

## Using Films as a Tool for Active Learning in Teaching Sociology

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### Abstract

This study aims to examine and demonstrate practices, elements and techniques employed by the action research method. It examines the use of films in sociology instruction in college, and the influence of films on the development of students' understanding of human nature. Based on the professional experience of the authors films utilize and enhance the teaching-learning process, the study describes two courses that incorporate film viewing. The class discussions following the screenings were guided by the teacher, and involved student response and interaction. The study addresses the use of films as a teaching method employed to facilitate the comprehension of sociological concepts by specific instruction, to ensure a better outcome in the classroom.

**Keywords:** Films as educational tool, active learning, learning by watching films.

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The purpose of this study is to examine and demonstrate practices in using elements and techniques employed by the action research method to derive a better classroom outcome. This article is an exemplar of how to structure the instruction in such a way so as to ensure a better outcome when a lecturer uses films as a tool for active learning in teaching sociology. This study attempts to introduce a means to meeting the challenge of teaching sociology in a complex classroom, using films as an educational tool.

The purpose of this study is to describe the didactic mode of using films in active learning of sociology in academic colleges. The multimedia classroom is seen here as a space of opportunity, where general terms can be related to the students' world (Morze, 2008). The main intention of the study is to show human behavior as an exciting experience in all its social dimensions, revealing structure and perspectives of social behavior. When appropriately accepted by teachers, films can provide an entertaining and unique way of addressing cognitive and affective instruction objectives. Films can demand that students develop the ability to analyze, synthesize, and offer criticism by connecting what they see to sociological concepts and theories.

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## Literature review

### *Characteristics of the population studying in academic colleges*

The principle characteristic of the population of the universities and colleges in the USA is the enormous variance in race, religion, and culture, and the multi-cultural nature of most of the campuses (Banks, 2003). In Israel, public policy has adopted a social goal, providing equal opportunities to students of different sectors, by establishing academic colleges in the periphery. Higher education has become more available and has brought about an increase in, and diversity of, the populations represented in academic education. Establishing the colleges in the periphery encouraged students from a low socioeconomic background, new immigrants, and minority sectors, to study in colleges, particularly because of the accessibility of the college to where they lived (The Council for Higher Education, Planning and Budgeting Committee, 2000). Dispensations in college entrance requirements, similar to the process which has occurred in the USA (Duke, 1998), have contributed to the increase in the number of students who do not meet minimum university entrance requirements (Davidovitch & Iram, 2005; Davidovitch, 1993).

The population in the colleges in northern Israel includes Jews, immigrants from the CIS and Ethiopia, and large percentages of Arab students, who view higher education as a channel for social mobility and professional advancement (Soan, 1999). The great variation in the students' cultural-demographic background, and the naturally low acceptance statistics, lead the higher education institutions to recognize, that one teaching method of lectures for all the students, does not suit the academic requirements, and that the teaching methods must be adapted to the facts as they exist (Hativa, 2000a; 2000b). One of the teaching methods which suits colleges in the periphery is using films as a tool for active learning.

### *Learning by watching films*

The social studies curriculum is composed, for the most part, of theories and abstract concepts which require concretization, and to achieve this, various pedagogical strategies are employed, among them the use of visual media. Viewing film in the classroom (not in "film" studies) gives visual representation to abstract thoughts. It helps students gain in-depth knowledge, develops critical interpretation, and actively involved students in their studies (Morze, 2008). When using films in the social studies classroom, instructional goals like reasoning, critical thinking, retention and understanding, self-regulation, and refraction of the curriculum are developed. Authentic activities can include: problem-based learning, hypermedia (media), role-play, debates, and collaborative learning (Driscoll, 2000). Allen (2005) explains that examining films can promote social thinking and awareness of social perspectives. According to the meaningful learning theory, students are allowed to interpret their new experiences and make connections with their prior knowledge (Ausubel, 1962; Glaserfeld, 2000). Engle (2003) suggests that decision making is at the heart of social studies, with students learning the decision-making process and not focusing on content memorization. Film can help provoke a meaningful inquiry of a social event, thus allowing students to make insightful decisions based on what they

viewed and what the teacher does to support the curriculum. Allen (2005) sees two benefits in using films in the social science classroom: First, films have been found to bring students closer to the people, events, concepts, and theories, and help them come alive academically; second, films correct, improve, and simplify social content by enhancing long-term memory and retention and generating abstract thinking (Benedict, 2006).

## Methodology

The research methodology is based on elements and techniques using some demonstrable best practices in the implementation of action research and the Self-Case Report documented by the writers (Cohen & Manion, 1989; Shulman, 1992), and qualitative methods using interviews with students who participated in this process (Shkedy, 2003).

The interviews were open without a questionnaire, and were mainly conducted after the lesson in a friendly manner. We interviewed 30 students, and used films as a teaching method once during each semester, for several years. The data was collected from three small colleges in the Galilee (northern Israel).

Action research demonstrates the importance of the involving impetus for action together with the reflective process of progressive educational inquiry (Hayman, 2003). Teacher-action researchers have contributed educational methods from multiple studies about effective learning (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). The present research is an interactive, spiral-steps model inquiry aimed at revealing the main problems and demonstrating applicable ways to cope with the learning problem and resolving them by remembering, understanding, and internalization of abstract terms to improve learning (Hayman, 2003; Levin, 1996; Zimran, 2003).

Zelmermeer (2001) describes the features of action research as collaboration, reflectivity, dialectics, plurality, risk, and apposition.

**Collaboration.** Students are required to actively participate in the educational-learning process, with vivid dialogue between teacher and students about contents, methods, commentaries, meanings, and implications. In the present study, the researchers participated and were involved in the educational process (Cohen & Manion, 1989), and reported their personal experience, including comments and interpretations about all occurrences in the classroom (Shulman, 1992).

**Reflectivity.** Assessments were made at each stage, giving the opportunity to make any necessary changes. The research was self-reflective: researchers analyzed and explained the learning process which involved development of testing and self-evaluation (Shkedy, 2003).

**Dialectics.** The dialectics is the ongoing interaction between the research action itself and the data collected in the field (by watching films).

**Plurality.** Disclosing participants' opinions and attitudes while watching the film and taking part in the discussion. During the time of film analysis there is reflection, and different attitudes toward the explanatory process of understanding the sociological concepts are manifested. Such learning processes help individuals become more aware, more just, and more sustainable (Sherman & Torbert, 2000; Torbert, 2004).

**Risk.** Researchers cannot foretell whether the films will achieve the didactic aims (Zelmermeier, 2001). This study examined and demonstrated practices in action research, concerning the use of films to teach sociology in an academic college.

### **Procedure**

This article describes the films that the authors used to increase students' abilities to summarize, strengthen, and stabilize identification and internalization of theoretical sociological content. Films were screened once a semester in different sociology courses: introduction to sociology, organizational behavior, Israeli society, sector organizations, gender, feminism, and films study. Prior to screening each film, students got a worksheet with reviewed terms and relevant sociological concepts in order to prepare them for attentive viewing. This "unit sheet" (Wilson & Herman, 1994), which is a pre-made worksheet about the specific film aims to (a) relate to the relevant learning subject, (b) stimulate expectations and reinforcement of motivation, and (c) focus on foundations and principles. The concealed target of the paper was to attract attention so that students would think about the written concepts. The worksheet was used three times – before screening, during screening, and after it.

1. Pre-screening: At the first stage the aim was to guide, direct, and advise the students; introduce them to the new vocabulary; clarify cinematic terminology; and discuss what is required during the screening.
2. During screening: At this stage the worksheet aimed to push the student to collect data from the film in relation to the written concepts.
3. Post-viewing activity: Class discussion and debate, and students' evaluation of the film.

This three-stage practice promotes *timeliness* – learning with moment-to-moment intentional awareness of the outside world of nature and human institutions. The discussion took place immediately after the screening in the class, and reflected the process of learning and implementation of sociological concepts.

Following are documented examples of two Israeli films that proved to be an effective educational method. The examples include the appropriate worksheets.

## Findings (based on two class self-reports)

### *Case Study 1. "Beit Shean: A War Film" (Chror & Chubery, 1995)*

The film was screened in an introduction to sociology course, where we taught basic theories and such words as culture, status and roles, socialization, communities, groups, organization, and stratification (Meshonies, 1999). Before watching the film we gave the students instruction and questions about the film, relating to theories and sociological concepts.

#### *Worksheet for watching the film "Beit Shean: A War Film"*

1. What is the culture that characterizes the people of Beit Shean?
2. What are the processes of socialization reflected in the film?
3. Explain the statuses and roles that appear in the film.
4. What are the types of communities and relations in the film according to Toennies (1963)?
5. Offer at least one sociological theory to explain the plot.

According to the film, the focus of the people of the town of Beit Shean is the local football team. The interaction described in the film shows a strong emotional involvement of the townspeople in the actions of the team. The plot gives the viewer an opportunity to get to know the local life style, which is described in an ironic manner with comic situations.

*Post-viewing discussing:* The first question that always rose is whether the citizens of Beit Shean are interested only in football games. This question usually causes a great deal of excitement in the classroom: Some of the students claim that the film is biased and reflects the producers' prejudice; other students reject this notion, claiming that the film is very close to reality. We directed the discussion toward a sociological theory – the theory of symbolic interaction (Berger, 1979), which claims that it is difficult to find one objective reality. We can explain and understand reality based on subjective meaning, and thus make sense of events in our lives according to our views and perspectives. The film reflects the subjective world of its producers. These examples clarified the complexity of sociological theory as symbolic interaction and represented a concretization of abstract thinking in one fundamental sociological theory.

The students described the local culture of Beit Shean: "In the film we can recognize traditional Mizrahi (pertaining to Jews from Arab countries) and religious elements. The relationships between the sexes are not equal. The women in the film perform domestic roles like cooking and cleaning, and do not work outside their homes. They always serve their husbands and give them food. In the film their role was marginal; males were the center of the plot. This situation is an example to the concept of *sexual socialization* (Shapira & Ben Eliezer, 1987), a concept that concretizes the way parents educate their children for male or female behavior."

Other examples from the film helped to understand the term *participatory socialization* (Meshonies, 1999), meaning that children imitate their parents because they are exposed to several patterns of behavior and they can then internalize the values and behavior. The fathers taught their sons to play football because they had played in a football team in their youth. One of the fathers in the film forced his son to practice the game for long hours. Another father, an owner of a small shop, said that he had been a goalie, and was guiding his son to succeed in this position. His demonstration of his past skills, moving his hands and body, caused laughter in the audience.

The film demonstrated the terms "provincial community" (*Gemeinschaft*) and "urbane community" (*Gesellschaft*; Toennies, 1963). In the movie we saw two communities: the football team, and the citizens of Beit Shean. The students claimed that the local people were strongly involved in the football team, and that the boundaries between the communities were blurred. Every one of the locals thought that he has the ability to give advice how to run the team. They attacked the manager when the team lost the game, and demanded his resignation. This episode demonstrated the nature of provincial community without role differentiation and specialization, and characterized by social relations that are based on friendship, clothes, and strong emotions. This society is in contrast to urban communities where roles and statuses are more clearly differentiated, and human relations are characterized by formality and social distance.

Most of the students said that the best explanation of the film is through the conflict theory, which views the world as a battle field with fights and conflicts interest and desire between humans (Meshonies, 1999). Many episodes in the film describe confrontations between the locals and the football team, among the players themselves, and very strong competition between the football teams. The people of Beit Shean used the word "war" for any game the team played. Some students claimed that the film can also be understood by the symbolic interaction theory, which emphasizes the meaning of making sense of reality. As an active lecturer, the teacher commented that the best approach to explain the film is an eclectic approach, which combines several theories explaining the same situation from several points of view. The students also asked whether the producer presented the citizens of Beit Shean in ethnocentric and stereotype manner, one which caused viewers to make fun of the locals.

The students who were interviewed said, that the discussion after watching the film helped them understand the sociological concepts, and it promoted contemplation and awareness of social perspectives by seeing them live in the film. They claimed that before watching the film the sociological terms had been vague, but after the three stages in the classroom they had become much clearer and more concrete. One of the students said: "the film helped me academically by simplifying the social content". Another student was excited after he recognized some of the figures in the film; he was from Bet Shean (a small place in northern Israel). This student criticized the producer and claimed that the film caused his hometown damage by labeling Bet Shean as a backward and primitive area. He was convinced that the producer had twisted reality in the film.

***Case Study 2. "We are Doing Business – Stu Landers" (producer and year unknown)***

The film was screened in an organizational behavior course, and used to help internalize concepts such as organizational culture, organizational climate, leadership, management styles, and organizational success. The focus in this case study was on those hidden elements of culture of which only members of the organization are aware, and the open elements that are recognized by the environment (Bar-Haim, 1994; Samuel, 1996).

*Pre-screening worksheet for "Stu Landers"*

1. What are the open elements of organizational culture in the film?
2. What are the hidden elements?
3. Can you find a connection between the open elements and the hidden ones? Give one example from the film that demonstrates the connection?
4. Is organizational culture used in the film as management instrument?

The film presents Stu Landers, a large store, which is family owned and run. Following the screening, the students referred to the success of the store by analyzing the values, beliefs, and norms of the members of the organization (in this case, the family that owned the store and local workers). The store owner has values, and believes in achievement, liability, and excellence. He was fond of saying that if an item was not something he'd give to his mother, he would not offer it to his clients.

The students noted the main norm – *the customer is always right*, and demonstrated it by describing segments of the film. They noted that the store personnel was warm to customers, and paid careful attention to their requests and demands. The good climate in the store was reflected by the active involvement of the customers in running the store, for example, by recommending products the store should stock. The store held debating groups of customers and staff, and management style was unusual. The students demonstrated the value of openness in managing style. One example was when the clients asked that fresh fish be kept on ice and not in plastic bags and the owner accepted this idea. Customers suggested that bread and cakes be baked on the premises, and the owners heeded their advice. These are just two examples demonstrating the willingness of management to react and respond to clients' demands.

In the film, proprietor Stu Landers explained how his ability to listen to his customers improved store management. When a customer complained that the milk was not fresh, Stu Landers argued with him, the customer became angry, and never returned to the store. Stu said: "the customer is your best friend, he is telling you what you need to correct." This incident taught him to listen to customers, not argue with them, and to benefit from their knowledge. His attitude became more tolerant.

The students recognized another important value in running the store – pleasure and fun. This was demonstrated by showing how Stu Landers and his family created a climate of entertainment: they had an indoor amusement park in the store with several attractions, giving a carnival-like feeling (pattern of behavior). This example helped the students understand the connection between the open and hidden aspects of organizational culture.

The students learned effective norms for running a store: enthusiasm, liability, achievement. As a manager, Stu Landers was a role model. He said: "my enthusiasm affects other salesmen and creates a happy atmosphere, and the result is better selling."

This story concretizes abstract concepts in organizational behavior. After class discussion, we summarized the students' ideas, and thus revised sociological knowledge and helped them internalize new theories and terms (Kunda, 2000; Raz, 2004).

The students that were interviewed were excited about the management's techniques as reflected in the film. Some of the students worked as senior executives; one told me that he wants to bring the film to other managers to demonstrate effective methods of management to them. Another student told me that he can now internalize the levels of organizational culture, and can see the connection between the hidden and overt levels. The students' responses to this film were similar to the previous one. Most of the students very much enjoyed and were involved in the class and encouraged me to continue with this teaching method.

## **Results and Discussion**

A standardized universal procedure for using film in the classroom has yet to be designed. However, researchers have developed basic guidelines for teachers to follow when using films in classroom to maximize student performance and learning. In the present study, the authors want the students to use their own sensory and emotional systems to learn elements of social human behavior.

The discussion and the deliberations after the screening exposed how abstract concepts become understood and comprehensible, and how they deepen students' critical interpretations (Morze, 2008). Using films in the classroom facilitated a high level of self-involvement and cooperative learning. Screening films as an instructional tool intensifies retention and understanding, reasoning and critical thinking (Driscoll, 2000). For example, students criticized the film director of "Beit Shean: A War Film" for being biased. The students claimed that the film presented the citizens of Beit Shean in a manner that was stereotypic and one-dimensional.

The commutative theory (Meshonies, 1999) got new and deep meaning. Students understood that art, including film, presents the world from the subjective perspective of the person who produced it. For example, the episodes in the film can be interpreted by the conflict theory (Shapira & Ben Eliezer, 1987), as the entire situation is presented as a battle. As such, it supports the worldview of the conflict theory, according to which life is a constant power struggle between people. The film also supports the symbolic interaction approach (Berger, 1979), referring to the fact that fans used symbols – salt, sugar, and water – as various signs for winning a game. The film succeeds in demonstrating and concretizing these theories.

Viewing the films contributed to the deep understanding and the conceptualization of social formations, as students used different sociological theories to analyze the films. The



variety highlighted the limitations of leaning on one theory only, and the students learned that each theory supplies one conceptual system and ignores all other concepts derived from others theories. The conflict theory sees the world from a perspective of confrontation and ignores harmonious situations. The functional theory (Shapira & Ben Eliezer, 1987) explains the world by balance and harmony without considering conflicts. In such open discussion students could understand the eclectic approach in sociology, and the validity of introducing a number of theories to the analysis. The result of the learning process was deep, abstract, pluralistic, and open thought.

"Stu Landers" demonstrated owner's creativity and self-criticism (reflection) as a fruitful management style. Students were motivated to think creatively. They came up with more examples of unusual, interesting, and challenging ways to run a company for greater profitability. Stu Landers had consulted his customers on how to run the shop, what product to buy, and how to present the goods in an attractive way. This film is a case study on raising management's consciousness of management and personnel involvement; and improving organizational culture and organizational climate (Kunda, 2000; Raz, 2004; Samuel, 1996). The film succeeded in concretizing the curriculum. In addition, it supplied many situations that illustrated sociological theories and concepts, such as values, patterns of behavior, and norms that are elements of organizational culture. We estimate that the film provided students with the opportunity to internalize the conceptual framework emotionally and artistically. The students use action-reflection cycles of expressing concerns, developing action plans, acting and gathering data, evaluating the influences of action, modifying concerns, ideas, and action in the light of the evaluations. The films brought concepts and theories to life (Allen, 2005).

Following the procedures outlined in this study, it is important to determine that a "Use of Films" survey using elements and techniques employed by action research, does not match all classical models and principles (Hachohen & Zimran, 1999; Hayman, 2003; Levin, 1996; Zelermeer, 2001, Zimran, 2003). The models and principles characterize action research as a way of dealing with an educational problem or a subject for study, and by presenting some solutions. There is only one element which does not match appropriately. The teaching method "Films as an educational text" is not presented as dealing with *one* specific problem, as it is required and used by the pure action model. A film tells a story and describes several issues. Others features of the model were relevant and presented in our study: collaboration and cooperativeness, pluralism, and reflexivity. The process of learning, as was described, contributes to open and multiple thinking. The manner in which we used the model integrates elements from "Action Research" by enriching the learning and educational experience of the students, and these enhance identification and internalization by developing appreciation for abstract subjects of the social study curriculum.

### **Conclusions and Suggestions**

When teaching abstract material in multicultural academic colleges, it is especially important to create a classroom climate that encourages all students to bring their own au-

thentic selves to the classroom. In such a climate, the instructor works hard to bring her or his whole self to the classroom.

This study claims that of the use of film is useful in the non-film course, because it contributes to the involvement, collaboration, pluralism, creativity, assessment, and evaluation of the students. It is important that teachers preview any film they plan to show in class, and prepare the forms for the students. This article demonstrates how to practically implement this method using three steps of instruction to ensure a better classroom outcome.

With all their advantages, films can be effective but teachers are reluctant to use them, as teaching visually takes a greater effort and demands more time. Yet, as the present study reveals, they enable students to make the connection between theory and real-life situations. This example provides a positive experience, one which will hopefully encourage other teachers to use film for active learning in school, college, and university.

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