

# Immigration Today: Three Strategies for Teaching with Film

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U.S. films have served as public textbooks about the immigrant experience.

—Carlos Cortés, in *Hollywood as Mirror*<sup>1</sup>

At a time of growing immigrant populations and increased political attention in the upcoming presidential election, it would seem that the topic of immigration would receive a great deal of attention in public schools. Yet many teachers shy away from it.<sup>2</sup> In this article, we argue that teachers should embrace teaching about current immigration events and controversies and suggest three ways to do this through film.

## Why Teach with Film?

Film has a long track record as an instructional tool for teaching social issues. Film has been shown to elicit and maintain student interest and engagement more effectively than traditional teaching methods like lectures.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, using film as a medium may also be more comfortable for teachers who are hesitant to broach this issue. Watching a film excerpt can provide a common experience for all your students as they begin to discuss related news, controversies, and family histories.<sup>4</sup>

In this article, we present a brief overview of literature about film and immigration and list a few feature and documentary films related to recent immigration that can work well in the middle school classroom. We also present three teaching methods that are useful for analyzing the film content and bringing today's immigration issues into the conversation. We believe these three methods are ideal for middle level social studies; especially for those teachers who want to examine immigration with their students while integrating social studies and language arts.

## Why Teach Immigration?

Why should the topic of immigration be a priority in 21st century classroom? First, immigration is a lived experience for many students. Almost 2,000,000 immigrant students enrolled in

U.S. schools in 2013, and more than 11,000,000 students have at least one foreign-born parent.<sup>5</sup> Avoiding the topic ignores one of the most formative experiences of these students' lives. Second, immigration policies are widely discussed and hotly contested. In keeping with tradition, it's a prominent topic in debates and official statements during this year's campaigning by presidential hopefuls and others. Finally, the present wave of immigration differs in many ways from previous populations. For example, contemporary immigration is characterized by new dispersion and settlement patterns (e.g., immigration to traditional gateway states and new gateways), meaning that a greater number of teachers in a wider variety of areas are likely to teach immigrant students.<sup>6</sup>

Each of these reasons suggests that middle level teachers should take up immigration as a social issue, not just as a historical subject. Teaching immigration as a social issue can help teachers and students better understand this complex phenomenon and the relationship between immigration and politics, both historically and contemporarily. Most importantly, teaching immigration can help teachers better understand the students in their classrooms, while also helping immigrant and native-born students reflect on their own experiences and perspectives. Yet, precisely because immigration is contentious and politicized, teachers may be hesitant to broach this complex social issue in their classrooms.

## Feature Films and Documentaries

Immigration has become such a central feature of our demographic, social, and political landscapes that many feature films

**ON THE COVER:** Snapshot from the movie *Papers: Stories of Undocumented Youth* (Courtesy of Graham Street Productions, [www.grahamstreetproductions.com](http://www.grahamstreetproductions.com))

and documentary films explore it as a central or secondary theme. Professor Emeritus of History Carlos Cortés wrote that Hollywood offers “a kind of popular curriculum on immigration” through feature films.<sup>7</sup> Since he penned these words over two decades ago, several phenomena have led to changes in U.S. immigration trends, legislation, and immigrant experiences. Hollywood has responded to these changes by “expanding the curriculum” with mainstream films with variations on the theme of “coming to America.”

While these feature films continue to offer a “popular curriculum” of immigration to the general public, documentaries have also emerged as a valuable resource for teaching about this complex social issue. Documentaries often present “counter-stories” of immigration experiences, perspectives that challenge popular narratives and provide viewers more nuanced views of immigration. The best documentaries are built upon primary and secondary sources (not just expressions of opinion), and they typically focus on actual lived experiences rather than generalized (or possibly romanticized) immigration stories embedded within a fictional storyline.

### Using Video Excerpts

Finding a specific episode within a film has become easier with the advent of “chapter titles” programmed within digital movies as well as scroll bars (showing time elapsed) along the bottom of the screen. Viewing an entire film is not necessary to examine the issues and facilitate meaningful discussions. In fact, viewing specific 10–15 minute excerpts can be very engaging and as meaningful (for your pedagogical purposes), while allowing you to devote most of the class time to analyzing a film clip’s content with your students.

Teachers should preview the entire film before showing any part of it to a middle school audience. By thoughtfully selecting excerpt(s), a teacher can show a segment, while avoiding parts that would not be appropriate for a middle school classroom. Excerpts from the film, *The Namesake*, for example, are appropriate for a middle school audience, yet the film in its entirety is not. Before you plan to use an appropriate excerpt of a film (one created for more mature audiences), share the excerpt and lesson plan with your principal. Then send a letter to students’ parents outlining the lesson, describing the use of the video excerpt in the classroom and explaining that you recommend parental guidance (and preview of the film) if a student were to ask them permission to view the entire film at home.



Monica, from the movie *Papers: Stories of Undocumented Youth*.

### Three Exemplary Films

Here we briefly describe three films that we’ve found to be exemplars for teaching immigration. We selected these films for a number of reasons: they are critically acclaimed and youth are the central characters. These exemplars also represent three different home cultures and three different life experiences: being an undocumented youth, being a young refugee, and being second-generation family member. The first two films focus primarily on the journey to the United States, while the third focuses more on immigrant acculturation. Teachers can choose to highlight these different aspects, or to focus on one.

*Which Way Home* is a documentary that chronicles the experiences of children and teens as they rode freight trains in their journeys through Central America and Mexico to reach the United States. Video footage and personal interviews recorded on the trains, in detention centers, and from the nations of origin illustrate the experiences or counter-stories of the youth in ways that are largely unreported in traditional news outlets.

*The Lost Boys of Sudan* is a documentary that follows two young Sudanese refugees from Sudan to a refugee camp in Kenya where they seek asylum during civil war and then to the United States. Although safe from physical danger and hunger, they still find themselves confronted with the abundance and alienation of contemporary American suburbia.

*The Namesake* is a fictional drama based on a book about the Ganguli family that moves from Calcutta, India, to Cambridge, Massachusetts. We suggest using a specific, powerful scene rather than the entire movie. For example, in the “Taj Mahal” scene, the clothing of each family member illustrates his or her visible level of acculturation to America: the son’s sports jersey, the daughter’s light blouse and scarf, the father’s business casual attire, and the mother’s sari. Yet, the family shares

a powerful moment as they look in awe and admiration at the Taj Mahal, an iconic symbol of their heritage.

In our teaching, we follow viewing of a film with a combination of three teaching strategies that help extend students' understanding of immigration: backchanneling; taking a stand; and analyzing and comparing sources.

## I. Backchannel (Watch and Comment Simultaneously)

Films should be consumed critically. Understanding this, teachers can backchannel with their students to foster critical media literacy skills as well as to teach skills and concepts related to immigration and discussing current issues.

A backchannel is "a digital conversation that runs concurrently with a face-to-face activity," such as watching a film clip.<sup>8</sup> It "provides students with an outlet to engage in conversation." It mimics a casual "texting" practice among teenagers with cell phones: they text one another while watching a movie together.

In the classroom, students can respond to teacher-generated prompts, or freely write their reactions to what's happening on screen. We ask students to respond to short queries. Table 1 shows a sample of backchannel prompts to use with the three films discussed above. After the film excerpt has shown, students can respond to longer questions in whole-class discussions, small-group conversations, or in writing assignments.

Applications such as Padlet enable students to chat about the film sequences in real time. Padlet and similar 2.0 applications (e.g., PiratePad, NoteApp) allow teachers to easily prearrange group membership and select small- or whole-group backchanneling formats. These apps work on various devices, such as iPads and wireless laptops.

## II. Take a Stand (Enable a Discussion)

"Take a Stand" is a discussion strategy whereby students move about the room as they read, respond, analyze, and deliberate statements individually and as a group. There are many varieties of this approach (e.g., as practiced by Facing History and Ourselves, [www.facinghistory.org](http://www.facinghistory.org)), but the common purpose across the different approaches is the deliberation of social issues.

"Take a Stand" begins when students silently read a declarative statement displayed large at the front of the room. The teacher posts signs displaying a progression describing a person's opinion about that statement and how strongly they feel about it (Strongly Agree; Agree; Undecided; Disagree; to

Strongly Disagree). Then each student takes a stand, literally standing up and walking to the posted sign in the room that most clearly aligns with their sentiments.

Once they select a "position," students begin a conversation about their "stances," which allows each assembled group to clarify why its members adopted that particular stance. Then members of one group can share their opinions with members of other groups. As they listen to their peers, students may indicate that they're changing their minds by physically moving near another posted opinion. In this free-flowing forum, they may pose questions to each other, reread statements, and explain their reasoning, all the while listening to others articulate their perspectives.

For the topic of immigration, declarative statements could include "U.S. border entry should be more restricted" or "Immigration strengthens countries." Teachers could generate statements directly related to a film clip. For example, statements for the documentary *Which Way Home* might include: "Undocumented immigrants should follow the legal path to citizenship"; "Home countries should help prevent migration"; or "Freedom of movement between countries should be a human right."

There are several variations of "Take a Stand" that we've found work equally well. Students may elect to respond to the statements electronically using wireless clickers or online voting tools like PollEverywhere.com, and then deliberate their stances on the issue(s) together, sharing and responding to one another from their seats. Teachers may choose to record students' positions on a continuum, providing a visual reference to an otherwise largely verbal deliberation. This extension activity helps students understand the multi-layered nature of social and political issues like immigration, and the process of creating the continuum elicits rich conversation among the students.

Finally, while traditionally the teacher prepares the statements, some students are motivated to write their own statements for class deliberation. To this end, teachers may include "statement writing" as part of students' responsibilities during or after the viewing of a film, or, depending on the length of class sessions, students may write statements or respond electronically outside of class, and then hold a discussion the following class session.

In summary, "Take a Stand" is a good method for integrating social studies and ELA as it offers a space for students to respond to a film by holding an issues-centered discussion. The film serves as a "common experience" shared by all students, although their interpretations of any one scene might vary.



From the photo gallery of *The Namesake* (Fox Searchlight, 2007)

### III. Analyze and Compare Sources

The third teaching strategy can be used separately, or it can follow either of those above. In this activity, students analyze and compare the various sources of information about immigration, comparing and contrasting how immigration issues

and perspectives are represented across the sources. A film clip can provide background about an issue before students dive into the details of a particular issue or controversy by engaging with different sources.

We have used two different approaches for source analysis and comparison. First, in the stations method, small groups of students rotate through different tables and sources, analyzing and comparing a collection of sources. Items at these stations can include a book excerpt (nonfiction or YA, with a section marked for students to read aloud); a magazine and newspaper article; an opinion piece; a political cartoon; or a photo. At one station, the teacher could prepare a laptop that would run a video clip or a short Webquest. We then hold a whole-group debriefing focused on the immigration issues presented in the sources, and we work to envision potential solutions to some of the current challenges in our world today.

A second way to incorporate source analysis is to use the jigsaw method, in which small groups of students select and present different types of sources to their peers (e.g., Group 1 presenting a political cartoon, Group 2 presenting a website). In this variation, the end goal is to analyze the themes about

Table 1: Three Exemplary Films and Classroom Queries

Title, Studio, Year, * Characters' Origin *	Backchannel Prompts (During the film)	Discussion Questions (After the showing)
<b><i>The Lost Boys of Sudan</i></b> Actual Films, 2003  * Sudan *	Fight? Flight? Or frozen with fear?  Is this ironic?	What were the Lost Boys' most difficult decisions?  What new challenges arose when the boys experienced the comparative ease of life in America?  What could U.S. communities do to help such youth make the transition to the United States?
<b><i>The Namesake</i></b> Fox Searchlight, 2007  * India *	Notice the clothing.  This is the first time all family members are looking in the same direction!	In what ways do the family members represent values and traditions of both India and the United States?  Describe the internal conflicts faced by the two teens when visiting India. How do they "find a balance" in their own lives?
<b><i>Which Way Home?</i></b> HBO Films, 2009  *Central America and Mexico *	Why ride trains instead of another form of transportation?	What different emotions do you imagine the youth felt while hitching a ride on "the Beast" (the trains through Mexico)?  What things (internal and external) helped them survive?  Which nations, organizations, or individuals have the ability to help these youth? What might they do?

immigration that emerge from the sources available. Themes can include motivations for leaving one's home country; challenges of acculturation; racism and tolerance in America; learning a new language; and what has been lost or gained by moving to America.

With either the stations or jigsaw method, we offer students two choices for recording and presenting what they have learned. They may either create a chart showing the types of sources (in our class, they can use Popplet (a free mapping tool)), or they may record the immigration themes found in each source using a graphic organizer (distributed by the teacher).

## Conclusion

As immigration to the United States continues to evolve, this topic is increasingly relevant in students' personal lives and in their awareness as a critical social and political issue. We have had great success with examining immigration issues by examining carefully selected film excerpts with these three strategies. While the urgency of this issue may cause some teachers to avoid teaching immigration, we argue that this urgency calls for thoughtful and engaging teaching strategies. (See recommended films & readings on page 7.)

## Notes

1. Carlos Cortés, "Them and Us: Immigration as Societal Barometer and Social Educator in American Film," in *Hollywood as Mirror: Changing Views of "Outsiders" and "Enemies" in American Movies*, R. B. Toplin, ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1993). 53.
2. Jeremy Hilburn, "Challenges Facing Immigrant Students Beyond the Linguistic Domain in a New Gateway State," *Urban Review* 46, no. 4. (2014)
3. See Lisa Brown Buchanan, "Elementary Preservice Teachers' Navigation of Racism and Whiteness through Inquiry with Historical Documentary Film," *Journal of Social Studies Research* 42, no. 2 (2015); Jeremy Stoddard, "The Ideological Implications of Using 'Educational' Film to Teach Controversial Events," *Curriculum Inquiry* vol. 39, no. 3 (2009).
4. Jeremy Stoddard, "Socratic Seminar: A Model for Film Discussion in the Social Studies," in *Social Studies and Teacher Diversity Education*, R. Fruja and M. Missias, eds. (New York: Routledge, 2010), 288-291.
5. Migration Policy Institute, "United States: Demographic and Social Data: State Immigration Data Profiles" (2013), [www.migrationpolicy.org](http://www.migrationpolicy.org).
6. Xue Lan Rong and Judith Preissle, *Educating Immigrants in the 21st Century* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press, 2009).
7. Cortés, 54.
8. Beth Holland, "The Backchannel: Giving Every Student a Voice in the Blended Mobile Classroom," *Edutopia* (June 7, 2016), [www.edutopia.org](http://www.edutopia.org).

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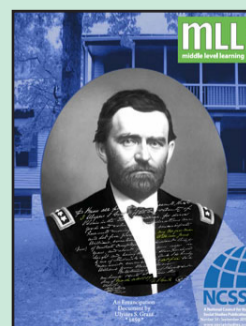
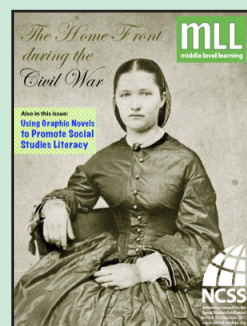
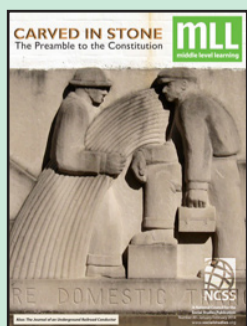
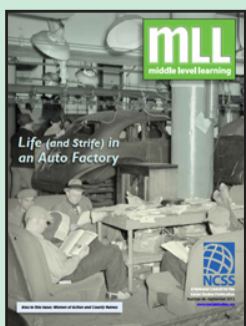
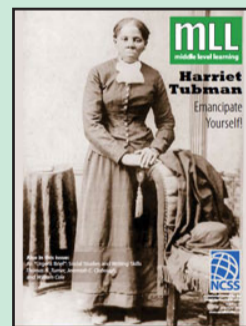
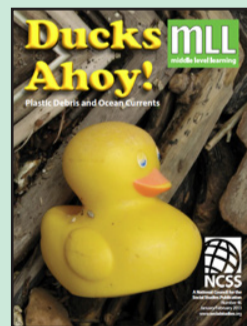
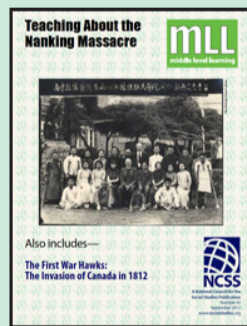
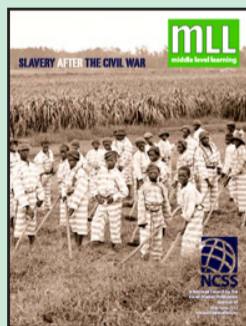
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## Recommended Films (for Excerpting)

*The Lost Boys of Sudan.* by M. Mylan and J. Shenk, Directors. San Francisco, CA: Actual Films, 2003. Length of film: 87 minutes. [www.lostboysfilm.com](http://www.lostboysfilm.com); [www.pbs.org/pov/lostboysofsudan](http://www.pbs.org/pov/lostboysofsudan)

The genocide in the Darfur region of Sudan is the most recent violent episode in a country torn by a 20-year civil war. The Dinka tribe has been hardest hit. The film follows two young Dinka refugees, Peter and Santino, through their first year in America.

*The Namesake.* L.D. Pilcher and M. Nair, Directors. New York: Mirabai Films, 2007. Length of film: 122 minutes.

[www.foxsearchlight.com/thenamesake](http://www.foxsearchlight.com/thenamesake); Also [teach-immigration.wikispaces.com/Indian+Immigration](http://teach-immigration.wikispaces.com/Indian+Immigration)

A fictional story following a married couple from India through their immigration to the United States and the life and family that they create today while constantly adjusting and struggling with cultural differences.

*The Other Side of Immigration.* Roy Germano, Director. New York: Roy Germano Films, 2009. Length of film: 55 minutes. [www.theothersideofimmigration.com](http://www.theothersideofimmigration.com).

A collection of interviews (shot in Mexico) revealing why many Mexicans migrate to the United States.

*Papers.* Anne Galisky, Director. Portland, OR: Graham Street Productions/El Grupo Juvenil, 2008. Length of film (PBS version): 56 minutes, [www.papersthemovie.com](http://www.papersthemovie.com); Search on "immigration lesson plan" at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

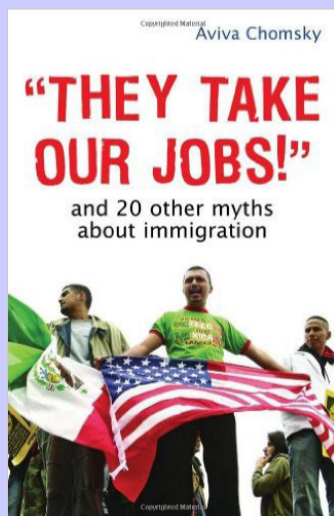
An account of undocumented youth who face multiple challenges as they become adults without U.S. legal status.

*Which Way Home.* Rebecca Cammisa, Director. New York, New York: HBO Films, 2009. Length of film: 90 minutes.

[www.whichwayhome.net](http://www.whichwayhome.net); Also [www.hbo.com/documentaries/which-way-home/index.html](http://www.hbo.com/documentaries/which-way-home/index.html).

The journey from Latin American countries north to the United States as seen through the eyes of youth riding the train tops.

## Readings for Teachers' Background



Chomsky, Aviva. *"They Take Our Jobs!" And 20 Other Myths about Immigration.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2007.

Interviews provide the substance (immigrants take Americans' jobs, are a drain on our economy, contribute to poverty and inequality, weaken the social fabric, challenge American identity, and contribute to a host of social ills) that is analyzed and debunked by the director.

Hobbs, Will. *Crossing the Wire.* New York: Harper Collins, 2007. Faced with failing crops and starvation, fifteen-year-old Victor Flores attempts to "cross the wire" from Mexico into the United States so he can find work and send money home. He has no money to pay the "coyotes" who sneak illegal workers across the border. He jumps trains, stows away on trucks, and hikes

for miles through the Arizona desert."

Holden, Stephen. "Film Review: Modernity and Tradition at a Cultural Crossroads," *New York Times*, March 29, 2007, [www.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/movies/09name.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/09/movies/09name.html).

Nazario, Sonia. *Enrique's Journey.* New York: Random House, 2007.

*Enrique's Journey* recounts the quest of a Honduran boy looking for his mother, eleven years after she is forced to leave her starving family to find work in the United States. Clinging to the sides and tops of freight trains, Enrique faces physical dangers and risks, and also humans at every step who would thwart his efforts.

Pace, J., and B. Barrow. "Trump Risks Deepening Republican Rift on Immigration." *U.S. News and World Report*, August 28, 2015, free at [www.yahoo.com/news](http://www.yahoo.com/news).