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Learning through Film: Lessons from Workshops for Teachers and Pre-service Teachers of English

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Abstract

This article looks back on the professional development offered to teachers of English to support them in their teaching of film since the introduction of film into the English syllabus in Ireland in 1998. It focuses on three inter-related elements: the interpretation or reading of film; the pedagogy that supports this interpretation; the potential of exploring issues of social justice and the self-other relation through narrative films. The article outlines four distinct phases in the professional development offered to teachers and shares the emerging findings. The first phase involved the introduction of film and its use in opening up discussion and creating interpretative communities in teacher education workshops for teachers of Leaving Certificate English. The second involved an exploration of film genre in workshops designed for teachers of Transition Year. The third involved the development of a dialogic form of pedagogy in interpreting film in a series of workshops directed at teachers of Junior Cycle English. The fourth involved the use of film in exploring education for justice in a series of workshops for pre-service teachers on Bachelor of Education and Master of Education programmes. The article explores the link among narrative film texts, generative questions, thoughtful interpretation, and the value given to dialog and the movement of question and answer in professional development workshops where narrative films are viewed and interpreted. The article is autoethnographic in character (Holman Jones 2005; Ellis et al. 2010). It involves self-reporting, descriptions of practice and reflection on that practice.

Introduction

The article presents an account of the professional development workshops offered to qualified and pre-service teachers of English to support them in the teaching of film. The need for this professional development arose from the introduction of film into the national English syllabus by the Department of Education and Science (DES), in the Republic of Ireland, between 1998-2001.

The article points to the power of learning through film. It suggests that attentive engagement with film generates dialog and prompts interpretative discourse. The article is, essentially, a looking-back exercise, from the perspective of the four authors who designed and/or facilitated workshops for teachers and pre-service teachers of English during the four phases of professional development. (See Figure 1.) Using an action research approach (Whitehead 1989; McNiff 2017), the authors sought to reflect on, and develop, a practice through questions of the kind, “How can we facilitate learning through, and about, film?” “How can we bring the narrative power and excitement of film into the workshops?” “How can we develop the rationale and the theoretical underpinnings of our practice?”

The article gives a narrative account of the reaction of the participants - teachers and pre-service teachers of English - to the film education workshops, which supported the incorporation of film into the English syllabus. The article also recounts how, in exploring the interpretation of film and the pedagogy that supports it, in the workshops, the potential of narrative films to address issues of social justice and the self-other relation became apparent. The strong connection among narrative films, dialog and ethical interpretation that emerged in the workshops was the result of the personal engagement and intellectual endeavor of the participants. Interestingly, it is these qualities – personal engagement and intellectual endeavor – that many commentators (Ball 2008, Goodwyn 2012, Milner 2013) believe have been eroded by the trend towards nationally scripted curricula and a narrow version of teacher professionalism.

Phase	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Dates	1998-2001	2005-2008	2009-2012	2014-2016
Level	Leaving Certificate	Transition Year	Junior Certificate	All three Levels
Target Group	Qualified Teachers	Qualified Teachers	Qualified Teachers	Pre-service Teachers
Focus	Interpretative Communities	Film Genre	Dialogic Pedagogy	Education for Justice

Figure 1. The Four Phases of Professional Development: Summary and Timeline.

Phase One. The Introduction of Film (1998-2001)

In 1998, the Department of Education and Skills (DES) introduced a revised syllabus for Leaving Certificate English in the Republic of Ireland (DES, nd). For the first time, the study of film was formally placed in the national curriculum within the subject of English. The *Draft Guidelines for Teachers of English* laid out the strict parameters within which film would be studied (NCCA nd). The emphasis was on developing students’ understanding of the aesthetics of film (NCCA nd: 79).

Moreover, the guidelines indicated that all the films selected for inclusion in the syllabus would be narrative in form and would be studied in a comparative manner with other prescribed, literary texts (NCCA nd: 79). (Among the 37 texts prescribed for comparative study, for examination in 2020 are Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Austen's *Persuasion* and the films *Brooklyn* (2015), directed by John Crowley, and Debra Granik's *Winter's Bone* (2009)). The intention was that the comparative study would "illuminate the unique world" (NCCA nd: 75) of each text and encourage students to interact with different worlds and their perspectives (NCCA nd: 71). Teachers were advised to explore film by focusing on the elements common to all narrative texts. These included: genre; themes; story/plot/action; characters; setting; and point-of-view (NCCA nd: 80). Teachers were also provided with a brief outline of what the guidelines referred to as "the discourse of film" (NCCA nd: 81). Four elements were highlighted: *mise-en-scène*; composing an image; sound; and editing (NCCA nd: 83). In addition to the guidelines, published by the National Council for Curriculum and Development, the state body responsible for developing curricula for both primary and second level schools in Ireland, all Leaving Certificate teachers of English attended day-long mandatory workshops on teaching film. These workshops were held in local education centers. There were follow-up half-day workshops for each English Department in the 752 second level schools in the country. The guidelines suggested that the rationale for including the study of film in this limited and focused way was to provide a secure structure for teachers who had no training in teaching film (NCCA nd: 79). There was training for teachers in film and media studies in the decade prior to the introduction of film into the Leaving Certificate syllabus. The Irish Film Institute offered courses and seminars, and in conjunction with RTE, the national broadcasting organization, ran a series of summer schools for teachers (Barnes et al. 2007: 24). The first national Media Education Conference was held in Dublin in 1985, followed by the establishment of the Teachers' Association for Media Education (TAME). The group offered support to teachers of media in both primary and second level schools and acted as a lobbying group for the inclusion of Media Studies and Film into the core curriculum (Barnes et al., 2007; O'Neill and Howley 2002). The introduction of film into the Leaving Certificate can be seen as a success for this association, although it fell short of its hopes for the recognition of Film and Media Studies as a subject in its own right. Training and professional development for all aspects of the new syllabus, including film, was the responsibility of a DES-established training and support service, referred to throughout this article as the English Support Service (ESS). For the first three years of the new syllabus 1998-2001, the ESS was staffed by 14 teachers of English, who were released by their schools to staff the new service. Three of the authors were members of the ESS.

Initial resistance

In the initial phase of support (1998-2001), there was some resistance, primarily from established teachers of English, to the new syllabus and its wide range of prescribed texts, and, more particularly, to the introduction of film. Notwithstanding the enthusiasm of TAME, many English teachers felt that they were being asked "to take on the burden of Media Education with little formal training in the academic discipline of media studies" (O'Neill and Howley 2002: 86) and were defensive and cautious in their attitude to the new national syllabus, which they were obliged to teach. The Leaving Certificate examination, which assesses the syllabus,

is the final examination in the second level school system, and a high grade in English is required for most university degree courses. Consequently, there was nervousness among the ESS personnel before the commencement of a national round of workshops on film. The ESS were teachers of English leading workshops for their peers. The issues of the acceptance of film onto the syllabus by English teachers and the authority and expertise of the ESS team in introducing film were at the fore. Would the workshop participants respond to the newly prescribed films? Would they accept the ESS personnel as qualified to provide an introduction to film? One way of addressing this concern was to raise questions about the meaning of the films to be viewed, rather than offering a definitive interpretation, an approach well-suited to the immediately-accessible medium of film, and one which seemed appropriate in a peer-led, professional development workshop. The questions were largely dictated by the prescribed modes of comparison, which focused on themes, relationships, the world of the text and the way the text told its story (DES nd: 17-18). One of the first films to be introduced to teachers was *My Left Foot* (1989). The film won two Academy awards in 1990 and was a much-loved film in Ireland. What soon became apparent was that this film, and the story it told, an adaptation of a well-regarded literary autobiography, exerted its own immediate and persuasive power. The teacher participants were engaged by the world of the film – by the characters, their lives and their relationships and by the quality of story-telling, as evidenced by the participants' workshop evaluation forms returned to the ESS. The teachers were not new to reading literary texts, which were, and continue to be, an essential part of the prescribed Leaving Certificate English syllabus, and the focus provided by the NCCA guidelines. The syllabus document ensured the preservation of the literary foci that teachers valued (themes, genre, character development, relationships, setting, atmosphere, mood, imagery and symbols (NCCA nd: 80)), while, at the same time, re-configuring the interpretative act of reading to encompass film. As the workshops developed, participants adopted the metalanguage of film, referring in a natural and matter-of-fact way to such things as the use of the camera, tracking shots, framing, lighting, soundtrack, what the Guidelines called the "discourse of film" (NCCA nd: 89), as they discussed themes, relationships and storytelling in the text.

The role of the facilitator.

In this context the role of the workshop facilitator became one of facilitating conversation around what the guidelines refer to as "significant episodes" in the film (NCCA nd: 89). The guidelines state: "Select a series of short significant episodes which will fit into the class time available and focus the study of the film on these episodes." In conjunction with the NCCA and the education officer for the Irish Film Institute, the ESS agreed the episodes for viewing in the workshops. After viewing an episode, the facilitator posed questions related to the modes of comparison, prescribed by the syllabus: theme or issue, relationships, cultural context, social setting, genre and hero/heroine/villain. The questions, and the conversation which arose from them, were intended to deepen understanding, interrogate insights, and explore alternative interpretations. These open and potentiating questions were of the kind: "What strikes you about the way the film tells its story in this episode?" "How do you interpret what you see?" "How is the central character portrayed?" "How does his mother relate to the young Christy (the central character)?" "How does his father relate to the young Christy?" "Does the film speak to you?" The questions were designed to elicit the response of the participants to what they had seen. Thereafter, the facilitator both affirmed and challenged the

contributions of participants and explored what Gergen et al. (2004) refer to as productive difference in interpretations and responses among the participants, as well as synthesizing and linking ideas. For example, because the central character has cerebral palsy, participants raised interesting questions on the nature of the heroism that he embodies, and the relationship of this heroism to the traditional masculinity, represented by his father. There was also animated discussion on the representation of gender roles in the working-class, inner-city community where the film is set.

Interpretative Community

The best of the workshops succeeded in creating a sense of community, where the participants shared their interpretations. On more than one occasion, when discussing *My Left Foot* (1989), interpretations were framed by the personal and autobiographical experiences of the participants, and there was a powerful link between the external text and the personal memories of the participants. (See Britzman and Pitt 2002). This was particularly true of the scene in which the protagonist, Christy, writes his first word, "mother," on the living room floor, provoked by his father's dismissal of an earlier attempt to write and declaring to his wife, "The child's a cripple."

A number of teachers in their 50s and 60s, who grew up in the 1950s in the Ireland portrayed in the film, spoke of relationships in their families as they discussed the scene, so that the act of interpreting was related to acts of self-recognition and disclosure. One participant, for example, recounted how he dared not question his father on any issue, large or small. Others mentioned that their fathers displayed no outward signs of affection toward them. In this way, in addition to the history and tradition of reading texts as teachers of English, the teachers drew on their personal memory in reading and responding to the film. In these cases, the interpretative discourse was infused with narration, self-disclosure and reflection, though there was no simple identification between the workshop participants and the protagonist. These contributions encouraged and challenged the other participants to dwell on the film text and offer their own personal responses in a reflective and considered way. The contributions of the workshop participants were also related to the immediacy of film, the way in which film appeals to the senses. As Stadler argues, film 'works on the emotions (...) and has the capacity to elicit an affective response in ways distinct from other narrative arts' (2008: 2).

In most of the workshops, which took place in a non-school setting in local teachers' education centers, there were teachers from ten or more schools from the same locality. This meant that teachers in private, fee-paying schools, were meeting teachers from state schools; teachers who taught in single-sex schools, were meeting teachers from co-educational schools. The presentation of the film in a non-school setting, allied to the novelty of the grouping and the collective form of interpretation, added a sense of excitement to the occasion. The very act of being present in the same place watching the same film, however differently received and understood, and participating in the public interpretation of what had been seen created an intersubjective sense of solidarity, cohesion, even intimacy, among the workshop participants and an inclusive sense of something achieved.

Shared achievement.

The achievement is related to the quality of interpretation and the shared sense of participation in its construction. This is not to say that a single interpretation emerged, but the dialogical and conversational nature of the workshops created a space in which 'better and more interesting and more fruitful ways of speaking and interpreting emerged (Rorty 1980: 360), a process to which Rorty's gives the term "edification." Interestingly, Rorty's "edification" is a translation of Gadamer's "bildung," an attitude of disposition toward the world that keeps the self open to what is different or other (Gadamer 1982: 15). This openness to what is other is taken up in a later part of this essay.

The achievement of the various workshop groups in reading the film, *My Left Foot* (1989), in interesting and fruitful ways, was related to the direct and immediate appeal of the film. It was also related to the text's power to open up questions that were important to the participants, and, therefore, worthy of their consideration. These questions related to the protagonist's struggle to be accepted and acknowledged by his father and his community. They also related to his struggle to overcome the limitations of cerebral palsy and strive for self-expression and independence. The achievement was also linked to the facilitator's ability to ask questions that brought to the fore what Gadamer describes as "the undetermined possibilities of a thing" (Gadamer 1982: 338). Lawn, in his discussion of Gadamer's treatment of "authority" remarks that the real authority of a teacher "resides in the questions that the inspired educator (...) makes vivid, vital and important to those in genuine search of knowledge" (2006: 37). In the case of the workshop participants, the search was less for knowledge than for understanding of the films they were encountering, prior to presenting these films to their students in their own classrooms. And no matter how inspired the educator or facilitator, questions are only likely to become vivid and important, if the text, from which the questions arise, has the depth to sustain focused and clear-sighted interpretation and analysis. In reviewing the workshops on *My Left Foot* (1989), the ESS personnel were unanimous in agreeing that the film text had the capacity to engage viewers and to support rich conversations and interpretations that revealed complex and multi-layered responses.

Hindsight

Based on the feedback and evaluations of participants and the reports from the ESS personnel, the workshops on *My Left Foot* (1989) were successful. However, the nature and potential of the facilitative dialog, which had developed through the workshops, became apparent only in hindsight. Before the workshops, the plan was to focus on key episodes and invite discussion and interpretation of these episodes while keeping the discourse of film to the fore. And while there may have been an intuitive sense of the importance of dialog and open questions before and during the workshops, the significance and understanding of the link between dialog and interpretation appeared in retrospect. And it was also in retrospect that we understood that, given the nature of the text under consideration, the dialog in the workshops constituted a form of philosophical hermeneutics, that is, interpretation aimed at addressing important questions about what it means to be human. Indeed, in the episode referred to above, which begins with Christy being dismissed as a cripple by his father, the question is concerned with whose life counts as a human life, or, in the words of Judith Butler (2004: 20) "Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives?" As Gadamer argues, we can only begin to understand a text when

we understand the question(s) to which it is an answer (1982: 333). And on occasion for several of the participants, understanding the text was bound to some element of self-understanding. What facilitated the articulation of what were, on occasion, personal and self-revelatory insights, was the sense of solidarity among the participants, so that the conversation, through which interpretation and insights were achieved, had an ethical character. Participants were respectful of each other's contributions and thoughtful in their responses. In retrospect, the role of the facilitator was crucial in supporting the conversational ethics that emerged. In their best moments, the facilitators practiced the communicative virtue of attentive and thoughtful listening (Burbules 1993: 42), as well as those of empathy and discernment.

Phase Two. Transition Year Module (2005-2008)

From the outset, teachers of English seized the opportunity to incorporate film into their teaching of the comparative study and films featured in the list of most popular texts in the Leaving Certificate English examination (SEC, 2005: 39; 2008: 32; 2013: 8). The evident interest in, and enthusiasm for, teaching film encouraged the ESS to support the IFI, who were developing a module in Moving Image for Transition Year (TY) students, in a program of professional development workshops for teachers of TY. (Transition Year is an optional one-year program between Junior and Senior Cycle offered in most second-level schools in the Republic of Ireland. (See Jeffers 2011.) In Transition Year, teachers are free of the pressures of state examinations and have the scope to offer courses in subjects not available in the Leaving Certificate curriculum. The TY module in Moving Image was intended to move beyond the limitations of the Leaving Certificate English syllabus, where film was only available for study in a comparative manner with literary texts and present moving image in its own right. The module explored the discourse of film in greater detail than was possible in the LC English context.

The module also introduced participants to film genre and raised questions about how age, class, gender, sexuality and ethnicity were represented in selected texts (McGivern 2006: p.6). The focus on representation was influenced by the increasingly multi-ethnic character of classrooms in second-level schools across the country (McGivern 2006: 4). It was also influenced by the 1995 government White Paper on education, which envisaged a role for arts education in assisting the young person "to become a tolerant, critically aware and socially committed citizen" (DES 1995: 22). There were many different reasons for the choice of texts, including: suitability for the audience; availability; the perceived quality of the films; and genre. In retrospect, the choice of key films for the module also reflects a concern with social and critical awareness. Abrahamson's (2004) *Adam and Paul* (2004), *Maria Full of Grace* (2005) and *Mean Creek* (2004) all portray characters on the edge of society: two working-class drug addicts; a poor Colombian girl who becomes a drug runner; and a school bully. The choice of these engaging and morally complex narratives prefigures the later work in exploring the notions of otherness in and through film and look back to *My Left Foot* (1989) and Christy's struggle to overcome the stigma of disability.

Phase Three. Dialogic Pedagogy (2009-2012)

The third phase in offering professional development to teachers of English involved the ESS, in partnership with the IFI, developing workshops for teachers of English on film in the Junior Cycle English. In planning these PD sessions, it was intended to incorporate the most successful elements from the TY workshops and those for teachers of Leaving Certificate English, by providing a space that facilitated collective enquiry in a spirit of solidarity through the shared viewing of a film rich in potential meaning and addressing questions that were important to the participants. The key films chosen were *Bridge to Terabithia* (2007), *Whale Rider* (2002) and *Stand By Me* (1986). Apart from being age-appropriate, the films were chosen to appeal to teachers teaching both girls and boys. They were chosen for the power of their storytelling; their thematic richness; the existential questions they posed, such as: “How do I escape from my life?” “With whom do I share my secrets?” “Where do I belong?” “Whom could I become?”

Generative Questions and Dialogue

As with the workshops for teachers of TY, the emphasis was on the teaching of the discourse of film. However, a conscious effort was made to develop a pedagogy based on generative questions, an adaptation of the generative topics described in Project Zero (Perkins and Blighe 1994). These questions were character-centered and were intended to be of particular relevance to teenagers, such as: “Who am I?” “Where do I belong?” “Where will I find love?” “Why did I leave?” “Where have I come to?” “How can I go back?” “Who owns my life?” “Whom can I trust?” For individual films, questions were selected to which the text offered possible, if tentative, answers. Nor were these questions set in stone. It was understood that the questions and the answers that arose would change and become refined in the process of interpretation, in what Gadamer refers to as “the conversation with the text” (1982: 331). It was also understood that the chosen questions admitted to various possible answers. As facilitators, we were anxious to avoid ‘staged’ readings of the films, or any attempt to steer discussion in a particular direction or secure particular affective responses from the participants (Taylor 2011).

Allied to these generative questions, teachers were encouraged to introduce their students to some of the thinking routines explored in the Artful Thinking project (Tishman and Palmer 2006). These routines were designed to cultivate a set of dispositions related to thinking about and interpreting works of art (figure 2).

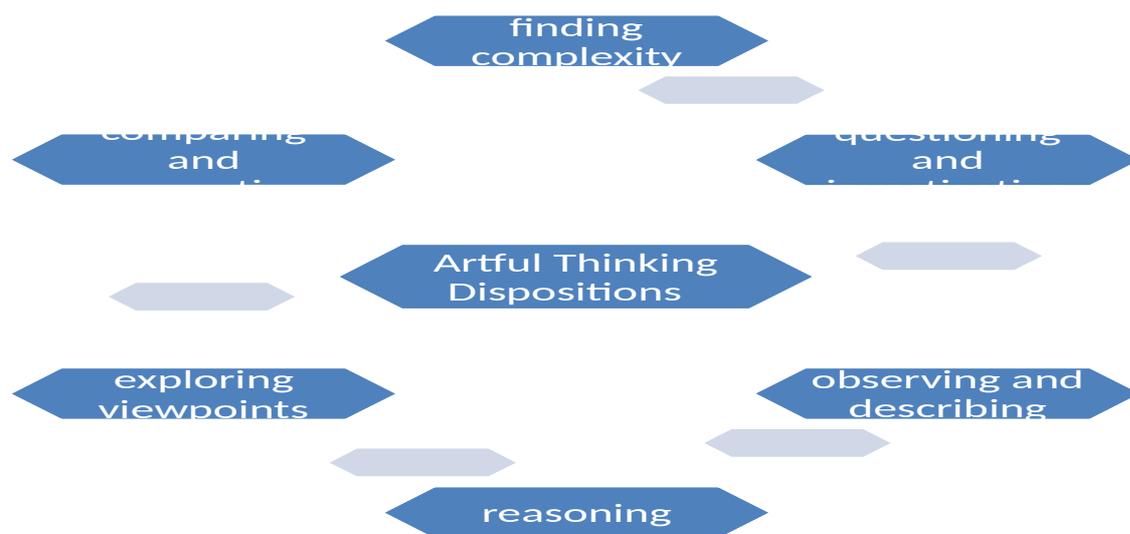


Figure 2. Artful Thinking Dispositions.

The thinking routines, such as “I see/I think/I wonder” were short, easy-to-remember procedures for both teachers and students. The dispositions identified in the Artful Thinking project were directly applicable to film texts and were compatible with the foci of film study in the LC English syllabus: the discourse of film and the modes of comparison. This was important, given that the majority of teachers attending the workshops were involved in teaching film at both Junior and Leaving Certificates, as is the norm in second-level schools in Ireland.

The focus on questions and speculative thinking in the workshops reflected the facilitators’ identification of reading film with philosophical hermeneutics. In Gadamer’s formulation (1982: 266), the primary hermeneutical condition involves the individual being addressed (by a text or another person) in a way that requires the bracketing of assumptions, suspension of judgment, suppression of our preconceptions as the question(s), which the text puts into play, is pursued. Gadamer likens the pursuit of this question to a conversation governed by the movement of question and answer. In pedagogical terms, the facilitators wanted the participants to explore ways in which the spirit of philosophical hermeneutics might find expression in a practical form in the classroom. One model that was trailed and proven popular with participants was that of dialogic teaching (Alexander 2008, 2010). For Alexander, teaching is dialogic when it meets five criteria: collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful (2008: 28). The participants agreed that these criteria were helpful in visualizing interpretative dialog, and how it might be encouraged in their own classrooms, although they recognized that, in themselves, the criteria could not guarantee the content and quality of that dialog. We were also at pains to emphasize that, while teachers and students may well “help each other reach common understanding” (Alexander 2008: 28), that could also co-exist with disagreement and a divergence of interpretation among students. Furthermore, as Fisher (2011) points out, for pre-service teachers there are a variety of issues at play, including prior experience of classroom talk and levels of confidence, all of which

affect their attitude toward pedagogic dialog and its promotion in the classroom. Some workshop participants expressed anxiety over the 'ownership' of discussion. They related experiences where the climate of discussion on topics such as the rights of ethnic minorities was set by one or two students with forceful personalities, who made their points aggressively. Their contributions had the effect of closing down dialog. The participants felt that their authority as teachers was diminished in these situations. It made them wary of continuing to open up classroom discussion.

As workshop facilitators, we were conscious that our work took place under ideal conditions. We worked with colleagues and peers in a situation and setting removed from school tensions. The workshop participants spoke freely. Their contributions tended to be open and responsive. There was give and take in the exchanges among participants. However, as Gurevitch (2001: 88) argues, dialog can be associated with struggle as much as co-operation and can be characterized by strain, tension and silence. Developing this point, Lesfstein (2006, 2010) suggests that idealized accounts of dialog need to be modified in significant ways if they are to offer teachers a realistic model that might be applied in the classroom. Most importantly, the tension between a divergent and convergent orientation, between difference and agreement, competition and cooperation, needs to be acknowledged so that teachers can approach dialog not as an answer to educational questions, but as a challenging and difficult practice. Lesfstein also argues that, in whole-class teaching situations, participation in dialog takes on elements of performance before an audience. Student participants may well be motivated by a desire to contribute to classroom dialog, but they may also be motivated by other desires, such as a desire to entertain their peers and amuse themselves. In worst case scenarios, students may simply opt out of classroom dialog altogether. For these reasons, the choice of film becomes crucial in engaging students and orienting them toward participation in interpretive class discussion. Of course, it can also be argued that the immediacy of the intellectual and emotional impact of film creates a desire in most students to voice their opinions and engage in dialog and enriches the classroom context in which dialog might flourish.

Feedback from participants from the round of workshops for teachers of Junior Cycle English indicated that they enjoyed exploring the selected films and welcomed the introduction to generative questions and thinking routines. In encouraging a dialogic response to the address of individual films, we were keen to keep to the foreground the role that both narrative and perception play in the multi-sensory discourse of film. Film appeals directly to the senses of hearing and seeing. And spectators understand what they see and hear as story (Stadler 2008: 5).

In some of the workshops we explored a number of ways of using film as a starting point for students in writing their own short stories (Mc Dermott 2015). We were taken with the response of the participants to one film, *The White Dress* (2006). The film tells the story of a girl on her communion day who makes her communion on her own, without any members of her family present. In a number of the workshops, the interpretive conversations that followed the viewing of *The White Dress* (2006) set up the approach adopted in the fourth phase of the project. In the film, the child is shown wearing two dresses, one white and one red. The color symbolism was discussed at length, with multiple re-viewings of key scenes to consider different interpretations. Doubts were raised in the mind of some participants about what, in fact, they were viewing. Was the girl making her communion, or was she using the occasion to accept money from well-meaning adults? Was she, in fact, a con artist? If she was, how did this affect the viewers'

response to her? Did it, for example, lessen their identification with her? Did it affect their empathy for her? The conversations that arose from these questions were rich and engaged. The film represented a young person living in poverty in a way that evoked complex responses. The details of the life of one young girl living in impoverished circumstances prompted reflective conversations on the lives of other real children living in poverty and the participants' understanding or lack of understanding of the reality of their lives. More so than any film viewed in the workshops, the response of participants to *The White Dress* (2006) demonstrated the fruitful relationship among open questions, attentive engagement and interpretative conversation. The powerful representation of a vulnerable child caught the attention of the participants and activated what Stadler (2008: 239) calls their "ethical understanding".

Phase Four. Education for Justice (2013-2016)

Following from the workshops on *The White Dress* (2006), the fourth phase of workshops involved the use of film to explore issues of social justice with pre-service teachers of English under the auspices of the Ubuntu network, an initiative designed to integrate Development Education into second level Initial Teacher Education in Ireland. Ubuntu is funded by Irish Aid, Ireland's official overseas development programme. The workshops designed for pre-service teachers drew on our previous work. Rather than introduce the themes of social justice and poverty in abstract ways, the film *The White Dress* (2006) was shown. By attending to the discourse of film and grounding interpretation in the details of the text, a conversation was opened up on what the film, whose address was urgent and compelling, meant for the viewers.

The understated storytelling, including the way the film was shot, lit and framed, made the vulnerability of the protagonist, a young girl of seven or eight years of age, real and compelling. The naturalism of the young actor; the precariousness of the life portrayed; the co-existence of precariousness and liveliness; the lack of adult care; the qualities of ingenuity and persistence; the threat of violence; allied with the visual and aural aesthetics, all worked to draw the viewers in, to make them feel that here was a life that mattered to them. In the workshops, it seemed to the facilitators that we were witnessing an example of ethics in practice. The pre-service teachers formed a connection with the young protagonist as her life was revealed, through the impoverished interior of her home; the bareness of the food cupboard; the single item of clothing in her wardrobe; the lack of adult care in her life. Emmanuel Levinas (1969) suggests that in the moment of encountering another, face-to-face, we feel ourselves summoned, obligated to take responsibility for their well-being. The experience of the workshops suggested that this is especially true of films that show in a vivid way the concrete and specific conditions in which the protagonists live their lives. *The White Dress* (2006) dramatized the life of the young protagonist in recounting a single day of her life. Its focus affected the participants, drew them into the life of the young protagonist, and, in their attentive engagement, asked them to affirm that here was a life that mattered, in its "depth, surprise, aliveness, and difference" (Britzman and Pitt 2004: 357) and in its vulnerability and fragility. The pre-service teachers may have made sense of the protagonist's life, in part, in relation to their own experiences, especially their memories of their own First Holy Communion, but the vividness of the storytelling, the details of the social spaces the protagonist traversed, brought attention to the young girl's own identity and alterity. The feeling of

care and compassion, which the film called out to the spectators, did not diminish her identity. However, it caused some workshop participants to question themselves and their characteristic ways of seeing or not seeing the world, specifically communities affected by poverty, drug addiction and social disadvantage. To borrow from Judith Butler (2009: 51), the film challenged some participants to question why it took *The White Dress* (2006) to make this life “visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter, and what is it that keeps us from seeing or understanding certain lives in this way?”

In the immediate aftermath of viewing the film, not all the student-teacher participants felt able to articulate a response. Similar to the students described by Felman (1992), but in a less traumatic way, some of the participants were at a loss as to how to respond, such was the extent to which they were affected by the film and its impact on them. For the student-teachers, their confusion was experienced as a form of crisis - if they could not articulate their own response, how would they teach their prospective students to respond? In this context, the facilitators felt a pedagogical imperative to help restore the agency and faith of the student-teachers in their capacity to make meaning. One way of doing this was to have the workshop participants work slowly, patiently and thoughtfully (Hinchion and Hall, 2016) through the discourse and details of the film. In the workshops at the University of Limerick, the facilitator introduced props, similar to those used in the film (a communion dress, a handbag, hair ribbons, a can of tuna, a doll among others) and invited the pre-service teachers to speak through and with the props. The props were something for the participants to hold on to, something concrete to speak about as they made sense of the film and their response to it. All the while, the tutor/facilitator re-assured the pre-service teachers that there was no rush or pressure on them to find the words to voice their response. Given the power of the film, we were confident that meaning and insight would, in time, emerge from their reflection on the event and their response or lack of response to it.

As facilitators, we were interested in furthering our understanding of the kind of learning that might emerge from the distress of some of the participants, the kind of “difficult knowledge” (Britzman 1998) the film forced them to confront, and the purposes that might be served by such learning. For Gadamer (1982: 266) understanding begins when a text addresses readers/viewers, and, as they attend to it, they temporarily suspend their own perspectives. Often their view of the world is foregrounded, even challenged or put at risk, by the viewpoint of the text. The assumptions and presuppositions, the frames of reference that govern their own understanding of the world are stimulated and made conscious to them by a text that addresses them from a viewpoint not their own. And the space between their characteristic way of viewing the world and the viewpoint of another, to which they give thoughtful and invested attention, is conducive to ethical reflection. For the pre-service teachers, *The White Dress* (2006) prompted ethical reflection. The film engaged their senses, their imagination and their emotions (Stadler 2008). It brought them face-to-face with a child who led a precarious life and left them to work through the ethical implication of what they had seen and heard, of what they had witnessed. The workshops with the pre-service teachers demonstrated the potential of narrative film to raise issues of social justice by representing the particularity of a given situation as lived by unique individuals. They also afforded the pre-service teachers the opportunity to consider how film can produce emotional responses which cannot always be immediately understood.

Future Directions

From our work to date with teachers and pre-service teachers, we are convinced that intense involvement with compelling film narratives opens an ethical space in which important questions can be addressed in a potentiating way. The process of estrangement experienced by some of the participants in our workshops, the temporary loss of self as they gave full attention to the other, enabled learning, in the sense of a widening of understanding, to take place.

Into the future, we envisage selecting narrative films that address their audience in compelling ways; that engage them and implicate them in the lives of others; and that extend their ethical understanding of otherness and their relationship to those who are perceived as different. As a starting point, we intend to trial *Girlhood* (2014), a widely acclaimed and commercially successful film, with pre-service teachers of English. The film portrays the life of Marieme, a black teen-age girl living in a Parisian suburb, in a community of first and second-generation immigrants. Marieme lives her life on the margins – on the margins of the city; on the margins of her family; on the margins of the educational system; on the margins of the underworld life of the banlieue. At a time of public debate, conflict and division in Europe over the European Union's response to the refugee crisis in Syria, texts such as *Girlhood* (2014), with its complex and often joyous exploration of identity and self-determination in a multicultural context, provide opportunities for teachers and students to consider questions of identity, openness and hospitality, as they attend to the desires, possibilities “and vulnerabilities of a unique individual (...) within a concrete and particular ethical context” (Stadler 2008, 206). Following Taylor (2011) we believe that a major task for educators in current times is to challenge the cultural processes by which Muslim and Arab war victims, and, by extension, Muslim and Arab refugees, are ‘derealized’ and dehumanized. And, despite extensive news coverage, these victims do not appear to be understood for their vulnerability and frailty by a large portion of the population of the European Union. As Berlant (2004) asks, why is it we show compassion for some lives and withhold it from others? Butler (2009: 51) suggests that one of the ways educators might address this issue is to consider “the representability of life itself: what allows a life to become visible in its precariousness and its need for shelter?” We believe that the personal involvement and attentive engagement of teachers and students with marginalized or otherwise occluded lives, through films such as *Girlhood* (2014) or *The White Dress* (2006), is the beginning of an answer to Butler's question. We also believe that a film like *Girlhood* (2014), which portrays the children of immigrants who were born and raised in Paris, opens up a space for educators to explore assumptions around identity, Irishness, integration and assimilation, especially in relation to Irish-born children of immigrants, and the forces – age, gender, ethnicity, religion, class or race - that marginalize or exclude some individuals or that limit their freedom.

We also want to explore the role that teachers play in facilitating, mediating and regulating classroom discussion and dialog where conflict arises (Todd and Sastrom 2008) and when viewpoints are expressed that might be considered sexist, racist or xenophobic. As teachers, we are aware of our pedagogical obligation to attend in an active and engaged way to the viewpoint of our students and to seek to make their ideas intelligible to us, without having to agree with them, or stand in the same place (Gadamer 1982: 270). As we move forward, we want to explore with our pre-service teachers the circumstances in which students listen respectfully to each other's point-of-view; justify the positions they take; ask and answer questions;

consider different perspectives and treat each other as equals. We wish to pursue the questions “How can we use film in the classroom to create a climate in which students discuss and disagree, in a respectful way, with their teachers and fellow students?” “How do you facilitate discussions that are inclusive and fair?” We are aware that these are complex questions. As King (2009 224) points out, for example, it can be uncomfortable for some students to encounter perspectives that challenge their own and challenging for teachers to facilitate such students to learn from the perspective of others.

In the workshops with pre-service teachers, some of the participants were at a loss to express their response to *The White Dress* (2006) because they were deeply affected by it. They felt their response before they found the words to express it. However, in the classroom situation, we cannot expect that all students will be similarly affected, and neither can we command a ‘right’ response or insist on the obligation to bear witness to lives from which some students may feel distant and unaffected. Seeking to introduce texts into the classroom that present other lives in all their uniqueness and aliveness cannot become the means by which we diminish or deny the uniqueness and aliveness of our students.

Conclusion

Reviewing our work with teachers and pre-service teachers of English, on teaching and learning through film, we believe that there are important lessons to be learned. The first relates to the power of narrative films to engage spectators and draw them into the lives of protagonists. We believe that the attentive engagement of spectators creates an ethical space in which thoughtful and complex interpretations can be constructed. We believe that these interpretations draw upon the personal resources of the spectators, including their knowledge and experience of viewing films as well as those of memory and reflection. The second lesson relates to the role of the teacher or facilitator in posing questions that are not only open and potentiating, but vivid and important too. A question such as, “Who counts as human?”, will be followed by interpretation and logical question and answer working toward deeper and more complex interpretations. The third relates to the nature of teaching and the duty of teacher educators in a time of war, terror and international conflict. We believe that narrative film has the potential to promote an attitude of openness to what is different and other and that teacher educators must be involved in exploring how education promotes non-violent ways of encountering otherness and living with alterity.

This work, as with ethical understanding itself, is, in the words of Stadler, often “incomplete and provisional” (2008: 15) and undertaken with particular groups in specific contexts. We are committed to pursuing it and deepening our own understanding and insights, as we explore “the undetermined possibilities” (Gadamer 1982: 338) of film education as ethical pedagogy.

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