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The English Language Arts hundred years' war: Subverting the stigma of film in America's English classroom

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Abstract

Against the backdrop of the century-long stigma associated with film in America's English classroom, which persists despite its codification in the English Language Arts (ELA) standards, this study investigated the question: How do American high-school English teachers make sense of and instruct with film? Employing semi-structured interviews with 12 high-school English teachers who instruct with film, from suburban, urban, rural and private school settings, the findings suggest that the stigma staining film in America's English classroom is systemic. Participants shared their view that film is not an inherently passive medium, and when purposefully and actively facilitated, it possesses unique and efficacious pedagogic promise. Employing strategies typically associated with teaching printed texts, maintaining high classroom expectations, and integrating twenty-first-century pedagogic technologies when teaching with film may allow instructors to fulfil film's remarkable learning potential, and consequently subvert misperceptions of, malpractices with, and the stigma surrounding film in America's English classroom.

Keywords classroom technology; English Language Arts; film; film education; media education; secondary English education; stigma

Introduction

With the advent of the motion picture more than a century ago, film's relatively short lifespan has not precluded a very rich and complicated history (Monaco, 2009), which is mirrored by its complex and controversial relationship with the American public education system. Soon after audiences got their first glimpse of film in 1895, English teachers began recognising its pedagogic significance (Costanzo, 2004). By 1913, Thomas Edison prophesied that the newfangled technology would forever change the school system within a decade by rendering books 'obsolete in the public schools', since it would be 'possible to teach every branch of human knowledge with the motion picture' (Smith, 1913: 4).

Not all agreed, nor were all pleased. Viewing Edison's predictions as a pedagogic *casus belli*, *The Educational Screen* couched movies as 'a dangerous opponent' of teachers (Greene, 1926: 124). *The Chicago Tribune* had already hyperbolically condemned motion pictures in 1907 for indirectly or directly causing 'more juvenile crimes … than all other causes combined' (Barnouw, 1956: 18), and *The English Journal* histrionically characterised film as 'satanic' soon after (Neal, 1913: 658–60). Thus ignited the hundred years' war over the paradoxically most popular and pilloried pedagogic medium in the American education system.

Despite film's unique appeal with students and teachers leading to its ubiquity in the English classroom during the ensuing century (Hobbs, 2006), American pedagogy's civil war over this technological storytelling vessel and art form has only persisted since that opening salvo. In an atavistic callback to the apoplexies of the early twentieth century, teaching with film in American classrooms continues to be questioned, viewed with suspicion, and even vilified (Krueger and Christel, 2001). Many see it as merely entertainment (Vetrie, 2004), a guilty pleasure (Donaghy, 2015), a time-waster (Kelly, 2020), inferior to literature (Lambirth, 2003), an enemy of literacy (Golden, 2001), or even mindless (Ostrander, 2003). Former Teacher of the Year and education author Michael D'Amato (2005: 2) enjoined instructors to 'stop showing those movies', and no less than former President of the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Carol Jago (1999) called for film's exclusion across the English Language Arts (ELA) curriculum.

Across the border, however, media education, which significantly overlaps – and sometimes competes with – the discrete field of film education (Reid, 2018), is included in the ELA curriculum in every Canadian province, where it first became required in middle and secondary English education in Ontario in 1979. Adding to the country's already-rich media studies tradition pioneered by Marshall McLuhan, Toronto's not-for-profit Association for Media Literacy, founded by media educator Barry Duncan, created the media literacy programme adopted by the Ontario Ministry of Education, and provides teacher training (CNNfyi, 2001). The programme features a multilayered framework, eliciting inquiry-based examination of the codes, conventions, content, structure, aesthetics, messages, and economic and meaning-making implications of film and other media forms, while emphasising strategies for authentic media assessment (Association for Media Literacy, 2021).

Across the equator, Australia is a leader in media studies (Luke, 1999). By 1970, scores of secondary schools in South Australia had implemented a film curriculum (Sharman, 1971). Over the following two decades, Barrie McMahon and Robyn Quin developed educational frameworks and materials, paving the way for critical media literacy practices to become 'entrenched' among Australian educators by the mid-1990s (Luke, 1999: 623). Codified by the federal education ministry, and supported by not-for-profit organisations such as the Australian Teachers of Media, Young Media Australia and the Australian Childhood Foundation, media literacy education is now included in the K-12 formal curriculum (McMahon, 2011), both in the English curriculum, with a textual studies focus, and within arts education, where it is globally unique for outlining a curriculum scope and sequence for 5–15 year olds, emphasising both analysis and creation (Dezuanni, 2019).

Across the pond, film pedagogy research in the United Kingdom dates back to the 1970s. The British education system boasts a lengthy record of film in the language arts classroom (McEwan, 2014), first introduced in the 1980s (Rochester, 2017) and supported by the work of pioneers such as Roy Knight

(1972) and Roy Stafford (1995). Although not immune from the occasional call to ban film from the classroom today (Bennett, 2016), collaborations between the British Film Institute (BFI) and the Department for Education led to the standardisation of film in the national curriculum (Reid, 2018). The initial focus on teaching about media in general sharpened to the moving image in particular in 2000 (Goodwyn, 2004), and film pedagogy became increasingly developed and integrated in the British education system over the ensuing years under the stewardship of Cary Bazalgette, Head of Education at the BFI (Fedorov, 2008). The BFI's *Moving Images in the Classroom* teaching guide features detailed learning objectives, classroom activities and instructional techniques, applicable for all age groups, centred on the linguistic, production and distribution aspects of moving image texts, with extension activities for manipulation and connection to other media (BFI, 2000).

Across the Channel, France's efforts to integrate film into its education system date back to the post-Second World War reconstruction period. In the 1980s, media educator and researcher Jacques Gonnet teamed with the Ministry of Education to establish the Centre de liaison de l'enseignement et des moyens d'information ('Centre of Contact Between Education and Media') to promote media in the classroom and support teacher training (Fedorov, 2008). Similarly, collaboration after the turn of the twenty-first century between film scholar Alain Bergala and Minister of National Education Jack Lang produced educational film curricula (Bergala and Whittle, 2016) for over eleven thousand French schools (Reid, 2018). The elementary-level École et cinéma programme, which aims to nurture student discovery of cinema through screenings in theatrical venues (Boutin, 2019), aptly reflects France's aesthetic and affective approach to film education (Chambers, 2018) and film's unique status in France as 'the seventh art' (Reid, 2018: 1). Such alliances between political and cultural institutions have increasingly integrated film education there through an organised and centralised national approach (Reid, 2018: 1).

America's decentralised and disorganised state-level approach to education has only impeded the growth of K-12 film pedagogy. Although the pioneering work of leading media scholars in America, such as Marieli Rowe, former leader of the National Telemedia Council, Frank Baker, founder of the Media Literacy Clearinghouse, and Renee Hobbs, creator of the Media Education Lab and co-founder of the *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, has doubtless advanced the cause of media pedagogy in America immeasurably, the paucity of an official K-12 media literacy curriculum (Yates, 2004), and cultural agencies with equivalent influence or roles to the BFI or the National Film Board of Canada to coordinate between political and educational institutions in advocating for, developing and integrating film pedagogy in the public school system, has hindered the mainstreaming of such scholarship in American classrooms (Hobbs, 1998).

Although the NCTE, the International Reading Association, the Common Core State Standards Initiative (CCSSI) and the Next Generation Learning Standards have all explicitly called for, and codified the use of, film in the American ELA teaching standards seriatim over the last three decades (NCTE, 1996; National Governors Assocation, 2010; New York State Education Department, 2017), some states have not adopted these guidelines. The curriculum frameworks of nearly all 50 states do feature at least some language that supports media literacy (Hobbs, 2005), often tasking students with comprehending, comparing, evaluating or drawing evidence from diverse media, and analysing how their elements contribute to the text. However, with a 'focus on results rather than means', leaving instructors, curriculum developers and states 'to determine how the standards should be reached' (National Governors Association, 2010: 2), most, like their national counterparts, eschew detailing precisely *how* film instruction in the English classroom should be done, resulting in scattershot implementation.

This absence of guidance and uniformity, profoundly complicated by a significant dearth of pre- and in-service teacher training in media pedagogy (Marcus and Levine, 2007), has left many American educators largely unaware of the body of scholarship that exists in the field (Hobbs, 2004). This perfect storm has tainted film's instructional reputation by leading many teachers to misuse it as a reward, a time-filler, a substitute teacher, a means for controlling student behaviour (Hobbs, 2006), or as a non-teaching break (Vetrie, 2004). Such malpractices have only enshrined the enduring stigma of 'a classroom of

slack-jawed students sitting in a darkened classroom while the teacher sits quietly in the back' (Fisher and Frey, 2011: 2).

This stigma, and the chorus of calls to ban film from the English classroom, against the backdrop of the ELA standards' prescription to include film in instruction, led me to investigate the following question: How do American high-school English teachers make sense of, and instruct with, film?

To investigate this question, I chose a qualitative framework to discover the viewpoints (Rubin and Rubin, 1995), behaviours and experiences (Bogdan and Biklen, 2007) of 12 New York State high-school English teachers who choose to teach with film (see Table 1; all pseudonyms). Semi-structured interviewing enabled me to achieve rich and in-depth descriptions (Sofaer, 1999), as open-ended questions allowed responses to go in any direction and organically arise from the participants' experience and thinking. This afforded real-time follow-up questions about the participants' emerging views and ideas (Rubin and Rubin, 1995).

By first purposively selecting six English teachers from the suburban public high school where I work, I was able to ensure outlier and typical cases (Lofland, 2006), as I had familiarity with their disparate film backgrounds and teaching approaches. Using 'snowball' sampling (Creswell, 1998: 158) to recruit two more participants from each of urban, rural and private school settings enabled maximum variation

Table 1. Participants (pseudonyms) and contexts

Participant	School setting	Ethnicity	Courses taught	Years of teaching experience	Date interviewed
Ms Smith	Suburban	Caucasian	English 11; AP (Advanced Placement) Language and Composition; senior Sports Literature	20 years	23/9/16
Ms Thompson	Suburban	Caucasian	English 10 and 11 Regents; Public Speaking	21 years	3/10/16
Ms Donaldson	Suburban	Caucasian	English 11 Regents; AP Literature; Public Speaking elective	22 years	21/10/16
Ms Franklin	Suburban	Caucasian	English 9 Regents; English 9 Co-Teach; college-level writing	18 years	24/10/16
Mr Davies	Suburban	Caucasian	English 10 Regents and Honors; AP Language and Composition; Creative Writing; college-level writing	26 years	26/10/16
Mr Sanders	Suburban	Caucasian	English 9 Regents; English 10 Honors; English 12 Reading Media; Public Speaking elective	17 years	2/11/16
Ms Muller	Rural	Caucasian	Remedial English literacy	16 years	8/3/18
Mr Pierce	Rural	Caucasian	Remedial English and Public Speaking elective	6 years	24/3/18
Ms Wilson	Urban	Caucasian	English 9 Repeaters; college-level writing	18 years	5/3/18
Ms Cole	Urban	Caucasian	English 10 Honors and English 12 Regents	24 years	23/5/18
Mr Collins	Private	Caucasian	AP Literature; Creative Writing and Film elective courses	18 years	7/6/18
Mr Hays	Private	Haitian-American	English 12 and AP Literature	16 years	13/6/18

sampling to discover the diversity of the phenomenon (Lofland, 2006). Over the course of two school years, from 2016 to 2018, I interviewed each participant once, with interviews typically lasting between one and two hours.

Results

I share the findings of this investigation by organising them into five sections. I begin by reporting on how the participants described experiencing and conceptualising film in the ELA classroom context. Next, I enumerate the participants' rationales and pedagogic methods for teaching with film, which I divide into three sections: facilitating active film viewing, privileging *what* film communicates, and privileging *how* film communicates. I then call back to the participants' experiencing and conceptualising film in the classroom context to share a paradoxical finding that is best understood in juxtaposition with their practice, before presenting the concluding discussion.

Experiencing and conceptualising film in the ELA classroom

The systemic stigma of film

The participants unanimously spoke of experiencing the stigma that accompanies teaching with film. 'The perception that you're letting them off easy' (Ms Wilson), that it's merely 'a time killer', or that 'showing film is lazy on the teacher's end' (Mr Pierce) permeated their testimonies. Indeed, the 'only drawback' to incorporating film into the English classroom that Ms Thompson could think of was the 'perception of you're not doing anything in the classroom if you're showing a film'. Ms Smith characterised the attacks by presumptuous critics of film in the classroom as being 'akin to just saying that PE teachers are just throwing a kickball out there'. The participants' language revealed the bias against film to be systemic, as members across all strata of the educational system – from students to parents, from teachers to administrators – regularly subscribe to it.

Mr Collins described being 'acutely aware' that students view film as little more than 'downtime for the teacher'. The misperception that film in the classroom means 'that all we're going to do is watch movies' (Ms Muller), and that no teaching or learning will occur, has led students to become more apt to 'sneak peeks' at their phones during class because 'it's *only* movie day' (Mr Sanders), to think that they can 'check out' (Mr Davies), and even to believe that they 'don't need to go' to class on a day that a film is being shown (Ms Wilson). Ms Donaldson decried that the wonted practice of other teachers showing films only after major assessments with no apparent instructional purpose has conditioned students to see film in the classroom as little more than 'a babysitter'.

Their adult counterparts hardly differ. Mr Hays recounted parents who 'question it still', and who implied that his using film was 'dumbing down the curriculum'. Ms Franklin reported fellow faculty making 'disparaging comments', and Mr Sanders described a colleague accosting him over an English class field trip to a movie theatre that his classes were not even joining. Ms Wilson grieved the 'obvious … bias' that has followed film nearly all of her career, and which has caused her to have to 'constantly prove its value'. Ms Thompson reported that film in the classroom is 'almost like an ongoing joke amongst staff and students'.

It is a joke in which many administrators find no humour. Ms Franklin described administrators warning against teachers using film. Mr Davies surmised that 'judgements will be made' by administrators 'because, to them walking by, all they're going to see is kids looking at a movie', when the lights are dark and the screen is glowing. With the screen dark and the lights back on, passing administrators likely will not connect the attendant cognitive labour of students engaging in post-viewing discourse, written responses and other academic work to the film at all. Mr Davies expressed worry over the future possibility of 'administrators, department chairs or curriculum coordinators' forbidding film because of a misperceived disconnect with ELA standards or a shift to prescribed learning modules.

That future possibility is a present reality for some participants. For a time, Ms Wilson felt compelled to obfuscate films in her course syllabus by listing them as texts her classes would 'read' rather than 'view' because her 'principal said, "We don't want to be seeing video. There is no reason for anyone to show more than a five-minute clip of a video."' Similarly, Ms Cole bemoaned that she 'just had a principal, who wants to be our superintendent, who didn't want anybody to show *any* kind of film'. While the participants acknowledged that the regular misuse of film in the classroom has fuelled the stigma that dogs it, the notion of allowing film to be 'a day off' (Jago, 1999: 33) for their students or themselves was anathema.

This just in: Film as a day off is out

'A movie with no reason? I tell ya'. That's like doing a word search to me. That's not my goal,' insisted Ms Franklin. 'It's not gonna' be like "just get out your popcorn",' Ms Smith echoed. Ms Muller clarified that while 'maybe that's the reputation' film has, her classes are instead 'picking apart that scene, or analysing' that film. 'I never show [film] gratuitously … I really never have just shown a movie just because,' Mr Sanders maintained. Ms Smith utilises film 'for a very specific purpose, like to deal with satire,' for example. Ms Wilson confirmed that screening film in her class is never to babysit the students so that she has a day 'to just correct' student papers. Ms Donaldson explained that it is simply not 'worthwhile to pop the movie in and there you go … There's a purpose why we're doing this.'

Indeed, the teachers' rhetoric regarding their instruction with film consistently involved descriptions of intellectual labour on the part of their students. In Mr Hays's classes, students 'know that they're going to work, even if [they're] watching a movie … It's not just play time. It's not something we do to relax. It's not a break.' When employing film in his classes, Mr Pierce testified that 'there's a lot involved. A lot of effort on [the students'] part goes into it.' Moreover, the participants underscored that this labour expected of, and done by, students is not busywork, but instead explicitly demands cognitive exertion.

Ms Wilson emphasised her expectation that students 'need to be thinking about' the films she shows. Ms Cole similarly described using film specifically to effect 'higher order thinking skills'. For Mr Hays, film 'advances the curriculum' by provoking students to 'think deeply. Think in new ways. Think about things [they] haven't thought about before.' Mr Hays's words intimate his view that film may not only serve as an intellectual instrument, but that it can also elicit student thinking that might otherwise not occur. These teacher testimonies belied film's reputation in the American education system of intellectual inertia, and invited questions about the intrinsic nature of film.

Is film active or passive? Yes

While the participants acknowledged that film is designed to be passively consumed, and easily *can* be in the classroom, they vehemently disagreed that it is *inherently* a passive medium. According to Mr Collins, the 'way film was designed was you're strapped into the experience for ninety minutes, and then you get up, shaking and blinking in the light. That's how it was built.' Mr Davies explained that when you're 'the ideal audience' for the commercial interests of the film industry, you are passively taking in the story on its most superficial level, and 'you've suspended your disbelief. You're just gonna' buy into everything that's on there', as 'you go for the pleasure, or whatever' the film-makers intended you 'to feel'. Although film's entrancing and unyielding design partly explains both its pleasure and its potential for passive consumption, the participants nevertheless did not view this possible pitfall for instruction as *sui generis*.

Mr Hays acknowledged that one possible 'downside [to film in the classroom] is if a kid does check out when watching', but he maintained 'that's also a downside when reading a book'. Ms Wilson echoed that 'even when [students] have a book, [they] also have that ability to look at something and not be processing it'. Film 'can be allowed to be a passive activity' in the same way 'that reading can be allowed to be a passive activity. That cuts both ways,' Mr Pierce concurred. Although 'popular film was engineered to be passively taken in,' Mr Davies insisted that one could make 'the same statement about almost

all media, including the highest forms of literature'. Not even 'Shakespeare was written to be actively analysed and parsed', but instead 'was made to be passively received as entertainment' in its time.

The participants thus troubled traditional notions of film as inherently passive or inferior to printed texts (Iser, 1980), while perhaps still selling the visual medium's intellectual implications short. Vision is cognitive by nature (Arnheim, 1969; Neisser, 1976), harnessing upwards of 85 per cent of the brain to process and categorise visual stimuli (Apkon, 2013). The 'cognitive and educational benefit' of watching a film owes to the 'viewer's activity in synthesizing a concretization of the film' (Nadaner, 1984: 128). Indeed, a secondary definition of the word 'image' is 'a mental experience', as viewers 'read' images through 'a process of intellection' (Monaco, 2009: 171). Since sensory perception is the catalyst for the mental formation of concepts, qualifying the arts as cognitive activities, the training of sensory abilities is the fulcrum for determining the depth and diversity of the concepts formed (Eisner, 1981).

Mr Hays consequently puts the onus on instructors, reasoning that good teachers 'wouldn't allow or reward passive viewing of a film any more than [they] would reward passive reading of a [printed] text'. Likewise, Ms Cole ensures that her students 'don't just sit back and watch', but remain 'actively engaged' when a film plays. Mr Pierce agreed that film 'can be as passive as we allow it to be, or it can be as engaging as we make it'. Ultimately, it 'all just depends on how you use it,' Ms Muller concluded. Since 'kids can just tune out and pay no attention' when viewing a film, Ms Wilson sees the relevant question as: 'What do you do to make sure your kids are thinking while they're watching?'

Facilitating active film viewing

The participants described employing numerous methods for optimising their students' active and cognitive engagement with film. Utilising technology first made widely available in the 1980s (Costanzo, 2004), many described using the pause button as a critical strategy for disrupting film to make certain that students 'are paying attention' (Mr Pierce); to keep 'an air of engagement' (Ms Wilson); for discussion (Ms Donaldson); for clarification (Mr Hays); to effect 'higher-order thinking skill' (Ms Cole); to explore how the film-makers' choices 'add meaning to the story' (Ms Wilson); to reflect on how the film tacitly shapes the audience's values (Mr Davies); and 'just like [how she] would pause if [she and her students] were reading together' (Ms Franklin). Mr Collins described using the rewind feature to cue the film to scenes that his students 'want to look at again' for closer inspection. Roughly half of the participants have students put pencil to paper while the film plays, whether to take notes, to answer worksheet questions or to complete graphic organisers.

However, some doubted the efficacy of student notes scribbled in the dark, worried about students missing details up on the screen while looking down to write, and eschewed pausing when screening a film over concerns for breaking the narrative and disrupting student enjoyment. Mr Davies assuages these obstacles by downloading clips of films he teaches from YouTube, and then sharing them on the Google Classroom learning platform for his students to access on a class set of Chromebooks. This enables students to rewatch and pause as often as they individually need after viewing the full film together, and to write analytically about it, 'not from memory [or] from notes taken in a darkened' classroom, but from their individual computer screens. Mr Davies argued that, as 'they've got it right there' in front of them, they can 'be really precise' with analysing the film's details, thus making note-taking far more effective and understanding far deeper. But to what end?

Privileging *what* film communicates

Teaching plays: The film's the thing

Deeper understanding of theatre, and the stories it communicates, was one major outcome that the participants cited for incorporating film, foregrounding *what* film communicates over *how* it does so. 'I think with a play, of course, you have to see it on stage,' Ms Donaldson posited. 'Sophocles wrote

[*Oedipus Rex*] to be *performed*, not to have us reading it,' Mr Sanders tells his students. However, with severely limited opportunities to take students on field trips to see live theatre, the participants viewed filmed performances of plays as an indispensable tool when working with these staples of the English classroom. If 'it's a drama … you need to see it dramatised,' Mr Collins argued, insisting that experiencing plays only on the printed page actually does a 'disservice' to them.

To serve their students with better understanding of a playwright's language, story and characters, the participants underscored that screening a performance by professional actors, in tandem with having students read the words on the page, makes 'a big difference', in Ms Franklin's words. Ms Thompson observed that her students could make better sense of the dialect in Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* through a film adaptation, and were therefore more sensitised to 'what the mother was feeling' when making the agonising decision to have an abortion, as they could 'visualise the setting, the characters, [and] the mannerisms'. Likewise, Ms Smith testified that her students better understood how Reginald Rose's *Twelve Angry Men* is 'embodied in these characters' through film, which also 'really helps with reading comprehension'.

The participants unanimously viewed film as essential for student comprehension of Shakespearean texts, typically employing the well-documented 'read an act, watch an act' method (Krueger and Christel, 2001). Ms Cole 'rel[ies] on the film' in this way to overcome 'the language' barrier that Shakespeare poses for her students, and Ms Thompson finds this approach more effective for student comprehension than the 'film as dessert' method (Krueger and Christel, 2001) of saving it 'until the end'. The attendant increase in understanding keeps 'the kids engaged' with these challenging and unfamiliar texts, in Ms Smith's experience. Although some 'things might be left out' in the film performance, Mr Sanders finds that his students can 'see the drama unfold, and match that with how they read it', allowing them to 'compare and contrast' the print and filmic versions. For several participants, however, inverting this approach produced superior results.

Ms Wilson 'always, always, *always* teach[es] Shakespeare with film *first*', before 'div[ing] into the print text', to make the 'complex, antiquated language structure' in his plays 'accessible' to her students. After discovering that her students failed to 'appreciate what [the language in the printed text is] doing' when reading before watching, Ms Franklin began using film 'as the primary text' for Shakespearean units, and found it successful even for her students with 'modified curriculum', who actually 'liked it' and understood what 'other kids in the past haven't about the play'. Instead of 'having [students] read it aloud in class, or chorally', Mr Davies also finds it more effective for student understanding to first screen a filmed performance before 'deal[ing] with it on the page' through close readings, followed by student video-recorded recitation performances of key scenes, and sometimes composing rhetorical analysis essays on select speeches from the play.

Arguing, citing and writing with film

Indeed, many of the participants described leveraging film to hone essay composition skills. Most commonly, they focus on students crafting evidence-based arguments about characters, symbolism, irony or themes, more recognisable to them in film, and citing textual examples for support. This aligns with a spate of essential reading and writing ELA skills emphasised in the CCSSI and assessed on the New York State ELA Common Core Regents examination. Ms Muller has her students write argumentative papers about film to give them practice using 'textual-based evidence'. Mr Pierce has his students 'pulling evidence from … within the movie … to support' their arguments about the narrative or literary elements in the film. Mr Hays explained that 'the use of evidence is the same' for mounting arguments about literature or film, and therefore maintains the same expectations for both: be specific, make a critical point, and use evidence to support that point.

Some participants simultaneously fulfil additional CCSSI directives by having their students compose evidence-based arguments based on their analysis of multiple versions of the same literary text.

Ms Wilson combines Homer's *Odyssey* with graphic novel and film versions of it, and then has students compare and contrast the creators' respective 'choices' regarding the characters and plot. Ms Franklin combines Shakespeare's original play *Romeo and Juliet* with two film interpretations of it directed by Franco Zeffirelli (1968) and Baz Luhrmann (1996). Her students explore the competing portrayals of characters, and construct written arguments for which version is most 'true to what Shakespeare intended' or 'worked better in the story'.

Similarly, after Mr Sanders's students complete reading the anonymously written epic poem *Beowulf* and the retelling of the same tale from the antagonist's perspective in John Gardner's novel *Grendel*, the class watches Robert Zemeckis's (2007) film adaptation of the original story. Class discussions about characters, symbols and themes bookend screening sessions over the course of three 83-minute class periods. Students are then assigned a culminating essay prompt requiring them to argue for which version portrayed the titular character as most fully human, using textual evidence for support and acknowledging counterclaims. Although cinematic elements were relegated to the background in the instructional methods detailed above, they were foregrounded in the participants' instructional methods catalogued below.

Privileging *how* film communicates

A lexicon for learning film's language

The teachers who made space to sometimes centre their instruction on the grammar by which film communicates (Monaco, 2009) discussed equipping their students with a nomenclature to navigate it. After screening the opening scene from George Lucas's *Star Wars* (1977), Mr Collins invited his students to describe how the camera moves to reveal the diegetic world inhabited by its characters, before a spacecraft speeds into frame. One student motioned his finger downward, saying it '"went like that".' Mr Collins explained that we 'call that a tilt'. His students soon experienced an epiphany: '"Like, where the hell is the camera?!"' Suddenly, they became attuned to *how* the story is composed and communicated. By providing a 'language students [had] never heard before', which makes the film's linguistic elements more visible and classifiable for them, Mr Collins was able to press them to analyse how these choices produce meaning: 'Why is that so strange? I like the idea that you've noticed the thing, but what does it really mean?'

Ms Franklin likewise invites her students to 'look at what the camera is doing' and consider 'how is [the story] told, and why is it told that way?' when beginning a mini film unit featuring Robert Mulligan's film adaptation (1962) of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. She then distributes a packet containing cinematic terms, introduces close-up shots, and directs students to record that they are used to reveal characters' emotions. After covering medium and long shots, she explains low, eye-level and high camera angles, enjoining students to record the conventional meanings they connote. Her students use this taxonomy of cinematography as a foundation to recognise and then parse meaning from their use in scenes from the film.

During his film unit, Mr Davies similarly provides students with handouts defining camera shots, scale and movement to afford them 'a similar language to talk about cinematography'. He prompts students to notice 'how is [the camera] moving, how is it angled, how is [the shot] framed?', and he explains that is 'really what's at stake when you're looking at cinematography'. However, Mr Davies begins the unit by introducing the compositional concept of *mise en scène*, inviting his students to think of the screen like the stage, and consider how the furniture, decor, lighting, acting performance, costumes and all else in the frame are arranged to communicate the story. For practice, he guides students to closely inspect still frames from the unit's centrepiece text, Jeff Nichols's *Mud* (2012), and to work 'inductively from the little details … to produce meaning out of [it]'. However, Mr Davies drills deeper still in teaching the grammar of film.

While the viewer can attend 'a play and see all the *mise en scène* stuff', or attend 'an art gallery and see all the [cinematography] stuff', Mr Davies underscores for his students that what 'makes film really unique … is editing'. Because film 'is a bunch of very fragmented cut-up shots that have been sutured together', it 'should be very jarring to us', since 'we are moving instantaneously across space and time' in a film. Consequently, he explains, editing provides 'a grammar that we are all accustomed to', which guards against disorientation by making film 'feel continuous', and is often designed to go unnoticed. To make the seams more visible to his students, Mr Davies begins by distributing a handout with a typology of transitions. He then tasks students with calling out the word 'cut' every time they see a transition in a short clip he screens. This sensitises students to the editing choices still more, and it becomes a springboard to puzzling out the impact of the pace of the editing on the story. However, this was only the beginning of Mr Davies's story.

YouTube and mobiles and software, oh my!

In a remarkable anomaly, Mr Davies blends modern technologies and repositions his students from critiquing film to creating it. In addition to paper handouts to introduce film composition concepts, such as framing, deep space composition, the rule of thirds and negative space, he shows his students short YouTube tutorial videos replete with examples from Hollywood films. Students then apply the concepts by working in small groups to create and storyboard short original visual stories, which they communicate through still images captured with their mobile phone cameras. Group members next move to assigned locations in hallways and foyers around the building to take turns being actors, cinematographers and directors to photograph their stories. Finally, students upload their images to a shared Google Slides presentation, allowing group members to simultaneously work on individual Chromebooks to decide which images will be included, arrange their order, and type explanations on the slides regarding their compositional choices and the meanings they create.

While time limitations preclude recording and editing original moving images, both essential elements of film-making, capturing still images enables students to focus on how composition, camera angles, scale, facial expression and body language can be manipulated to communicate meaning in film. To let students experience how editing moving images functions to create meaning, Mr Davies shows another YouTube tutorial video explaining simple cutting, match-cutting, cross-cutting and cutting on action. Students then use video-editing software in the computer lab to assemble semi-professional, pre-recorded raw footage available free online. Mr Davies reasoned that as he would never teach poetry without having students write poems, he would never teach film without having students create films. However, he and the other participants never second-guess teaching or writing poetry in the English classroom.

Film stigma surreptitiously stains the subconscious

Despite their substantive experiences of fulfilling ELA learning standards and achieving desired learning outcomes with film, many of the participants paradoxically self-restricted using it. Ms Smith noted that she 'hesitates sometimes' to use film, despite it being a 'really effective medium', simply because of her 'fear' of overusing it. Mr Collins recognised that he also limits film, owing not to any shortcoming of its pedagogic prowess or external pressure, but to the stigma penetrating his psyche. 'It's me. It's me projecting,' he realised. Ms Franklin has similarly found herself 'being on the defensive', and observed colleagues who 'feel self-conscious about using film'.

Mr Davies described feeling negligent in his teaching duties as a result of using film in his curriculum:

It's one of those things that many of us have. This worry that if we're using a lot of film, we're not doing our jobs because we're English teachers, and we're supposed to teach books. I know that I kind of have that. And I still kind of do.

Mr Davies's anxiety reflects the underlying shibboleth across the American education system that the teaching of English is bibliocentric, despite the ELA standards defining literacy as multi-modal. The systemic bias against film implicitly drove Mr Davies to virtually abstain from teaching with it for several years, despite his experience and certainty of its instructional efficacy. 'That was me policing myself,' he reflected. The stigma of film in the American education system is so powerful that, like the blood staining Lady Macbeth's hands conjured only by her poisoned mind, it poisons the minds of even the practitioners who have borne witness to its instructional powers.

Conclusion

This research suggests that carefully considered pedagogy may allow film to fulfil its potential as a catalyst for student cogitation and learning. The participants described film as an invaluable tool for developing critical thinking; improving reading comprehension; teaching theatrical texts; making Shakespeare accessible; honing textual analysis skills; composing evidence-based arguments; fulfilling ELA learning standards; and analysing how the language of multi-modal texts functions to produce meaning. Towards these ends, the participants described assigning note-taking or worksheets during viewing; disrupting film for refocusing, questioning and discussing; employing a variety of methods for students to rewatch film segments; sharing still frames and film clips on learning management platforms for close reading; prompting oral and written analysis and arguments; maintaining high expectations with film; repositioning film as the primary text; introducing a language by which to notice, classify and analyse the grammar of film; and blending modern instructional technologies to critique and *create* film.

Because film's artistry and technology are inextricably intertwined (Costanzo, 2004), which originally made it an 'exemplary art for the machine age' (Corrigan and White, 2004: 441), understanding of the technology of both film and modern pedagogy is necessary to make it an exemplary teaching tool for the digital age. Mr Collins noted that the pause, rewind and slow-motion controls of late twentieth-century technology 'utterly reshaped' student 'interaction with' film by revealing its 'ligaments and how it's been put together'. Mr Davies's practice illustrates how student interaction with film may be reshaped anew by wedding these controls with twenty-first-century teaching technologies, such as user-generated content culled from online video-sharing platforms, mobile phones, and video-editing and web-based presentation software. Since teachers are 'the gatekeepers' of technology in the classroom (Lee and Winzenried, 2009: 10–11), fulfilling film's instructional promise hinges on their facility with it.

More than a century after film's advent into the English classroom, and a quarter of a century after its codification in the national ELA standards, the stigma of film has nevertheless survived and thrived across all layers of the American educational system. This research reveals that its influence can even paradoxically prejudice its exemplary practitioners. But reason for optimism remains. Discussing his experiences for this study made Mr Davies first 'feel very guilty about not doing the film stuff [he] used to do', as he (re)recognised its educational value. Ultimately, it gave him relief to feel like he was granted 'permission' to reinstate film in his curriculum. His example is doubly instructive.

The participants' pedagogic practices, experiences and understandings should be shared with fellow educators so that malpractising teachers are equipped with a better arsenal of instructional approaches with film. Teachers already effectively instructing with film may also benefit by supplementing, modernising and generating new film pedagogy methods, and abate their possible cognitive dissonance and self-restriction. Further investigation of how American teachers make sense of, and instruct with, film should be conducted to discover the extent and diversity of their practice, and the technological, social, political, pedagogic and other forces that shape it (Hobbs, 2005).

The desperate need to amplify pre-service and in-service training for film education in America (Heins and Cho, 2003) was only reified by the participants unanimously reporting never having had access to either over their roughly 250 collective years of teacher preparation and teaching careers. In an all-too-familiar pattern, this has left the participants to figure out on their own the best ways of incorporating

film to maximise learning (Marcus and Levine, 2007), and it has dramatically decreased their chances for exposure to the domestic scholarship in the field. Although what is institutionally fitting for one setting is not always precisely applicable to another (Bazalgette et al., 1992), the potential benefits from exposure to the international scholarship and rich global traditions of film pedagogy (Hobbs, 2004) has been similarly obviated by this lack of training.

Ultimately, partnership and coordination between academic, political and cultural institutions and educational organisations in America are needed to achieve a more unified and sustained approach to improve, develop and standardise teacher preparation, professional development, educational frameworks, goals, assessments and methods for teaching with film. Only then may effective instructional practices, substantive student experiences and successful learning outcomes with film wax and permeate the layers of the educational system, and the malpractice, stigma and hundred years' war with film in America's English classroom may finally wane.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by Syracuse University's Office of Research Integrity and Protections.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflict of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently blind the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

Beowulf (US/GB 2007, Robert Zemeckis)
Mud (US 2012, Jeff Nichols)
Romeo and Juliet (GB/IT 1968, Franco Zeffirelli)
Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope (US 1977, George Lucas)
To Kill a Mockingbird (US 1962, Robert Mulligan)
William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet (US 1996, Baz Luhrmann)

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