Focus

Now showing: Using film as an educational medium in British schools

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School students care about what is happening in the world. They know that there is life beyond their own communities and countries, and they know, even if they cannot explain or systematically understand, that there are powerful forces operating in those other parts of the globe that they might know only from television or second-hand anecdote. What they often do not know is how those forces interact with their own lives and concerns, and what they can do to help make sure those interactions are positive.

Students want to understand these things. A large scale survey of British school pupils showed that over three quarters (78 percent) think it is important for schools to help pupils understand what people can do to make the world a better place (Think Global & Ipsos MORI, 2008: 7). Teachers too believe that this is important; but more worryingly, a large majority do not believe that the current school system is succeeding in achieving this goal (Think Global, 2013: 4-7). There are various factors contributing to this problem. The current national curriculum focuses closely on ‘the basics’ of English, Maths and Science, with global issues appearing only incidentally as part of these core subjects. Many schools are under considerable funding pressure, and perhaps most pertinently, there has been a sharp drop in teachers’ confidence to teach about complex global issues such as immigration, climate change and global interdependence (ibid).

There are, however, ways to address this problem, and to put UK school students back on the right path to becoming informed and thoughtful citizens of a globalising world. Appropriate resources, and teacher training in ways to make use of these resources, are amongst the most powerful solutions. This article examines film as an education medium particularly well suited to global teaching and learning. Although, as the first section below describes,
there are plenty of teaching and learning resources available to British educators, this paper begins by explaining the special strengths of film, touching on its familiarity and flexibility, as well as its capacity to deal with complex and sometimes emotive global issues. The latter parts of the article consider how this matches up with what is happening in British schools today, and a new project currently under development by Think Global and Doc Academy is introduced. Concluding comments follow, putting the arguments for film in global learning into larger perspective, and considering the best way forward in helping school students towards a future where they are informed and confident about their own and others’ roles in international affairs.

**Global Learning Resources: Keeping up with change**

There is no shortage of teaching and learning resources available to school teachers in Britain. Primary and secondary teachers; teachers in central London and in small rural towns; teachers of Maths and English and Music; new teachers and experienced teachers – for all educators a rich variety of resources and learning aids is often only a click away.

As this suggests, access to the internet has revolutionised access to teaching and learning resources. Online resources are readily available, often free of charge, and neatly categorised according to subject area and learning stage. The websites of subject associations are particularly well-stocked repositories. The Geographical Association, for example, provides both activity suggestions and background resources for topics ranging from floods, cyclones and earthquakes to human geography, census taking and environmental sustainability. Similarly, the Personal Social Health and Economic Education (PSHE) Association provides resources dealing with topics from road safety to personal health, while the National Association for the Teaching of English provides resources on a diverse collection of specific texts, as well as guidance for teachers on how to teach particular literary forms, such as ballads.

More generally, the BBC provides a contemporary and diverse collection of teaching and learning resources on topics from curricula across the UK, again conveniently listed by both subject and learning stage. Think Global, specialists in global learning and development education, maintain the UK’s premier web-based collection of school resources for global learning,
relevant across subjects and learning stages (http://globaldimension.org.uk/); while for-profit corporations such as Pearson and TES Connect provide sizeable collections of resources available to buy.

Naturally, more traditional, non-virtual resources also continue to play an important part in British classrooms. Teachers of modern foreign languages still find value in flash cards for simple vocabulary building; teachers of the physical sciences can only go so far before practical laboratory activity comes to the fore; and teachers of music do not get far without instruments and sound equipment. Like internet-based resources, however, these more practical, hands-on learning aids are also more readily available than ever before and, the (often significant) constraints of limited school budgets aside, resources of every shape and form abound for UK school teachers.

However, development education, or global learning as it is referred to here, presents unique resource imperatives for schools and teachers. Most obviously, global learning per se is not a discrete curriculum subject in any part of the UK. The latter stages of citizenship studies do touch on some matters of relevance to global learning,¹ as do different stages of the Geography, Religious Studies, English, and History curricula, among others. A coherent global learning ‘offer’ is not, however, part of current curriculum or syllabus design, and thus it also lacks its own programme or associated subject body.

This is not necessarily a bad thing. The essential nature of global learning and global issues is cross-disciplinary and interconnected. A student-oriented development text by the World Bank illustrated this neatly, explaining that:

¹ The terms ‘development education’ and ‘global learning’ are often used interchangeably, and indeed the distinctions are subtle. The former term is often more popular in European continental work and scholarship, whereas the latter is gaining popularity in the UK. For this reason, and because the focus on ‘global’ matters can be understood more broadly than a focus on ‘development’, the term ‘global learning’ is used here.
“...for some people, development means primarily higher incomes, for others, a cleaner environment. Some are more interested in personal security, others in personal freedom. Note that these goals and values are not always easily compatible - faster economic growth may be more damaging to the natural environment and a strengthening of personal security may require limiting some personal freedoms. The abundance of such tradeoffs in development is one of the reasons there are so many open questions...” (Soubbotina, 2004: 2).

It begs the question, though, what kinds of teaching and learning resources are most suitable for this complex and interconnected subject matter? Further, globalisation means that developments or changes in any one or more of the interlinked factors that comprise global issues flow rapidly into others, fundamentally altering the parameters of entire debates in the blink of an eye. Teaching and learning resources need thus to be flexible and responsive to change, as well as to communicate complexity in a simple way. Resources for global learning do certainly exist but (as with resources for other subjects) some are more successful than others. Film, with its unique dynamic capacity, is one of the more successful; the next section explores how this is so.

**Right Here, Right Now: Why film works as a Global Learning Resource**

The use of film as a global education resource is possible because of radical and wide-reaching developments in technology. While film as a medium has been in existence since the development in the late nineteenth century of cameras for moving pictures, it is only much more recently that films have been available for personal and formal educative use. This has been in large part due to the advent of computer-based visual and audio equipment, which allows teachers and learners, as well as other professional and private individuals, to view, copy, edit and otherwise manipulate film materials in ways that were unimaginable a few decades ago:

“In the 1970s, film buffs organized their lives around repertory-house schedules, and might travel 50 miles to catch a screening of a rare film. Today, even the most out-of-the-way town has a video store with four or five thousand titles in stock, ready of viewing at a moment’s notice, and if you can’t find it there, you can get it on the Internet. Twenty
years ago, very few of us actually owned movies; today, even fewer do not” (Monaco, 2000: 13).

Accessibility alone, however, is not the reason why film makes such a good resource for global teaching and learning. Rather, the strength of film lies in four interconnected factors: familiarity, flexibility, cross-cultural connectivity, and content density.

**Familiarity**

One of the greatest challenges for educators of adapting to the spread of new technologies has been the difficulty of keeping up with students’ own knowledge of, and familiarity with, those technologies. Whereas in the past teachers could generally rely on superior expertise to help manage volatile classes, research shows that the use of digital resources ‘can become a source of anxiety for teachers who feel they are no longer in charge of their classes, and that the students know more than they do’ (Vickers & Smalley, 1997).

The flip side of this, however, is that where students are ‘digital natives’ (Greenhow & Robiela, 2009: 1130), film and other technology-based resources make sense and appear immediately relevant. As Kuzma and Haney put it:

“We teach and live in a culture dominated by film, television, and other visual media. Our students...spend a major proportion of their time in front of the television, at the computer, or in a movie theatre. Consequently, they are geared to audiovisual rather than written forms of expression and communication” (2001: 34).

So film-based teaching and learning resources speak clearly to students who are already accustomed to audiovisual media, and moreover are engaged and enthusiastic about it; a core criterion for successful learning.

**Flexibility**

Film-based resources are also notably flexible, engaging and accommodating learners at a range of stages and with diverse learning preferences. Pointing to studies on memory and recall, Kuzma and Haney argue that traditional classroom tools such as books, blackboards and notes do serve a purpose, but
that information presented simultaneously visually and verbally engages more and different senses, leading to that information being more readily imprinted, retained for longer, and being recalled more easily (ibid).

This means that film can reach students with visual, aural and sometimes even kinetic learning preferences, all at the same time; and can be equally attractive to more advanced students and those who are struggling. Practical experience in the UK context has borne this out. Work by the UK Film Council and others recorded teachers who had used film education explaining that:

“...starting with film, all children regardless of ability, have been able to discuss narrative in a sophisticated manner. The use of film has allowed children to learn using a medium with which they feel comfortable and able to take risks” (2008: 4).

Flexibility of this kind also means that film resources can be made readily accessible for students of many different ages, from Key Stage (KS)1 through to KS5 and beyond.

It is worthwhile acknowledging that audiovisual resources in the form of television material have been available to teachers for much longer than the new generation of film-based resources. Two important distinctions are: first, that there is now much greater capacity for teachers (and indeed students themselves) to adapt, edit and manipulate film-based resources to highlight certain issues and to present learning in an original and dynamic way; and second, whereas the older generation of audiovisual television resources were often fact-oriented documentaries, the creative and emotive potential of modern film is a distinguishing factor in its power to engage.

Cross-cultural connectivity
The two factors so far mentioned are both important contributors to the strength of film as a global learning resource; but they are arguably not the most critical, as they may equally apply to the use of film in other subject areas. There are, however, two other factors that relate distinctly to global learning: cross-cultural connectivity and content density. Global learning by its nature
concerns matters that cross national borders and which indeed may often be wholly located in regions or countries far removed from British schools. This means that concepts and aspects of global learning will often (in common with many social science subjects) appear highly abstract, and difficult to make ‘real’ in the lives of UK school students.

Here, film’s ability to engage the emotions by bringing together information, narrative, and visual and musical mood, means that there are many opportunities for finding chords of resonance with existing student experience. Following pedagogical thought on cognitive development, which suggests that effective learning happens when students are supported to fit new stimuli into an existing framework, expanding that framework as they do so, this suggests that film provides a strong vehicle for eliminating perceived distance between the geographically removed issues of global learning, and the real lived experience of British students:

“I usually do not like films where you have to read subtitles. However I think Tsotsi changed my mind completely. After a while I forgot I was reading the subtitles and got hooked in the story. It was moving, watching how people in the third world lived. I thought the acting and the scenery was good, and the film got me intrigued. A good film” (ibid).

In light of the stated aims of the new national curriculum in England, which includes that every state-funded school must prepare pupils for the ‘opportunities, responsibilities and experiences of later life’ (Department for Education, 2013), it must be evident that in a globalised world, this means students should be prepared to engage with the world beyond English borders.

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2 One of the early and most influential of theses on this matter was proposed by Russian scholar Lev Vygotsky. After his work was translated into English in the early 1960s, aspects of his thinking such as the ‘zone of proximal development’ became very popular as a pedagogic model. In decades since, the idea of ‘scaffolded learning’ has been considerably refined and recast; but the fundamental concept retains value, and Vygotskian thought continues to be highly influential. See Vygotsky, L. S. (2012 edition) Thought and Language (Massachusetts: MIT Press).
In this context, learning resources which make that international world real and understandable, as film does, can have a prominent role in school-based learning.

**Content density**

Finally, the complexity and instability of many global issues means that effective resources for global learning must be able to address adequately and lucidly problems with many interlinked components, and which often reach across multiple subject areas. Further, the underlying purpose of much global learning, namely to equip learners to actively pursue solutions to global problems, relies for its integrity and conceptual consistency on the understanding that change and progress are possible.

Film is uniquely placed to deal with both these challenges, due to its capacity for content density. By this is meant film’s capacity to reference, through its multiple components, many different issues within a very compact series of images and sounds. For example, a brief filmic sequence showing an altercation between multi-ethnic gang members in an inner city street might simultaneously touch on issues relevant across the curriculum, including: language (English, or modern foreign languages); racism (Citizenship, or History); poverty (principles of basic Economics); religion; and immigration (Geography).

Similarly, film is well-equipped to demonstrate concepts of change and progress, by seamlessly integrating ‘real’ historical information with contemporary material. In this sense, film can act as something of a time machine, and in a way that other educational media are not able to:

“Film enjoys enormous advantages over textual history in this domain; its reality effect resides not only in the ability to show viewers the ‘look’ of the past but to trigger emotions” (Berenson, quoted in Kuzma & Haney, 2001: 35).

In this sense, film can effectively but discreetly demonstrate the reality of change and progress; thereby validating the possibility of remedial action against global problems. Conversely, the use of film can also have a negative effect, in that
students perceive the persistent recurrence of unhappy events such as war, and conclude that such problems are insoluble. The role of the teacher in guiding learning, and highlighting examples of positive progress, is paramount here.

**In the classroom: What’s happening in British schools?**

Filmic resources do have a presence in British classrooms. Over the last two decades in particular, as access to audiovisual teaching and learning resources has increased, the British Film Institute (BFI) has had an active role in developing and supporting the implementation of film projects in schools across the UK. For example, Story Shorts was introduced in a number of schools with the aim of using short films as whole texts in the context of the National Literacy Strategy. Similar initiatives, also led by the BFI included *Show us a Story!*, a primary teaching resource based on growing understanding of the significant role of moving image media in modern culture, and ‘Edit: Play’, which was a research-based project investigating how young people use ‘edutainment’ software to tell stories and understand concepts of narrative (Parker, 2002: 3940).

Most recently, Doc Academy, an education-focused initiative of BRITDOC (a non-profit organisation that funds and facilitates the distribution of independent documentary films), piloted an innovative project involving eighteen schools, in which documentary film clips and accompanying lesson plans, all with explicit links to the national curriculum, were offered to teachers, along with support to implement the plans. Feedback from the pilot was strong, mirroring many of the strengths of film as a resource mentioned above:

“Particularly for the less able and less engaged, Doc Academy allows instant connection. Most pupils are into their media in various ways so they understand and use it regularly, it engages them easily and with pace, allows engagement to start from the moment they walk in” (Doc Academy, 2012).

Nevertheless, the use of film as a teaching and learning resource is still not as common as the use of other resources, and many teachers and schools lack both the expertise and the material resources to engage with the opportunities that film offers, particularly for global learning. Not all constraints (particularly
those of funding) can be easily addressed; but Think Global and Doc Academy are currently working on a new programme of intensive teacher training and support for using film to achieve curriculum outcomes and improve student achievement standards. It is hoped that as well as delivering attainment improvements in participating schools, evaluation and assessment of the project will make an important contribution to the growing literature on film as a medium for development education.

**Opening windows on the world: New Think Global and Doc Academy project in London schools**

The project which is currently under development aims to support innovative collaboration between KS3 teachers in London schools, using film to help them engage creatively with global issues, and within the parameters of the 2014 English national curriculum. It builds on research which finds that despite the centrality of English to everyday life, too many pupils see it as passive, school-based and academic (Office for Standards in Education, Children’s Services and Skills, 2012). Making English ‘real’ uses the engaging and accessible medium of film to build teachers’ knowledge of, and ability to critically analyse global issues for the purpose of improving students’ attainment in language and literacy.

The focus of the project on teacher support highlights a key element in any effort to use film effectively in the classroom, which is the ultimate centrality of the teacher. As previously noted, some teachers lack confidence in the use of audiovisual resources, particularly where their students are already ‘digital natives’; so given the teacher role as leader and guide, effective training in how to use film is vital. Further, the project focus recognises that even the best learning resources will never and should never take the place of good teaching.

The project follows a constructivist participatory approach, in which teachers build their own understandings and related scheme of work. With training days, review points, regular feedback and participant sharing opportunities, this approach maximises the opportunities for subject knowledge to become personalised and deeply embedded. Teachers can learn from each other, sharing the latest in practical experience. They can also gain expert training from experienced teams at Think Global and Doc Academy in effective
teaching of global issues, and use of film clips in the classroom teaching of English. This in turn opens the way for project outcomes and outputs to become transferable across classes and schools: the unit of work would be developed into a publishable teaching resource, congruent with broader school learning strategies, and sustainable into the future.

Evaluation of the project is critical, not only in terms of judging its success, but also in terms of contributing to the growing body of evidence for the efficacy of film as a learning resource; and moreover one that can effectively support global learning. A comprehensive evaluation strategy including teacher observations, analysis of student attainment, qualitative analysis of teacher and student experience, and analysis of resource dissemination and uptake, all add to collective understanding of how these types of projects can work.

**Next steps**

Development and implementation of individual projects like this one can go some way to increasing the effective use of film as a medium for global learning in schools; but there is potential for much more comprehensive and wide-reaching action. This will require creating a positive policy environment, not only within schools, but within the school education establishment more generally. This would mean not only increasing capacity and willingness to use filmic resources, but increasing understanding of, and explicit support for, global learning at both formal and informal levels.

In relation to the former, it has already been mentioned that global learning is not a stand-alone feature of the 2014 UK national curriculum; and it is not likely to become one at least in the short-term. Nevertheless it is possible to increase focus on global learning within the formal curriculum by exploiting the flexibility of international issues to resonate with the content and objectives of other curriculum subjects, and to deepen learning by reinforcing that content from multiple angles. Effective teacher professional development and school leaders’ encouragement of global awareness are critical to successfully leveraging this opportunity.

Film will not always be the most effective or appropriate resource for global learning because of the tendency of films to ‘leave details and events out,
make too much of other things, and often take license’ (Gregg, quoted in Kuzma & Haney, 2001: 37). Films thus risk twisting already complex and emotive issues, like poverty and war, into even more fraught and emotionally charged phenomena. Further, even though the film industries of developing countries such as India and Nigeria (Sacchi, 2013) are booming, on a global level the film industries of (English speaking) developed nations, and particularly the US, retain overwhelming dominance. Despite the many original and astute films touching on global issues that emerge from Western studios, the risk of films depicting and perpetuating Western biases must never be under-estimated. Finally, the flip-side of film’s ability to increase learning by engaging students’ emotions is that, where that emotion is negative or becomes too extreme, learning can in fact be hindered. Teachers can never be fully aware of what emotional histories their students bring to the classroom, and even with the most careful preparation lessons can go awry where students become so involved in complex plots and emotive story-lines that their ability to retain a critical viewpoint is compromised.

For these reasons, the ability to think critically, to maintain appropriate distance, to choose resources carefully, and to help students always understand not only overt messages but sub-messages and artistic license, must always be a key feature of global teaching and learning where film is used.

**Conclusion**

The world around us, and in which today’s school learners are growing up, is changing rapidly and becoming ever more complex. It is also, through the forces of globalisation, becoming more interconnected and interdependent. To act with wisdom while ignoring the global contexts of issues as diverse as farming, genetic research, political organisation and education, is impossible. Preparing school students to live and act in this world requires a prominent role for development education. The fact that in Britain at least, this remains largely outside the formal confines of the national curriculum, does not mean that its presence in schools is impossible. It does mean, however, that there is a critical role for effective global learning resources, and for training and support for teachers to access and use these resources.
This article has considered why film can be a very effective resource for development teaching and learning. Its familiarity to students accustomed to audiovisual media; its flexibility to be meaningful to learners at varied ages and stages; its capacity for cross-cultural connectivity; and for content density, all combine to provide a resource which can be adapted for diverse topics, and applied across curriculum subjects and objectives. There will sometimes be circumstances in which other resource types are more suitable for the issue or learners at hand; and in these cases it makes perfect sense to put film aside. However, it is to be hoped that in the future, there will be a place for filmic resources in every school that takes global affairs seriously.

References
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**Teaching & learning resources referred to in the article**

British Broadcasting Association (BBC): http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/.


British Film Institute (BFI) *Teaching Resources*: http://filmstore.bfi.org.uk/acatalog/BFI_Shop_Teaching_Resources_50.html
Doc Academy: https://docacademy.org/.


Global Dimension: the world in your classroom: http://globaldimension.org.uk/.

National Association for the Teaching of English: http://www.nate.org.uk/page/resources.


TES Connect: http://www.tes.co.uk/teaching-resources/.

Think Global: http://globaldimension.org.uk/.

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