LEARNING FROM THE STARS

Do Motion Pictures in the Classroom Make a Difference in Student Performance?

By DEAN J. CHAMPION

The utilization of motion picture films in the classroom for educational purposes is not new.¹ The non-theatrical market of educational films is extensive and well known to most educators.² Topics have covered everything imaginable, illustrating how to accomplish various kinds of tasks, hobbies, and projects, as well as coping with social and psychological problems and dilemmas.

Usually, these films have been incorporated into elementary and secondary school courses as well as those at the college/university level as supplements to highlight particular issues or to illustrate certain phenomena. Many are documentary in nature, with a narrator taking the student through a sequence of experiences or events. Many deal with historical topics such as the Battle of Britain, the Tudors, or the economy of 18th-century France. Others have dramatizations of well-known novels such as Jane Eyre or The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.

It occurred to me (although I am certain that I am not the pioneer of this particular notion) in the late 1970s that a course focused almost entirely around motion pictures would not only be entertaining to students but of significant educational value as well. At that time, I was becoming involved in film collecting, a hobby interest involving purchasing prints of various motion pictures from other such collectors. By 1977, I had amassed over 100 feature films in my private collection.

I approached the department head with the idea of using my own films in an honest-to-goodness film course. (Using my own films eliminated rental fees and relieved the financial burden of the course.) There were circumstances at the time that contributed to a favorable decision on his part to let me implement the project. For instance, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville was instituting special Mini-Terms,³ or concentrated courses over two-week periods between summer session and fall quarter and between fall and winter quarters or Christmas break. Many students were confined to Knoxville during those periods, not being able to afford roundtrips to their homes. The Evening School of the university responded with an innovative set of Mini-Term courses or regular university courses that could be offered over a two-week, highly concentrated period during theseulls in academia and that would cater to students with nothing to do.

One interesting aspect of the initial request from the Evening School about the new Mini-Term concept
They Shoot Horses, Don't They? illustrates many sociological concepts including social processes, conflict, primary group, and values.

nally outlined and conceived for the Mini-Term program.

The Humble Beginning of the Experiment

The course I offered was "Sociology Through Film." It would run ten evenings, Mondays through Fridays, 6:30-9:30 P.M. I planned nine films to show, one examination, and short papers about questions I would prepare accompanying each of the films viewed. I decided at first not to assign a textbook to accompany the films screened. This was a mistake: Students need a glossary of terms and some organized presentation of material where those terms are used or applied. This enhances their understanding of course content appreciably. But I wanted the films to accomplish this same task: without the formality of the textbook.

On the first evening of class, I told the students that we would be watching movies during the entire course and writing reactions to questions I would provide them. I explained that the final examination would consist of questions of movie content and concepts illustrated by the films as well as material from my lectures.

The format I initially projected was simple. I spent about 45 minutes lecturing concerning the film the students were going to see. I gave the questions they were to answer and left enough time for a question-answer session. I also explained those parts of the film that would highlight the concepts I wanted them to learn. I discussed the concepts and we talked about each of the questions briefly. Then the movie was screened.

After the movie was over, we had a short discussion about the meanings of different scenes. I did not want to taint their reactions to my questions and receive uniform reactions from all of the students, but I did want to give them some structure about the kind of...
answers I expected generally. Basically, I wanted a thoughtful analysis of each question. If the question required a yes or no response, it was followed by, “Please explain your answer.” We discussed what I wanted to see in their explanations for the answers they gave. As the days progressed, we spent less time on my expectations about answers, but we did spend some amount of time discussing the film’s sociological significance.

I overcame the textbook problem initially by supplying students with handouts prior to each film screening. These handouts were excerpts from textbooks, passages from novels, or other materials that I felt would enhance their understanding of the film viewed. I also supplied them with a selected glossary of technical sociological terms I had copied from an introductory textbook.

The Films Viewed

The films selected for the first course and some of the concepts I wanted to illustrate are listed here, not necessarily in the order in which they were shown:

- **Hell in the Pacific**: socialization, comparative sociology, definition of the situation, body language, paralanguage, territoriality, symbolic interaction, values, culture, norm of reciprocity, prejudice
- **Jane Eyre**: socialization, self-concept, sexism, reference group, attitudes, convention, conformity, social attraction
- **Jeremiah Johnson**: socialization, culture, norm of reciprocity, role making, expectations, generalized other, gender roles, body language, ritual, symbolic interactionism
- **The Paper Chase**: socialization, stereotype, social exchange theory, self-disclosure, self-concept, definition of the situation, modeling, role strain, reference group, cooperation, complementary needs, primary group
- **Deliverance**: ethnocentrism, definition of the situation, deviants, prejudice, discrimination, cohesiveness, altruism, aggression, conflict, generalized other, learning, labeling, influence, communication, impression management, status, norms
- **They Shoot Horses, Don’t They?**: social processes, halo effect, norm of reciprocity, cooperation, conflict, negotiated order, primary group, status, values, norms
- **Guess Who’s Coming to Dinner?**: race, prejudice, discrimination, socialization, generalized other, role strain, reference group, communication
- **Zero Population Growth**: deindividuation, culture, deviants, learning, role playing, bonding, definition of the situation, crowd, conformity, generalized other, frustration-aggression hypothesis, norm of reciprocity, role, primary and secondary groups, norms
- **Nashville**: definition of the situation, roles, role taking, significant others, reference group, front-stage behavior, self-concept, conformity, modeling, social order


A partial listing of concepts treated in these films included territoriality, body language, deviance, labeling, alienation, socialization, prejudice, conflict, conformity, consensus, sociological processes, discrimination, value conflict, family violence, norm of reciprocity, innovation, norms, roles, role sets, role playing, aging, capital punishment, child abuse, death and dying, euthanasia, Gemeinschaft society, perception, definition of the situation, collective behavior, self-fulfilling prophecy, primary groups, and symbolic interaction.

Subsequent classes I offered used a basic introductory sociology textbook (or social problems or social psychology textbook, depending on the course offered) to accompany the films. I began offering film courses each quarter, usually affiliated with the evening program. Evening courses were usually for extra compensation and did not affect our day teaching load. My regular day courses, however, were standard, lecture-type courses with little or no class discussion.

The Experiment

I decided in early 1979 to keep records of student performance in both the film courses and in my regular daytime courses. In fact, I was asked by my department head in late 1979 to offer a film course as part of my regular daytime teaching load. The reason was that the film courses in the evening program were drawing students heavily. My average class size was 65–70, and sometimes the course enrollment increased to 90 or more.

I agreed to offer the daytime film course and was provided two graduate teaching assistants to help in grading. I also had the TAs lead discussion sessions one period during the week where the original class was broken down into smaller groups. The day course had about 100 students.

Did the films make a difference in student performance on exams and comprehension of sociology subject matter? While a causal relation between student grades and style of course presentation is difficult to demonstrate empirically, the data I compiled over the next four years provided convincing evidence of the fact that the film courses I offered were yielding substantially higher grades on the average compared with the nonfilm courses. And this general finding was consistent for all years.

Some questions need to be answered at this point. Did I give iden-
tical exams to students in film and nonfilm courses in Introductory Sociology and Introduction to Social Psychology? Yes. Did I use the same textbooks in both types of courses? Yes. Did I emphasize the same concepts in both types of courses? Yes.

But the classes could not be considered "matched." And although most of my film courses were offered in the evening program, which generally draws older students from the Knoxville area, my film courses were comprised mostly of day students who apparently were attracted to the prospect of watching movies. Therefore, I had no reason to suspect that my film course students were remarkably different from those enrolled in my nonfilm courses. Table 1 shows the distribution of students in both film and nonfilm courses by year in school from 1979-1983.

From the data in Table 1, there were proportionately more freshmen and sophomores in the nonfilm courses (both Introductory Sociology and Introduction to Social Psychology) compared with the film course enrollments. However, these differences are not substantial. By the same token, there were more juniors and seniors in the film courses compared with the nonfilm courses. But again, these differences do not appear to be great.

The average age of all students in the film courses was 20.4, while the average age of all students in nonfilm courses was 20.1. The average overall grade point average (GPA) for all students in the film courses was 2.9 (about a C+ on a 4.0 system), while the overall GPA for students in the nonfilm courses was 2.7. Table 1 shows the grade distributions for all students in the film and nonfilm courses during 1979-83.

The overall course GPAs for students in the film and nonfilm courses were 3.02 and 2.49, respectively. Although a t test is superfluous in cases involving such a large subject sample, one was conducted anyway with a resulting observed $t = 7.983$, significant at $p < .001$. It may be concluded that film course students did significantly better on their examinations and final grades compared with nonfilm students studying the same materials. The question of whether students taking the film courses actually comprehended the material better than students taking the nonfilm courses is obviously unanswerable. We can only make inferences from the limited data available. Do higher grades mean greater comprehension of subject matter? In the professional literature on the subject, the issue is highly debatable.

One significant question I wished to answer was whether students in the film courses wanted to learn more about sociology compared with students in the nonfilm courses? Each quarter, students are required to complete course evaluations of professors' performance, course content, and other things. Early in the utilization of course evaluations, I devised a maverick instrument that included the question, "Did this course make you want to learn more about sociology?" Table 1 shows the results of the four-year survey.

Clearly 76 percent of the students enrolled in the film courses indicated that they wanted to learn more about sociology. About half (51 percent) of the students enrolled in the nonfilm courses indicated that they wanted to learn more about sociology based on the course they had taken.

In 1983, our department changed administration. Under the new administration, all extra teaching in the evening program was withdrawn from all faculty in our department. We were even deprived of offering Mini-Term courses in the "dead zones" of early September and early December. Therefore, my experiment was terminated. In spite of the fact that my film courses had been cancelled during the day as a part of the regular teaching load, these, too, were cancelled.

---

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Film course</th>
<th>Nonfilm course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year in school</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gradea</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B+</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C+</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Response to</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>evaluation questionb</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>246</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>325</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*a GPA for film courses = 3.02; GPA for nonfilm courses = 2.49. t observed = 7.983, p < .001, df = 663.
b The question students responded to was "Did this course make you want to learn more about sociology?"
I learned later that the film courses I had been offering were drawing criticism and jokes from professors in my department as well as others around the university, and quite undeservedly so. "'Watching movies' is not educational." "'Watching movies' is easy." "A course based on 'watching movies' is an embarrassment to the department." The courses were drawing well, perhaps too well, and student enthusiasm was high. But I felt that I had accomplished what I had set out to accomplish initially—that some major college courses could be built almost entirely around feature films, that students would learn more about sociology in film courses offering dramatized glimpses of "sociology in action," and that students would be motivated to learn more about the field as a result of these experiences.

**Discussion**

Regardless of the social pressures of other faculty, the film courses demonstrated that at least one four-year sample of students outperformed those students studying the same subject over the same time period. I taught both film and nonfilm courses, gave the same exams, and graded the exams in an identical fashion each and every year. Notwithstanding the fact that we can never be sure of the impact of individual differences of both sets of students on the differences in grades they achieved, the quantities are large enough to permit modest inferences about the most probable influential variables in the situation.

In the film courses, the students "watched movies." In actual fact, they watched dramatizations of social reality. They were armed with a set of questions for each film, priming them to watch for certain scenes, certain sequences of dialogue, and certain body language, which they would remember long after the course was completed.

The film course students did significantly better on exams and achieved higher final grades compared with nonfilm course students studying the same material. And the large majority of film course students wanted to learn more about sociology as a result of taking those courses.

The film course students prepared reaction papers to the films viewed. They were obligated to sit down and prepare thoughtful answers to various questions and offer insightful criticisms and interpretations to many scenes. They were encouraged to incorporate their "book learning" into their papers—to actually use new words learned in their sociology texts in the preparation of their answers in reaction papers.

Two illustrations of the significant impact of feature films on these students can be taken from scenes in the films *Hell in the Pacific* (with Lee Marvin and Toshiro Mifune) and *Interiors* (with E. G. Marshall, Diane Keaton, and Geraldine Page).
Hell in the Pacific takes place during World War II. Lee Marvin plays a downed marine pilot who washes up on a small deserted island somewhere in the Pacific. Unknown to Marvin is the fact that a Japanese soldier (Toshiro Mifune) is also stranded there. These soldiers finally discover each other’s presence and there is the inevitable confrontation. Facing one another on the beach, Marvin holding his knife in one hand and a tree branch in the other, Mifune holding a sharp bamboo sword in a Japanese samurai position, the camera shifts to each other’s eyes. Marvin’s eyes suddenly reveal an attack by Mifune with his bamboo sword. Here Marvin is disarmed and killed. Then we see Mifune’s eyes in closeup. His eyes suddenly reveal Marvin attacking, disarming Mifune and stabbing him in the back with his knife. Then the camera shifts back to the two men facing one another. The viewer realizes that they have just “imagined” what might happen to each of them. Their “definition of the situation” has caused each to reconsider attacking. They carefully back away from one another and Marvin retreats into the jungle.

One interesting feature of this film is that Marvin always speaks English and Mifune always speaks Japanese. English-speaking students never know what Mifune is saying to Marvin. This makes them focus their attention on kinesics or “body language.” (I imagine that this film could be shown in Japanese classrooms with similar educational effects.)

Both Marvin and Mifune “capture” each other at different points in the film and subject one another to various mild tortures. But probably because of loneliness, they eventually tacitly agree to put up with each other. Eventually, they communicate (through body language again) sufficiently to build a raft and sail to another island. While they are adrift on the raft for several days, Marvin gently covers Mifune’s sunburned back with his own shirt. Even though these men cannot understand one another’s language, there is a common thread running throughout their relationship.

On the new island, it is apparent that the war has come and gone. There are bombshells, abandoned hospitals and other buildings, and GI litter. Marvin and Mifune both roam the deserted island looking for anything useful (food, clothes, cigarettes, saki, etc.). Mifune jumps onto a metal roof from a low-lying window and startles Marvin. Marvin has become so “culture-blind” at this point that he jumps at being frightened by Mifune, looks up, and then says, “Oh, for a minute I thought you were a Jap!” What a beautiful educational tool.

In Interiors, a movie directed by Woody Allen, the story is far from being a comedy. This story is about a problem parent: a domineering, unloving, unfeeling, cold, selfish, uncreative mother who experiences life through each of her three daughters. The three daughters, Renata, Janet, and Flyn, are each in different “creative” professions, but, ironically, none of them can “create” or be productive. They suffer from the same
afflictions besetting their mother. They have no feelings for others, or if they do, they cannot express them.

E. G. Marshall, who plays Arthur, the father, decides early in the film to divorce his wife, Eve (Geraldine Page). She attempts suicide to gain sympathy from her daughters and to hold on to her husband, but she does not succeed. The daughters are forced to look after their mother, but each avoids this “task” as much as possible. There appears to be a love-hate relationship between each of the daughters and their mother.

The mother has socialized her daughters and their respective mates with colorless attributes. Their clothes, the “interiors” of their personalities, the furnishings of the homes or apartments in which they live, all suffer from lifeless, colorless, and unfeeling properties. Eve has always prided herself on being an “interior decorator,” but, clearly lacking these creative qualities herself, she viciously attacks her daughters for their own paucity of creativity.

Arthur divorces Eve and decides to remarry. His choice is a warm, feeling, vibrant woman, Pearl (Maureen Stapleton). She is introduced to the other family members at dinner. Each of the daughters in her own way attempts to put down Pearl. She is full of life, creative, and certainly anything but dull. Seated at the dinner table, Pearl is wearing a bright red dress. All other family members are clad in drab browns and grays and “blend” in with the equally colorless woodwork. The contrast is remarkable. These colorless, uncreative, and unfeeling persons are shocked by the intrusion of this alien woman into their sterile environment.

Pearl innocently responds with earthiness and feeling to their esoteric, intellectual discussions of a recent play they have viewed. The play they are commenting about concerned a value conflict experienced by an Algerian doctor during a war. One of the daughters remarks, “. . . think the writer argued both sides so brilliantly, it was difficult to decide which side was right.” Pearl sits there and says, “I don’t know. I didn’t get that at all. One was the good guy, the other guy was a squealer. Did you like the squealer?” The daughter responds, “How do you really know which one was right?” Pearl responds, significantly, “Oh, I don’t know, you, you just, you just feel it, I suppose.”

Arthur and Pearl eventually marry, and unknown to them on their wedding night, they are visited by the ex-wife, Eve. The mother is confronted by her daughter Joey, who exposes

*Interiors* illustrates family conflict and parent-child relationships. Here, the daughters attend a birthday party for their dependent, uncreative mother.
her as a sick spirit who has always tormented her daughters and husband. The mother walks out of the beachfront home into the ocean and drowns. Joey runs after her, attempting a rescue, and almost crows herself. She is pulled from the ocean and her "new" mother, Perzl, literally breathes life back into her with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Later, after her mother's funeral, Joey is entering some thoughts into her diary. She observes in the last line of the film, "I felt compelled to write these things down." This is certainly a far cry from the unfeeling and unemotional Joey we encountered earlier.

A textbook can discuss body language or kinesics, definition of the situation, parent-child relationships, personality systems, and any other social psychological phenomena. But when you encounter these concepts and phenomena in "real-life" situations portrayed in film, the effects are long lasting and far reaching. Sometimes, the effects are not particularly favorable. After watching a depressing Depression-era movie, They Shoot Horses, Don't They?, one co-ed approached me a week later and said that she had wandered around "dazed" for the past week because of the film. It had totally devastated her. For most other students, however, the experiences of "watching movies" were markedly different.

Questions can be designed for practically any film with a smidgen of social relevance. I would be most pleased to share with anyone the questions used in any films listed in this article upon request. The final beneficiary, of course, is the student who is inspired to learn more about the subject. And if grades are any indication of greater comprehension of subject matter, then films do make a positive difference in that regard.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Hoyt, D. The Relationship between College Grades and Adult Achievement (Iowa City: American College Testing Program, 1965).

NOTES


DEAN J. CHAMPION is a professor of sociology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. He is the author of several books on sociology and is currently preparing a book entitled An Introduction to Criminal Justice.