide human connection with the issue, give insight into human psychology, show a disease in its social context, present a disease in its ethical perspective, present issues in their context, and present issues in a multidimensional fashion (Figure 3). Films such as *Wit* and *Philadelphia* are examples of films that provide medical students with perspectives of what a patient might go through on a psychological level as he/she combats issues of diminishing self-esteem and loss of faith in the face of approaching death. The 1990 film *Awakenings*, borrowing facts from real life, brings to light the ethical and moral implications of a clinical trial—a subject also broached in reasonable depth in *Wit*. For researchers as well as physicians, such movies allow an examination of research ethics from the human subjects' point of view, thus highlighting the often overlooked moral connection between scientific research and humanity. Similarly, for students of politics and sociology, films such as *Wag the Dog*, released in 1997, provide a perspective on how our lives are governed by external references imposed on us by political influences, media, etc. In a similar vein, the 1989 film *Dead Poets Society* provides food for thought as well as fuel for debate on critical life-governing issues, intellectual independence, and the right to freedom of choice. This film takes us through lives of young adult students and acknowledges the importance of a teacher's role in their struggle to balance parental and social pressures with their own volition. This is a film with which students of sociology and psychology, and of education, can relate. Indeed, perhaps keeping in view examples of such films, a great majority of our course participants agreed or strongly agreed that films could invoke empathy and provide human connection with the issues (Figure 3).

Our course participants also agreed or strongly agreed that films can teach us about right and wrong and help us understand life in general (Figure 3). Apart from providing discipline-specific perspective, there are films that teach essential lessons in life that can be useful in the education of any student irrespective of his/her discipline. The 1993 film *Groundhog Day* teaches us that there are no shortcuts to finding happiness in life; to find rewarding fulfillment, hard work, persistence, and passion are essential. The 2013 film *About Time* deals with certain fundamental lessons about life; the film helps us realize that the worth of life is not determined by longevity or eternity; rather, the quality of life is enriched by appreciating little details and wonders embedded in the mundanity of everyday routine. These are essential life lessons in films that should be integral to the education of adults in any school or discipline. Indeed, a majority of our course participants reported that after attending the film course they learned a great deal about the difference between right and wrong and about life in general (Figure 4).

The Division of Medical Health at St. George's, University of London, has developed special study modules regarding psychiatry and film (Akram, O'Brien, & Latham, 2009). They have used film as a tool to elucidate the psychiatrist-patient relationship and to raise debate on ethics, stigma, and the role of the psychiatrist in society. Short movies are also being used in pharmacology lectures at Monash University in Australia (Ventura & Onsmann, 2009). To evaluate the effectiveness of this technique in improving student engagement, motivation, and learning, a student survey was carried out at the end of the lecture series. The survey reported positive outcomes—students saw the practical applications of the theory they had been taught (Ventura & Onsmann, 2009). Similar observation came out from our post-course survey, where participants reported that after attending our film course they had become more attentive to the underlying moral/ethical themes in films. The participants also appreciated that the films could help them gain insight into human psychology (Figures 3 and 4).

In conclusion, as a supplement to traditional methods of teaching, films can play a significant role in improving the depth and breadth of education for a student. While our study gave some insight into the utility of films as a teaching/learning tool, our participants were confined only to one institution and a particular discipline. A more rigorous study, including a larger sample size, multiple institutions, and varied disciplines, would provide a more thorough view of the effectiveness of films as a resource that may supplement curriculum delivery in academia. Studies to evaluate the effectiveness of films as a teaching/learning tool may also use a larger, more diverse collection of films to determine how this resource can deepen the understanding of human nature and of the social, moral, and philosophical issues associated with everyday life.

Acknowledgement

This study was funded by the Higher Education Commission, Pakistan, grant 20–2267.

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