

Joseph Coencas

How Movies Work for Secondary School Students with Special Needs

Joseph Coencas shows scenes from films to help special education students improve their visual and auditory skills, build confidence in their abilities to talk about and analyze the components of a narrative, and feel comfortable engaging in class discussion and writing. He also encourages students to pursue their interests in subjects they have learned about in films.

Movies are part of the collective consciousness of most Americans. Yet, when people mention a film that they enjoy—or dislike—they either reiterate the plot in detail or are tongue-tied. They lack the vocabulary to articulate what makes a favorable or unfavorable impression on them.

This is especially true of young people diagnosed with dyslexia, attention deficit disorder, autism, Asperger Syndrome, Tourette Syndrome, focusing difficulties and behavioral problems, or other disabilities that affect how and what they learn in school or at home. Because they watch the same movies that “normal” teenagers see in theaters or at home, the film experience provides them with an opportunity to feel as one with their peers.

As a language arts teacher of secondary school students with special needs, and with a passion for movies, I have discovered that using films in the classroom helps young people with low self-esteem to move beyond their fears of incompetence. In fact, movies are an ideal motivational device for auditory or visual learners who resist or have difficulty with the printed word. From elementary school onward, students who have reading problems often feel inferior to their “normal” siblings, friends, and peers for whom comprehension seems to come easily. The anxiety that results from their difficulties dealing with the written word is exacerbated by the move into the middle and secondary school years, heightening the low self-esteem that is already a result of their disabilities.

Theory

The film experience offers multiple opportunities to reach students with special needs and make them feel a part of the mainstream. For literature teachers whose job it is to expose students to works of fiction and nonfiction and different genres, and to help them focus on literary elements such as plot, character, setting, narrative points of view, theme, style, figurative language, irony, humor, foreshadowing, symbolism, mood, and other literary devices, movies offer a remarkably parallel universe.

Students who study fiction and nonfiction films and the elements of motion picture art, such as acting, direction, production, editing, screenwriting, sound, cinematography, music, lighting, set decoration, special effects, and animation, learn how to look at movies with a critical eye. With this foundation in film, when young people go to the movies in the future and a parent, relative, or friend asks them how they liked a film, their responses will be more articulate. In addition, as students learn how to watch and analyze a film, the analytical skills they have acquired, according to John Golden in his invaluable *Reading in the Dark*, “seem to greatly affect their ability to read and critique literature” (xiv).

Because most students benefit from seeing what they read, using movies in the classroom works for other disciplines as well. Teachers of social studies, science, health, social skills, art, music, and math can use movies to transport us to

unfamiliar worlds and introduce us to people and ideas beyond the realm of our daily lives. The New York Historical Society in Manhattan, for example, sponsors the American Musicals Project. This program is intended to entice young people to see history from the human perspective. According to the *New York Times*, “the evidence suggests that musicals stimulate classroom discussion and help students retain what they learn. To get them through the American Revolution, there is *1776*. For studying the gold rush, there is *Paint Your Wagon*. For the Great Depression, *Annie*. . . . Several musicals cover World War II, including *South Pacific*, which has the added advantage of dealing with racism in an era when the military was segregated” (Haberma). All these musicals have been adapted as films.

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My work using movies with special education students has five objectives:

- > Teach students how to sharpen their seeing and listening skills.
- > Expose young people to the art of domestic and foreign films.
- > Help alleviate feelings of anxiety and inferiority by building students’ self-esteem and demonstrating that they are no different from other young people who enjoy watching movies and sharing their thoughts and feelings about the films.
- > Encourage class discussions and written expression.
- > Motivate students to pursue subjects of interest they learn about from their viewing of a variety of movies.

So Many Ways to View a Movie

Language arts teachers are the ones most likely to use movies in the classroom and the ones who do predictably show feature adaptations of novels or short stories that their students are studying. Social studies, science, and health education teachers occasionally use documentaries as background material, but since the curricula are so full of material teachers must cover, there is little time to devote to

films. However, many good films have applications to all the disciplines. As Golden suggests, “film . . . can be used in the same way that minilessons on grammar, readers workshop, and vocabulary practice can be woven in and out of our teaching” (xiv). A teacher can use short clips from movies (some as short as two minutes, and none longer than fifteen) to highlight the skill(s) he or she is trying to practice with students.

As the teacher, my most important questions include, What are my aims? and Which film do I show? Once I decide on the film, I consider several questions, including the following:

- > At what point in the lesson do I pop in the DVD or VHS tape and show the movie? Before students read the book? While they’re in the middle of reading it? After?
- > Do I need to show the entire film?
- > Which parts of the film do I show?
- > Do I interrupt the film and allow for discussion?
- > When should I replay a segment, fast-forward, or freeze a frame?

A movie I have shown in a number of special education classes is *Twelve Angry Men*. It is in black and white, has a running time of ninety-five minutes, and was directed by Sidney Lumet. The film tells the gripping story of one man who tries to convince eleven other jurors that their hasty decision to convict a teenage boy on trial for murdering his father should be reconsidered. I usually devote three forty-minute classes to a discussion of the film. Depending on the strengths and weaknesses of a particular class, my instructional objectives might include a discussion of the author’s/filmmaker’s point of view, plot, characterization, motivation, setting, symbolism, and theme.

I begin the first class with some questions about students’ familiarity with our judicial system. Many of them are fans of a number of popular TV programs that deal with trials, and they recall favorite episodes. They know about prosecutors and defense attorneys, judges and juries, but they have little knowledge of what actually goes on in a jury room. Next, I introduce the movie and tell students to note that the story is told in “real time”—the ninety minutes it takes the jurors to decide on their verdict is approximately the same as the film’s run-

ning time—and that virtually all of the action takes place in one room. Then I start the movie.

Following a brief prologue, we see twelve men entering the jury room where they will deliberate the case. Almost immediately, each man is distinguished by what he wears, how he behaves, and what he says; these details create a character for the viewer. A few men wear suits and ties, some are more casually dressed, one verbalizes that it's an open-and-shut case, one man impatiently says that he has tickets to the Yankees game in a few hours. Someone mentions that this is the hottest day of the summer. Soon the foreman asks the group to take a preliminary vote to see where they stand. This scene takes no more than five minutes, and we already have a good deal of contextual information conveyed to us through visuals and words. I pause the film and pose several questions to the students: What do we know about each of the men? Did you notice the man who fails to remove his hat and who throws a gum wrapper out the window? Did you notice the man in the white suit standing alone by the window? Does the fact that it's a hot day symbolize and foreshadow the heated debates that are bound to come?

The questions are simple and provide students with a comfort level that makes it relatively easy for them to respond. Hands go up, the students are eager to contribute, and their interest is palpable. They plead with me to continue with the movie. But I go on, calling their attention to the film's point of view. Are we seeing the story unfold through the eyes of one character? I explain that when we attend a live performance of a play or concert in a theater or auditorium, each audience member decides what to watch. In a movie it's different; the director chooses what we see. Then I describe the director's use of long shots, medium shots, and close-ups. I ask students to pay attention to how and when these different choices are used and to note when the camera moves. Has there been any music in the film so far? Why did the director choose to shoot the movie in black and white? Would it make any difference if it were filmed in color?

Again, many students feel comfortable with this conversational approach and are eager to offer their opinions. Even the shy or reticent ones are open to expressing their ideas and enjoy participating in this nonthreatening situation. All opinions are entertained; none are dismissed.

I press the Start button and the movie continues. Eleven men are absolutely certain that the boy is guilty; the man in the white suit says he's not sure and votes "not guilty." The jurors groan and complain as the one holdout tells them that a boy's life is at stake and he feels that they owe it to the boy to discuss the evidence and testimony. I pause the film.

Now we're into questions about psychology, sociology, and the dramatic construction and development of the plot. What do we know about each of the juror's personalities? How do we get this information? Will one man be able to convince the other jurors to change their minds? What are the major conflicts in the movie? Almost forty minutes have flown by and the homework assignment is to write answers to two of the questions I have written on the board. Depending on the class's level, my questions range from easy ones asking students to recall a character's name or physical description to inferential ones dealing with other instructional objectives such as a character's motivation, symbolism of a juror's white suit, or the theme of one person standing up for his beliefs.

At our next meeting, I ask volunteers to read their homework responses aloud. Students' comfort level with the material and their confidence in their opinions are apparent as they volunteer to read their work. Next, I select a scene approximately forty-five minutes into the film. Now there are five jurors convinced that the boy is innocent and seven who are enraged, including the man with the tickets to the Yankees game. We watch another fifteen minutes of the film and I pause for questions: What do you think will happen next? Which jurors will be the most adamant? How will the plot be resolved? There is time for some discussion and another homework assignment.

In the third and final class, several students read their assignments aloud, there is some discussion, and I play the film's closing ten minutes. Some students complain that they want to see the entire film, but class time is limited; if they are interested, I tell them they can rent the DVD and watch it at home. Several students say they plan to do just that and some keep their word.

Hands go up, the students are eager to contribute, and their interest is palpable. They plead with me to continue with the movie.

It is gratifying to see how I have accomplished many of my objectives: most students have learned to practice their seeing and listening skills; they have been exposed to and enjoyed a classic American film; they have begun to feel comfortable expressing their feelings and opinions; many, who were often silent, have begun to participate in class discussions; and some have even dropped their guard and put their thoughts down on paper. The high level of students' interest in the content, the dynamic cast, and the subtle direction make *Twelve Angry Men* an essential film addition to my lesson plans.

"The Play's the Thing"

Language arts teachers commonly show film adaptations of novels and plays that are part of the high school curriculum. Often there are several adaptations available of a particular

work, and the teacher must decide which version to show and at what point in the unit the entire movie (or portions of it) should be shown. Some teachers like to use the film as a motivational device and show it before the class starts reading. Others show the movie after students have read the text. I prefer to begin with the written word and then introduce the film once

students have had a chance to visualize the characters, setting, and language. In the case of *Twelve Angry Men*, students did not read the play because my objective was to hone their watching and listening skills. Even then, I chose not to show them the film in its entirety. There is something to be said for showing key scenes and then letting students discover the rest of the film for themselves. In fact, weeks or sometimes months later a student will come into class excited at having seen *Twelve Angry Men* on TV and having reminded his or her parents that we had watched the movie in school.

Typically, a high school student's first introduction to Shakespeare is *Romeo and Juliet*. But many special education teachers avoid teaching Shakespeare's plays because of the difficulties with

the language. Movies, however, make the incoherent comprehensible. The opening prologue of *Romeo and Juliet* provides a succinct summary of the play, and once students understand the basic plot and are able to sort out the Montagues and Capulets, they're hooked.

We read the first two scenes of the play aloud, and I pause frequently for questions and explanations. After a few lessons, I introduce them to the opening of Franco Zeffirelli's exquisite *Romeo and Juliet*. The film's opening closely follows the play and students get an eye- and earful of settings, characters, and language. I also run the movie with English subtitles to focus some of their concentration on the words. There's no need to show them more than five to ten minutes of the film before I remove the DVD and replace it with *West Side Story*. The remarkable opening visuals of Manhattan shot from a helicopter high above the city are stunning, and the camera seamlessly zooms into a neighborhood and slowly zeroes in on a public school playground where the Jets spar with the Sharks. The gangs sing and dance, which usually results in classroom laughter, and the conflict between the two opposing forces is clearly established.

We compare the films. Are the adaptations faithful to the play, how are they different, and which version do students prefer? Our study of the play continues in this fashion: we read several scenes and then watch key parts of the movies—the masked ball where Romeo first sees Juliet, the balcony scene, the street brawl where Tybalt slays Mercutio, Romeo's fight with Tybalt. Even the most disabled youngster is getting his or her first taste of Shakespeare, understanding it and enjoying it.

Again, I have reinforced my objectives: students continue to sharpen their seeing and listening skills; they have been exposed to various film interpretations of an important work of art; they feel "normal" about how they understand the play and how they can express their thoughts and feelings about the works; they are participating in class discussions and written assignments; and some are motivated to get past their preconceived notions of Shakespeare and his language and try another play.

About halfway through our study of the play and films, I introduce students to the independent project, which calls on the research and writing skills that they have been developing throughout

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RECOMMENDED MOVIES

The following movies work especially well with secondary school students with special needs. All of them are available in DVD and VHS formats.

- Au Revoir, Les Enfants*. Dir. Louis Malle. Sony Pictures Classics, 1987.
- Bicycle Thief, The*. Dir. Vittorio De Sica. Rialto, 1948.
- Breaking Away*. Dir. Peter Yates. Twentieth-Century Fox, 1979.
- Bronx Tale, A*. Dir. Robert De Niro. Savoy, 1993.
- Face in the Crowd, A*. Dir. Elia Kazan. Warner Brothers, 1957.
- High Noon*. Dir. Fred Zinnemann. United Artists, 1952.
- Igby Goes Down*. Dir. Burr Steers. United Artists, 2002.
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. Dir. Philip Kaufman. United Artists, 1978.
- Koyaanisqatsi*. Dir. Godfrey Reggio. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1982.
- Modern Times*. Dir. Charles Chaplin. United Artists, 1936.
- Paths of Glory*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. United Artists, 1957.
- Rivers and Tides*. Dir. Thomas Riedelsheimer. Roxie Cinema, 2001.
- Sherlock Jr.* Dir. Buster Keaton. Metro Pictures, 1924.
- Singin' in the Rain*. Dir. Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1952.
- Triplets of Belleville, The*. Dir. Sylvain Chomet. Sony Pictures Classics, 2003.
- What's Eating Gilbert Grape*. Dir. Lasse Hallström. Paramount Pictures, 1993.
- Wild Child, The*. Dir. Francois Truffaut. United Artists, 1970.

the year. Each student must use the library or Internet and write a three- to five-page research paper, including a bibliography. They discover how many film versions of the play have been made and find and read several critical responses to at least three versions. Our school has a designated computer room and a bank of laptops that a teacher can bring into the classroom. I plan a day when students can use the Internet to do research. Classmates have an opportunity to share their computer skills with each other and help those who have no idea where to look or how to begin. Within a short time, students have found the required information and are ready to begin writing.

Their next step is to locate and view at least one film version of the play on DVD or VHS and to

write their own review. Many students are surprised to learn that there have been almost fifty film adaptations of *Romeo and Juliet*.

I break down the project into several parts, which students have to tackle over a period of a few weeks, often over a holiday break. The long-term assignment teaches students to complete their work one step at a time, during class time and at home. Students are encouraged to write about the differences and similarities between the play and the movies. Some discuss setting, costumes, and language, while some compare concepts and styles. An assistant teacher or I meet with students individually to make sure that their questions are addressed and that they are moving along at a reasonable pace. All work is to be typed, double-spaced, and proofread, and deadlines must be met.

The final reports often are insightful. One student commented, "One bizarre version, Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, takes place in modern times and is set in Venice, California. It has been recommended for people who find the play's text difficult. I've seen this version and enjoyed it. It has virtually the same feel as the original play. Shakespeare's dialogue is intact, so I'm somewhat skeptical about it being easier to understand. One interesting side note is that the balcony scene is reversed. Romeo climbs up to the balcony while Juliet walks out the front door below."

Another student was so enamored of the play that he decided to watch the award-winning film *Shakespeare in Love*. "It tells the story of how Shakespeare supposedly developed the play. We see the outside influences that inspired Shakespeare, including suggestions from his colleagues, and an affair with an engaged woman. Many of the scenes are roughly the same as the more memorable parts of the play, and the film ends with the final draft of the play acted out."

To complete the play projects, students who studied *Romeo and Juliet* memorize at least fourteen continuous lines of Shakespeare's words—many choose the opening prologue. Most do well, and their work is quite gratifying. Even those students who had difficulty with the language and could not memorize a long passage seemed to feel proud of what they could accomplish.

This method works as a template for teaching any play. Recently, while one class was reading

Romeo and Juliet, a class of juniors was studying Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. My use of the Paul Newman–directed film was limited to showing them Tom Wingfield's monologues and several scenes with Amanda, Laura, and the Gentleman Caller. Students were also assigned an independent research project. As a culminating activity, I asked students to write an original monologue for one of the four characters.

Conclusion

We know that children learn in a variety of ways, and students with special needs, in particular, benefit from seeing and hearing what they read. In the last few years, I have begun to show foreign films to my classes. It is interesting to note how films with subtitles help even the most reading-disabled student maintain focus and follow a plot. A wonderful, easily accessible film such as *The Story of the Weeping Camel*, with minimal dialogue in Mongolian, captures their imagination and gives them a glimpse into a different culture.

Students hamstrung by their difficulties with the written word blossom when they become full participants in the milieu of movies. They begin to feel more confident about themselves and their place in the world.

Films are a valuable tool for teaching in many disciplines. A music teacher, for example, might

show sequences from Steven Spielberg's *Jaws* (1975) to illustrate how critical John Williams's score is to setting up a tense situation. A film teacher might show a sequence from the same film to demonstrate how important acting, editing, and color are to creating a suspenseful mood, and a psychology teacher might show parts of *Jaws* to demonstrate how hysteria can spread like wildfire through a community.

Similarly, using film adaptations of classics such as *Death of a Salesman*, *Inherit the Wind*, *Arsenic and Old Lace*, *The Miracle Worker*, *The Member of the Wedding*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *Great Expectations*, and *To Kill a Mockingbird* is a foolproof way to enrich lessons and make a meaningful and lasting impression on students. The possibilities are only limited by one's imagination.

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Joseph Coencas teaches classes in literature, writing, and film appreciation at The Summit School in New York. He is the co-screenwriter of *A Very Natural Thing* (1974), a New Line Cinema release. email: coencascom@aol.com.

READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

Coencas shares his successes with using film in the classroom and explains several approaches and examples. The lesson plan "Exploring Satire with *Shrek*" demonstrates how a film can be used in the classroom to teach literary elements and genres, specifically the satirical techniques of exaggeration, incongruity, reversal, and parody. Students brainstorm fairy tale characteristics, identify the satirical techniques used to present them in the movie, then create satirical versions of fairy tales.

http://www.readwritethink.org/lessons/lesson_view.asp?id=810