

Using Feature Film in the Teaching of History: The Practitioner Decision-Making Dynamic

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Abstract: Historical feature film can engage and motivate today's visually orientated students and provide a bridge between the school and life world of a youth culture habituated to communication via numerous electronic portals. It is not surprising that international scholarship suggests that these multi-modal recreations of the past are being used as teaching resources in many history classrooms. However, the use of historical filmic narratives is not without its difficulties for the history teacher. These films are made with no obligation to adhere to evidentiary records and, the limitations of the art form and commercial imperatives, can lead to compression and manipulation of the narrative and the inclusion of fictionalized elements. History educators are faced with the dilemma how best to harness the engagement of film and test its historical representation. This paper reports on an Australian research project that explored the decision-making dynamic of history teachers in regard to the use of feature films. It found that the dynamic was governed by a complex interplay of factors in relation to teaching context, learning community perceptions and practitioner understandings and strategies, and concluded that teacher disciplinary perceptions were a major contributing factor in the decision-making process.

Key words: history education, history and feature film, practitioner understandings, disciplinary perceptions.

Introduction:

Historical feature film has the potential to engage and motivate contemporary students and can bridge the school and life world of a youth culture habituated to communication via numerous electronic portals. These films can teach rich lessons about the nature of historical inquiry and the subversion and redrafting of history in contemporary media (Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010; Wineburg, 2001; Seixas, 1994). Their appeal to the cognitive and emotional endows historical feature films with an enduring impact that can be exploited by teachers in epistemological and ethical investigations and lead to the development of metacognitive frameworks of historical understanding and consciousness (Donnelly, 2013).

However, the very nature of commercial film production is an issue in the use of film for educational objectives. Feature films are money-making enterprises and as such need to attract an audience. It is often the case that adherence to the historical evidence and narrative is sacrificed in the name of entertainment with distortions, compressions and fictional additions. Perhaps the most insidious problem is that of "presentism", that is having characters act and speak in the manner of the contemporary society, rather than those of the film's historical setting (Taylor & Young, 2003). This is a problem in the presentation of values, attitudes and societal roles of the past, which may jar with modern sensibilities (Weinstein, 2001). For example, many contemporary audiences may not be comfortable with the rigid codes of behavior and limited expectation of independence that existed for women in some past, and indeed contemporary, societies. However, to modernize, and westernize, these narratives for the comfort of the audience is to falsify the historical record and

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undervalue the dynamic shifts in sex-based roles in human history. These “creative liberties” need to be explicitly exposed assessed and amended, if feature films are to be helpful in the teaching and learning of history.

The effective utilization of film in the teaching of history is not a simple matter and requires clear learning objectives and explicit teaching (Stoddard, 2007). Wineburg and Martin (2004) found without careful time allocation and explicit teaching, film can become another “distraction” to the examination and analysis of historical sources. They conclude that if students only passively engage with the film and are not required to deeply investigate and respond to it as an historical artefact, then films run the same risk as internet searches, computer slide shows and other technology: that of being a distraction from historical literacy skills. This project examined the interplay of tensions that influence if and how feature films are used in the history classroom and analysed data from a group of Australian history teachers to identify the factors that encouraged or inhibited their use of feature film.

Research Design and Data Analysis

This paper reports on an Australian research project that examined the use of feature films in the teaching of history and explored the decision-making dynamic of the teachers in regard to if and how they used film in their secondary classrooms. The project was designed in three phases. The majority of participants were from the most populous Australian state of New South Wales with small contributions from Queensland, Tasmania and Victoria. Initial data was gathered from two surveys about filmic pedagogies in history, one focused on teacher practice (n = 203), while the other looked at student experience (n = 361). The teacher practice survey investigated the use of film in the history classroom in terms of films used, implementation strategies and the conceptual frameworks underpinning pedagogical decision-making. The student survey examined students’ experiences with film in history and their attitudes to its place in their learning. The second phase of data gathering took the form of twenty semi-structured teacher interviews. The selected group volunteered from the surveys and were from a variety of teaching contexts, and had a diverse range of experiences and attitudes with using film to teach history. Case studies formed the last phase of the project (n = 6). These were selected from the teacher interviewees’ group on the basis of exemplifying distinctive approaches to the use of film and being extreme examples of methodological approaches that were evident in Phase 1 and 2 data. The case studies took the form of classroom observation, document analysis and in-depth interviews. The data was coded and, using NVivo software, analysis was undertaken by the development of “trees” of inter-related ideas and themes. The findings discussed here are drawn from the three phases of the project with a focus on the teacher-based data.

Findings

Rationales for Feature Film Usage

The teachers were asked if they found feature film to be a powerful teaching tool and if so, they were asked to give one reason for their answer. The results are shown below in Table 1.

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Table 1: *Filmic Usage Rationales from Phase 1 Teacher Survey (N = 202)*

Yes/No	Total Percentage	Reasons Given (Expressed in Whole Number Percentages)
Yes	83%	Encourages empathy (42%)
		Brings history to life – historical imagination and visual literacy (30%)
		Good for teaching historiography and historical understanding (8%)
		Excellent stimulus for discussion (6%)
		Provides different strategy to reading (4%)
		Good introduction or conclusion to topic (2%)
		Familiar genre for generation x, y and z (1%)
No	15%	Films not historically accurate (10%)
		Students find boring (2%)
		Film lacks sufficient depth (2%)
		Students consider a “bludge” (non-productive) lesson (1%)
Undecided	2%	Only good for mature students (1%)
		Yes in some ways and no in others (1%)

Film’s ability to engage and to create interest by encouraging empathy and stimulating the historical imagination were the most reported rationales (72%). These responses are typical of this large group. “Kids enjoy the experience and become more involved in their learning. Students recall what they have seen and discussed rather than what they have just read. Film allows the teacher to refer back to particular scenes or incidents in their explanations and gives the students an initial frame of reference.” Also “Yes, [film] is a very powerful tool because it makes history visual and alive in a way that no textbook can. Historical films can give students a feel for the era and are excellent for motivation of most students.”

Many respondents reported that film helped their students identify with the past and develop emotional as well as intellectual connections. As one teacher related, “I’ve watched a whole generation of students empathize with Aboriginal people because of watching *Rabbit Proof Fence* and I’ve yet to get a single student volunteer to fight the way soldiers did in World War I thanks to *Gallipoli*. Another teacher used the same films as examples for the power of film to take students back to a past world. “Most students don’t understand the society of 1914 so showing *Gallipoli* explains in one film what could take a month of words and pictures. Same with *Rabbit Proof Fence*. When they see the anguish of the parents and kids they really know what the Stolen Generations is all about. It makes it more real to them and brings the topic to life and they will not forget.” Several teachers related this emotional response to the encouragement of perspective taking. “It [film]

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allows students to empathize with situations that may be beyond their experience and one of my aims is to get my students to see and feel the lives of others. I find films very effective means of examining different points of view and values by comparing and contrasting attitudes and experiences of the various characters.”

The importance of the visual in learning was advocated by many of the teachers as a positive aspect of film usage. “Visual material can create an image of the context so beautifully — even if inaccurate at times. Film is hugely important in history, I believe.” Many commented here on the visual nature of the film experience as appropriate and engaging for contemporary students who inhabit a very visual technological world. As one teacher explained, “many students are visual learners and films are designed to be powerful. A powerful impact can be a very handy teaching tool if used carefully; students remember the visual imagery clearly.” Visual literacy and historical imagination were also canvassed in this question. As one teacher explained, “it [film] helps students to visualize aspects of the historical period. Students often comment on how the topic comes alive for them after watching a film. They connect with the narrative and it often garners thoughtful questions from the students.” The link between popular culture, film and the life world of the students was also reported. This comment is illustrative of the group, “[film] brings both enjoyment and a visual learning aid into classroom. Actors are much more glamorous and interesting than boring old teachers and much more connected to youth culture.”

Eight percent of teachers cited film as a useful medium for teaching historiography. As one teacher explained, “Film does provide students with a medium that they are familiar with as visual learners, and does not require students to ‘imagine’ but rather ‘observe’ the product of someone else’s imagination. Most students watch movies regularly and therefore would find watching a film more accessible and relevant than reading a book or a set of primary written sources. Though these skills are important, students are able to see how historians and directors and producers use those skills and others to create films that teach the world audience about the past. This does not only allow for a study of the past events and issues that the film covers, but also a layer of historiography and mass media that require higher-order thinking skills to understand.” A number of comments alluded to critically examining film and the importance of this skill for life beyond and after school. This comment epitomized this notion, “Film serves to complement work done in class when it is an accurate presentation, when inaccurate promotes discussion of film as source and representation of the past, promoting higher order thinking. As entertainment, film can foster a life-long interest in History, which is one of my major objectives.”

Filmic Pedagogy Dynamic

Further analysis of the data from the three phases of the research aimed to discern the decision-making processes that determine if and how teachers use historical feature film in their teaching of history. The work from this section of the project builds on the findings of Wineburg and Wilson (1993) that characterizes impact teachers’ expertise and pedagogical decision making processes as difficult to isolate due to the many contextual factors that impact on teachers’ epistemic stances. The project data indicated a wide variety of teacher attitudes and approaches to using feature film in secondary school history. The analysis identified eight broad factors that impacted on the use of filmic pedagogies and these are epitomized in the diagram below (see Figure 1). The following section provides a descriptive analysis of the factors that determine filmic pedagogies and discusses each using examples from all phases of the project.

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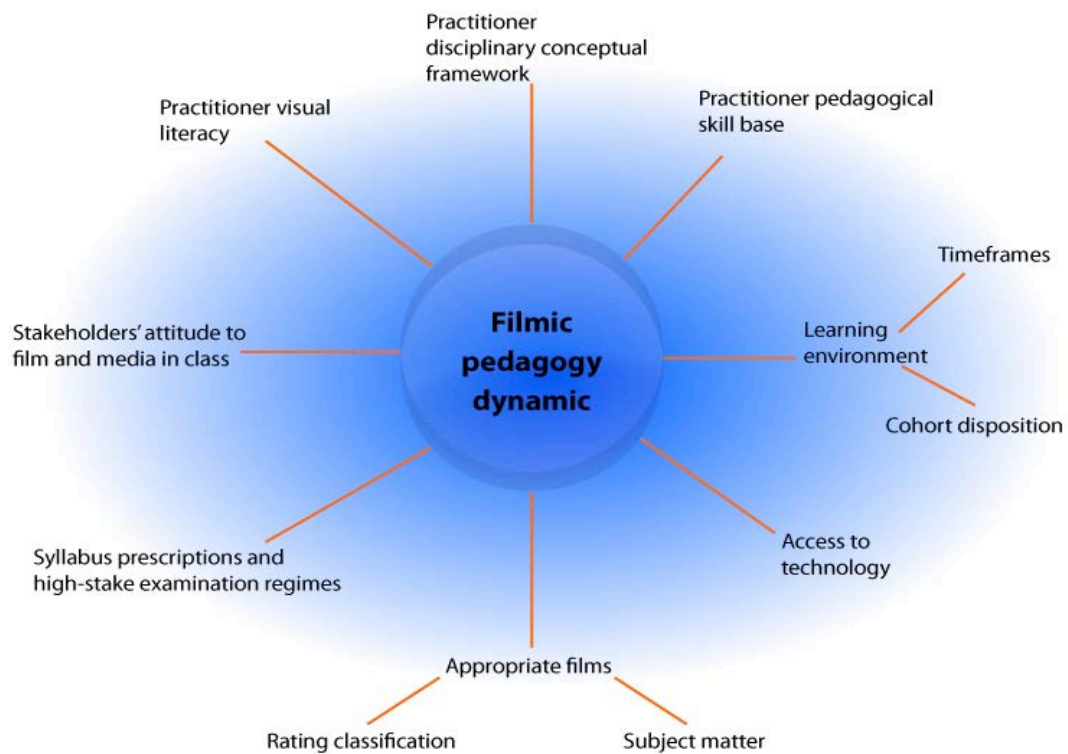


Figure 1. Filmic pedagogy dynamic

Learning Environment and Technology

The learning environment, such as access to technology, systemic timeframes and cohort disposition, were factors that influenced how teachers tended to use feature film in their pedagogy. Access did not appear to be a deterrent. Only six teachers, from a participant group of 203, reported having problems with access to the technology required for watching films, all the rest graded their access to technology as good to excellent. The non-alignment of the school timetable and the time needed to effectively teach using film was a complaint that echoed throughout the teachers' survey and interviews with most teachers having good access to the required technology and films, but not enough access to their students' time. Many teachers found that film viewing did not easily fit into the rigid timeframe of secondary high school time structures, especially when they want to include time for discussion or reviewing strategies. As one respondent put it, "films are too long to be viewed in one session and so need several viewings. If there is discussion on part of the film, it also takes longer. I do occasionally use edited parts, but this doesn't engage student interest as much." Several teachers suggested that a major re-organization of the school day was needed to allow them time to use the new technologies effectively as they saw the lack of continuity caused by short lesson times and irregular class attendance as reducing the effectiveness of the teaching programs.

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Another dimension of the learning environment that influenced teaching practice with film was the culture of the school and the resulting behavior of the students in class and their attitudes to their learning. It is obvious that enthusiastic, literate students are more easily guided through issues of problematic knowledge and historiographical changes over time than those students who resist the journey, for whatever reasons. Several of the teachers referred to the socio-economic background and the poor literacy skills of their student cohort and expressed the view that film, and visual sources generally, were effective teaching tools for their students. The narratives of teacher practice in this group tended to concentrate on engagement, motivation and communicating the content knowledge with some use of historical sources. Two case study subjects, Mrs Drew and Ms Stacey (pseudonyms), taught in advantaged learning settings and their narrative of teacher practice centred on historical literacy skills and understandings. Their classes were small, single-sex and their students were reported as eager to learn and had strong literacy skills. The compliance and capabilities of their classes appeared to give the teachers more opportunity to investigate disciplinary issues, such as the nature of historical representation and its evolution over time. On the other hand, the case studies of Mr Murray and Mr Price demonstrated that feature film can be integrated into the more challenging teaching contexts and that issues of contestability and historical representation can be explored. As Mr Price explained it, "my school is pretty rough and we seem to always be looking at visual stuff. It seems the more films I use the better and the better the kids like it and the more they learn." Although cohort disposition did appear to impact on filmic pedagogy, the variety of approaches reported and observed suggested that other factors held more sway in the choice of pedagogical approaches with film.

Several teachers revealed that their use of film was blocked, against their professional judgement and understanding, because of the traditionalist school culture view of historical films as entertainment. This controversy stems from the nexus between history, fiction and entertainment and almost certainly has been intensified by the misuse of film by teachers with little regard, or perhaps understanding, of its potential.

Appropriate Films and Systemic Prescriptions

Two factors that were found to have negative impacts on the use of feature film in the history classroom were the difficulty in finding suitable and allowable films and the syllabus compliance requirements. Many teachers commented about the difficulties of finding appropriate historical feature films for their classroom studies. There were numerous complaints about the unrealistic Australian censorship ratings for many historical feature films and the inconsistent application of the criteria for the classifications. As one teacher explained, "some films have little that is in any way controversial and these films can be seen in the students' homes on prime time TV." In state-run New South Wales schools the classification problem was compounded by the administration of compulsory permission notes that caused many teachers to use film less frequently. Although few parents refuse permission, it is common for some students to fail to return their permission notes and so these students, often the more unruly members of the group, have to be excluded. As one teacher put it, "all those slips of paper and lists for each class – it has become an administrative nightmare and what am I to do with the few non-watchers?" Some teachers reported these logistical difficulties as inhibitors to the breadth of pedagogical approaches and an encouragement to an almost exclusive concentration on print-based methodologies.

The prescriptive syllabus documents and the high stakes examination regimes were seen by many teachers in the Australian state of New South Wales as impediments to their effective use of feature film. The syllabi for History prescribe broad coverage of numerous topics and this is coupled with the

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pressure of a public examination regime. As one teacher explained, “my biggest problem is fitting everything in while engaging and challenging my students. I teach in a senior high school and the content demands are heavy, which means there is little time for extended viewing.” One teacher commented that his students became impatient with spending valuable class time watching a feature film. “Students are under more and more pressure from the many subjects they study and want to use their time efficiently. If we are ‘taking up time’ watching a film, regardless of the effectiveness of its use, some students feel that we are ‘getting behind’ with the work, particularly if they have already seen the film before.”

Practitioner Pedagogical Skill Base and Visual Literacy

All interviewees in this project portrayed themselves using a variety of teaching resources when teaching and all agreed that technology has provided information sources and presentation devices beyond the printed page. Although there may be a gap between the described in the interviews and actual classroom practice (Barton and Levstik, 2004). However, the four of the six case studies demonstrated the use of a variety of teaching resources across a range of formats. Mrs Drew’s response captures the sentiments of the participants. She was observed using a variety of resources and explained, “I use pretty much everything that’s available. . . . I tend to use a lot of primary sources and we use websites, sometimes in the classroom, it might be interactive or maps. Sometimes I bring in an artefact as a stimulus.” Another case study subject, Mrs Matthews (pseudonym) also expressed the need for varied teaching resources, “it’s always a variety. There will be a textbook, there’ll be a short film, and I’ve got things on CD that I play, all sorts of bits and pieces that provide separate forms of stimulation for the kids.”

This research found that few of the teacher participants had training in the semiotics of film or the issues around using film to teach history. Only 8% of the participants had studied using film to teach history in their initial qualification or in subsequent training. The data indicated that many teachers who were confident with printed source analysis and interpretation were less comfortable with investigating film as an historical artefact. This comment from an interviewee demonstrates this lack of understanding, “I just show the movie and talk about what happened. Then I move on to the sources.” When asked what methods they used to teach using film most teachers referred to discussion and worksheets. There were a few exceptions to this with a small number of teachers commenting on the need for explicit teaching of visual media analysis skills and they were able to narrate their methods. This is from an interviewee, “you can’t expect kids to be critical thinkers without some guidance and they need to be taught how film works. I use the special features included on DVDs to explore the director’s intention and the music of music, costuming, effects and so on.”

There was general agreement that film appealed more directly to the visual learner and many stated that today’s students, as users of technology, are more visually orientated than previous generations. This comment is representative of many. “Film gives students, who are part of a world filled with visual stimuli, a visual hook on which to hang often complex concepts. They remember what they see better than what they read and film gives the class a basis for discussion. Remember when x did that in the film?” The case studies of Mrs Drew and Mrs Warner (pseudonyms) demonstrated impressive use of the visual for learning. They used visual representations and scaffolds to summarize observations and opinions around specific focus questions. They both re-visited important scenes to allow students to “collect” extra evidence and encouraged their students to argue from a number of viewpoints. Mrs Drew devoted time to the analysis of filmic techniques and the effects and rationale for their use. She focused her students on the persuasive devices employed

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by the film-makers to convince the audience to a particular viewpoint. Mrs Warner's classes re-wrote scenes from alternative perspectives, and performed them for the class. The students provided explanations for their directorial decisions and linked these to other historical sources. However, the other teacher practice interview narratives had a much more limited approach when using film and the visual in their teaching. Most had questions for the students to answer during or after viewing, and these tended to focus on the story of the film.

The data suggest that the limited visual literacy skills of some of the teachers precluded them from thorough film analysis and that their ability to scrutinize production motivation, agenda and representation issues was lacking. These teachers tended to concentrate on the narrative of the feature films and did not treat the films as contemporary historical sources to be interrogated. Some teachers did test the historical veracity of representation, but few integrated this study by comparison with other primary and secondary historical sources. Although there were a few exceptions, most teachers in this study used a limited range of pedagogies when dealing with film and many saw the feature film as separate from the rest of the study.

Practitioner Disciplinary Conceptual Framework and Filmic Pedagogies

The data indicated that philosophical positionality concerning the nature of the discipline of history, and the resulting notions of teaching purpose, was an important element in the decision-making processes of history teachers. A continuum of disciplinary understandings was suggested in the teacher survey data and further explored in the teacher interviews. This line of investigation began with the observation that attitudes to historical accuracies in feature films vary and that this impacted on the teachers' attitude and use of film.

A small group of seven teachers observed that film was useful to the development of historical understanding as the narrative could be examined as a construction of the past and then embedded in a broader study of the evidence. As one of these teachers explained, "they [films] help in the understanding of the process of historical construction. Films put forward a particular historical interpretation in a way they [students] do not necessarily pick up in a written text. Things such as what is left out, selection of actors for particular parts and introduction of romance can be detected and motives for inclusion looked at." Another teacher supports this idea, "when I'm evaluating a film as a source I have focused viewing followed by discussion and comparison with other sources. It is vital to line up the film with other historical evidence." A few teachers from this group commented on the importance of critically examining the films to detect how the audience is being manipulated. "I think it is important that the students understand that the visuals, music, characterizations and narrative of the film are designed to get them in. I have them note down the techniques used by the film makers for later discussion."

There was a small but significant group of twelve teachers who took the position that film did not help with historical understanding as it confused the students with its inaccurate portrayal of history. As one of these teachers put it, "some students find it difficult to separate out the entertainment 'add-ins' from the historically sound material." And again, "Hollywood distorts history but kids remember what they've seen more than the facts. A good film tells the story accurately, a poor film confuses the students." This appeared to indicate that a number of teachers did not view history as a contestable and multi-perspectival account of the past, rather they held to the idea of history as a story to be transmitted to students. This is more striking when one considers that the respondents in this study were likely to be a more informed and motivated sub-set of history teachers compared to the entire population of history teachers in New South Wales.

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To further explore the influence of disciplinary positionality, the interviewees were classified using categories of history teachers' pedagogical approaches devised by Evans (1994). These categories were: storyteller, scientific historian, relativist/reformer, cosmic philosopher and eclectic. Although the categories were not a perfect fit for all the teachers, enough commonalities were found to classify the group on the basis of their stated purpose and historical understanding. The teachers were classified and then grouped. It was found that two could be labelled storytellers, five as scientific historians, seven as relativist/reformers, two as cosmic philosophers and four as eclectics. These results aligned with those in the Evans research. The self-described pedagogical practices using film were then added for each teacher with the aim of investigating the connections between conception of history teaching and filmic pedagogies. Although the Evans schema was a blunt instrument, it produced an impressive alignment between teacher notions of history, their pedagogical approaches when using film and their attitude to and use of empathy in their teaching. The findings in this project suggest that disciplinary positionality and understandings have significant influence on how teachers choose to teach and how they use feature film in their practice.

Conclusion

Teacher practice emerges from a web of decisions made in response to the educational, social and cultural tensions. This project undertook to examine a sub-set of the myriad of teaching decisions by focusing on the use of feature film in history teaching and found that, even in this bounded field of study, the decision-making process was complex and capricious.

The engagement with the visual and multi-modal constructs was seen to enrich pedagogy and makes the classroom encounters more significant and relevant to students' world life outside and beyond school. History teachers' attraction to feature film in their practice testifies to the importance of engagement for learning, to an appreciation of the powerful appeal of the multi-sensory narrative to the historical imagination and to the role of empathy in an enacted value system. In past decades easy access to technology would likely have been cited as an impediment to the inclusion of film in classroom pedagogy but this research found that this is not the case on the east coast of Australia, with access to data projectors and Smartboard technologies allowing motion pictures to be conveniently shown in the learning space.

The use of film also was reported to have practical implementation challenges. Modern feature films are often too long to conform to the lesson structure of a typical high school timetable. Viewing, discussing and analysing a film in its entirety can take up several weeks of lesson time. In many teaching environments, time is short with the demands of content-heavy syllabi and high stake examination structures. To counter this problem, many teachers show sections of films to illustrate particular teaching points, but using film clips can frustrate students who want to see the whole story and deny students the opportunity to fully engage with the film's narrative and production techniques (Metzger, 2010). There was an acknowledgement that the traditional privileging of the printed text has been considerably eroded by rapid technological advancement, and that engaging teacher practice would include an array of non-print sources peppered throughout teaching programs. Despite this, the problems of implementation were reported to discourage the use of film and encourage teachers to a heavy reliance on printed sources.

It did appear that cohort disposition had an influence on the utility of film with the more motivated and capable groups allowing opportunities to delve more deeply into meta-understandings of the discipline. However, this should not be over-stated as two of the case studies situated in challenging teaching environments, demonstrated clever use of film in the exploration of issues and to communicate the flawed nature of filmic historical narratives. Both these case study teachers

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integrated high interest primary sources to question the validity of the film narrative and broached questions of contestability with their classes.

The project data indicated that teacher skills in multi-literacy semiotic analysis and disciplinary understandings were highly influential in the effective inclusion of film in the history classroom. However, it was noted that few participants had sufficient training in this area and many admitted a lack of confidence in their pedagogical approaches to film. Of particular interest was the impact of practitioner understanding of the nature of the discipline and their aims in teaching history. This finding of the alignment between conceptual framework, purpose and filmic pedagogies amongst the interviewees and case studies, supports the argument proposed by Barton & Levstik (2004) that purpose in teaching is more influential than subject knowledge or teaching methodology when it comes to determining teacher practice.

Historical feature films are often flawed representations, but they are exciting and captivating glimpses into the past that will continue to have an important role in connecting secondary school students and the community at large to history. These films can be used to teach rich lessons about the nature of historical inquiry and the subversion and redrafting of history in contemporary media. Their appeal to the cognitive and emotional endows historical feature films with an enduring impact that can be exploited by teachers in epistemological and ethical investigations and lead to the development of metacognitive frameworks of historical understanding and consciousness. But none of this impressive potential can be achieved without expert guidance from history educators. The research concluded that there is a need for more targeted training agendas to better prepare history teachers to embed these newly available electronic sources that are so integral to youth culture. The findings concerning the relationship between teacher disciplinary frameworks and pedagogical practice points to the need for this training to explore notions of the nature of history and the purposes of history education, as well as pedagogies of historical and media literacy.

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