

Use of Visual Media in English Composition:
Improving Critical Thinking and Illuminating Concepts Through Film

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INTRODUCTION:

This paper will detail how I, as a first-year Teaching Assistant for English Composition, explored course re-design for my second semester, specifically through the use of a unique film presentation for each of the four units dictated by the four major paper assignments: an Explanatory Synthesis paper, an Argumentative Synthesis paper, an Analysis essay, and a Personal Narrative.

During my first semester of teaching, I only made use of one film in my class, the recent critically and popularly acclaimed hit *Little Miss Sunshine*. At this point in the semester, both my students and I were burned out, so I inserted this movie as something of a breather for us. The assignment that followed was a critique paper, so I was able to teach the elements of a critique by having a mutual reference point for the class via the movie. I was surprised by how helpful it was to have that reference point, and that enabled class discussion on a general critique of the movie, as well as further class activities regarding the criteria one needs to make a thorough critique and informed evaluation of a text, a piece of music, or, in this case, a film.

Had I more class time to incorporate further film or video pieces and more planning time to choose ones that would be the most pedagogically effective, I definitely would have made this more a part of my first semester teaching Composition. This led me to be thinking of ways to incorporate video into my second semester.

My theory was that using visual media would open up more channels of critical thinking than the use of reading and writing assignments alone, as is typically done in English Comp. I also felt I could reach more students in their preferred learning styles by using visual elements as a means to illuminate the concepts and objectives of each formal writing assignment. Additionally, I knew that this would be an effective breathing period for students, after submitting one paper assignment, to have the beginning of the next unit seem less overwhelming while still serving as a segue to further writing. My desire was to give more longstanding and broader significance to the concepts taught in English Composition by applying them to more than just written texts.

What follows is a detailed explanation of the choices in visual media I made for each of the four units, along with the result of that use. The individual discussions for each unit can be prefaced with the fact that I was able to ask students to incorporate elements of informed critique into the discussions and response writings following the viewing of each film piece. In the concluding portion of this paper, I will offer student reactions to the use of video presentations in class as a gauge of effectiveness and a guide for even further course re-design in future Composition classes.

Unit 1: EXPLANATORY SYNTHESIS PAPER

As an early paper but one that is heavily weighted at 20% of the final grade, I wanted to approach the use of visual media for this unit as simply as possible. I showed a relatively short documentary (60 minutes of our 105-minute class period) produced by public television call *Summer of Love*. I showed this fairly early in the unit, before students had begun to develop and research their topics. I fairly stumbled upon this documentary at the MSU Memorial Library by searching the catalogue of DVDs and looking for interesting titles.

A key to the Explanatory Synthesis paper is that it is *not* a persuasive essay. Students are asked to prepare a research-based paper illuminating and clarifying a topic or issue through explanation, without attempting to sway the reader to a particular side. It's important for students to conduct good quality research and synthesize what they find from multiple sources before they add the extra and often more complicated component of logical argument.

For that reason, I chose *Summer of Love* because it is strictly informative and does not pass judgment or offer opinion on its subject matter: the hippie movement of 1967 that descended upon the city of San Francisco. The documentary could easily have taken an opinionated stance on such controversial topics within the movement as drug use, neglect of personal health and finance, and liberal sexuality. However, the information stayed just that—informative—allowing the viewers to simply become more knowledgeable and, perhaps, choose their own opinions without it being imposed upon them by the video.

As the first video I showed my class this semester, I wasn't sure how my students would feel about it or respond to it as a means of clarifying the concepts of the paper assignment. I also knew it was key to connect the video to what we were working on in class, both before I presented it and afterward in class discussion.

I only received positive feedback about the video. Many students told me they expected the informative narration style of *Summer of Love* to be boring to them, but not only did they appreciate the value of the information, many students used the documentary's presentation of a counter-culture that was influential on a generation of young Americans as a jumping-off point for their own paper topics.

My students were able to think about and maintain interest in a topic that they wouldn't normally encounter through this video and subsequent discussion, something that asked open-mindedness and critical thinking of them. I found that the video I had chosen also served as a *model* or visual equivalent of the Explanatory Synthesis written paper. I connected this by telling students that their voices would be the voice of the narrator in their own papers, guiding it along and connecting source material, while the source material would be varied, synthesized, and interspersed within the paper just as it was through personal interviews, video footage, and newspaper stories in *Summer of Love's* presentation. This also emphasized for students that they needed to use valid and credible information to compose an effective Synthesis. Basically, this documentary served as a video example of an Explanatory Synthesis paper. I also offered this DVD as an example of what could be a credible and informative outside source for their papers, which opens students up to a much wider variety of research possibilities.

Unit 2: ARGUMENTATIVE SYNTHESIS PAPER

I had seen most of a documentary called *Go Further* during the break between semesters and knew I wanted to show this to my class no matter what. That was an easy decision, and it fit well into this slot because it definitely gives a more persuasive presentation than the first film, as a mirror of what this particular paper should be: definitively arguing for one side of an issue with the use of supporting material from outside sources. It is the video equivalent I could find that best fit what an Argumentative Synthesis paper is.

Go Further is a Ron Mann documentary from 2003 presenting actor Woody Harrelson and his group of friends on the "sol" tour (simple organic living), during which they travel along the California coast to promote the benefits of an organic, ecologically aware lifestyle. The lesson of the film is ultimately to "leave a lighter footprint on the earth," a message I knew I wanted to present to my group of Midwestern students.

Pedagogically, this film worked well to introduce the Argumentative Synthesis unit. It easily connected to the prior documentary, *Summer of Love*, as an example of an important American counter-culture characterized by natural living. The subject matter being aligned, the important added component was that of argumentation, which *Go Further* definitely evidences. There is no doubt that the goal of the film is to convince people that this type of lifestyle is the best one, so this illustrated for my students the importance of having a firm, well-informed opinion and arguing logically, without fallacies.

Again, their voices in this paper would be equivalent to the voices of the narrators in *Go Further*. They would similarly use source material as this film used the personal testimony of credible experts on organic living. I was able to make these connections for my students in discussion of the film. The discussion following the film itself evidenced increased critical thinking, as students showed their open-mindedness on such a liberal topic and also their questioning of the persuasive techniques and information used in the film.

Many students referenced this as their favorite film of the semester, which I wasn't surprised by, given the appeal of Harrelson as a charismatic activist. What I hadn't quite anticipated is how often we referred to this film throughout the semester, especially as a springboard for choosing topics for this Argumentative Synthesis paper. Many students desired to do their own deeper research into some of the varied issues presented in the film. It led them to question some of the things that they have always taken for granted as components of the correct lifestyle (their current one). I was very pleased to read the paper of one student, who chose to research the negatives of milk being such an emphasized component of the diet of young children through the school lunch program. I was impressed to have students who would think to question such a seemingly benign thing, which shows critical thinking on a level I hadn't even anticipated.

Unit 3: ANALYSIS ESSAY

While I was able to easily find visual media to show for the two preceding units, finding something to present for the Analysis unit was more difficult. The Analysis paper requires students to find a print advertisement in a magazine and analyze it through the lenses of two articles on principles and elements of advertising.

Looking to more current pop culture, specifically television, I chose an episode of *The Office* in which the specific branch of a large company is given the opportunity to develop its own television commercial to promote its services. I felt this episode took a close look at the concepts behind advertising, something I felt was important for students to grasp to begin their analyses. The finished product of the commercial contained in this episode shows the varied components that go into creating a cohesive advertisement, from music and narration to text and logo. I was able to make these connections from the video to the actual Analysis paper, encouraging them to look through careful eyes and think critically about their chosen ads.

Without commercials, this episode was only about 23 minutes long, much shorter than any of the other visual media used during the semester. This could be seen as the piece used most for strictly entertainment value of the four I chose, but I feel that it supplied as much of value as the time it took to show it to the class. Being aware of the pigeonhole English Composition often creates for itself regarding concepts that seem to only apply to *written* communication and aren't taken beyond that stale application, I wanted to show that even a modern and popular "text" such as this episode of *The Office* could communicate something important and be applied to their understanding of what purposes such communication can serve in their own lives.

Instructors never quite know how a new activity will work pedagogically until they experiment with it in their courses, but with the right application and connections made to class concerns regarding the current assignment, I feel even something as seemingly unrelated as an episode of a popular television show can be valuable to engaging critical thinking and improving understanding. Instinctively though, I know I

need to search for a better documentary or film to show as a pedagogical component of the Analysis assignment in future classes.

Unit 4: PERSONAL NARRATIVE

Having also watched the 2007 film *Once* during semester break, I knew I wanted to incorporate it into my Composition class and felt it could be done well. I knew it would fit the Personal Narrative assignment because it is, on its own, a sort of personal narrative that could be told from any one of the multiple viewpoints in the film. *Once* also fit the arc of what I had established through presenting *Summer of Love* and *Go Further*, that is, its own sort of counter-culture of the singer-songwriter-musician struggling to find his or her own measure and definition of success in a materialistically driven society.

I showed this film primarily to emphasize to students what a personal narrative could be. For this assignment, I specifically ask students to focus on telling an event important enough to make up two pages of their theoretical autobiography, taking it from any point in time during their lives: past, present, or future. I was a certain measure of disappointed in the vapidness of some of the personal narratives I received from my previous semester's students. An example of one such narrative was a student who told, in the two pages, about how awesome her group of friends was as seniors in high school and how much fun they had during homecoming week doing pranks such as toilet-papering their neighborhood. I don't degrade students for picking a topic that isn't of personal interest to me, but such papers of the prior semester made me realize that I needed to set the tone for the personal narrative in a significant way.

I feel *Once* accomplished this setting of tone very well. It is a film that I feel finds beauty and significance in seemingly ordinary lives. Before and after the presentation of this film I emphasized that aspect of beauty within the ordinary as an example of what a personal narrative could be.

I have yet to receive the final versions of this paper assignment, but I am eager to compare their quality and subject matter to that of last semester, wondering if a film as emotional and beautiful as *Once* can influence the overall tone of the personal narratives my students compose. The early feedback on this film gives me reason to think positively. One student responded: "I really liked the movie we watched called *Once*. To me, it seemed to be quite inspirational. I thought it really helped me get the idea of what a personal narrative is."

STUDENT FEEDBACK AND CONCLUSION:

I was able to gather student feedback on my incorporation of visual media during the semester and was pleased with the results, which validates my goals and encourages me to continue the use of visual media. One student commented: "I loved that we got to watch movies directly relating to what we need to write about. It helped my thought process and gave me new ideas." Another student enforced the effectiveness of the visual

media used in class, especially concerning it as a springboard for research: “In class, I like how movies and video clips are used to give students a better understanding of the assignment to come. I know it really helped me find ideas to brainstorm.” One student gave feedback that ultimately enforced what I was trying to accomplish with the videos I presented in my course: “I think that watching the videos in class helped quite a bit. They were good examples of what we were working on. They also helped by giving a break between assignments. They helped the flow of the class from one unit to another and brought focus onto the next paper.” Regarding the critical thinking and open-mindedness that are two of the things I most want to see come out of my class, a student said of the videos, “They helped me get a wider perspective on things.” These are all results I am very happy with.

I was hoping for more criticism from my students—and even asked for recommendations of other videos to show in future classes—in order to better sharpen this course component, but I can’t say that I’m disappointed to have essentially gotten no negative feedback, except for a few comments from students who thought *The Office* was shown more for entertainment and for a break rather than to prepare them for the Analysis paper. Overall, I found from the feedback that the videos are most useful to the students in the capacity of being a visual sample for the forthcoming formal paper assignment.

Ultimately, I feel one of the key philosophies behind Composition is that students need to be understandable, to communicate themselves effectively. By applying this to more than just written texts, perhaps through the incorporation of visual media as I explore above, I feel an instructor is able to offer the concepts of Composition as having more lasting importance and more varied manifestations than simply effective communication through formal, academic papers. Those are my ideas as a new teacher, but I think what is more important is the student feedback. I know I will continue to use visual media in my future Composition classes, trying different things in order to better illuminate the assignments, reach students of differing learning styles, and encourage critical thinking that transcends one particular course.

The effectiveness of this project, I feel, is best summed up by another student response: “I really enjoyed the use of film to introduce the different styles of writing we would be using. Personally, I learn things easier when viewed or heard rather than read. I think the same is true for many people who may take this class. I wholeheartedly endorse the use of film in English Comp classes, the more the better.” Though the video components I present will never serve to replace written texts in my Composition course, I feel they are a valuable supplement.

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