

Reading in the Social Studies: Using Subtitled Films

Kerry Holmes, William B. Russell III, and Allison Movitz

Involving reluctant and low-achieving students with reading is an essential step to increasing students' content area knowledge. One way to increase students' engagement with text is by linking social studies content with foreign films that have English subtitles. Not only can subtitled films help increase students' engaged time with text, but the use of these films provides a multi-sensory, multidimensional exposure to the social studies. Films bring social studies—particularly history and geography—to life for students, bringing them closer to the people and events they are studying.¹ Films can also impact and influence a person's perspective of history and offer an accurate interpretation of history.²

This article aims to identify and describe specific films that teachers can use to supplement and enhance the social studies curriculum (grades 6-12), while also encouraging reading. The article illustrates how teachers can capture students' interest and stimulate their imagination as they are learning. We also provide readers with a research-based rationale for using foreign films with English subtitles in the classroom; criteria for selecting films suitable for classroom use; and information on the legality of using copyrighted material in the classroom.

Capitalizing on Novelty, Movement, and Interest

Novelty and movement are two recognized ways to attract and maintain student interest. Wolfe states that when new information is presented in a novel context, students learn the material in a deeper, more meaningful way.⁴ The brain is a "novelty seeker," writes Sousa.⁵ Unexpected events provide interest and stimulation. This aspect of foreign films, accentuated through movement

and sound, makes them exceptional at captivating students.

People are all drawn to movement; movement alerts the mind to danger and changes in the environment. Teachers have all had to compete with movement while trying to keep students focused on their lessons. When someone passes outside the classroom window or door, heads turn to focus on the movement. By linking lessons to movement, teachers can capitalize on the instinctive preoccupation with movement. Studies on "interestingness" indicate that students read at a faster rate and at a higher reading level when they are interested in what they are reading.⁶ Learning is also more likely to be retained in long-term memory when it is attached to an emotional response.⁷ American students become emotionally connected with the lives of people around the world through foreign films, while at the same time participating in reading and social studies learning.

People, Places, and Environment

Because foreign films come in many genres and are set in countries around the

world, teachers can find films to supplement almost any social studies theme. Foreign films explicitly expose students to cultural differences by allowing them to enter the homes and workplaces of people around the world. Differences and similarities between the students' lives and the lives of people in other places and at other times are easier to perceive. The compelling images and scenes enable students to make comparisons between cultures and customs and, when fostered by discussion, may help them develop greater appreciation and sensitivity for cultures and customs different from their own.

Getting Started

Two resources that provide an overall description of films suitable for classroom use are the book *Engaging Reluctant Readers through Foreign Films* and the website TeachWithMovies.com. These resources also offer numerous vocabulary, reading, and social studies activities.⁸ Leonard Maltin's *Movie and Video Guide*, Tom Wiener's *The Off-Hollywood Film Guide*, and Elliot Wilhelm's *Video Hounds World Cinema* are excellent preliminary guides, providing brief descriptions of films and their ratings.

Foreign films with English subtitles can be checked out for free from public libraries or rented from video and DVD stores. Most of the foreign films described in this article were found in various small town public libraries. With small town



Ziyi Zhang
in *Crouching
Tiger, Hidden
Dragon* (2003).
Photograph
courtesy of Sony
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availability as a benchmark, teachers should have little problem finding the films they need in their public libraries. Foreign films can also be ordered online. Prices for films range from \$.25 to \$25 depending on format (VHS or DVD) and condition (new or used). Many are well under \$10, if bought used, through shopping websites such as Amazon.com.

Viewing films beforehand for lesson and age suitability is advisable. In some cases, teachers may choose to show clips from the film to illustrate or dramatize aspects of a lesson. At other times, they may wish to show the film in its entirety. By previewing the film, teachers can determine the length of clips, and show the film over an extended period of time to meet the objectives, needs of the students, and that perennial problem of short class periods. Other criteria to consider when choosing films include

- educational worth
- interest of the plot to the students
- suitable levels of language and violence
- absence of sexually explicit scenes
- speed of words as they appear in the subtitles
- readability of the printed text

Technical Issues

Ideally, films should be shown on a large screen using a liquid crystal display (LCD) to project the film onto a screen. This allows large groups of students greater visibility for reading subtitles. However, during a pilot study in a rural high school in Mississippi, students were shown a subtitled film on an older television with a relatively small screen. All students were able to see and read along with the subtitles. This was determined because students laughed and expressed sorrow during scenes where the meaning was primarily communicated through print. The size of the class and location of the television are two issues that should determine the type of equipment needed for classroom viewing.

Foreign Films for the Classroom

Foreign films with English subtitles are easily aligned with the National Standards for Social Studies. Social studies standards are organized around ten interrelated themes that are based on the social sciences and related disciplines including history, geography, civics, and economics. By connecting themes from the films to the social studies themes, teachers can facilitate reading, problem solving, and the examination of critical issues within real-life contexts.

The national social studies standards are described at www.ncss.org/standards.

The following annotated list of foreign films is adapted from a list recommended by Kerry Holmes, one of the authors of this article.⁹ These films address, to varying degrees, the 10 social studies themes. Each film is briefly described along with some of the dominant social studies themes that can be pursued in the classroom.

Au Revoir Les Enfants, Grades 9-12

Rated PG

Set outside of Paris, France, during 1944, this is a biographical history of 12-year-old Julien, a non-Jewish boy, who becomes best friends with Jean, a Jewish boy hiding from the Nazis in a Catholic boarding school. A vengeful act by a worker at the school sets off a chain of events that will haunt Julien all of his life.

This film addresses the social studies theme of **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**. The world beyond the boarding school has changed. Once innocent actions are now deadly. Institutions such as school, home, and restaurants appear to be the same, to all outward appearances. However, the war and enemy occupation have infused hatred and anxiety into the most normal of daily routines. A boarding school filled with preadolescent and adolescent boys demonstrates the power of peers and the

need for peer acceptance. (❷ **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**)

Babette's Feast, Grades 6-12

Rated G

This story is set in Frederikshavn, Denmark, in 1834. Frederikshavn is a small community on the northeast coast of Jutland, the largest geographical region in Denmark. Film footage highlights life in a small coastal Danish town, presenting homes with thatched roofs, a tiny grocery store, the style of dress, transportation, and food preparation techniques. Philippa and Martina, two daughters of a pious minister, lead a simple, pure life, honoring God and serving the poor. Their values are severely challenged when Babette, a French woman, seeks employment and refuge at their house.

At the beginning of the film, the two sisters, Philippa and Martina, are shown as old women. Their images then morph into young women and the story begins. The flashback to the sisters' youth offers viewers the unique perspective of seeing events unfold with full knowledge of the conclusion (❸ **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**). The theme of (❹ **SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY**) can be explored by comparing life in nineteenth-century Denmark with contemporary times, with attention given to cooking technology and the transportation of goods. The theme (❶ **GLOBAL CONNECTIONS**) is also highlighted when the sisters are faced with different values, or experience "culture clash," upon encountering visitors from France. These visitors bring with them dreams and customs quite different from those of the people in the remote Danish village.

The Bicycle Thief, Grades 6-12

Not Rated

This film is set in Rome, Italy, two years after the end of World War II. It is 1947, and people are suffering from a post-war depression. Antonio, a man of high integrity, desperate to put food on the table for his family, is driven to an act of crime. His young son witnesses the aftermath of the crime, creating a heartbreaking situation for both father and son.

The themes of (❷ **INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**), and (❸ **CIVIC IDEALS AND PRACTICES**) are explicit in this film. Institutions such as the family, church, and government agencies impacted the life of the major character. The civic ideals of responsibility and honesty are largely the focus of this film. The viewer sees how people must part with their worldly goods, as illustrated through the burgeoning stockpiles at a pawn shop (❸ **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**). Antonio also undergoes a dramatic change to meet the needs of a new life.

Children of Heaven, Grades 6-12

Rated PG

Set in the homes, market places, and a school of modern day Tehran, the capital city of Iran, this story, portrayed through the eyes of two young children, is about a lost pair of shoes. Ali, age nine, and Zahra, age seven, must find a way to share one pair of shoes without the knowledge of their overburdened parents. Ali, responsible for losing his sister's shoes, goes to extraordinary means to help her get a new pair.

Scenes from the lives of the people in Iran are vivid, portraying the people as ordinary citizens going about their daily lives. (❶ **CULTURE**; (❷ **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**; and (❷ **INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS**)

The Cup, Grades 6-12, Rated G

This statement from the film, "Inevitable modernization comes from the ideas of the young," epitomizes the story's theme. Set in a Buddhist monastery in India, the viewer sees traditional customs through the eyes of young student monks. The film follows the antics of two young Tibetan refugees who have fled to India. The spirited student monks challenge old customs when they go to great lengths to see the 1998 World Cup soccer game between France and Italy. Scenes from the actual World Cup game are shown. (❶ **CULTURE**, (❷ **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**; (❷ **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**; (❹ **SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY**)

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Grades 9-12, Rated PG-13

Set in nineteenth-century China, this film weaves nonstop action through the unfolding events of two love stories. This is a story about women who possess superhuman qualities and their quest for power and love. The possession of the Green Destiny sword, a sword with magical powers, leads to triumph sacrifice and tragedy.

Students can compare and contrast issues related to gender roles, honor, responsibility, and being true to oneself. (❶ **CULTURE**; (❷ **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**; (❸ **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE**; and (❷ **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**)

East-West, Grades 9-12

Rated PG-13

This historical drama, based on the actual events told by the survivors, is set in the Soviet Union between 1946-1958. The film opens with scenes of hundreds of happy Russian expatriates returning to Russia from France at the end of World War II. They are unknowingly headed for tragedy. Stalin, seeking to keep the knowledge of a more affluent West from the Russian citizens, has ordered their murder or imprisonment. This story follows the plight of one expatriate family—a doctor, Alexei, his wife, Marie, and young son, Sergei.

Scenes from this film provide vivid comparisons between life in communist Russia and the West. Cultural contrasts between life in postwar Russia and our lives today are dramatic. Citizens live in cramped quarters in fear and suspicion of their government and of each other. (❷ **POWER, AUTHORITY, AND GOVERNANCE**)

Grand Illusion, Grades 9-12

Not Rated

This film is set in German prisoner-of-war camps during World War I, in 1916, and on a rural farm near the Swiss border. Though they were mortal enemies on the battlefield, French prisoners of war Captain de Boeldieu and Lieutenant Maréchal find they have much in common with their German guards, especially Commandant von Rauffenstein.

Students will grapple with social studies themes when pondering questions about war, friendship, social class, and artificial boundaries among the countries of the world. This film deals with human nature and its paradoxes. (IX GLOBAL CONNECTIONS)

Jean de Florette, Grades 6-12

Rated PG

This film is set in the French countryside of Provence after World War I, around 1919. Farmers from two neighboring farms have the same essential need: water. The story is about one farmer's desire for his neighbor's water and another farmer's blind optimism and determination to run a successful farm even when faced with a drought.

The story explores human interdependence and dependence on nature. (IV INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY)

Life is Beautiful, Grades 6-12

Rated PG-13

This film has two distinct parts. Part I takes place in the Italian countryside prior to World War II. During this time, tragedy and persecution are foreshadowed as Guido, Dora, and their young son Joshua happily go about their lives. Part II takes place in a German concentration camp, weeks before the American liberation.

Guido, knowing his son will be killed if he is discovered, devises an elaborate game of hide and seek. The stories Guido invents to shield his son from the truth are at once humorous and poignantly sad. This film is truly a study of the triumph of the human spirit. (II TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE; III PEOPLE, PLACES, AND ENVIRONMENTS)

War and Peace, Grades: 9-12

Not Rated

This epic film, based on the book by Leo Tolstoy, has four parts. The accounts of Napoleon's invasion of Russia and the characters' personal stories span a period from 1805-1812. The film has several settings including St. Petersburg, Russia, small Russian towns along Napoleon's invasion route, the battlefields of Austerlitz and Borodino, and the Russian capital of Moscow during the reign of the tsars. Tolstoy writes about the human experience being a juxtaposition of frivolity, natural death, and war. The director, Sergei Bondarchuk, used many of Tolstoy's words throughout the film—the most notable being Napoleon's farewell speech to his soldiers in Part IV. Andrei, a member of the nobility and a Russian officer, and Pierre, the illegitimate son of a nobleman, are best friends. Their romances, hopes, and dreams are shown throughout the story.

Several themes resonate throughout the four parts of this film. The primary theme, as evidenced by the title of Tolstoy's book, *War and Peace*, has to do with the ways people's lives are impacted during times of war and in peace. Personal identity is poignantly addressed when a Russian soldier observes, "They are men just like us." Individuals, groups, and institutions played a major role in the way people viewed their place in life. The Russian Orthodox Church is shown as an integral part of the lives of the Russian people. Effects of production, distribution, and consumption are tragically shown in the context of Napoleon's march across Russia. The types of warfare used during the nineteenth century illustrate the levels of science and technology that had been available at the time. Communications on the battlefield and between the battlefield and home were grossly inadequate by today's standards. (IV INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY; V INDIVIDUALS, GROUPS, AND INSTITUTIONS; VII PRODUCTION, DISTRIBUTION, AND CONSUMPTION; VIII SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY, AND SOCIETY)

Summary

All teachers, whether they signed on for the job or not, must help students become more proficient at reading. Reading is a necessary tool for learning social studies

TEACHERS AND THE LAW

Can teachers show copyrighted films to students in their classrooms without prior permission or without paying royalties? Yes, but they have a legal responsibility to know and follow the law regarding the use of copyright protected materials. Section 110 (1) of Title 17 of the United States Code on Copyright and Conditions cites the following exemption for the use of copyrighted films for educational purposes:

Performance or display of a work by instructors or pupils in the course of face-to-face teaching activities of a non-profit educational institution, in a classroom or similar place devoted to instruction, unless in the case of a motion picture or other audiovisual work, the performance, or the display of individual images, is given by means of a copy that was not lawfully made under this title, and that the person responsible for the performance knew or had reason to believe was not lawfully made.

Teachers must adhere to the following guidelines when showing a copyrighted film to their students:

Films must be shown in a non-profit educational institution. Within the institution, the film must be shown in a classroom or place intended for instruction.

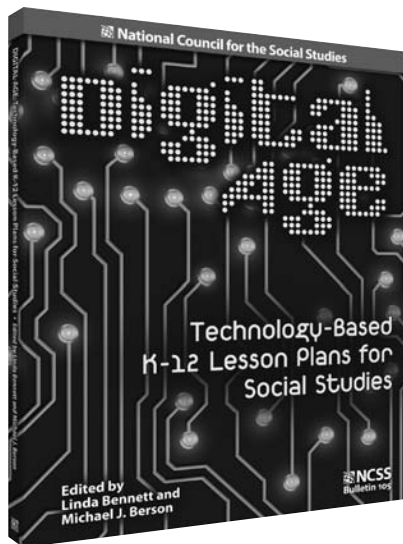
Films must be for planned educational purposes, not for extra-curricular entertainment.

The teacher must show films to the students in a "face-to-face" encounter.

The Teach Act passed on November 2, 2002, and signed into law by President George W. Bush, has loosened the restrictions on the copyrighted materials, including videos, teachers can use in the classroom.¹ However, teachers still cannot make copies of the film, use the film for public performances, or make a profit from the film. Teachers are absolutely prohibited from making or showing a pirated copy of a film.

Note

1. Kenneth D. Crews, *New Copyright in The Age of New Technology*. Fastback #405 (Bloomington, Ind.: Phi Delta Kappa, 2004).



Digital Age: Technology-Based K-12 Lesson Plans for Social Studies

Linda Bennett and Michael J. Berson, editors

NCSS Bulletin No.105, 200 pp. 2007

Exemplary K-12 social studies lessons that infuse technology are the focus of this bulletin. At least one of the authors is a classroom teacher in the majority of the lessons presented. The lessons are based on the NCSS standards. Each lesson includes links with NETS-S (National Educational Technology Standards) and suggests technology applications appropriate for the grade level. In addition, the bulletin includes a section on tools and techniques concerning classroom management, Internet safety, software, images, and podcasting.

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content. Students must be able to read and comprehend books and other materials that convey information about the social studies. Using foreign films with English subtitles encourages students to read and gather information on a variety of social studies themes. Subtitled foreign films serve to supplement reading and the social studies curricula. Turn down the lights and turn up the learning. 🎬

Notes

1. Karl A. Matz and Lori L. Pingatore, “Reel to Reel: Teaching the Twentieth Century with Classic Hollywood Films,” *Social Education* 69, no. 4 (2005): 189-192;
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4. Patricia Wolfe, *Brain Matters: Translating Research Into Classroom Practice*. (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001).
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8. Kerry Holmes, *Engaging Reluctant Readers through Foreign films* (Lanham, Md.: Scarecrow Education, 2005).
9. Ibid.

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Conclusion

I found that while developing a project or unit plan such as this takes time and effort, it is well worth it. Students want to be engaged in the learning process. Not only did they learn more about the time period involved and the historical implications, they also learned how to properly analyze cases and understand the principle of judicial reasoning. They worked with “real” cases and implemented them in the form of a creative, interactive lesson. In this way, students found an appropriate means of assessing the historical and constitutional implications of past events without depending on a teacher’s notes or textbook.

Over the years, by using an item analysis of the multiple choice questions and comparing essay responses from the New York State Regents Exam, I found that students’ retention of subject-matter was significantly higher on the government section than on other parts of the test.⁹ Their written essays demonstrated an ability to accurately analyze and interpret the information, provide relevant outside information with correct facts, examples, and details, and offer a logical and clear plan of organization. This exercise also enabled them to write more clearly and effectively. Committee graders were struck, for instance, when one student observed that restrictions on free speech can and do provide absolute power to governmental authority during an international crisis. She weighed her response with a reflection on the true meaning of democracy and its application to civil liberties. When asked on the regents how much power government should have in promoting civil rights, another student explained the historical reasoning behind the enactment of the Fourteenth Amendment during Reconstruction and its application to the 1950s and 1960s with particular reference to the *Brown* and *Heart of Atlanta Motel* cases. These results proved what I had already suspected: Creative lessons