CHALLENGING YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH FILM: A unit for Stage 5

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The NSW Syllabus for the Australian Curriculum (English) provides many opportunities to stretch our students in their thinking and their relations to the world around them, especially through the study of film. This article gives focuses on how both short films and feature length films will challenge students’ outlook on the world, enable them to become better readers of film and ultimately produce their own well thought-out and constructed short film.

Using short films allows for differentiation across a class through the choice of films.

Included in this unit are texts that address the following requirements for Stage 5:

- Texts written about intercultural experiences
- Texts that provide insights about the peoples and cultures of Asia
- A wide range of cultural, social, and gender perspectives, popular and youth cultures
- Nonfiction, picture books
- An appropriate range of digital texts, including film, media and multimedia

Overarching focus questions

- What makes a film stand out and win awards?
- What is the relationship of film to story?
- How do the techniques of film convey meaning?

Tropfest

Possible Stage 5 outcomes that could be addressed: EN5-1A, EN5-2A, EN5-5C, EN5-6C, EN5-7D, EN5-8D (focus on no more than three for a unit of work)

_Tropfest_ is an Australian short film festival whose short films provide an accessible introduction to begin this study (preview all films as some may not be suitable).

1. Discuss with your students what they know about _Tropfest_.
2. Bring up the _Tropfest_ website and look at the different regions in the world that host this competition.

3. Have students take notes on the history of _Tropfest_.
4. Students look at the _Tropfest_ signature item for the 2014, which is 'change' (reminds me of a past HSC AOS). In pairs students brainstorm a few possibilities for an idea for a short film on change. They then develop one of those ideas into a synopsis for a short film and present it to the class.

Film Techniques:

Teach the key elements of a short film to your students. There is a wonderful YouTube video link http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oFUKRTFhoiA that explains various film techniques using _The Lord of the Rings_ clips as examples. You could provide students with a list of these techniques and then have them write their own definition or drawing and explain how these techniques could be used for effective in the medium of film. Alternatively in pairs students could invent a scene that uses five of the mentioned techniques.

For homework students will analyse a commercial or film clip noticing different film techniques incorporated and comment on their effect.
CHALLENGING YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH FILM:
A unit for Stage 5

*Time (2013 Finalist)* directed by Liam Connor – http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FBly6LdzW_g

As a class watch *Time*. Place students into groups and provide the following questions for them to discuss and take notes on.

1. How is atmosphere created in the opening scene? Include discussion on music, voice over, dialogue and camera angles.
2. How does Liam Connor (the writer/director) use characterisation to create suspense? (An simpler alternative question for students: What is Jimmy like and how is he different to his friends?)
3. Describe the techniques used in filming the crash. Is this combination effective? Include discussion on the use of flashback, music, slow motion and camera angles.
4. Do you think the rescue was a result of time travel or coincidence? Justify your answer.
5. Did this film effectively incorporate the signature item of a balloon? Why/why not?

After the groups have ample time discuss this film as a class.

**Group analysis of different films**

Over the next few lessons, each group will watch a different short film from Tropfest. The groups will discuss the questions provided and anything else that strikes them about this film. They will then become the expert presenters as they introduce their film, show the film and then lead a discussion on it. When all groups have presented their films, discuss if these films have similar elements due to their being all entrants to the same competition. This is an effective differentiation activity based on the film you select for the groups.

Some worthwhile films with questions you can use include:


This film embraces the cult of personality in a uniquely Australian way. It is a film that is suited for the larrikins in the class. Raymond Borzelli, the lovable optimistic hero of this piece, became a recognisable figure to many as a result of this film.

Students should look at the following aspects of this film when preparing their presentation:

- How is Raymond’s character shown, both through the information provided about him and the way he is portrayed? What is it about him that the audience like?
- Who does the camera focus on when he is busking? Why?
- What is the meaning of poverty and riches, both economically and in life as seen through this film?
- Why do you think this film was so well received?
- Are the humorous sections funny?
- Why is the music an effective way to end the film?
- Would a non-Australian audience connect with this character as effectively?
- How was the signature item incorporated? Was this adequate from your viewpoint?


This short film will provoke all students to think deeply. It is a film I would give to advanced students to analyse as a way of differentiation. It is set in a war zone and is a little gruesome at the end. It contains mature content and provides them with a wide scope to discuss:

- What is the context of this film and why do you think this?
- Why does the director use close ups on specific items in the opening scene?
- How are the three soldiers different? How does this characterisation enhance the film?
- How effective is the contrast of filming in monochrome with occasional injections of one colour? How does it support the ideas in the film?
- Was their rendezvous with fate? Is it inevitable that Meredith will leave the second soldier?
- Does the photo booth predict or create what
CHALLENGING YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH FILM: A unit for Stage 5

happens to the soldiers?
• What aspects of life in general does this film reflect?
• How effective is this film in making its responders think?

_Boo (2012)_ directed by Rupert Reid – http://shortfilmsin.com/video/9219/BOO

This is a modern take on the classic cried wolf tale, where a married elderly couple pretend to have heart attacks to create humour. This would be suited for a lower ability group.

Students should look at the following aspects of this film when preparing their presentation:
• Describe the opening scene and explain its effect.
• What is the key idea of this film and how is it achieved?
• Describe the relationship between the couple. How do you know this?
• How effective was the incorporation of the signature item of a light bulb?
• Is this film funny? Why or why not?
• How does the use of only diegetic sound until the credits enhance this film?
• Was the ending expected? How could the ending be changed?

_Cargo (2013)_ directed by Ben Howling and Yolanda Ramke – http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gryenlQKTbE

This short film is a zombie film but I think it is worth looking at as it takes an interesting perspective and it is also a topic many teens are interested in and are reading and viewing in other formats.

Students should look at the following aspects of this film when preparing their presentation:
• How does this film link to the zombie phenomenon that is prevalent in modern movies and other texts?
• Does this offer anything new to the genre?
• The opening shot is blurry and incorporates music and close ups. What is the purpose of this?
• How does it show the concept of sacrifice?
• Who is the target audience for this film and why?
• How is sound used throughout this film to create tension?
• How is the innocent contrasted with the horrific to create empathy?
• Was the signature item incorporated effectively?

_Animal Beatbox (2011)_ directed by Damon Gameau – http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YqZyqSU4XII

This short film was a controversial winner in 2011. It included the signature item of a key in a clever way but is it a short film? I suggest that the students viewing this one put on their headphones before pressing play.

Students should look at the following aspects of this film when preparing their presentation:
• Did this deserve to win the Tropfest competition? Students might want to look at the guidelines for submissions before considering this question: http://tropfest.com/au/guidelines/
• Is this a short film or a music clip? What criteria did you use to determine this?
• Describe and evaluate the effectiveness of the setting and the mediums that were used to create it.
• How is music used to create meaning and humour in this text?
• What is the film’s purpose and how is that achieved?
• In what way/s is this film original?

_The Maestro (2011)_ directed by Adam Anthony – http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=twgRVaBhYES

This is an interesting short film and one in which students will see different things. I would give this film to the thinkers in your class who like to analyse.

Students should look at the following aspects of this film when preparing their presentation:
• What is the initial focus in the opening shot? Why is his face unclear?
• What is reflected in his glasses? Why? At what other time in the film does Adam Anthony use reflection and why?
CHALLENGING YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH FILM:
A unit for Stage 5

• Describe the maestro. How is he depicted? How do others respond to him in the film? What is his physical appearance like?
• What is the effect of the distorted lighting?
• What is the difference between the city and ocean for the maestro?
• What do you think is the point of this film? How did you come to this conclusion?

Oscar nominated short films
Stage 5 outcomes addressed: EN5-1A, EN5-2A, EN5-3B, EN5-5C, EN5-7D, EN5-8D

The following short films have all been nominated for Oscars. These films have no requirements of signature items and enable you to look at how international composers utilise the medium of short film to present their messages. I have selected three short films and recommend watching them as a class.


The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore is a short film that was adapted from the delightful picture book with the same name by W.E. Joyce. It looks at the power of books to heal and provide meaning. The short film did a great job at adapting the book.

1. Read the picture book to the class and discuss the key ideas of the book and how they are brought about. If you have enough copies of the text have students analyse different sections of the book looking at the techniques used such as colour, layout, text, allusion to stories, its cyclical nature and characterisation of both animate and inanimate objects.

Focus questions and activity:
2. If you were to create a short film of this picture book what would your focus be? What style would it be in? What techniques would work?
3. Select a page and on your own or in pairs storyboard it for a film. Think about whether you would use audio, music, similar graphics or a different style.

The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore

4. What were the standout animation features for you? Describe the scene in as much detail as you can. Explain why it was a standout feature for you.
5. Describe the different music elements for each section. How effective was the music in this film?
6. Do you think the future scenes were too gruesome? Explain.
7. What does the close up of all the locks on the door in the future say to you?
8. Do you think this film deserved an Oscar nomination? Explain your answer.

A Morning Stroll (2011) directed by Grant Orchard – http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=purPz8FQVQw

This short film looks at a changing society and offers a ghastly picture of the future and the disconnection that is becoming more prevalent in modern society. It also includes a zombie element which is filmed in a cartoon style so the grotesque nature of it is toned down.

1. Describe in about five lines each, the three parts of this film.
2. What does this film say about our current society and how do you know this? Do you think this is a fair reflection?
3. Each section begins by looking through a shape that frames snapshots of the world. What are they showing and why is this needed when you see it in the film element that follows?

Still from A Short Stroll by Grant Orchard –

Extension question: Evaluate the techniques used in the picture book and examine how these could be transferred to a short film. (Allowing gifted and talented students “the capacity to make connections and manipulate abstract ideas”2)
CHALLENGING YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH FILM:
A unit for Stage 5

Viewing the film
1. Analyse the three key characters in this short film – the man, the woman who gives him the book and the girl that he gives it to. Explain how they are depicted and how the use of these characters tells the story.
2. Describe the use of black and white filming and the way it contrasts with colour. How does this enhance the message of this film?
3. This is a silent film that uses a symphony score akin to the silent films of the past. How does this music enrich the film? Did you recognise the main tune in the film? If so, what was it? How does the music add another layer of story telling?
4. How does the absence of dialogue work in this movie?
5. What struck you about the animation in this film? Give a specific example from it.
6. Do you think this deserved an Oscar nomination? Why/why not?


Raju (2011) directed by Max Zahle, is a foreign short film that investigates the overseas adoption of Indian children and the corruption and family devastation that can occur as a result.

1. While watching the students should take notes in point form on the following to discuss with the class and then write an extended response about.

Still from Raju. Source: http://www.oscars.org/video/watch/38saa_clip_raju.html

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Full length films
Stage 5 outcomes addressed: EN5-1A, EN5-2A, EN5-3B, EN5-5C, EN5-7D, EN5-8D
The following are ideas of full length films that you could use with this unit given your time availables.
CHALLENGING YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH FILM:
A unit for Stage 5

Oscar Winners
1. Have a class discussion about your students’ favorite films. What type of films do they like? What do they have in common?
2. Teacher projects up on the smart board the list of the biggest box office successful films. Ask the students if they have watched any of them. Discuss what type of movies they are, what they are about and why students think they are so popular. http://www.imdb.com/boxoffice/alltimegross
3. Teacher projects up on the smart board the list of the Best Picture Oscar winners since 1980 http://mistupid.com/entertain/oscars.htm Ask the students if they have watched any of them. Based on their titles, discuss what type of movies they think they are and what they might be about.
4. Students select three that they have not heard of and research the plot synopsis of them and any controversy or accolades that the film created.
5. You select an Oscar winning film to watch and study as a class. Within the study students would look at the context, filming techniques, why it was so successful etc. The film chosen would depend on your class and you could even get them to select the film.

Bollywood
Find out what students know of Bollywood. Have them research what Bollywood films are. Some websites they can look at include:


When studying this film have students take notes on the following aspects:

Black is based on the story of Helen Keller. G&T students could research this story and include another section on their notes analysing the differences and similarities to this original source.

Contrasting styles in Bollywood
Bride and Prejudice (2004) directed by Gurinder Chadna
Bride and Prejudice was a world-wide successful Bollywood film. This film is fun, includes humour and looks at the prejudice that exists in modern society. It is also an effective film to use to extend your gifted students as they could compare it to Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen. You could use the same scaffold for notes taking as for Black.

Foreign Films outside of Bollywood
The teacher selects a foreign film for the class to study. Some great options are The Round Up (2010) Directed by Roselyne Bosch, Sarah's Key (2010) Directed by Gilles Paquet-Brenner and Life is Beautiful (1997) Directed by Roberto Benigni. These are all powerful films about the Jewish holocaust and would require some background information on the holocaust. With any of these films I would provide the students the following focus question and have students take notes while watching the film to be able to answer the question:
CHALLENGING YOUR STUDENTS THROUGH FILM: 
A unit for Stage 5

How does the director use the medium of film to move and challenge the audience?

Allow your students to freedom to answer this question in whatever style they want. This allows different learning preferences to be catered for. Just ensure you make it clear that the standard needs to be equivalent to something they would understand. E.g. An essay.

Final assessment (of learning)
Creating their own short film
Stage 5 outcomes addressed: EN5-1A, EN5-2A, EN5-3B, EN5-4B, EN5-5C, EN5-7D, EN5-9E

The assessment task for this unit can be for the students in small groups to create their own short film. The students will need to introduce their film and comment on things such as what their purpose is, where their inspiration came from and what decisions on various filming techniques did they make (include some that may have been rejected). You could also include a question/answer time at the end of the viewing.

You could give them a signature item or you could give them free reign. Turn it into an internal competition if this is appropriate at your school.

Endnotes
1 Page 27 NSW syllabus for the Australian Curriculum
3 P9 English syllabus

PRAC SNACK:
Prac students report on their experiences
Andrew Flores, Charles Sturt University

What did you like most about teaching English in the classroom?
I really enjoyed diving into the texts that students were using. It brought back fond memories of what I studied back at high school whilst also giving me a deeper appreciation of them. Teaching English is much more exciting than I had imagined. I found that being in the classroom I made sure I was on top of my game, with students firing questions that I wouldn’t have dreamt of, to do with the learning material and experiences.

What were the best lessons, and why did they feature highly for you?
The best lessons were those that I was over-prepared for. No matter how many times I had been told by lecturers, older students and even peers, it never ceased to amaze me how much better a lesson would (not could) go when I had clear objectives and learning experiences. I found that the best lessons included a lot more of the teacher listening than speaking. In the earlier practicum rounds I found that in order to “tick the right boxes” I would often speak at students, which sometimes removed the learning aspect of the lesson. Instead, listening is an integral part in a productive and engaging lesson.

What was best about being with your mentor teacher(s)?
The best thing about being with my mentor teacher/s was being able to connect as professionals. Another aspect that I found myself doing was watching, listening and learning from lessons that they taught, how they dealt with students both in and out of the classroom, and how that affected the students.