Reading the World through Film

Literacy Strategies in the History Classroom

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Abstract

Research shows that many students see history as a series of unrelated dates, names and facts to be memorized and accepted. During her first year of teaching middle school, Erin Deis observed that students from marginalized groups, especially those from recent immigrant families, found the study of American history especially alienating, as they did not see themselves as “American”. Using socio-cultural theory, Deis focuses on the use of critical media literacy lessons and historically themed films as a means through which to engage students and encourage critical thinking. In this inquiry, Deis explains the findings from a qualitative study that investigated the use of media literacy and peer discussion groups in an eighth grade history classroom to explore the issues of bias inherent in historically themed films and history in general. Students were engaged in the process, while they practiced important critical thinking skills. These findings suggest that English learners and struggling readers can be supported academically in the history classroom by incorporating the critical viewing of historically themed films and meaningful small-group discussions. Teachers can also encourage critical thinking in history and other content areas, and media representations in everyday life, through the incorporation of critical media literacy lessons and strategies.

Reading the World through Film: Literacy Strategies in the History Classroom

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As an eighth grade teacher of both language arts and social studies, I found myself struggling with the teaching of history. Through writing prompts and assignments in English, I connected with my students as individuals, which allowed them to highlight their unique identities. I chose culturally relevant texts, and ultimately, I felt my English curriculum valued my students' cultural wealth, backgrounds, home languages and cultures. However, it had been difficult to do the same in my American History classes; I struggled to help my predominantly Latina/o students make personal connections with the overwhelming California History-Social Science Content Standards.

My students made it very clear from the beginning of the year that they did not like history. I tried numerous ways to make the class more interesting, to help students make connections, but I found that their negative experiences in prior history classes carried over to this year. Ultimately, I had at least wanted my students to think like historians, so I had attempted to incorporate primary sources in my lessons. This had worked with several examples of artwork and political cartoons of the eras we were studying; however, for a large majority of students for whom English is a second language, reading primary documents was extremely challenging. The front-loading of dated vocabulary that was necessary for comprehending those documents was extremely

difficult and time-consuming, so often, I felt it was not worth the effort. I wanted my students to think historically but struggled with finding other strategies to meet this goal.

This was my first year of teaching and my second year in a teacher credential/ masters program, so I was not only learning to teach but was also required to find a master's inquiry topic and develop and implement a research project. I taught two groups of 29 students each at Dailey Middle School in downtown Los Angeles. I saw the students every day for English and every other day for history. Approximately 92% of my students were Latina/o and the remaining 8% were African-American. Dailey Middle School has a student body of just over 1900 and is located in a working-class neighborhood in the Pico-Union district of Los Angeles. The community is made up predominantly of immigrant families, most notably represented by those from Mexico, El Salvador and Guatemala. Spanish was the first language of all of my Latina/o students and their home language.

Early in the school year, I heard some of my Latina/o students talk disparagingly about the "drunk black bums" who lived in their neighborhoods, along with some snide remarks about slave ships. Because of this, I decided that I needed to change the tone in our classroom. I incorporated a middle passage experiential activity I had created, along with the viewing of scenes from Alex Haley's *Roots* mini-series. Those two activities were the most powerful learning experiences of the school year. I learned through reflections that my students were not only moved emotionally, but these experiences also translated to some great critical thinking about slavery and early America. Months later, not a day went by that I did not have at least one student ask if we were going to watch

Roots that day. Students even asked to borrow the DVD to take home. By making new connections, my students' attitudes towards history changed.

Beyond *Roots*, my students were also more engaged when watching *Brain Pop* video cartoons and quizzes on-line; they seemed to remember the content better. Comparing myself to my students, I realized that we not only came from entirely different linguistic, ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds, but there was also a huge generational distinction. These teenagers had been raised in a world saturated by moving images: from the Internet and video games, to film and television. Media and technology made up a large part of their lives, and while it was important for them to be able to read, I also knew that in the 21st century, they would need to be media literate as well.

It was for these reasons that I chose to investigate the following question:

> ***How will historically themed films and critical media literacy strategies increase student engagement and encourage critical thinking in my American History classroom?***

I believed that through film, my students would have a chance to better visualize what different eras may have been like, and as historians, they would also have the opportunity to uncover the inaccuracy and biases of films through looking critically at portrayals of people of color, women and those from different regions of the country. I did not want them to just learn about the past; I wanted them to learn to *uncover* the past. My goal was that they would learn to look for the biases that exist in film storytelling, another method through which history is interpreted (much like textbooks, websites and encyclopedias). I looked forward to using film in my class as I appreciate the artistry of filmmaking and believed that through film my students could better envision the time periods we were studying. However, I was even more excited that my students would be thinking and acting like critical historians, whereby they would discover hidden messages

in the films we watched. Ultimately, I wanted them to view films critically and think analytically about history and all forms of media in the world around them. I wanted them to understand that history involved more than simply reading a chapter, answering the questions at the end, then memorizing names and dates for tests; my hope was that they could see themselves as historians and learn to think critically about history and its representations.

My philosophy of education centers around the empowerment of my students, which I attempted to do on a daily basis through the validation of their home lives and expressions of support and caring. Empowered students can be agents of change in their lives, at their schools, in their neighborhoods and beyond. I wanted my students to be reflective learners who would be able to transfer their learning and criticism of history to other subjects. I also wanted them to use their knowledge as a means to empower themselves in the real world. It was my goal that through this inquiry, my students would learn to look critically and analytically at events and images in the world around them so that they would be able to both "read the word and the world" (Freire, 1970).

Initially, I incorporated media literacy strategies as a means through which my students would analyze historically themed films. I introduced these strategies by using a series of 25 lessons created by the Center for Media Literacy (www.medialit.org) which aligned with my teaching philosophy and my inquiry study. The lessons would create an awareness and understanding of the center's "Five Key Questions of Media Literacy":

1. Who created this message?
2. What creative techniques are used to attract my attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently than me?
4. What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why is this message being sent?

These were the questions I would ask my students to answer while analyzing the historically themed films we would watch as a class. Without asking and understanding these five questions, the students' analysis of the films would be only surface level. These lessons would speak directly to my inquiry question and give my students the necessary vocabulary and training to analyze and critique the historical films they would be watching in class, as well as the media images they see every day. Therefore, I decided to incorporate the Center for Media Literacy lessons in my English classroom over a five-week period.

In the sixth week of the inquiry, the school district history pacing plan advised that the Civil War unit should begin, and I decided to show the final two episodes of *Roots,* both of which dealt with the Civil War and Reconstruction eras. Because we had watched and discussed prior episodes, I felt the students had a buy-in with the film and would therefore be more engaged with the new discussion process I would be introducing.

I created literature circle-style role sheets (Daniels, 1994) for students to use within their group, with each taking on a different role for each viewing of the film. These included key questions from the Center for Media Literacy, questions I found in Woelders (2007), as well as questions I had developed. The role sheets were intended to encourage participation and discussion while also holding students accountable.

Following are the history roles that I adapted from Daniels' literature circle roles:

1) The **Internet Movie Database (IMDb)/Summarizer** summarized the film as well as answered the key questions: "Who created this film?" and "Why was this film

made?" Specifically, the students looked for scenes that were meant to inform, entertain and/or persuade.

2) The **Historical Expert/Connector** looked for historical inaccuracies in which the film interpreted history/readings differently than we had in class. The Historical Expert also answered the key question, "How might different people understand this film differently than me?" In this role, the student made connections to other films/stories and/or their own lives, and identified how various groups (race, gender, region, etc.) might view the film differently. Lastly, this role involved thinking like a historian and questioning how this film would have appealed to audiences in the time it was made.

3) The **Missing Persons Investigator** critiqued representations of different groups (or their omission) and answered the key question, "What values, lifestyles, and points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this film?" These students were responsible for encouraging discussion in their groups about what the film told them about life in the United States at the time the film was made.

4) The **Technical and Discussion Director** answered the key question, "What creative techniques were used to attract my attention?" This student recorded key scenes/moments when the filmmakers attempted to sway opinion through emotion by techniques that influenced the tone/mood of the film including music, camera angles, lighting, etc. They led discussions within their groups and created critical questions that sparked conversations.

5) Because of the uneven number of students in my class, I created a fifth role after the first day so that students would not have to "double-up" their roles within a specific group. The **Character Illuminator** was a variation on roles used in literature

circles, where students assumed the persona of the specific characters, illustrating what was going on inside their heads, and then writing letters from those characters' perspectives.

Prior to watching the final two episodes of *Roots*, students watched a clip from *Ebert & Roeper At The Movies* where they watched two critics respectfully discuss their differences regarding the director's portrayal of African Americans and women in the movie *Transformers*.

The students then found classmates in other groups who shared their same roles and sat with them. They filled out their role sheets while watching the film and were encouraged to ask me to stop the film, rewind, play scenes over, etc. I scaffolded the process initially by stopping the film and pointing out various scenes, etc. that would help each student better understand the responsibilities of their roles. Students changed roles after each discussion so that all would have the opportunity to experience each of the various roles.

After each viewing of *Roots* (approximately 45 minutes), students were encouraged to finish filling out their role sheets, comparing and borrowing information from students with the same role. They then went back to their original groups to share the information on their role sheets and any other aspects of the movie they wanted to discuss (Bransford, et al, 2000). After conferring with their group, each student was responsible for filling out a reflection in which they discussed what they learned that day and what they did or did not enjoy about their role and the process.

After *Roots*, the second film I chose to screen was *Gone With The Wind*, and again, the students each took on a different role for this film. I selected this movie

because it is considered a classic by multiple critics, and for many Americans, it is the lens through which they think about the South and the Civil War. I also thought this film would be helpful for my students to see different representations of the same historical event. The film itself is subtly racist, and shown after several days of screenings and discussions of *Roots*, I felt the students would see the extreme differences between the two portrayals. The rest of the screenings and discussions followed the same format as before; however, along with the role sheet, I required that each student fill out their own Venn Diagram comparing and contrasting *Roots* and *Gone with the Wind.* While my students did not finish watching *Gone With The Wind*, they had seen enough of it to decipher the differences between it and *Roots.*

I next created a lesson to prepare my students for the silent film *The Birth of a Nation*. I felt it was important that they watch this movie, but only after seeing *Roots* and *Gone With The Wind.* The historical context of this film was too important to leave solely to the Historical Expert in each group, so I created a lesson in which we looked at the similarities between the Reconstruction era and nativist fears about immigration from the beginning of the 20th century through today. Students filled out timeline graphic organizers, and we had a whole class discussion about American wars and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan. The rest of the film screening and discussion followed the same format as before; however, rather than showing the entire film, I selected specific scenes important for them to see. I did not believe that seeing the film in its entirety was necessary. After this discussion, I gave the students an assessment to be completed as a group in which they conversed and wrote down their thoughts about specific representations in each film

and how the films depicted America at the time they were made, as well as generic questions about the reliability of using film to learn history.

In the final activity, a summative assessment, each group could determine how it would be assessed. The assessment options included the creation of talk shows, movie scenes, newspapers, broadcast newscasts, rap songs and critiques of films they had watched. They had several class periods in which to create and rehearse before they gave their group presentations.

Once the inquiry process ended and I had thoroughly evaluated anecdotal observational data and student work and questionnaires, I found that historical films, media literacy strategies, and film discussion groups engaged my students and created a rise in interest and confidence levels for some of my students. For some, especially my struggling readers, the process made the content more accessible and more meaningful. Film helped my students better connect with the past through visual representations. During the inquiry process, students thought like historians. They learned to see the partiality present in historical films and transferred that to their understanding of how history and textbooks are also biased. My students' other teachers said they were thinking critically in other content areas, and I saw evidence that they were examining and questioning the media in their everyday lives as well.

My students came to see themselves differently in the classroom, and I in turn saw them differently as well. My students perceived themselves as experts and gained confidence in themselves as learners. They recognized themselves as more than class clowns but rather valued members of film discussion groups and vital creators in media literacy projects. My students began to view themselves as "good" at things that might

(and could) one day become their jobs, specifically careers in entertainment, design and politics. My African American students, who made up a very small percentage of our school and classroom population, saw themselves and their ancestors portrayed bravely in *Roots* and gained a new found sense of pride in their ancestry. Overall, the strategies, lessons and content combined to allow my students opportunities to question the way they had previously viewed themselves: changing their self-perceptions and seeing themselves differently as learners and classroom contributors.

English learners and students in inner city schools are not often given the opportunity and space to think critically about the world around them, nor are they given the occasion to talk and discuss how they feel. Through this inquiry, my students had the chance to learn from each other and have in-depth conversations about important topics such as race, gender and identity. They began to question not only what they were learning in the classroom (and what they had been taught before) but also the media images they consumed on a daily basis. Some of our conversations more closely resembled university seminars than an eighth grade classroom. Such dialogue should be present in all schools. Students of all backgrounds have the right to a critical, questioning education. As a social justice educator, I believe critical media literacy should be an imperative for all students, as people of all backgrounds live in a media-rich world where such literacy is a necessity. Brazilian educator Paulo Freire wrote about the importance of an education that gives oppressed students the chance to visualize a world in which they have the agency to influence it. Critical media literacy not only allows for students to question the world, but it creates opportunities in which to change it. For teachers who hope to empower their students, media literacy provides the necessary tools.

Through the inquiry process I came to find the importance of critical media literacy for students, and I also saw the need for more choice and student input in the classroom, allowing for inquiry when students are engaged in a specific topic. I found that I need to continue to bring film into the classroom as well as other forms of technology. I saw the value of student dialogue in the classroom, and I continue to look for ways in which I can make it run more effectively. The inquiry also illustrated the significance of experiential activities and alternate means of assessment in the history classroom.

Through the process of looking critically at what they were currently learning and what they had been taught in the past, my students constructed meaning and came to understand that they could and should question not only their history book but the world around them as well. This idea of constantly questioning echoes Freire's belief that knowledge is a social progression of practical, critical and reflective experiences attained not only in the classroom but also in everyday life. Critical media literacy asks students to examine aspects of their daily lives, in the classroom setting, and analyze, criticize and recreate them. My students, through this process, became the "narrating Subjects" of their education rather than "listening objects" (Freire, 1970). My classroom evolved into a space in which my students and I not only looked critically at history and the world but also, through reflection, we re-created our knowledge and acted upon it. For as Freire (1970) asserts, "the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement" (p. 69).

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