

## Teaching with Film: A Research Study of Secondary Social Studies Teachers Use of Film

William B. Russell III<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** *Showing a film is common practice in most classrooms. However, how are secondary social studies teachers using film in the classroom? This article attempts to answer this question. Therefore, the major purpose of this study is to examine how teachers use film to teach social studies. Using survey research methodologies, a national random sample of secondary teachers from the United States was administered. In total, two hundred forty eight secondary social studies teachers from across the United States completed a twenty question likert-style survey regarding how they use film in the secondary social studies classroom. The results concluded that many teachers are not using film for optimal purposes. A full discussion of results and study limitations is included and conclusions are made.*

**Keywords:** *Teaching, Film, Social Studies, Teachers*

### Introduction

Film is an amazing and fascinating medium. It is considered to be an effective communicator and has the potential to arouse emotions (Interview w/J. McPherson in Russell, 2008) and stimulate feelings. Film is a part of popular culture and most teenagers spend an enormous amount of time watching films and/or television. An average student spends over seven hours a day using media (7:12) – more than 50 hours a week (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). On the average, almost four hours are devoted to videos (film) and television per day. These findings illustrate how significant a role films can have in a student's day-to-day life.

With the invention of the VCR, DVD player, and now VOD (video on demand) access to feature films, documentaries, and/or television is limitless. Teachers have been attempting to incorporate film into the curriculum for nearly one-hundred years (Russell, 2007). This is because film can bring students closer to the people, events, and issues that they are studying (Russell, 2009, 2012a; Russell & Waters, 2010). Furthermore, teaching with film is considered to be an effective strategy for teaching social studies related content (Holmes et al, 2007 & Russell,

---

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, College of Education, University of Central Florida, Russell@ucf.edu

2004, 2012b). As well, historians have written that film images impact and influence a person's perspective of history (O'Connor, 1990 & O'Connor & Jackson, 1988) and that history on film can be an accurate interpretation of history (Rosenstone, 1995).

Although teaching with film has been part of the learning experience for many students since the creation of film, it has not been accepted as a highly effective and rigorous means of teaching and learning. Contemporary curriculum is standards oriented, which often concludes in the lack of dynamic instruction, such as teaching with film.

The purpose of this study is to examine how secondary social studies teachers use film. Therefore, the author attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How do teachers use film in secondary social studies courses?
- 2) Are teachers being formally prepared to teach with film?

### **Teaching with Film**

Although research pertaining to how teachers use film is limited, it is necessary to examine the current and relevant literature devoted to teaching with film. With the popularity and availability of film, it is natural that teachers are going to attempt to engage students with such a relevant medium. In fact, in a research study of social studies teachers, 100% reported using film at least once a month to help teach social studies content (Russell, 2007). The frequency of reported film use demonstrates a need to examine how secondary social studies teachers reportedly use film in the classroom.

In a national study of 327 teachers, 69% of the teachers reported that they use some type of a film/movie to help teach Holocaust content. The method of using film to teach Holocaust content and the method of using firsthand accounts of the Holocaust were tied for the number one method that teachers use to teach Holocaust content (Donnelly, 2006). Furthermore, a national survey of social studies teachers conducted in 2006, reported that 63% of eighth grade teachers reported using some type of video-based activity in the last social studies class they taught (Leming, Ellington, & Schug).

In 2008, Metzger and Suh conducted a comparative case study of two white teachers (one male and one female) to examine the teacher's use of film in their instruction. The study concluded that these two teachers use film literally as an instructional text to help students with historical literacy.

Research pertaining to how teachers use film for instruction is limited and needs further examination. The lack of significant research pertaining to the instructional practices of teachers use of film demonstrates and emphasizes a legitimate need for this study.

### **Method**

This study utilizes survey research methodologies. The methods and procedures described in this section were designed to parallel the methods outlined by Creswell (2005). In order to achieve a representative, national random sample of secondary teachers, the following multi-step method was used. Fifty public middle schools (one from each state) and fifty public high schools (one from each state) were randomly selected from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), which maintains and regularly updates its comprehensive and representative database. Schools were randomly selected from the NCES database using a numbering chart.

#### ***Participants***

The author then selected all the social studies teachers from each school's faculty listing. Five hundred ninety seven (597) teachers from across the United States were emailed a letter of consent asking for their participation in the study. All 597 participants had one calendar month to complete the survey. In total, two hundred forty eight (248) teachers completed the online survey (41.5% return rate). Participants who agreed to participate clicked on a hyperlink embedded in the letter of consent email, which redirected participants to an external survey. All surveys were anonymous.

All participants were secondary social studies teachers (6-12). The participants ranged in teaching experience and educational level. Ninety-two participants highest degree earned was a bachelor's degree (37.10%), 136 participants highest degree earned was a master's degree (54.84%), and 20 participants highest degree earned was a specialist degree (8.06%). No participants earned a doctorate degree. The participants teaching experience ranged from first year teachers to seasoned veterans. 24 participants reported having 0 – 3 years of teaching experience (9.68%). 84 participants reported having 4 – 9 years of teaching experience (33.87%). 140 participants reported having 10 or more years of teaching experience (56.45%). Participants taught at schools ranging from small rural to large urban and varied in grade level (6-12) and social science subject matter teaching assignment. Many participants reported teaching multiple

social science disciplines (U.S. history, Economics, Geography, etc...). Of the 248 participants, 104 (41.94%) were female, 140 (58.06%) were male.

Additionally, 220 (88.71%) participants reported that he/she had graduate from a teacher education program. 28 (11.29%) participants reported that he/she did not graduate from a teacher preparation program. Participants were also asked to report the formal education related to teaching with film. 42 (16.93%) participants reported having some level of training related to teaching with film, while 206 (83.7%) participants reported having no training related to teaching with film.

Despite the lack of training, the use of film was prevalent in the classroom. All 248 (100%) of the participants reported using film at least once a month. As well, 196 (78.69%) of participants reported using film two times or more per month. Furthermore, 104 (42.59%) participants reported using film at least once or more per week.

### ***Instrument***

This study utilized a survey method to obtain information regarding social studies teachers' use of film. The instrument (See Appendix A) consisted of twenty questions. Prior to implementing the instrument, a pilot study was done to test the instruments reliability and validity. The pilot study was conducted in a graduate level social studies education course comprised of twenty secondary social studies teachers.

The questionnaire was designed to measure the frequency in which teachers utilized film when teaching social studies content. The participants' responses were analyzed for percentage per frequency towards each question. The responses were analyzed by numeration towards each of the likert-scaled responses; almost all the time or all the time (1), more than half the time (2), half the time (3), less than half the time (4), and very little of the time or never (5). The instrument utilized a continuous interval scale similar to the likert scale; which "provides continuous response options to questions with assumed equal distances between options" (Creswell, 168).

### **Limitations**

This study utilized a survey research method, which has limitations. To minimize the limitations, the researcher attempted to align this study with Salant and Dillman (1994) factors of good survey research. To ensure good survey research the researcher did the following 1)

developed an instrument with clear, unambiguous questions and response options. 2) Utilized a national representative sampling frame to randomly select individuals. 3) Selected a large sample from the population as possible. 4) Used appropriate procedures to ensure a decent return rate.

However, the researcher is aware of possible limitations. As with any survey research study, a larger sample could have possibly uncovered different findings. In addition, this survey required teachers to self-report about their use of film. Self-reporting can have limitations, because participants may not be completely honest. To help prevent this, all surveys were completed anonymously.

### **Finding and Discussion**

The purpose of this study is to examine how secondary social studies use film in the classroom. The results of this study are found to be troubling. The responses and percentages were tabulated for each question (See Table 1). The bold numerations indicate the mode, or most frequently chosen scale which corresponds to the higher percentage rate.

**Table 1.** Percentage Responses per Statement

Question	Almost all of the time or All the time (1)*	More than half of the time (2)*	Half of the time (3)*	Less than half of the time (4)*	Very little of the time or Never (5)*
1	<b>93%</b>	4%	1%	0%	0%
2	<b>79%</b>	19%	0%	1%	0%
3	22%	<b>32%</b>	16%	16%	11%
4	<b>33%</b>	25%	19%	14%	6%
5	<b>34%</b>	32%	21%	9%	1%
6	<b>50%</b>	31%	9%	1%	6%
7	<b>45%</b>	31%	16%	3%	3%
8	19%	<b>38%</b>	17%	12%	11%
9	1%	17%	22%	24%	<b>33%</b>
10	0%	6%	1%	16%	<b>74%</b>
11	<b>82%</b>	8%	8%	0%	2%
12	<b>48%</b>	35%	8%	6%	1%
13	<b>58%</b>	19%	14%	6%	1%
14	25%	12%	9%	9%	<b>41%</b>
15	9%	9%	9%	18%	<b>52%</b>
16	6%	9%	17%	29%	<b>37%</b>
17	<b>38%</b>	18%	23%	13%	6%
18	24%	<b>30%</b>	22%	16%	6%
19	<b>25%</b>	24%	19%	20%	9%
20	14%	8%	25%	<b>30%</b>	20%

Notes:

1. (\*) indicates Likert-scale number
2. (Bold) numerals indicate the mode or most selected scale response.
3. Due to rounding total percentages may be slightly more or less than 100%
4. Results are displayed in percentages

### ***Barriers to Teach with Film***

The resulting disaggregated data indicated some interesting trends from the teachers' responses to the questionnaire. The most notable and troubling responses were related with Statement 14; "obtain administrative permission" and Statement 15; "obtain parental permission." Statement 14 showed 59% of respondents obtain administrative permission to use a film in the classroom only half the time or less (See Table 1). This is a skewed trend to the less frequent scale of the survey, illustrating that the majority of teachers prefer and typically do not obtain administrative permission to use film in the classroom. More than half of the respondents reported not obtaining administrative permission on a regular basis, despite the fact that many school districts have policies related to using film in the classroom that clearly require administrative permission. A basic policy for using film in the classroom will be similar to the following:

- 1) All films must be used in the classroom for instructional purposes.
- 2) Films with a rating of "G" may be used for instructional purposes with teacher approval and administrative permission.
- 3) Films with a rating of PG may be used for instructional purposes with teacher approval, administrative permission, and parent/guardian permission.
- 4) Films with a rating of PG-13 may be used for instructional purposes with teacher approval, administrative permission, and parent/guardian permission.
- 5) Films with a rating of R and/or higher cannot be shown (Russell, 2007).

Included in most district film policies is a statement regarding parental permission. Responses to Statement 15 show 82% of respondents reported obtaining parental permission to use a film in the classroom only half the time or less. This is a skewed trend to the less frequent scale of the survey, illustrating a clear preference of not obtaining parental permission prior to using film in the classroom.

The results of statement 14 and 15 can be seen as a common practice, because many teachers, who utilize film, do not adhere to common school policies. However, it should be noted that administrative and parental permission is considered a best practice because of the serious legal issues that may arise when using film in the classroom. For example, a teacher was suspended for showing the rated-R version of *Dracula* to a class. The Assistant Principal was quoted saying,

“although the teacher did not show any nudity or parts of the movie that prompted the R rating, he should have sought approval before showing any movie rated anything other than G” (Associated Press, 2003). Additionally, a middle school teacher was put on administrative leave for showing an inappropriate film. Although the film was approved by the Public Broadcasting System for middle school aged children, parents felt that it was not appropriate (Associated Press, 2004). These incidents would have been avoided if the teachers would have obtained permission from the administration and parents.

### ***Lack of Planning***

Statement 11; “view the film prior to using it in class” is considered to be encouraging. 82% of respondents reported viewing the film prior to using it in class almost all the time or more. This is a positive or skewed trend to the more frequent scale of the survey, illustrating a clear preference of pre-viewing films prior to implementation. The discouraging aspect of this question is the 18% of respondents do not pre-view films prior to implementation on a regular basis. This lack of planning when using film is not encouraged and adds to the negative stigma often associated with teaching with film.

The results of statement 9; “showing a film when you have a substitute” is considered surprising based on the author’s research and experiences. 40% of respondents reported showing a film when he/she has a substitute at least half the time or more, this is lower than the author expected. Nonetheless, the responses of statement 9 are a positive step for removing the negative stigma often associated with teaching with film as being used as a baby sitter when the teacher is out. Additionally, the results of statement 10; “show film as a reward” is also considered encouraging. 90% of respondents reported only using film as a reward less than half the time or never. This is a positive or skewed trend to the less frequent scale of the survey, illustrating a clear preference for not using film simply as a reward, but more for educational rigor. This is positive step in the removing the negative stigma often related to teaching with film and emphasizing the educational worth of film related instruction.

### ***Mechanics of Film Use***

The responses to statements about the actual mechanics of using film in the classroom varied. Statement 16; “show the entire film without stopping” showed 66% of respondents utilizing this



technique less than half the time or less. This is a positive or skewed trend to the less frequent scale of the survey, illustrating a clear preference of not showing the entire film without stopping. Responses to statement 17; “stop film periodically” correspond with the results of statement 16. 79% of respondents reported stopping the film periodically to highlight important aspects of the film half the time or more. This is a positive or skewed trend to the more frequent scale of the survey, illustrating a clear preference of stopping the film and highlighting significant information to enhance the educational experience. Furthermore, responses to statement 2; “mention ideas students should focus on before viewing” showed 99% of teachers reported explaining to students what they should be focusing when watching the film more than half the time. This is a positive trend for verbally preparing students for what they are about to watch. However, this does not correspond with the results of statement 3; “give pre-viewing activity.” Only 55% of teachers reported giving a pre-viewing activity more than half the time and 45% of teacher reported giving a pre-viewing activity half the time or less. Furthermore, responses to statement 18; “show small segments or film clips” correspond with the results of statement 16 and 17. 76% of respondents reported showing small segments or film clips half the time or more when teaching with film. This is a positive or skewed trend to the more frequent scale of the survey, illustrating a clear preference of using small segments or films clips when teaching with film instead of using the entire film.

Questions related to post viewing activities varied. Over 90% of the respondents reported having a “class discussion about the film” (Statement 12) half the time or more. Furthermore, over 90% of respondents reported having a “question and answer session after viewing the film” (Statement 13) half the time or more. Results of both statements are a positive or skewed trend to the more frequent scale of the survey, illustrating a clear preference of using discussion related techniques after viewing a film. Despite the positive trend of discussion related techniques, 92% of respondents reported developing “activities to accompany the film” (Statement 7) half the time or more. Moreover, 87% of respondents reported giving “a post viewing activity related to the film” (Statement 5) half the time or more. Additionally, 81% of teachers reported “verbally summarizing the film for students after the film is shown” (Statement 6) more than half the time and 76% of teacher reported “developing original activities to accompany the film” (Statement 7) more than half the time. 74% of respondents reported including “items on tests, which derived from the film” (Statement 8) half the time or more, but 77% of teachers reported having students

“complete an activity during the film” (Statement 4) half the time or more. In addition, 68% of respondents reported using “written assessments related to the film for grading” (Statement 19) half the time or more. Interestingly, only 47% of respondents reported “using observation or non-written assessments related to the film” (statement 20) half the time or more, indicating that teachers more prefer written forms of assessment over non-traditional forms of assessment.

### **Conclusion**

The first research question attempted to uncover how secondary social studies teachers are self-reportedly using film in the classroom. This was answered in the discussion per the results of the survey. The reliance on traditional assessment and the lack of non-traditional post viewing activities is disheartening. Providing students with an array of learning experiences and ample opportunities to reflect and think critically is an essential element for preparing well-rounded and effective 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens who will be able to actively contribute in modern society. Teaching with film is a non-traditional teaching strategy when used effectively; however, film is still being treated as a visual textbook. Teachers are using a film, the same way they would use a book. Read or watch it, and take a test or answer some questions.

The second research question attempted to uncover if social studies teachers were being formally prepared to teach with film. Unfortunately, the data indicate that social studies teachers are not being properly prepared to teach with film. Of the 248 participants, only 42 (16.93%) reported having formal educational training on teaching with film. This disheartening considering previous research shows that the large majority of teachers attempt to utilize film as a teaching tool (Russell, 2007).

The findings of this research study indicate a gap between theory and practice. Since, the goal of social studies teachers is to develop students into effective 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens through the use of a diverse curriculum and instructional practices; one would have to conclude that social studies teachers should be effectively and legally utilizing film to maximize their potential to meet this goal. Thus, the formal education of teaching with film is needed for current and future teachers, considering that all teachers will eventually utilize film as an instructional strategy.

In sum, the data from the respondents provided insight, and evidence on the methods and practices social studies teachers utilize when teaching with film. The extremely strong preference

for written assessment is disheartening, but not unexpected in the current state of education. Nonetheless, the data indicated that teachers clearly utilize passive and non-engaging assessment/post viewing techniques more frequently than assessment/post viewing techniques considered to be active and engaging. Furthermore, the lack of parental and administrative permission is extremely troubling. The legal aspect of teaching with film is vital. Lack of respect for copyright is problematic and irresponsible. The lack of respect for parental and administrative permission is risky. Jeopardizing ones career because of a lack of parental/administrative permission regarding a potentially inappropriate film is unacceptable. The actual classroom teaching practices of social studies teachers do not align with relevant literature supporting teaching with film, further expanding the gap between theory and practice. This widening gap indicates that urgent action needs to be taken to help educators see the importance and value of utilizing film in the classroom and the effective, appropriate, and legal strategies to do so. Teacher educators need to implement teaching with film related instruction in teacher preparation programs and alternative certification programs. Additionally, teacher educators need to provide continuous professional development opportunities to current classroom teachers related to effective film instruction. More so, teacher educators need to advocate for effective film use to classroom teachers and administrators. Educating teachers about how to effectively use film in the same manner as teachers are educated about other forms of technology will help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

### References

- Associated Press. (2003). Teacher Suspended for Showing R-Movie Excerpt. *CNN News*. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: <http://www.cnn.com/2003/EDUCATION/04/24/class.movie.ap>
- Associated Press. (2004). Teacher Suspended for Showing Eighth-graders "Inappropriate" Video. *KUTV*. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: [http://kutv.com/topstories/local\\_story\\_127131818.html](http://kutv.com/topstories/local_story_127131818.html)
- Creswell, J. (2005) *Educational research: planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education, Inc.
- Donnelly, M. (2006). Educating students about the Holocaust: A survey of teaching practices. *Social Education*. 70(1): 51-54.

- Holmes, K., Russell, W., & Movitz, A. (2007). Reading in the Social Studies: Using subtitled Films. *Social Education, 71*(6), 326-330.
- Kaiser Family Foundation. (2005). *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Years Old*. National Public Study. Retrieved from the World Wide Web: [Http://www.kff.org](http://www.kff.org).
- Leming, J., Ellington, L., & Schug, M. (2006). The state of social studies: A national random survey of elementary and middle school social studies teachers. *Social Education, 70*(5): 322-327.
- Metzger, S.A. & Suh, Y. (2008). Significant or safe? Two cases of instructional uses of history feature films. *Theory and Research in Social Education, 36*(1), 88-109.
- O'Connor, J.E. (1990). *Image as artifact: The historical analysis of film and television*. Malabar, FL: Krieger Publishing Company.
- O'Conner, J.E. & Jackson, M.A. (1988). *American history/American film*. New York, NY: Ungar Publishing Company.
- Rosenstone, R.A. (1995). *Visions of the past: The challenge of film to our idea of history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Russell, W. (2004). Teaching with film: A guide for social studies teachers. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 530820).
- Russell, W. (2007). *Using film in the social studies*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc.
- Russell, W. (2008). *Civil War films for teachers and historians*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc.
- Russell, W. (2009). *Teaching social issues with film*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.
- Russell, W. (2012a). The art of teaching social studies with film. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas, 85*(4), 157-164.
- Russell, W. (2012b). The reel history of the world: Teaching world history with major motion pictures. *Social Education, 76*(1), 22-28.
- Russell, W. & Waters, S. (2010). Cinematic citizenship: Developing citizens of character with film. *Action in Teacher Education, 32*(2), 12-23.
- Salant, P. & Dillman, D.A. (1994). *How to conduct you own survey*. New York, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

**Appendix A**

<b>Film-Related Activities</b>	Almost all of the time or All the time	More than half of the time	Half of the time	Less than half of the time	Very little of the time or Never
<b>How Often Do You...</b>					
1. Give a verbal introduction to the film?					
2. Mention ideas, situations, or events that students should focus on while viewing?					
3. Give some type of pre-viewing activity?					
4. Have students complete some type of activity while viewing the film?					
5. Give a post-viewing activity related to the film?					
6. Give a verbal summary of the film after it is shown?					
7. Develop your own activities to accompany the film?					
8. Include items on tests, which are derived from the film?					
9. Show a film when you have a substitute teacher?					
10. Show a film as a reward?					
11. View the film prior to using it in the classroom?					
12. Hold a class discussion about the film?					
13. Allow for a question & answer session after the viewing a film?					
14. Get permission from school administration before showing a film?					
15. Get parental permission before showing a film?					
16. Show the entire film without stopping?					
17. Stop the film periodically to highlight different					

points?					
18. Only show small segments or clips from a film?					
19. Use written assessments related to the film for grading?					
20. Use observation or non-written assessment related to the film for grading?					