

## Film as Engaged Learning: A Study on Teaching Civics Through Spanish Culture

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### ABSTRACT

University professors use film as a medium to examine social issues, although little is known about the tangible effects that socially minded films have on viewers. This study examined how combining film studies with a philanthropy project was beneficial to students' understanding of global social concerns. Survey data showed that with this teaching approach, students increased their awareness of local social needs and nonprofits and had a greater personal interest in community involvement and helping others.

Keywords: service learning, community engagement, film studies, philanthropy, Spanish

### INTRODUCTION

Scholars and teachers at colleges and universities have used film as a medium to examine social issues, although little is known about the tangible effects that socially minded films have on viewers. The purpose of this study was to address this concern by offering a film studies course that allowed students to watch cinematic representations of social concerns and then observe and reflect upon how these issues were present in the local area through a community engagement project. Students watched films from Spain about specific demographic groups (women, adolescents, people with disabilities, and immigrants), identified social needs related to one of these groups, researched a nonprofit in the local community that serviced some of these needs, and prepared a persuasive presentation about one nonprofit that compared the films' fictional representations

with real-life circumstances. The class was given \$2,000 in grant money to award to one or two of the nonprofits. Students took a survey before and after completing the community engagement project to measure their current attitudes and awareness about social needs and nonprofits, their academic goals, and their plans for volunteerism.

By comparing the pre- and post-survey responses, results showed that students' awareness of social needs and nonprofits increased, along with their personal interest in helping others and being involved in their community. The post-survey measured students' level of satisfaction with the course and the community project and suggested that this was a successful teaching method for a film class. Student responses share similarities with existing data about traditional college-age students and their attitudes toward volunteerism, community involvement, civic engagement, and preferred learning methods (Southgate,

2010; Greenberg, 2008; Boyte, 2004; Provitera McGlynn, 2005).

## **Review of the Literature**

### **Community Engagement**

Universities are increasingly drawn to community engagement as a way to boost students' civic participation and social awareness across disciplines, as shown by the Carnegie Foundation "Community Engagement" elective classification that, as of 2011, includes 4,600 institutions (Saltmarsh, 2011, p. 3). Within higher education, community engagement may involve engaged scholarship, a pedagogical approach that bridges teaching and learning with projects or research that are centered on service and reflection about the well-being of self and others (Nuñez, 2014, p. 93). Some of the outlined goals of engagement can include critical thinking and writing skills, a sense of accomplishment and increased self-esteem, and the fostering of valuable personal and professional relationships that contribute to students' future success in their area of study (Nuñez, 2014, p. 95). Often times, service learning is linked to community engagement. The implementation of a successful service learning component relies on two main ideas: 1) reciprocity among students, faculty, community members, and educational institutions to achieve a common objective, and 2) a critical reflection component to produce and record meaningful learning and service outcomes (Felten & Clayton, 2011, pp. 77-78).

Philanthropy is another method associated with community engagement (Bowen, Newenham-Kahindi, & Herremans, 2010). This approach centers upon a one-way transaction between a company that commits resources to a recipient organization (Briggs, Yang, Harmon-Kizer, & Arnold, 2016, p. 111). The difference between philanthropy and service learning is

that the former provides monetary support to community partners while the latter may provide more hands-on support such as fundraising, donated time, or other creative assistance.

### **The Millennial Generation and Engagement**

The role of the millennial generation is vital in assessing the success of community engagement in higher education, since a large percentage of millennials are those who carry out this work in the university setting. The Pew Research Center's publication, "Millennial: Confident, Connected, Open to Change" (2010), describes millennials as those born after 1980 and are the first generation to come of age in the 21st century. As an optimistic and tech-savvy generation, they are known for their tolerance of social issues including race, immigration, and civil status, and they possess a strong ability to get along with others, including those from older generations (Pew, 2010, p. 7-8). Nationally, millennials make up about 30% of the U.S. population and one in five of them are from at least one immigrant parent (Provitera McGlynn, 2005, p. 13-14).

With regard to community engagement, the executive summary of a survey of 2,000 millennials indicated their commitment to the common good over individual gain, and that they are active in and passionate about volunteerism (Greenberg, 2008, p. 1). Millennials have a strong interest in promoting equality, not just within the United States but also globally (Greenberg, 2008, p. 4). A smaller 2016 survey of 1,050 millennial respondents, taken between March and May 2016, revealed that 37% of millennials reported that a person like them could have a moderate impact in the United States, while another 30% answered that they could have a big impact. The survey also revealed that within the

month prior to the survey, 46% of respondents had volunteered for a social issue that they care about, while 52% of respondents had donated to a cause affiliated with a social issue that they care about, and 64% had signed petitions about an issue that they care about (Millennial Impact, 2016).

In the university classroom, students, including many millennials, often juggle coursework demands with other responsibilities including full-time work, establishing financial independence, or caring for a dependent (Provitiera McGlynn, 2005, p. 13). While these factors may have an impact on their attitudes toward teaching and learning styles, the millennial population as a whole highly values teamwork, experiential activities, and the use of technology (Provitiera McGlynn, 2005, p. 14). Millennial students appreciate learning through collaboration and from structured activities that allow for creative thinking about real-life issues that matter to them (Provitiera McGlynn, 2005, p. 15). They can benefit from active engagement that permits them to make strong connections with course content (Provitiera McGlynn, 2005, p. 15).

Deliberative democracy is one pedagogical approach that provides students with an opportunity to piece together information and voice opinions about topics that matter to them. Coined by Sarah Marie Stitzlein (2010), the term “deliberative democracy” refers to teaching methods that allow for democratic participation, inclusive dialogue, public reasoning and deliberation, and collaborative social and political decision-making (p. 1). Students not only engage in their own personal critical reflection but must be open to other viewpoints and, at the end of the process, collectively agree and make decisions as a group (Englund, 2006, p. 503). Deliberative democracy is an activity that is centered on

real content and a call for action (Stitzlein, 2010, p. 5). The roots of these ideas can be traced back to the writings of John Dewey (1916), who argued that a democracy must include meaningful interactions among a multiplicity of social groups and the willingness of informed citizens to contribute to the betterment of the larger social good (p. 87).

The outcomes from deliberative and democratic negotiation can include improved academic skills, heightened personal awareness, an interest in connecting with the community, and being more civically active (Conway, Amel, & Gerwien, 2009, pp. 234-235). Deliberative democracy not only teaches virtues such as honesty, toleration, and respect but also helps students understand that the perspectives of diverse individuals should be considered while making decisions for the common good (Stitzlein, 2010, p. 5-7).

## **Case Study**

### **Structure**

In the Hispanic Film course, the professor selected a total of 12 films, all from Spain, related to four demographic groups: adolescents, people with disabilities, immigrants, and women (three films per theme). The films were selected for their representation of broad social challenges that pertained to these demographics.

The class met once a week for 2.5 hours. Most of the class session was dedicated to discussion and analysis of the film and a critical article about it. In the last 45 minutes, students watched the beginning of the film for the following week. Students finished viewing the film at home. Films were shown in chronological order, according to theme. Upon finishing each theme, the students engaged in a discussion about

<b>Selected Films</b>	
Adolescents:	<i>Just Run!</i> (Carlos Saura Medrero, 2011); <i>Butterfly</i> (José Luis Cueda; 1999); <i>El Calentito</i> (Chus Gutiérrez, 2005)
People with disabilities:	<i>Me, Too</i> (Antonio Naharro, Álvaro Pastor, 2009); <i>Talk to Her</i> (Pedro Amodóvar, 2002); <i>The Sea Inside</i> (Alejandro Amenábar, 2005)
Immigrants:	<i>Poniente</i> (Chus Gutiérrez, 2002); <i>Biutiful</i> (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2010); <i>Agua con Sal</i> (Pedro Pérez Rosado, 2005)
Women:	<i>Princesas</i> (Fernando León de Aranoa, 2005); <i>Take My Eyes</i> (Iciar Bollain, 2003); <i>Seven Billiard Tables</i> (Graciela Querejeta, 2007)

the social needs of the demographic group presented in the three films, as well as reflected upon the similarities and differences between them.

The course objectives and outcomes related to film were to identify, and think critically about, some of the major, as well as lesser-known, social issues of Spain in the late 20th century and early 21st centuries and how they have been cinematographically represented. These film outcomes were assessed through weekly Blackboard discussion posts about the critical articles related to the films, and a final project in which students wrote a detailed analysis of one of the films that they watched in class.

At the same time that students studied film, they participated in a collaborative class project, the Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project (MSPP). The community engagement goals and objectives were to increase students' knowledge of philanthropic processes, particularly grant seeking and grant making, and also to build upon their critical thinking, communication, leadership, and other work-life skills. During the semester, students read two articles

about community engagement and watched a video about the philosophy behind philanthropy and the MSPP. The philanthropic engagement component was evaluated through two reflection papers, a site visit to a nonprofit, and a persuasive group presentation about the nonprofit.<sup>1</sup>

### **The Mayerson Student Philanthropy Project**

The MSPP at Northern Kentucky University consists of a unique "learning by giving" model that was first implemented in 2000 on Northern Kentucky University's campus (MSPP, 2011/2012, p. 4). Each MSPP class is given a set amount of money, usually \$2,000, to invest in a local nonprofit. Faculty design their course so that there is an explicit link between the course content and the philanthropic component, and the classes follow several core procedures.

First, students divide themselves into small groups, often called "community boards," and research one of the social needs and the nonprofits in the area that service this need. Second, the community boards identify the nonprofit, related to

<sup>1</sup>For a discussion of the pedagogical approach, including a breakdown of the semester schedule and corresponding assignments, consult Larson (2015).

their social need, that they find most compelling (and also select one as a runner-up) to further investigate. Third, students are required to conduct a site visit to the chosen nonprofit or, in some instances, complete 20 hours of volunteer work with the organization. Fourth, the community boards create a presentation to synthesize the information about the course content and what students observed in the community with their chosen nonprofit.

In most cases, the community boards want to persuade the class that their chosen organization is deserving of the \$2,000 grant. The class discusses and then votes at the end of the presentations to select the recipient. An award ceremony is held at the end of each semester for all MSPP classes, approximately 12 classes per semester, across disciplines. At this time, the philanthropy funds are distributed to the nonprofits and the professors, students, and nonprofit representatives reflect upon, and most importantly celebrate, the positive impact of the MSPP experience.

Since 2000, the MSPP has grown significantly to include both undergraduate and graduate courses and 3,600 student participants in 41 disciplines (Scripps Howard Center, 2016, p. 9). To date, the MSPP has awarded over \$1.5 million dollars (\$1,535,911) to 331 nonprofits (Scripps Howard Center, 2016, p. 9). The end goal is to encourage Northern Kentucky University graduates to be life-long community stewards.

### **Take My Eyes (2003) and Bethany House Services**

The movie, *Take My Eyes* (2003), is one example to show how film and philanthropy can be combined to give students greater awareness about the social issue of domestic violence, a crime that most commonly takes place behind closed doors. In the case of *Take My Eyes* (2003), students

observed the complexities of domestic violence through the emotions of the victim as well as the abuser. The opening scene of the film, which begins in media res, shows Pilar and her young son as they escape from her abusive husband, Antonio. Pilar stays with her sister, Ana, and Ana's Scottish fiancé, John, and finds a job at an art museum. Pilar's employment there allows her to meet new female friends, despite missing her husband. In Pilar's absence, Antonio sets out to change his behavior through individual counseling and group therapy sessions. Pilar returns to Antonio with renewed optimism about their marriage, but her attitude quickly changes after one of Antonio's angry outbreaks. Pilar leaves Antonio at the end of the film, after he, yet again, hurts and humiliates her in a fit of rage.

Two primary techniques make this film a successful pedagogical tool to couple with student philanthropy. First, the director Iciar Bollain took much care in the character development to make her fiction as close to objective reality as possible, basing it on detailed documentation and research (Begin, 2009, p. 33). This realism could have helped students make clear connections between the film and the potential problems faced by many people in the local community. Second, *Take My Eyes* (2003) presents multiple perspectives about the topic of domestic abuse and does not solely focus on the female victim or villainize the male abuser. Instead, the film outlines the abuser's emotional and psychological state (Wheeler, 2012, p. 471). The varied points of view enable students to consider a broader array of approaches to combat domestic violence, seeking assistance for both the abuser and the victim, and to investigate these options through community engagement.

Upon viewing all three films related to women, the community board prepared questions for an insightful half-hour class

discussion about the films. The group solicited the class's opinion about the female stereotypes prevalent in *Take My Eyes*, as well as two other films about women. They asked their classmates to reflect upon the feminine characteristics of the protagonists, the obstacles that women had to overcome in the movies, and how their personal qualities helped them to get through their personal challenges.

For the MSPP presentation, the community board researched the topic of domestic violence and honed in on services for women, although in the local area, there are also organizations that help men seek therapy for anger management and addiction. The group selected Bethany House Services and framed their argument around what Pilar lacked in *Take My Eyes*: an impartial safe haven from her abusive husband. The community board provided statistics about the number of women that Bethany House Services serves annually, the costs associated with the organization's programs, the transportation network that they use to remove women and children from dangerous situations, and their unique help hotline for non-English speakers.

In the end, the community board provided a convincing argument to award Bethany House Services with an MSPP grant that would allow families staying in the shelter to purchase Christmas presents for their loved ones. The group, and ultimately the class, felt that this extra funding would create a sense of stability and empowerment for families that were working through difficult circumstances.

### **Me, Too and Redwood**

*Me, Too* (2009), another film showed in class, documents the life of a 34-year-old man, Daniel, who became Europe's first person with Down syndrome to graduate from university. His character is performed by Pablo Pineda who, like Dan-

iel, has Down syndrome. The plot begins with Daniel in his first job, one in public administration, in which he advocates for people with disabilities. There, he meets a co-worker, Laura, and they develop a close friendship. Daniel confesses to Laura that he has one unfulfilled goal: to fall in love and get married. The film has been celebrated as a piece of fiction that brings to the forefront the realistic prejudice of non-disabled individuals toward people with disabilities in their aptitude to make their own life choices and decisions. Daniel represents the true desires of many who are living with a disability: the equal opportunity for the pursuit of autonomy and happiness, because many disabled people are denied independence and are subjugated to decision-making by others on their behalf.

In the film class, the community board that researched this topic recognized a repeated message in the three films about disability: the topic of human rights and the idea that all individuals, regardless of their circumstances, deserve the right to be treated as equals. The class engaged in a philosophical debate about the role of the caretaker: Should this person have the power to make decisions on behalf of a person with disabilities? They drew upon the much-publicized case of American Brittany Maynard, who relocated to Oregon after being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, so she could utilize Oregon's "Right to Die" legislation.

In preparation for the MSPP presentation, they invited a speaker from Northern Kentucky University's Best Buddies student organization to talk about how students can promote awareness about disability, be part of a diverse community, and have fun in the process. The Best Buddies offers a mentoring program between college-age students and younger individuals to build a network of empowerment and optimism.

For the MSPP presentation about their chosen nonprofit, Redwood, the community board made a powerful argument in favor of the need for autonomy for all individuals, and how this belief is at the heart of Redwood's mission. The group provided an itemized list of different tools that Redwood provides to people with disabilities (to enhance mobility, to eat more comfortably,

etc.) so that they can lead more autonomous lives. Although the community board was not successful in acquiring the funds for their nonprofit, they were able to emotionally engage with the audience through their presentation. For instance, they incorporated a trivia game about disability awareness. At the end, the class watched a video and took the "R-Word Pledge": to

	<b>Question</b>	<b>Pretest Mean</b>	<b>Posttest Mean</b>	<b>t-value</b>	<b>p-value</b>
1.)	I am aware of the needs and problems of people living in Northern Kentucky and Greater Cincinnati.	4.09	4.36	2.32*	0.015
2.)	I am aware of nonprofit organizations in Northern Kentucky and Greater Cincinnati.	3.73	4.40	3.81**	0.001
3.)	I am interested in this course.	4.45	4.36	-0.620	0.73
4.)	I am interested in student philanthropy or service learning.	4.32	4.27	-0.370	0.643
5.)	I want to stay in college or complete my degree.	4.91	4.83	-0.370	0.643
6.)	I am interested in belonging to and participating actively in a group or association.	4.14	4.32	1.070	0.148
7.)	I plan to work with someone or some group to solve problems in my community.	4.05	4.09	0.270	0.394
8.)	I have a responsibility to help others in need.	4.32	4.23	-0.530	0.698
9.)	I have a personal responsibility to the community in which I live.	3.96	4.23	2.03*	0.028
10.)	I believe that I can make a difference in the world.	4.09	4.09	0.000	0.5
11.)	I intend to volunteer in the future.	4.64	4.64	0.000	0.5
12.)	I plan to seek a career in a nonprofit organization.	2.96	3.09	0.510	0.307
13.)	I will personally walk, run, or bicycle for a charitable cause.	4.00	3.96	-0.210	0.583
14.)	I plan to help raise money for a charitable cause.	4.14	3.91	-1.230	0.883
15.)	I intend to donate money to charity in the future.	4.27	4.32	0.240	0.407

\*\*p<.001, \* p<.05

vow to not use the word “retarded” (Treasure Valley, 2012; Joseph P. Kennedy Jr. Foundation, 2015). Through these means, they transformed the problem by showing how these issues can play out in campus life as well as in the surrounding community. The R-Word message, howev-

sulted in a statistically significant increase in students’ awareness of social needs and nonprofits in the local area, as well as their feelings of personal responsibility to the community (Questions #1, 2, 9).

The post-survey included additional questions that measured students’ satisfac-

<b>Table 2. Counts and Percentages for Responses that Indicated Satisfied/Very Satisfied with the MSPP Process.</b>		
Question	Count	Percent
Overall quality of the proposals submitted by nonprofit organizations for your consideration.	21	95.45%
Group decisions by your class for monetary award(s) to nonprofit organizations.	17	77.27%
The fit between the MSPP and the goals and outcomes of your class.	20	90.91%

er, did not end with the class. Instead, the students made it a larger initiative by incorporating it into the campus-wide awards banquet.

**Results and Discussion**

The MSPP administers a pre- and post-survey to every MSPP class to measure student perceptions of community engagement and philanthropy. The survey, given to the 22 undergraduate students in the class, included 15 questions with a Likert-type response (5 – strongly agree; 4 – agree; 3 – neutral; 2 – disagree; 1 – strongly disagree). Table 1 shows the mean scores for each of the questions of the pre- and post-test.

As depicted in Table 1, the findings suggest that participation in the course re-

tion with the MSPP deliberation process and the compatibility between the course and the MSPP. As shown by Table 2, students were largely satisfied with the end outcome of the MSPP.

As part of the post-survey, students also responded to how the MSPP impacted their attitudes and interests related to academics and social activism. As conveyed in Table 3, students felt that the philanthropy project had a positive impact on their interest in the course as well as on the application of ideas that were studied.

While these quantitative findings provide important insight in students’ experiences with the course, it is important to recognize that the sample size is small. Nonetheless, the data suggests that students value this combined teaching approach for its relevance to real-world issues.

Table 3. Counts and Percentages for Responses that the MSPP Class Experience Was Positive/Very Positive.		
Question	Count	Percent
Your awareness of the needs and problems addressed in this class.	22	100%
Your awareness of nonprofit organizations in Northern Kentucky and Greater Cincinnati.	22	100%
Your interest in this course.	19	86.36%
Your interest in taking another course with student philanthropy or service learning.	13	59.09%
Your learning of the material in this course.	16	72.73%
Your application of information and ideas from this course.	20	90.91%
Your academic skills or knowledge.	18	81.82%
The development of your functional life skills, like communications, assertiveness and decision making.	19	86.36%
Your desire to stay in college and complete a degree.	17	77.27%
Your belief that you have a responsibility to help others in need.	18	81.82%
Your sense of personal responsibility to the community in which you live.	18	81.82%
Your interest in community service.	17	77.27%
Your intention to work on behalf of social justice.	14	63.64%
Your belief that you can make a difference in the world.	18	81.82%
Your sense of purpose or direction in life.	13	59.09%
Your consideration of a career in the nonprofit sector.	14	63.64%
Your interest in belonging to and participating actively in a group or association.	14	63.64%
Your plans to work with someone or some group to solve problems in your community.	14	63.64%
Your intention to volunteer.	17	77.27%
Your intention to donate money to a charitable organization.	15	68.18%
Your plans to personally walk, run, or bicycle for a charitable cause.	16	72.73%
Your plans to help raise money for a charitable cause.	15	68.18%
The actual amount of funds that you currently donate to charitable organizations.	17	77.27%
The actual amount of time that you currently volunteer.	17	77.27%

## Conclusion

While awareness is difficult to measure, student comments from the official course evaluations suggest that the teaching approach was successful in getting students to see social needs in a new light and it improved their learning:

*“We incorporated the Mayerson Project into this course, and I think she did it very well. She chose movies based on four different social groups and we all were in a group and we would present on the movies as well as the organization we wanted the MSPP money to go to. It was a very unique course and I learned much more than I ever thought I would.”*

*“Definitely. The Mayerson Project helped greatly in this. It took what we were learning and put them in real-world context. We were able to see and fully understand what we were learning.”*

*“I have learned so much in this class!”*

*“I believe that there was too much out of class work for the amount of credit hours this class is.”*

Furthermore, the inclusion of the philanthropy project allowed for a collaborative learning style that many college-age students enjoy. The process required that students carefully examine, and perhaps uphold, some of the commonly held values of their age group, including tolerance and equality, and the deliberative democracy process allowed an opportunity to experience the empowerment, and perhaps for some the disappointment, of group decision-making. Student criticism of this teaching philosophy, as expressed in the course evaluations, was not focused on the end result or on the content of the project, but rather on personal time constraints.

While it is challenging to foresee or address the individual circumstances and needs of every student, there are clearly more advantages than disadvantages of this teaching approach. The incorporation of philanthropy in a college course is successful in enhancing the subject matter, and igniting awareness and passion among college students, while making a difference both in the classroom and the world beyond it.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Northern Kentucky University has published a handbook to assist other institutions in establishing similar charitable giving initiatives. See Olberding, Neikirk & Ng's *Student Philanthropy: A Handbook for College and University Faculty* (2010), which is available online at < [http://civicengagement.nku.edu/content/dam/CivicEngagement/docs/ScrippsHowardBooklet\\_optimized.pdf](http://civicengagement.nku.edu/content/dam/CivicEngagement/docs/ScrippsHowardBooklet_optimized.pdf) >.

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