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The Use of Film to Motivate Interest in Students with Learning Differences through Imagination and Diverse Thinking in Higher Education

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Abstract

This article examined the use of film in higher education to inspire imagination and motivate learning in students with learning differences. It highlighted the benefits of film in enhancing education and fostering imagination and diverse, critical thinking. The findings demonstrated that film is a pedagogical instrument that may assist students with learning differences to access the curriculum better, provide alternative forms of creative and meaningful expression, and develop self-awareness, empathy, and social justice.

Keywords: Film, imagination, learning differences, artistic, pedagogical technologies

Introduction

This conceptual article examines film and imagination to motivate learning in higher education. It theorizes that such stimulation can motivate creative learning and promote diverse open-minded thinking about complex social and human issues. The article includes an overview of the benefits of film in enhancing learning in students with learning differences. It explores the use of culturally responsive practices to foster creativity through film.

Bozhovich (2009) and González Rey (2018) indicated that Vygotsky in The Psychology of Art (1965/1971) used the term "perezhivanie" to describe the interrelationship of the arts, psychology, and sociology as a center of human motivation and creativity, which is based upon the entire complex system of human needs, emotions, imagination, and fantasies integrated with the influence of the external environment and culture. Film may be an effective instrument in educational practice and theory to stimulate imagination, which may help motivate learning through diverse thinking in higher education.

Education Theory of Film and Imagination

In Vygotsky's cultural psychology, experiential learning nurtures social-emotional growth and the development of imagination, a critical concept in higher education (Lindqvist, 2003/2010). When applied through the lens of Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Psychology, the theories of imagination converge nicely with theories of film for education. Made relevant through culturally responsive teaching practices, and viewed as social-emotional learning tools, the epistemological trinity of aesthetics, academics, and ethics, together with cultural relevance, blend with theories of imagination and film in education. Applied in an educational context, this combination may foster the development of critical thinking, diverse new ideas, and respect for social justice activities inside and outside the classroom (Selman & Testa, 2021; Cromarty et al., 2022).

Cultural Theory of Imagination

Vygotsky did not adhere to the concept commonly held in North American education of imagination as an innate capacity that stays the same over time with children's or adults' social and cultural growth. To Vygotsky, Imagination developed as part of the cultural development of the human personality (Gajdamaschko, 2006). While the development of imagination in children is commonly portrayed in academic writings, it is evident from the research that the development of imagination occurs throughout the entire life process in children and adults and is most highly developed in adults (Lindqvist, 2003/2010). In Vygotsky's theories of imagination, the social experience of individuals shapes our ways of thinking and interpreting the world. Language as a communicative tool through which we have a mental and emotional dialogue with the people around us helps to construct our higher mental activities (Berk, 1994; Vygotsky, 1934/1987).

Vygotsky was critical of viewing images in the creative arts through the lens of forms such as color, shape, and rhythm. Instead, Vygotsky regarded the arts as the representation of aesthetic form, which through the emotions and interpretations of individual imaginations, become socialized as part of culture through the work of art itself (Lindqvist, 2003/2010; Vygotsky, 1971). The artist, through art, forms an emotional relationship with the viewer, who creates interpretations in the imagination. Vygotsky wrote that creativity is the foundation for the arts, science, and technology (Vygotsky, 1995; Lindqvist, 2003/2010). Vygotsky also suggested that the absurdities of art are reminiscent of children's play, which is why art is an essential part

of the development of imagination and the socialization of children (Linquist, 2003/2010). All human beings are creative, and imagination is the foundation of all creativity. This is a concept given validity by two studies that took place concurrently in the arts by Viktor Lowenfeld at Pennsylvania State University and in the sciences by Dr. J. P. Guilford at the University of Southern California, which found that the creative arts and applied sciences utilize similar attributes of creativity (Lowenfeld, 1957; Cromarty, 2017).

Imagination is also a form of consciousness based on reality, meaning its development is rooted in the diverse array of an individual's experiences (Lindqvist, 2003/2010). Thus, imagination and emotions are inherently related and deeply connected to reality. According to Vygotsky (1995), imagination transforms the elements of reality to create new emotional and intellectual realities. Imagination develops slowly and gradually and in diverse ways with the experiences of each individual. It evolves from simpler forms to more complex ones at each stage of development and is dependent on human activity (Gajdamaschko, 2006). Referring back to the research conducted by Lowenfeld and Guildford (Lowenfeld, 1957; Cromarty, 2017). It is worth noting that Vygotsky felt the development of imagination was as necessary for technical and scientific creativity as it was for creative arts and that both deserve to be nurtured in school (Gajdamaschko, 2006).

To Vygostsky, imagination begins in early childhood as a result of play. It gradually develops through learning experiences as the child gains new cultural tools, which turn into adolescent imagination and, eventually, the productivity of adult imagination. As the child grows into adulthood, the imagination gains complexity, and the individual improves practical skills and the ability to exert greater control over the imagination (Gajdamaschko, 2006).

Bruner (2006) concurs with Vygotsky that consciousness develops as part of social and cultural experience through which the individual uses symbolic tools to grow internally and create meaning through dialogue. Vygotsky also states that relationships and activities with more experienced peers and teachers create zones of proximal development that engage cooperative dialogue, the guidance of adults helps to scaffold cognitive development, and cooperative learning takes place through small groups of peers working together to share responsibilities and varying opinions (Berk, 1994; Forman, 1987; Tudge, 1992). Socialization occurs through

intersubjectivity in which peers having diverse perspectives learn to work together and gain shared understandings (Berk, 1994; Göncü; 1993).

Imagination leads learners to create change through new understandings and meanings that guide actions. In transformative education, as in Vygotsky's theories of imagination, the focus is on holistic learning inclusive of emotions, social experience, and intellect rather than relying solely on rational explanations (Jones, 2016; Mezirow, 2000). An imagination formed through social and cultural experiences helps learners to consider different narratives and to form new meanings and world views. In this way, imagination helps to make change possible and creates new ideas and visualizations of life.

Imagination is transformative because it generates new ideas from old knowledge and assists in seeing new possibilities (Kushnir, 2022; Seligman et al., 2013). It helps to imagine alternatives and make sense of human behavior, social groups, and cultural communities. Imagination in the development of social cognition describes the ability to use existing knowledge in ways that consider contrasting alternatives and create new possibilities (Kushnir, 2022). Thus, imagination helps to create and consider alternative realities. This construct fosters the ability to appreciate diverse perspectives and the complexity of social meanings that differ. In this way, the development of imagination makes individuals receptive to new learning that may be different and mitigates bias toward human diversity (Walker & Nyhout, 2020; Kushnir, 2022).

Theory of Film for Education

Digital film in the form of movies, photography, and cross-media is increasingly being used in the classroom to create active learning experiences that stimulate the imagination and form the emotional relationships that foster transformational change. While the use of film in the classroom may have significant advantages in bringing learning to life and making lessons culturally relevant to students, it is the job of the teacher to carefully choose the media used to avoid film adaptations that have been corrupted for entertainment and marketing purposes. Lois Lowry in *The Giver* (1994) helps educators manage gaps in knowledge between actual events and portrayals in classroom media, suggesting that a successful film adaptation adheres to the spirit of the book (Selman & Testa, 2021). This way, digital media may supplement classroom activities that bring events to life, make academic learning relevant, and nurture students' emotional and social growth to make humane decisions.

Artistic Pedagogical Technologies (APTs) are creative instructional technologies, such as visual film, drama, and music, that may enhance learning (Janzen et al., 2017). APTs must be carefully chosen and be educationally valid to avoid APTs motivated by corporate profit. It must be ascertained that the APT cultivates independent thinking, creativity, and critical decision-making skills rather than convergence and reliance on the APT. Research conducted by Janzen, Perry, and Edwards (2017) implied that APTs in post-secondary education could provide a tool with which to develop further and express student creativity, enhance the sense of community, and improve the students' sense of risk and control in creative learning activities as the student cannot be confident of the result and exerts control over choice in the activity. APTs assist students in creatively working with alternative knowledge brought on by the rapid pace of change, such as using the internet in an educational context (2017). As one of the many forms of APT, film may allow each student and teacher to interpret learning differently, as everyone is unique, stimulating creativity (2017). APTs can enhance imagination and creativity by encouraging academically and socially relevant discussions.

There is a relationship between imagination and memory in education. Memory alone is of limited educational value, but it is essential to teach students how to learn by stimulating the imagination and developing procedural skills (Egan, 1989). Stories implant vivid images, colors, and emotions into events and characters with differing psychological roles, stimulating imagination (Egan, 1989). Imagination is a vital element that colors memory. It infuses emotion and culture that makes memory meaningful. In an oral culture, the teacher becomes the storyteller (1989). Integrating meaning, color, emotion, and culture makes memory relevant and aids in recall and learning. The storytelling element is vital to using film in educational contexts and the storytelling of an oral culture.

Reviewing a film through four epistemic ways of knowing academic, aesthetic, ethical, and cultural contexts can assist in achieving a deep student learning experience (Cromarty et al., 2021). According to the concepts of imagination described in the writings of Vygotsky, including emotion in the four epistemic ways of knowing will increase the meaningfulness of the learning experience. Creating a learning experience that is culturally relevant and which forms an emotional relationship with students provides a meaningful and transformative experience, which is more likely to be remembered and utilized in practice. It closes the cultural gap between

educational institutions and culturally responsive student learning. It provides a high-quality learning environment in which students develop practical skills and humane decision-making abilities that will be applied in life situations.

The ethical principles of a film should not be overshadowed by aesthetics when teaching students to interpret the meanings found in media-based learning experiences. According to Noddings (2003) in Fontaine (2010), a caring relationship depends on imagination. Dewey (1934; 2004) inferred that unless imaginations are stimulated, education becomes the unimaginative acquisition of skills and information. It is, therefore, the job of educators to provide creative environments in which students move from the ordinary to create their worlds, which according to Vygotsky (1978), makes people human. Imagination removes the delusion that we are complete, and when practiced in groups, for example, in the classroom, it allows the possibility of transcending ourselves and developing new social perceptions (Freire, 2005).

Considering the above, it is consistent that the critical discussion of diverse and new perspectives helps to promote the development of alternative concepts (Asterhan & Schwarz, 2007). Comprehension involves the exploration of new ideas. It is an activity that requires the need to imagine, dialectically interact, and make inferences based on imagination, and become part of an imaginary and diverse social world in which alternative ideas create new realities (Larraín, 2017; Rommetviet, 1979; Peirce, 1955). Transferred into the classroom, peers need to discuss, reason, and imagine ideas, through which argumentation and discourse help to scaffold meaningfulness and conceptualization (Larraín, 2017).

Film and Imagination in Students with Learning Differences

In 2016, about 2.4 million students in the USA were diagnosed with learning differences (Kellems & Edward, 2016), which has continued to increase. In recent years there has been steady growth in the number of college students with learning differences (Niazov et al., 2022). Students with learning differences (LD) involving physical, emotional, confidence, and socio-economic issues should be included when engaging in curricular activities in higher education. Educators are responsible for using critical pedagogy and inclusive practices (Freire, 2004; Stokes, 2017) that will give all learners strategies to compensate for learning problems (Baum, 1988). Educators should consider a range of APTs, including film, multimedia, audio design,

music, and screen theory (Stokes, 2017), that can help students with learning differences (LD) access the curriculum in critical and meaningful ways to fuel their imaginations.

At the formative level, the use of film in the curriculum can be valuable to struggling students and those with LD accessing the curriculum (Baum, 1989). On-screen imagery helps visualize written texts and gain information instead of reading or listening to lectures (Baum, 1988). One of the most accessible methods to reach some struggling students through film is turning on the captions, otherwise known as same-language subtitles, and putting words on the screen (Gernsbacher, 2015). This technique has been proven by over a hundred empirical studies to improve comprehension and reading skills, boost written and spoken vocabulary, enhance second-language learners' pronunciation, increase attention and memory, and raise literacy rates (Gernsbacher, 2015). Captions can be particularly beneficial for English Language Learners, students just learning to read, and those who are D/deaf or hard of hearing (Gernsbacher, 2015).

Along with educators showing films as learning tools or imagistic representations of texts, video modeling (VM) and video prompting (VP) have proven to be effective techniques for students who struggle in a regular classroom environment (Olçay, 2016; Kellems & Edwards, 2016). These interventions use film to break down new behaviors or tasks and visually instruct students on performing them (Olçay, 2016; Kellems & Edwards, 2016; Wright et al., 2020). VM and VP may be especially helpful for students having autism spectrum disorder (ASD) or Asperger's Syndrome, as they can be used to teach skills for understanding and responding to emotions and help to foster social and reciprocal play (Olçay, 2016). VM and VP are useful as pedagogical tools as they are considered transparent and concrete teaching strategies for students who struggle with specific tasks. They can often be seen as entertaining by individuals with disabilities (Olçay, 2016) and may inspire creative and imaginative thought.

Students with LD can likewise use film to show their creativity and imagination. Providing students with communication methods that do not involve writing, such as film production, can be extremely helpful and inclusive (Baum, 1989). Indeed, allowing students to produce work as a film rather than written reports helps minimize disabilities and highlight strengths (Baum, 1988) and lends to students' exploring their creativity. Students with LD are fully capable of creative effort and involvement in artistic activities and should be encouraged in these efforts in the classroom (Smieszek, 2019). For some individuals, especially students with

LD, art becomes a link between the outside and the inside world, and film production is an important area of creativity (Smieszek, 2019). In pedagogical practices, teachers should encourage students to show understanding through creative film stories, which can function as works of art, entertainment, research tools, posters, and textbooks (Smieszek, 2019).

Using film in the classroom can function for some students as medicine for sore souls (Smieszek, 2019). Smieszek (2019) wrote of cinematherapy and how students who feel isolated due to learning challenges may have the enlightening and invigorating experience of noticing themselves on screen - comparing their lives to the lives of film characters, and recognizing familiar situations or facts or creative symbols that may be meaningful. Through film, educators can display visual representations of individuals often absent from the mainstream media or inaccurately portrayed, allowing students with LD to feel less isolated (Schwartz et al., 2010) and explore self-identity. Such media displays may motivate students with LD, showing learners that great things can be achieved even when struggling academically (Schwartz et al., 2010). One example of a documentary depicting positive representations of learning differences in higher education is *Look; I'm in College*, about four men with autism who attend a pilot program at Pace University (Browne, 2006/2007; Schwartz et al., 2010). The film may help students with LD better understand the world in which they live and their place in it. Films can familiarize students with contemporary issues in an authentic way, helping them to understand better human relations and the problematic situations in which they may find themselves (Smieszek, 2019). Film may also allow these students to foster their imaginations in transformative ways, allowing them to generate new ideas and new possibilities (Kushnir, 2022; Seligman et al., 2013).

Media imagery such as the film *Look, I'm in College*, and the examples described above may help all students. As such, educators should recognize that film can help create empathy, promote diverse, open-minded thinking, and allow students to think critically and creatively and understand their peers' learning differences. As long as the films in the curriculum are utilized in a structured context, movies can help inform about the realities of disabilities and help promote inclusion through knowledge and understanding (Safran, 2000). The use of film should be conducted in ways that help students gain empathy and understanding; therefore, educators must be careful that representation in such media is fair and avoids stereotypes and ableism (Black & Pretes, 2007). As what is viewed in the media, specifically in film, appears to impact public

perception, it is essential to ensure that negative themes and stereotypes are not perpetuated (Black & Pretes, 2007). Through exposure to diversity in film, students can appreciate different perspectives and develop their imaginations in ways that make them receptive to new learning. The film should only be used as a critical tool that helps to develop understanding, awareness, and creative thought.

Aside from regular classroom practices, it cannot be overstated that understanding media is an essential 21st-century tool. Providing students with opportunities to practice critical interpretation is intended to inform their later work as producers and digital citizens (Stokes, 2017). Critical media literacy is an essential piece of transformative pedagogy and learning, which empowers students to question media, challenge hegemony, and participate in society as justice-oriented citizens (Funk et al., 2016). Therefore, film/media interpretation is vital for every student's education and citizenship, regardless of ability.

Imagination and the Gifted

The fluency and flexibility in adapting imagination and its expressions to diverse social settings and social change is a characteristic of gifted individuals (Lowenfeld, 1956). As a gifted individual matures, a chain reaction occurs in the fluency of imagination, its application to social problems, and the materials used to express imaginative concepts. This was called *Ideational Fluency* by Guilford (1952) in research conducted on creative thinking in the Psychological Laboratory of the University of Southern California. Gifted individuals and students having learning differences can be susceptible to experiences as they may have a highly integrated sense of thinking, feeling, perceiving, motion, and rhythm and require great flexibility and freedom of expression (Lowenfeld, 1956). When teaching with film, gifted individuals must be free to express intuitive imagery in concrete literary, artistic, auditory, and similar forms of expression. Gifted individuals may express and communicate differently than atypical students. Gifted individuals must be free to express imaginative concepts in applied ways within diverse social contexts without inhibiting their self-confidence in expressing new ideas.

Research by Gotleib, Hyde, Immordino-Yang, and Kaufman (2016) on social-emotional imagination concurs that gifted students display multiple cognitive and affective attitudes and perspectives reflecting alternative multi-disciplinary skills that offer real solutions to human

problems. When using film to teach, students need the support to think critically in ways that offer alternative and viable solutions to real-world issues and ethical dilemmas.

Freedom to express using social-emotional skills instead of standardized methods is essential when working with gifted students. Standardized methods such as IQ tests and tests which rely on memorization of information are culturally biased and do not reflect the intelligence of minorities and students having diverse talents, such as the gifted and students with disabilities (Gottlieb et al., 2016; Mackintosh, 2011). Research has shown that analysis of creative writing, art, and creative works by psychologists, accomplished creative writers, and teachers are more effective and do not show bias when comparing Caucasian, African American, male, or female students (Gotleib et al., 2016; Kaufman et al., 2004). A more accurate reflection of ability is that students learn to critically apply information to develop social skills and solve ethical, social, and intellectual problems.

Social Growth and Self-Identification through Imagination

Using film in the classroom can help foster social growth and the development of self-identification within the student to bring about an awareness of roles and social activities that benefit the community. Dewey (1959) inferred that the moral purpose of the school is to create an atmosphere in which students address moral issues and participate in community welfare. Historically schools have taught character development and social responsibility that includes respect for self, classmates, diversity, and the ability to form relationships (Leshnoff, 2003; Lickona, 1993). Using artistic media, such as film, educators can influence behavioral values learned in school activities through curriculum, discussion, and addressing the social and cultural contradictions society presents as moral issues (Leshnoff, 1999; Eisner, 1985; Duncum, 1989).

Lowenfeld furthered the concept of social development through creative arts in the classroom, suggesting that the goal is not the aesthetic product or the artistic experience but the growth of creativity and the student's sensitivity in the application of the arts to life situations (Young, 2013; Michael, 1982). Lowenfeld's concept of self-identification implies that all people can develop their own complex identities and, through social experience, can conceptualize individual meanings, cultures, and self-knowledge (Smith, 1996; Gay, 2004; Young, 2013). Culture alone is insufficient to develop a concept of individual complexity; it takes an understanding of the environmental influences and the holistic dynamics of self-concept that

affect the growth and expressions of each human being (Jenkins, 2001; Wilson & Wilson, 1982). The concepts of Lowenfeld are significant to the use of film and creative media to nurture social growth in education as Lowenfeld's research was conducted with students having disabilities, as well as cultural and emotional diversity.

Psychologists view imagination as an activity that enriches learning and self-actualization and helps prepare the learner for real life (Faure et al., 1972; Torrance, 1965; Kay, 1991). However, they warn that culture should not be transferred through ready-made models. Instead, in the optimal learning processes, self-actualization occurs in each individual in diverse creative ways that cultivate an exchange of differing perspectives and unique personal expressions (Kay, 1991; Faure et al., 1972). Psychologists suggest that if children were encouraged to realize creative activities, adults would not have such a stigma about partaking in original works (Kay, 1991; Childs, 2003).

Imagination helps us to comprehend the world and explains theoretical imaginings as to why things happen or could occur, suggesting that our ability to imagine alternatives to reality is as vital to social cognition as our ability to reason (Kushnir, 2022). Social cognition is defined as how we make sense of people's behaviors, including groups with whom we are familiar and cultural communities more distant (2022). This implies that the role of imagination in social cognition is to use existing knowledge to consider and integrate alternative possibilities for human actions that coincide and contrast with our social experiences. Relying on existing knowledge learned through personal experience and cultural communities may lead to bias (2022). Imagining new perspectives may lead to insights about human behavior that alleviate bias and make us receptive to learning alternative ideas and cultural experiences (Walker & Nyhout, 2020; Kushnir, 2022). Film creates diverse cultural activities and knowledge that stimulate the imagination to think creatively about alternative perspectives and social meanings that differ from our previous experiences.

Discussion, Argumentation, and Ethics

Supporting students through discussions, creative forms of expression applied to learning, and culturally responsive teaching can help make learning meaningful and relevant to gifted students, students with disabilities, and atypical students. As was inferred by Sir Kenneth Robinson, it is important to afford students a learning experience that is authentic and rooted in

the social and cultural context in which the students live (Robinson & Aronica, 2015). The methods of achieving this may differ with every class. Some examples may include letting students choose classroom topics, using modern adaptations of classic films and texts, creating activity-based projects that encourage students to make their own films and digital classroom presentations, and showing media that is culturally relevant to student life experiences, such as *The Hate U Give* (Tillman, 2018) and *Freedom Writers* (LaGravenese, 2019).

Social concepts can lose relevance to social practice when discussed in the classroom. Therefore, educators and students must resituate the meaningfulness of social concepts in classroom interactions (Larrain, 2017). Discussion of differing perspectives can promote the use of imagination in resituating social concepts as culturally relevant in classroom settings. Reasoned argumentation can bring new meanings and exploration to discussions, allowing for the imaginative reconstruction of alternative viewpoints (2017). Thus, argumentation plays a role in developing reasoned imagination to provide meaningfulness that makes learning relevant, respects diverse viewpoints, and mitigates bias in classroom discussions.

The film can be instrumental in teaching lessons of ethics in classroom settings. The film brings stories to life and provides images of experiential activities, which give meaning to imaginative events and makes learning culturally relevant. Using a movie complements the texts; it does not replace the literature but adds dimensions by motivating and drawing student interest toward a focal issue upon which to analyze (Teays, 2017). Coupled with critical discussion, stories may lead students to examine their own lives and moral dilemmas, thus strengthening ethical theory and practice. By making ethical issues that are foreign to student experience culturally relevant, film can give students the visual and imaginative experience to examine global issues that may have practical applications in the student's local communities. Three adaptations are suggested by Teays (2017) when utilizing film to examine ethical issues in the classroom, first, laying a foundation that students know how to deconstruct and analyze a film. Second, starting with the moral dimension of the film itself before bringing in advanced concepts. Third, make the lessons practical and relevant to the student experience, for example, discussing how ethical issues raised by a film affect the characters and are culturally and morally relevant to the student experience.

Conclusion

The use of film may stimulate imagination, give color and meaning to memory, and foster the human and intellectual growth of atypical, gifted students with learning differences. Imagination is a developmental life process based on an individual's cultural experiences and is highly complex and socially impactful in a higher education context. Film and digital media may be used to create visual and auditory experiences helping to make learning culturally relevant and heartening for students to imagine alternative realities and diverse perspectives that make sense of human behavior and mitigate bias.

Film is an instrument that may assist students struggling with learning differences and who are gifted to access the curriculum and visualize written texts and auditory lectures. It may provide students with alternative methods of communication that do not involve standard written formats, such as applications that increase accessibility and the artistry involved in creative film production. Alternative forms of expression inspire students to self-identify with characters and events, making learning culturally relevant and meaningful. By creating meaningful learning experiences, film can encourage students to develop a more profound concept of self, understand classmates, think empathetically about human differences, and respect alternative ideas and issues of social justice.

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