

Can we teach better? The relationship between the cinema and teaching

Graciela Laura Cappelletti, María José Gabriela Sabelli, Marta Alicia Tenutto

Instituto Universitario Fundación Isalud. Venezuela 931. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires (Argentina).

Correspondence: María José Gabriela Sabelli. Gregoria Perez 3446 frente (1426) Ciudad de Buenos Aires (Argentina).

e-mail: majosabelli@hotmail.com

Received 12 June 2007; accepted 29 June 2007

Summary

The aim of the present work is to provide a few ideas about the importance of the cinema, with its audiovisual narrative, in teaching. The use of films in teaching offers the possibility of enhancing students' ability to reflect on issues of importance. The observation and analysis of films comprise a privileged area for the development of certain professional skills in that they involve the mobilization of students' knowledge and the "inner" (or perhaps "outer") debate they are able to generate about the issues portrayed. Here we discuss two working schema employing cinematographic stories within the university environment: 1) video/DVD as an object to be studied, and 2) video/DVD as a method to teach of movie contents. Contrary to common sense, work with narratives portrayed in films for use as a powerful tool in the development of complex thinking processes is not easy either for medical instructors or their students. Audiovisual narrative is heavy currency indeed, but also involves certain risks.

Keywords: cinema, teaching, narrative, reflection.

*Say it and I shall forget it,
Show it to me and I shall remember it,
Involve me and I shall understand it,
Go away and I shall act.*
(Loose translation of a Chinese proverb)

Narrative, teaching and the cinema

The appropriate choice of teaching resources is acknowledged to facilitate students' learning. It is thus relevant to explore to such resources because our aim here is to provide some ideas that we bring into play when selecting parts of films to aid in the teaching of certain contents.

Let us start out from the thoughts of Bruner¹ (figure 1), an author on whom we have based our theoretical stance. Bruner proposed certain *postulates* that start out from a psychosocial perspective of education. He used these to explore considerations about the nature of mind and the nature of culture. From this perspective, any theory about education must necessarily revolve around the intersection between mind and culture. Accordingly, his postulates are of import for education. Bruner mentions nine postulates, of which we shall only address

one: namely, the narrative postulate. To explain it, the author refers to how human beings think and feel in general. Men and women create a version of the world in which, psychologically, they find places for themselves: a personal universe. For this, Bruner explains how, from the schooling experiences of growing children, we create meanings with which we are able to relate our lives to the surrounding culture. Narrative is an important form of thinking and an indispensable vehicle for the creation of meaning.

The importance of narrative for the cohesion of any culture is possibly as important as it is for the structuring of an individual's life¹. An educational system should help those living in a given culture to find their identity within it. Only in a narrative mode is it possible for us to construct our own identities and find a place in our own culture, and from here it is possible to derive certain implications as regards teaching practices, these implications being important in a system that implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) overvalues technology and logical scientific thinking.

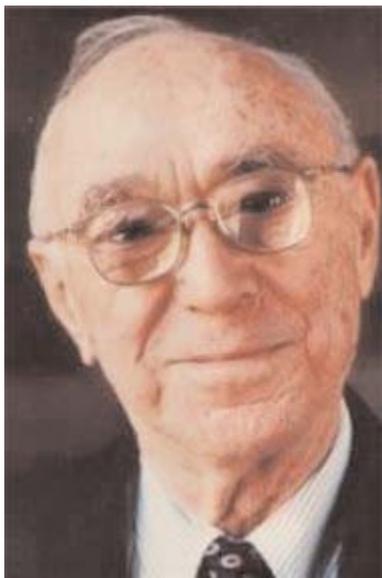


Figure 1: Jerome Bruner (1915)

The challenge for teaching is to situate knowledge within a living content, and this living context—in the classroom—can be referred to a situation that renders such knowledge “live”, forming part of the personal world of those studying it. Films, or fragments thereof—selected by instructors to facilitate the understanding of a concept, to present it in all its complexity, to favour critical analysis (by showing alternative approaches or way of thinking)—become “reality bites” to be taken into class. They are types of narrative that construct new narratives that become intermingled with the teaching materials that instructors wish to transmit to their students.

Here we are not trying to foster the idea that films illustrate a concept that has been presented previously, or later. We suggest that the film in question becomes a resource for students to construct their own knowledge.

How, then, can we teach better? According to Bruner, *contrast* and *confrontation*, in terms of “opposite but reasonable explanations” about the same phenomenon favour the possibility of the acquisition of deep understanding. Both contrast and confrontation lead to *metacognition*; that form of mental activity in which the object of thought is thinking itself. As a process, *metacognition* collaborates with the achievement of the understanding of knowledge and of its construction. The use of films in teaching can help in such processes.

The cinema is a reply to the Brunerian postulate about narrative. It is able to convey us to an imaginary

world, but one which we are ready to accept as real; it connects with our emotions and feelings, our fears and most universal dreams. We are equally likely to be confronted by something absolutely normal or something completely extraordinary. We are allowed to recognise ourselves, transform ourselves, enter the process of identification or rejection, analyse ourselves, and dream. It is based on images that reach out to all of us, although differently. Each spectator receives a different message that allows us to individualize it and adapt it to our own characteristics, needs and wishes.

The cinema offers us both an “artificial” and a real world, in the latter case sometimes so real that it leads us to forget that what we are seeing on the screen is not real. For many theorists, this apparent reality/illusion paradox is the very essence of the cinema².

Gadamer (figure 2) holds that the cinema is close to the approach to a work of art and that this is an experience *of* the world and *in* the world that radically changes the person involved³. We take up on the work of Gadamer because we believe that when working with a fragment of DVD/video those involved become involved in two movements, so to speak: and aesthetic one and a historical one. Thus, the cinema not only compares what is new with other readings of reality but also alters what has already been established, to generate something that will surpass this. From this author and from Jauss⁴ (figure 3), we retrieve the concept of “expectation horizon” in the sense that this materialises in the prior knowledge of the spectator and of that of the text in which it arises. In this case, when working with video/DVD we are trying to disassemble the fiction that all participants are understanding the same things when they observe a fragment of a film. We believe that the richness underlying this experience is upheld by what each of us can provide from the point of view our own horizons.

It is certainly true that the image has a direct communicative force; an image endowed with something so life-like as movement and enriched with sound, music, words....

The use of films in teaching should be seen from the point of view of the design of the teaching program. In this sense, it is a challenge to formulate proposals that will incorporate practical training, provide the possibility of enhancing students’ ability to reflect on matters and issues of importance, in and



Figure 2: Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002)

about the plot⁵. The problem is further exacerbated if we consider that students must become familiar with both the facts and relevant actions, and with the means to seek competent ways to deal with the problems in hand. We must look for examples in which the “description of the practice becomes intermingled with performance, and the complex forms of interaction between students and their instructors tend to conform certain basic models, each of them suitable for a given context and teaching style”⁶.

Within this framework, we propose that video/DVD could be used in the development of skills in teaching situations. For this, students must be placed in situations that induce them to reach a target, solve problems and make decisions. They must make decisions about how to act under the prevailing conditions, with insufficient data, sometimes very fast, and in uncertain situations⁷.

The observation and analysis of films thus becomes a privileged space in which certain professional skills can be addressed as regards the mobilisation of students’ knowledge and the reflections that each of them can make.

We refer here to competences that involve the deployment of the cognitive resources required to

cope with a given situation and, also, competences that will allow students to find an answer to a suite of similar situations. Accordingly, when working with DVD/video our aim is that those participating in such activities should carry out searches; they should elaborate and should re-elaborate what they already know with a view to building bridges between the different components of each individual situation. This may not necessarily be new but it is novel.



Figure 3: Hans R. Jauss (1921-1997)

The cinema and teaching: proposals and alternatives

Some authors have developed the idea of “teaching cinema” with reference to the intentional emission and reception of films with a certain cinematographic impact and that can be analysed from a teaching perspective in order to foster certain values^{8,9}. In this regard, De la Torre writes... “teaching cinema” is the intentional emission and reception of films with cultural, humane, technical-scientific or artistic values with a view to improving the knowledge, strategies and attitudes and opinions of spectators. First, it must have certain human values or merit;; second, these values must be encoded in such a way that they can be interpreted and, thirdly, there must exist the intention of using the medium as a training resource; that is, there must be the wish to produce some kind of learning process, which does not necessarily have to be linked to the message underlying the film...¹⁰.

De la Torre situates the cinema within the sphere of teaching based on the teaching method as a source of learning. That author considers that the cinema, like any other form of communication, can be used as a teaching resource but that in this task the role of the instructor is crucial; the instructor must act as a mediator, as a transformer of the fiction into learning codes. A proposal is made to work with the cinema through observation, reflection and applicatio:

- Observation and understanding of the material proposed.
- Reflection, going deeper into the implicit meanings.
- Application, setting what has been used in new situations¹⁰.

From another perspective, it is possible to consider two modalities with which it is possible to work in the university environment with cinematographic narrative: 1) video/DVD as the object of study and 2) video/DCD as a method for teaching contents.

In the former case, Roig¹¹ considers that the reading of the “video-object” is characterised by its analysis of dimensions or variables of the actual audiovisual media. Here, the interpretation of the video/DVD focuses on aspects such as the audiovisual language, its aesthetic features; it analyses the genre. It is considered a documentary source and in general she places it within the “corpus” of the analysis.

On the other hand, the “video-method” is characterised by being interpreted with a view to addressing some topic represented by means of the medium, either through topic-oriented documentaries, programs of an educational nature, or fiction films.

These categories of “video-object” and “video-mediator” are not exclusive since they may signal two opposite movements in the process of the understanding of audiovisual material. In the modality, or movement, of the reading designated “video-object”, the referential field (the topic of the film) is used to study the symbolic human productions that are materially manifested in the material. Regarding the other movement, this occurs in the opposite way: the modes of reference are used to advance in the understanding of the extra-discourse referential field.

In the observed uses of the video-method, mentioned up above, Roig¹² highlights an important risk: the process of mediation implied by video is only rarely addressed in class; in general, its mediating character is denied. In this form of reading we observe the predominance of a “transparent” use of the argumentative material and a “documentalising” use of fiction films. Narrative is subordinate to the disciplinary logic and sometimes the tension produced by this denaturing of the story is expressed in the compulsion of the instructor to “tell the ending”, even though it is of no relevance as regards the contents developed in class.

Secondly, she observes situations in which students perceive that the instructor is “translating”

the DVD/video. The asymmetry between the instructor’s readings and those of the students is not sufficiently well considered by instructors in their work with audiovisual material. Profound differences arise between instructors and students not only in the identification of the topics relevant to the disciplinary field or in the capacity to discriminate between what is relevant and what is secondary, but also in the perception of features for the construction of the phenomenon as such, in the possibilities of passing from one anecdotic level to a level of greater abstraction, in the mobility between different points of view about the same topic or phenomenon, in the recognition of different dimensions of aspects, and in the domain of “jumps of scale”, as happens when a case described by a video/DVD is re-signified as an example of problems of greater generality.

Contrary to common sense, work with cinematographic narratives to construct a powerful tool in the development of complex thinking processes is not easy, either for the instructor or the student. Audiovisual narrative is extremely potent, but involves certain risks such as rendering the material explored banal.

Linked to what has gone before, teaching implies enabling the following:

- The identification of topics relevant to the discipline.
- Discrimination of what is relevant and what is secondary.
- The perception of clues for the construction of the phenomenon as such.
- The passage from an anecdotic level to one of greater abstraction.
- The recognition of different dimensions or aspects.
- The “jump of scale”, as occurs when a case described by a video/DVD is re-signified as an example of problems of greater generality.

From our perspective, we propose that work with cinematographic material should be addressed from a plurality of approaches. Taking up the ideas of Bruner¹ mentioned at the beginning of this contribution, we suggest that the film in question becomes a resource so that students will construct knowledge.

Bearing in mind the sequence of the teaching proposal, we consider that the cinematographic story can open the door to preliminary work in certain

contents. It can also be worked as a closure to the teaching sequence. With this we wish to emphasise that cinematographic narrative is something more than an example to be seen by students: it is a tool for the construction of knowledge through metacognitive activities.

Observation of cinematographic narrative is extremely important, as are its later analysis and discussion. The establishment of ways to observe the narrative may be very dissimilar: from open ways to detailed ones.

The cinema and the training of health personnel

The use of cinematographic narrative has been assessed and reassessed in different professional spheres. However, in recent years health professionals have begun to investigate which diseases are dealt with in the cinema and how. Their studies have been published in high-impact professional journals, and cinematographic conferences and scientific meetings have been held to explore medical issues.

As suggested along this text, the cinema is able to transmit knowledge and experiences and awaken feeling in the spectators, who in turn interpret the narrative from the perspective of their own previous experiences but at the same time are affected by the narrative and incorporate it into their lives as yet another personal experience.

The cinema reflects the encapsulation, the circumstances and the individual and social contexts in which things happen and has proved to be an ideal medium for describing disease as an individual experience and social phenomenon, not simply as a biological fact or an abstract nosological entity¹³.

The cinema allows spectators to address different types of contents, especially contents that

involve attitudes, values and different skills. For example, the cinema is a very good instrument for exploring communications skills, which tend to be overlooked in curricular designs.

Along this text, we have developed the interest in incorporating education activities in which students play an active role. Regarding the various ways of addressing cinematographic narrative in teaching practice, we wish to point out that, as with drugs, there is not just "one" way that -being miraculous- will always prove to be effective. We thus propose a mixture of uses of the cinema in the training of health personnel.

References

- 1.- Bruner J. *The Culture of Education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press; 1996.
- 2.- Urpí, C. *La virtualidad educativa del cine. A partir de la teoría fílmica de Jean Mitry (1904-1988)*. Pamplona: Eunsa; 2000.
- 3.- Gadamer H G. *Truth and Method*. 2nd ed. New York: Crossroads; 1989.
4. Jauss, H R: *Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; 1982.
- 5.- Schön D. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass; 1987.
- 6.- Schön D. *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. London: Temple Smith; 1983.
- 7.- Perrenoud P. *Construire des compétences dès l'école*. 3e éd. Paris: ESF éditeur, 1997.
- 8.- Escamez J, Ortega P. *La enseñanza de actitudes y valores*. Valencia: Nau Llibres; 1989
- 9.- Ortega P, Gil R, Mínguez R. *Valores y educación*. Barcelona, Ariel; 1997
- 10.- Torre, S. de la. *Cine formativo. Una estrategia innovadora en la enseñanza*. Barcelona: Octaedro; 1996. p.17.
- 11.- Roig H. *Lectura de textos audiovisuales y prácticas educativas: el aula universitaria como contexto particular de recepción*. Tesis de Doctorado. Buenos Aires: Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, UBA; 2002
- 12.- Roig H I. *Lecturas de lo audiovisual en clases universitarias*. Congreso Latinoamericano de Educación Superior en el siglo XXI. Argentina. 2003 [cited 2007 May 4]; Available from: http://conedsup.unsl.edu.ar/Download_trabajos/Trabajos/Eje_6_Procesos_Formac_Grado_PostG-Distancia/Roig_Hebe_Irene.PDF
- 13.- Blanco Mercadé A. *Clinic bioethics and cinematographic narrative*. J Med Mov [serial on the Internet]. 2005. [cited 2007 May 4];1(3):66-67:[11 p.] Available from: http://www.usal.es/~revistamedicinacine/numero_3/ing_3_pdf/bioetica_ing.pdf