Opening the learning process: the potential role of feature film in teaching employment relations

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This paper explores the potential of feature film to encourage more inclusive, participatory and open learning in the area of employment relations. Evaluations of student responses in a single postgraduate course over a five-year period revealed how feature film could encourage participatory learning processes in which students re-examined their initial perspectives on a series of employment relations topics and debates. Over time, the course became increasingly characterised by a pluralism in which all participants became more open to a range of different views, including those of students from diverse political, cultural and religious backgrounds. Of particular note was how the fictional situations depicted in feature films could expand the opportunities for participation and more complex, multidimensional approaches to learning. Following on from a discussion of how more open learning processes require a reconfigured conceptual framework, the paper concludes with some open-ended questions on the use of film in learning processes.

Keywords: *Feature film, employment relations, openness, learning process.*

Introduction

The use of film in teaching and learning has attracted considerable attention for many years, across a wide and growing range of topics and subject areas – for example, medical sociology (Pescosolido, 1990), race relations (Loewen, 1991), ethnographic methods (Leblanc, 1998), sociology and social policy (Kennedy, Senses and Ayan 2011), politics (Chang and Cryer, 2009) and health education (Persson and Persson, 2008). This paper investigates the ways in which film, specifically feature film, might assist in achieving more open, inclusive and participatory learning processes in employment relations, which includes the sociology of work, industrial relations and human resource management. In doing so, it necessarily leads on to the potential roles of film, (to which TV and online audio-visual material could reasonably be added) in developing more complex intellectual and emotional responses that are irreducible to 'knowledge'.

The paper assesses the contributions of film to student learning in a single postgraduate course on strategic employment relations, taught over a ten-week period annually, between 2009 and 2013. The course had been re-designed to open up and evaluate different perspectives on employment relations issues, particularly through participation in seminar discussions, debates and case study analysis. The composition of each student cohort (between fifteen and thirty students) over the period was diverse, with a range of disciplinary backgrounds (encompassing arts, social sciences, business and law), nationalities (twenty countries represented overall), ages (a median of 32-36), with slightly more female than male students in each cohort (a ratio of approximately 55:45). The highest qualification for the great majority of students was a Bachelor's degree. Almost all the international students (around 40 per cent of each cohort) had no or very little work experience, while most of the local (Sydney) students had considerable work experience, with a sizeable sprinkling of middle managers.

Popular culture, including feature film, can play an important role in

how adult learners view themselves in relation to the world, providing informal learning experiences against which they can reposition themselves, reassessing their own views (Armstrong, 2008; Hall, 2001; Guy, 2007; Jarvis, 1999; Malcolm, Hodkinson and Colley, 2003; Tisdell and Thompson, 2007). Similarly, within the formal learning process, the situations depicted in feature films can enable students to draw on and complement their own experiences, as the dilemmas and challenges faced by the fictional characters resonate with events in their own lives. Significantly, identification and empathy with exploited, excluded or marginal groups can encourage a deeper appreciation of social, political and economic problems, conflicts and divisions (Batson, Chang, Orr and Rowland, 2002; Giroux, 2002; Schwandt, 2000; Stuckey and Kring, 2007; Tisdell and Thompson, 2007). Students' construction of their own narratives, therefore, can increase the possibilities for the emergence of a critical pedagogy that apprehends and examines prevailing power structures and relations.

The construction of such a critical pedagogy was a pivotal concern in this particular course, which sought to address the intersections between employment relations and broader societal issues of power relations, inequality and discrimination. Within this context, feature film offered the potential to open up multiple perspectives, through which students could identify and empathise with characters and situations which they may never have encountered previously. Thus feature film could encourage alternative narratives as a basis for engagement and critique, rather than the transmission of a single, didactic view (see Brown, 2011: 236). While an occasionally risky venture in terms of student responses, a form of transformational learning could be achieved, whereby students could gain new insights and ways of looking at their own work experiences (Brooks, 2004), which could in turn be brought back to inform and enrich class discussions.

The introduction of feature film to the study of employment relations could thus create possibilities for a critical workplace pedagogy through which adult learners could construct alternative meanings and interpretations to those promulgated by employers, which are predominantly oriented around closed neoliberal and managerial discourses of intensified individual competition and increasing corporate profitability (Wright, 2013; Yang, 2004; Subramaniam,

Perrucci and Whitlock, 2014). A particular strength of feature film in this respect was its capacity to explore frequently neglected emotional aspects of workplace situations, while illuminating the situations of previously silent or excluded groups (see Brigden and Milner, 2013; Paré and Le Maistre, 2006). The shifting intersections of informal learning, formal learning and popular culture could offer opportunities to analyse and debate fundamentally moral issues – for instance, job losses or sexual harassment. Identification and empathy with fictional characters and the moral dilemmas they encountered, therefore, could lead to further questioning of the moral stances of all participants, not just students, as the previously uncontroversial became complex, confronting and contested.

The introduction of feature film into the formal teaching context, therefore, could add specifically 'human' dimensions (Wright, 2013: 14), bringing into question the ostensibly uncomplicated rationality of 'efficient' business decisions – a recurring event in the course discussed in this paper. The development of a critical workplace pedagogy in this respect represented a step further than the occasional introduction of a film to illustrate a particular issue, since it required a consistent change of approach to the learning process, through which multiple, often competing and even unanticipated perspectives were opened up. These phenomena all became unmistakable in the integration of feature films in this course.

Film, closed learning and possible openings

The origins of this paper lie in a remarkably *un*successful use of film in a teaching and learning context. An unexpected level of disinterest had greeted the showing of a sequence from the documentary, *The Corporation* (Akbar and Abbott, 2004), to a class of postgraduate coursework students in 2007. This was despite my prior confidence that the film's content and style were well-suited to the teaching context in which it was shown: a seminar/workshop session on how transnational corporations have transformed employment conditions globally. Subsequent discussions with students indicated that they felt intimidated by the 'talking heads' format of the film: they felt they were being talked at, rather than being engaged in a critical dialogue. In effect, they thought that the film was like a traditional lecture – with all

that medium's advantages and limitations (Bligh, 2000; Dolnicar, 2005) – therefore adding little new in terms of the learning experience, as they had already attended a lecture on the topic. Students also indicated that they believed the content of the film was one-sided and that it left them little scope for alternative opinions – a major shortcoming, since the film was included as the focal point for debate on the topic. Students believed there was clearly a 'correct' view, the position endorsed in the movie and which they consequently, and not unreasonably, assumed was shared by the lecturer. Subsequent course evaluations confirmed that this perception was held across the student cohort. Students, then, withdrew into passivity rather than drawing upon the film to generate discussion: disengagement and closure were the outcomes. What factors were at play, leading to these generally negative student responses and learning outcomes, and how might they be addressed, to achieve greater, more meaningful participation and openness?

Some progress towards answering these questions was achieved in a quite different setting: a workshop at a US labour educators' conference. The workshop was oriented around the topic of workers and immigration – particularly the much-debated question of working class conservatism (see, for example, Nordlinger, 1967; Svallfors, 2006). From this general topic, the discussion then concentrated on an intensely controversial issue: why do many US workers, both union and non-union, remain resolutely opposed to 'illegal' Mexican immigrants – their legal status providing a further point of contestation – despite the apparently overwhelming evidence that these immigrants constitute no meaningful threat to the jobs of US workers?

One strategy discussed during the workshop was the use of a range of feature films, depicting the plight of many Mexican workers. Through viewing these films, US workers might identify more closely with the personal situations of the Mexican immigrants and come to question their own prior opinions on the 'border crisis'. This strategy, of the 'mile in their shoes' variety, meant addressing the issue at an emotional as well as intellectual level: 'the facts' may not be equally convincing to everyone, even without entering into debates on the reliability of 'facts'. The 'emotional' and the 'intellectual', therefore, came to be viewed as inseparable – and often indistinguishable.

Subsequent reflection on these two contrasting experiences led to the question of how film might be used most effectively in the employment relations learning process. The first film used in seeking to address this question was the Charlie Chaplin classic, *Modern Times* (Chaplin, 2003), which provides a caustic depiction of the Fordist assembly-line and Taylorist management techniques. The film, silent except for its celebrated closing scene in which the Tramp sings, was introduced, therefore, to encourage greater engagement by students, particularly by international students from non-English backgrounds. The first section of the film, approximately 15 minutes, entirely silent save for musical accompaniment, was shown. Focusing on the rigours of mass production, factory discipline and surveillance, this section's relevance to higher education teaching has been discussed by several authors (for example, Tolich, 1993). Students viewed the film in conjunction with seminar discussions and debates on unemployment and mass production techniques. Since the film was originally released in 1936, during the Great Depression, and the Global Financial Crisis had descended when the course was being taught, the discussion was given considerable contemporary relevance, enabling students to identify how certain themes remained consistent to the present.

Within this particular teaching and learning context, *Modern Times* created a common ground and even a common, non-verbal language, whereby the English-language difficulties of some international students were erased temporarily. Introduced primarily to add visual substance to the discussion of the topics, the film added a dimension of humour that encouraged student involvement and reduced any possible anxieties (Kaufman, 2002). Although many students were initially perplexed by the medium of the silent movie, most found *Modern Times* highly engaging, to the extent that they continued to discuss the issues for a considerable time after the end of the scheduled class. A significant number of students also specifically mentioned the film as a highlight when completing their course evaluations.

Feature film, multiple learning dimensions and openness

The use of film in the course was refined over successive offerings between 2009 and 2013, a total of twelve feature films being shown at different times, with varying degrees of effectiveness. After considerable

experimentation, the four films discussed in the following section were used in addition to *Modern Times*, which continued to serve to a considerable extent as an ice-breaker in the course, opening up greater space for discussion and debate. Extracts from each film were shown where they could clearly contribute extra dimensions to the course's lectures, workshops, debates and case study analysis. Therefore, they were not introduced as a routine element of the course, being viewed only where they could add depth and new perspectives to class discussions and assessment. The evaluation of the effectiveness of each film extract also included scrutiny of the most appropriate timing for film showings – for example, before or after debates, or even both, in order to introduce issues before a debate and/or to amplify issues raised during debates.

An extract from *The Closet* (Le Placard) (Veber, 2001) was introduced during a class on equity policies and legislation. The film was shown in its dubbed rather than subtitled version, to make it more readily accessible for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. Accountant François Pignon (Daniel Auteil) is in crisis: his personal relationships having disintegrated, he has just discovered he is earmarked for redundancy. Work, his only salvation, is about to be snatched from him. Suicidal and preparing to leap from his apartment balcony, he is interrupted by a neighbour, Jean-Pierre Belone (Michel Aumont), who eventually persuades him towards an alternative plan. This involves giving his management and co-workers the impression that he is gay – an impression to be achieved through anonymously sending mocked-up photos of Pignon embracing a male companion to the company, which manufactures condoms. According to Belone, management will be unable to fire him if they are to maintain their carefully cultivated appearance of employment equity. Pignon protests: 'I thought it over. Your strategy won't work. I can't fake being gay. I'm no actor, I'll get exposed!' To which Belone replies: 'You're right. If you camp it up, you'll be a flop. … You'll pull it off if you do nothing at all. Just stay the shy, discreet person they've known for years. What'll change is how they perceive you.'

From this core premise, a series of previously improbable events inevitably ensues. The only constant, as his world is transformed around him, is Pignon's own unchanged behaviour. Alarmed at the probable

consequences of firing him, the company's management becomes suddenly desperate to keep him. Pignon not only retains his job but goes on to achieve an unforeseen popularity and glamour, even attaining minor celebrity status at the local Gay Pride festival. The film thus enabled students to identify the multiple dimensions of employment equity legislation and policies – as the company was forced to act against its own informal culture of discrimination, standing in stark contrast to its formal commitment to equity. It helped to demonstrate, in conjunction with other elements of the course, how a deeply embedded, persistently sexist and homophobic organisational culture could be rapidly and very publicly disowned and dismantled, when the company's profits and core market were threatened. Students were also able to address, through a case study and a debate, the complexity of organisational decision-making, policies and procedures on equity in employment.

Following the gentle humour of *The Closet*, students were then confronted by a film depiction of a highly aggressive, often unscrupulous all-male workplace where equity was not a consideration. *Glengarry GlenRoss* (Foley, 1992), based on the play by David Mamet, focused on the desperate, even illegal efforts of a group of Chicago real estate agents to save their jobs. The movie's most celebrated scene was written specifically for the film version: Blake (Alec Baldwin), a highly successful, brutally aggressive salesman, has been drafted in from the Mitch and Murray central office to address the branch's salesmen in order to boost flagging sales. He proceeds to berate three of them – Shelley Levene (Jack Lemmon), George Aaronow (Alan Arkin) and Dave Moss (Ed Harris) – informing them that only two would still be with the company in a week, following a sales contest: 'Third prize is you're fired'. The fourth salesman, Ricky Roman (Al Pacino), is safe for the present, as he is a star performer. This is the scene used in the course, with reference to the topics of bullying and workplace voice and silence. Intimidation is present in almost every word uttered by Blake – for example, 'If you don't like it, leave' – thus presenting students with a graphic illustration of a workplace in which only one voice, that of management, is permitted. There are no sympathetic characters, as the agents proceed to lie, cheat and steal their way to sales, amidst their own feelings of resentment, despair and outrage. The scene was a revelation for many students, particularly those with little or no work experience,

providing a worst-case scenario against which students could evaluate other workplace situations, enabling them to explore issues related to workplace voice, silence and bullying. Film in this instance was particularly valuable in illustrating the operation of silence and inaction through the imposition of managerial power (see Lukes, 2005).

More light-hearted but no less confronting was the extract shown in the following week, from *9 to 5* (Higgins, 2007). Very much of its place and time (USA, 1980), the film was introduced during class discussion on gender discrimination and harassment. A particular strength was its illustration of the multiple forms of discrimination and harassment. Thus the blatantly discriminatory manager, Franklin Hart Jr. (Dabney Coleman), overlooks Violet Newstead (Lily Tomlin) for promotion, appointing a less experienced man: 'Clients would rather deal with men when it comes to figures', he states bluntly. Hart repeatedly sexually harasses his secretary, Doralee Rhodes (Dolly Parton): 'You mean so much more to me than a dumb secretary'; and hurls verbal abuse at Judy Bernly (Jane Fonda) as the Xerox machine goes rapidly haywire: 'Any moron could operate this thing.' The tables, though, are eventually turned – in the movie, at least. These brief scenes helped to capture the immediate consequences and enduring damage of discrimination and harassment, adding impact to textual and lecture presentations. Students were able to assess how much or how little had changed with respect to the contexts of their own workplace and national cultures, policies and legislation and to relate the film events to a case study and debate on gender discrimination and harassment.

Context was also crucial to the final film extract discussed in the course, from *Up in the Air* (Reitman, 2009). During the GFC and its aftermath, mass corporate downsizing in the USA prompted soaring demand for the services of professional downsizing firms. The film's central character, Ryan Bingham (George Clooney) is employed to deliver the news to employees that their own managers are unwilling to deliver: 'pussies … who don't have the balls to sack their own employees', as he describes them. In its opening few minutes, *Up in the Air* conveys the human dimensions of job loss with remarkable power, as Bingham conducts a (literally) rapid-fire series of terminations. He seeks to defuse the process through following a tested formula, focusing on a future he knows is bleak but which he portrays as full of promise: 'Anyone who

ever built an empire or changed the world sat where you are right now, and it's because they sat there that they were able to do it.' Bingham is the ideal downsizer, having dispensed with all unnecessary baggage, such as possessions and relationships, as he is most at home when 'up in the air', accumulating mileage points. He knows none of the people he fires – and he never will. All the emotion emanates from the employee's side. As one exclaims: 'This is what I get in return for 30 years of service for my company? And they send some yoyo like you in here, to try to tell me that I'm out of a job? They should be telling you *you're* out of a job.' Students are thus confronted in the opening few scenes with the emotionally devastating human consequences of what may appear initially to be bloodless financial decisions. These scenes, then, informed class discussion and debate on redundancy and dismissals. The emotional aspects of the employment relationship, those aspects rarely addressed in texts, became undeniable.

Therefore, these film extracts within a specific learning context could provide a collective experience in which students developed emotional closeness and empathy with different characters, in contrast to the distance and detachment demanded of many of them in their everyday working lives – for example, as middle managers. The unspoken signs of the workplace – from a raised eyebrow to physical intimidation and abuse – were illustrated dramatically: a non-verbal language often reinforced by words, impossible for students to ignore. Multiple issues could even be raised in a single film extract: for example, in a few minutes of *9 to 5* the topics of gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, organisational misconduct and unfair dismissals were made explicit. The extracts also helped to illustrate the need for historical contextualisation, a consistent theme in the course, particularly national and international political-economic developments – for example, the Great Depression in the case of *Modern Times* or the Global Financial Crisis in the case of *Up in the Air.* Thus students were enabled to explore the interrelationships between workplaces, organisational strategies and these broader contexts over time – for example, the effects of fluctuations in employment growth and unemployment on workforce planning.

Assessing the effectiveness of feature film

Several qualitative and quantitative sources were drawn upon over the successive offerings of the course, to assess the effectiveness of the film extracts – that is, the extent to which they added new dimensions to the learning experience. First, two main informal methods of evaluation were adopted: direct observation by the lecturer on how and to what extent the extracts enhanced both class discussions and student learning, as demonstrated through their class participation and assessment items; plus a brief (5-10 minutes) direct discussion between lecturer and students conducted at the end of each class, in order to capture immediate responses on the effectiveness of each film extract in relation to other teaching components of the course. Second, these informal methods were complemented by two formal, anonymous questionnaire surveys of the course (one online, one paper-based), which included open-ended questions on its most and least effective aspects and suggestions for improvements. In order to reduce the possibility of survey fatigue among students, these formal evaluations were relatively brief, lasting no more than fifteen minutes. The survey questions provided numerical indicators on a five-point Likert scale of student views on the overall effectiveness of the course, while the open-ended questions enabled them to provide comments on the specific effectiveness of the film extracts. These specific responses were almost entirely positive, while students were happy to provide comments on the value of particular films, with a particular focus on their relevance to the topics under discussion.

From this combination of formal and informal evaluation sources, it became evident that the situations portrayed in these film examples, in conjunction with discussions on debate issues and case studies, led to students developing more complex, reflective and negotiated responses that questioned the logic and suitability of actions based on a single perspective – usually that of 'the organisation' or its management. These responses included the integration of different cultural perspectives in reaching decisions, embracing a pluralism that recognised others' views as legitimate. The use of film in these contexts, then, helped to encourage both diversity in not only participants' ways of knowing but also in their ways of feeling and identifying with people and situations emotionally, these processes being constantly interrelated.

The film extracts provided scenarios which assisted both students and the lecturer to apply theories of strategic planning and implementation to a range of scenarios, both fictional and factual, in case studies and debates, and to explore relationships often more complex than could be accommodated by the available models usually deployed in employment relations. All participants could enrich their understandings of issues through apprehending alternative perspectives that were opened up by the contextually integrated use of film.

Initially, though, not all students were entirely happy with the role allocated to the film extracts: especially for several students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, it added to their sense of uncertainty, while other students expressed scepticism concerning the introduction of films seen as less than serious. Yet, once the connections with other elements of the course, particularly assessment items, were clarified, students expressed more enthusiasm for the role occupied by feature film. Indeed, the extracts were frequently mentioned as a highlight, while numerous students, mostly from non-English-speaking backgrounds, volunteered that, following the collective experiences opened up by the extracts, they felt more integrated with their peers. In the words of one student, 'I used to think I would be laughed at – but now I know that other people are thinking the same things.'

Several students from non-English-speaking backgrounds also ventured that they felt more prepared to assert their opinions, including disagreement – which had previously posed cultural difficulties for them. As one said, 'It's OK to think differently – and say it.' Therefore, the integration of film in this course stimulated at least a partial democratisation and diversification of the learning process, as numerous students moved from silence to voice, bringing a wider range of personal experiences, backgrounds and perspectives to the overall learning process and expanding the issues for debate and discussion. In this regard, accessibility, especially for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, proved to be a particularly vital criterion for selecting extracts, in order to reduce uncertainty and increase the possibility of a more open, participatory, collective learning experience. For example, the silent movie, *Modern Times*, could virtually eliminate English language barriers. In contrast, an English language extract with a high level of colloquial expressions, especially where delivered sarcastically

or with innuendo, as in *Glengarry GlenRoss*, could present difficulties. The French film, *The Closet*, when shown in its dubbed English version, reported by several international students to be more readily accessible than the subtitled version, in fact proved more immediately accessible for students from non-English-speaking backgrounds. In the case of *Glengarry GlenRoss*, the lecturer provided an explanation of the intent and impact of the sarcasm and innuendo, which were usually associated with bullying and intimidation. Thus predicting and increasing accessibility emerged as an occasionally complex exercise.

Inclusion of feature film extracts in this course contributed to a collective experience through which students could achieve identification and empathy not only with fictional characters but also with fellow students from very different backgrounds and with groups discussed in the accompanying debates and case studies. Film conveyed situations and identifiably 'human' dimensions with a pressing sense of immediacy arguably impossible to convey in print. Hence the learning possibilities identified in the initial example that inspired the introduction of film in this course, 'illegal' Mexican immigrants to the USA, were enhanced, replicated and reconfigured in several new contexts. As Jarvis (2012: 754) notes, though, the efforts of educators to achieve greater identification and empathy among students can have very uneven outcomes on different students, depending on background and context. For example, in this course the showing of *9 to 5* in conjunction with a debate and case study on contemporary employment discrimination engendered cross-national disagreements among students on gender-related practices and policies. Students' experiences underscored how differences may often not be reconciled and unexpected schisms may emerge.

Therefore, the potential for integration should not be exaggerated – as illustrated by a single event during one showing of *The Closet*. On seeing the photo of two men (Pignon and fabricated partner) embracing, three Saudi Arabian women students stood up and silently walked out. They returned the following week without saying a word and without expressing any concern about the torrent of expletives in the next film shown, *Glengarry GlenRoss*, which had been preceded by a standard 'explicit language' warning. Words, though, were scarcely necessary to illustrate how cultural borders can be crossed, even inadvertently.

It is at least arguable, though, that such borders *should* be crossed if employment and equity issues are to be addressed seriously. This instance indicated how the openness afforded by a feature film, therefore, may lead to unanticipated consequences: the particular showing of *The Closet* closed off discussion for the Saudi Arabian students, leading to the vexed question of whether or not the lecturer should effectively self-censure or should make those potential issues explicit at the outset. In this case, a brief warning was provided for subsequent showings.

Therefore, the extent to which students are able and/or willing to engage can fluctuate within the context of a particular class and according to the extent of openness or closure a class and their own backgrounds may provide. The effectiveness of film can vary widely with context and cohort, whereby one extract can be valuable in one setting and for certain students and less valuable in others. Consequently, evaluating their effectiveness requires assessing the responses of various student groups. Overall, the use of film in these contexts nonetheless revealed a complex, participatory learning process in which everyone experienced, to varying degrees, a reorientation of their respective understandings of a topic and of their own relationships to it – that is, film contributed to a degree of personal change and development within the teaching and learning process. As observed by Maggioni and Parkinson (2008), openness to multiple possible truths can enable students to apprehend and evaluate a range of alternatives – each of which may have greater or lesser relevance according to situation and context. In the most successful instances here, differences were made explicit and debate was integral to the content and conduct of the course from the outset. Pluralism, as the acknowledgement of and engagement with alternative perspectives, became an integral characteristic of the course – facilitated by debate questions that opened up a range of competing views.

The integrated use of film in the teaching and learning process, therefore, can enable us to identify with specific situations and the people within those situations, in order to develop more emotionally informed understandings that complement other teaching and learning resources and methods. The integration of feature films within the broader learning context poses a further crucial question: how to maintain a learning (rather than exclusively entertainment)

environment, while recognising the inherent paradox that the learning value of a feature film is that it is often engaging and entertaining: its capacity to entertain opens up possibilities for engagement. A particular strength of the films discussed here was their entertainment value, particularly humour, which ensured engagement. However, in order to maintain purposeful engagement, only scenes that were directly relevant to the week's topic were shown. A major consideration was how much of a film, within copyright constraints, should be shown: in this case, twenty minutes constituted the maximum, to ensure that engagement with the week's topic was retained. The films were not shown in their entirety as separate events but integrated as brief extracts into the teaching and learning process, in order to link them directly to previous and subsequent discussions.

Dorothy Parker once famously, but perhaps apocryphally, said of a performance by the young Katherine Hepburn that she had run 'the gamut of emotions from A to B'. In contrast, the use of film in student learning can assist us to draw on the A to Z of emotions that occur in the world of work, adding a significant dimension of openness to discussions. Although the situations depicted may be uncertain and even dangerous, film offers a safe, inclusive environment in which to address them and in which the problems of passivity and silence, especially in this case from students from non-English-speaking backgrounds, can be addressed. Fictional examples, such as those provided by feature films, afford us considerable licence in this regard: so long as characters are not readily identifable as real people, we can say virtually anything we like about them – an observation that of course extends to both written and other audiovisual representations. Yet often they provide potential sources of insight and analysis that would be impossible for any empirical research – for example, the kinds of bullying and harassment depicted in several scenes from these films would normally be revealed only in legal proceedings. Through discussing them in fictional form, though, students could explore potential strategies for the prevention of bullying with a considerable degree of freedom. The fictional situations depicted in feature films, believable to greater or lesser degrees, provided a basis from which to draw new, more reflective arguments and conclusions that breach the confines of textbook explanations.

Conclusion: opening the learning process through feature film

Research on higher education over recent decades has stressed the development of 'deep' rather than 'surface' learning, in conjunction with strategies which stimulate 'active' rather than 'passive' student involvement (Biggs, 1999; Ramsden, 1992). These constructs have been deployed widely in the higher education literature (see Webb, 2004) and they provide a pragmatic framework for the interpretation of student learning. There is substantial evidence (for example, Trigwell, Prosser, and Waterhouse, 2004) that, where teaching staff adopt student-oriented approaches which change students' conceptions, deeper learning outcomes are more likely than in more teacher-oriented, transmission-type approaches. This paper has been concerned with the potential of film, and specifically feature films, to enhance student learning in the study of employment relations, to produce more active, complex and deeper learning experiences, while acknowledging that students have to acquire fundamental knowledge (for example, of employment law).

Effective learning invariably comprises a combination of active/passive, individual/collective, surface/deep dimensions and related teaching techniques (Mayer, 1986). Not all learning can be exciting, active and 'deep'; certain basic ('threshold') concepts and knowledge are required to reach towards any deeper understanding (Land, Cousin, Meyer, and Davies, 2006) – for example, in this case, a thorough grasp of relevant employment legislation such as workplace health and safety. The main challenge lies in adopting approaches suited to the specific content, teaching environment, student cohort, and intended learning outcomes. The use of film should be similarly contextualised. The impacts of film can be multi-dimensional, complex and frequently unpredictable: the unintended consequences from the use of film may include unexpected learning outcomes.

Student are not 'passive observers': their responses can amplify the power of a film (Champoux, 1999; see also Tipton and Tiemann, 1993). However, if debate and discussion are closed off, they may withdraw into passivity. In this respect, 'mainstream' films, rather than the lecturer's favourite arthouse movie, offer considerable advantages in already being open to a wide audience. *The Corporation*, regardless

of its other qualities as a film, closed off debate, providing virtually a single perspective and reducing the possibilities for students to develop more complex understandings – and, while it could well have encouraged 'deeper' learning, student disengagement largely prevented this. However, the other films used in the course were successful because they encouraged different types of learning to those provided by the other teaching and learning methods used in the course, opening up new issues that neither the lecturer nor students may have contemplated or even recognised before. Students could become to some extent participant observers, within a collectively shared experience, generating emotional closeness and empathy rather than distance and detachment – the latter position being demanded of many of them in their daily working lives. Consequently, their ability to understand the situations of individuals and groups within a range of difficult situations was enhanced.

The conceptual framework for interpreting the teaching and learning process in employment relations should be able to apprehend the complex and multidimensional issues that provide their focus. This necessitates venturing, in addition to 'surface' and 'deep' understandings, towards the apprehension of multiple perspectives that encapsulate both intellectual and emotional aspects. The constructive use of film, integrated within the learning context and providing another dimension of experience, indicates a more complex understanding of the learning process, which reveals how conflict and contradiction can stimulate discussion and debate, leading on to a reformulated, often consensus-based understanding of the issues. This participatory and experiential learning process is one in which all participants undergo a reorientation of their understandings of a topic and of their own relationship to it – contributing to a degree of personal change and development. Thus participants can identify resonances with their own workplace experiences and informal learning, which are in turn brought back to the formal learning context. The inclusion of multiple perspectives also places a considerable onus on the lecturer: to take risks with respect to learning outcomes and to acknowledge a pluralism which, depending on the characteristics of the student cohort, can encompass a range of diverse political, cultural and religious views and backgrounds. This has quite radical implications – for example, it may lead to the overt questioning of the generally 'Western' values, practices,

assumptions and expectations contained in most employment relations, management and business literature.

To raise some open-ended questions on the use of film, questions which should be asked throughout a course and in formal evaluations: What, if anything, is the film extract adding that is new? How much should be shown? How suitable is the particular genre (for example, feature film or documentary) for the specific teaching context and learning purpose? How appropriate is the movie for the student cohort (nationality, gender, age, work experience, disciplinary background)? How well does it relate to the organisation of the class – for example, students engaged in group debates? The learning outcomes from the use of film are closely related to the answers to these questions.

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