

***Hollywood History in High School:
Using Feature Films to Support Students' Historical Understanding***
Alan S. Marcus
Report on Grant Progress

Spring 2007 Update

No data collection or budget expenditures have occurred since the last grant update. All data collection activities were completed during the 2004-2005 school year. However, I continue to present data from this study and write articles for publication based on the data. Below is a report on the research conducted and an updated accounting of the end products related to the study.

Report on Research

Understanding how students make sense of the past through viewing, interpreting, and analyzing feature films is essential due to the volume of student viewing of film both in and out of the classroom. Historical content and historical themes are imbedded in many of these films. In the classroom films offer the potential to motivate students, to portray varying perspectives and points of view, to reveal insight about the past and about the time period in which the film was created, and to emotionally and intellectually engage students. The rationale to include films in the history curriculum is further bolstered by national and state history standards which call for the development of historical understanding in students, a goal that can be supported by the use of film. In addition, students are likely to encounter the history in films long beyond their formal history education. Providing them with the skills and knowledge to productively analyze, interpret, and evaluate historically themed films – what might be called *historical film literacy*ⁱ – should be a vital aim of history teachers. However, we must give careful consideration to how films can best be utilized in lessons to develop students' historical understanding and meet curriculum standards, as well as to which films can best meet these goals.

This study, conducted in part with the grant awarded by the Teachers for a New Era project, examines how students make sense of the past through film by analyzing the influence and importance of specific teacher practices with film, the nature of the films shown, and the background and experiences of the students on three dimensions of historical understanding: how students use film as historical evidence, how students develop historical empathy – including issues of perspective, and how students connect the past and the present.

Data were collected in the high school classrooms of two teachers, Mr. Thackeray, who teaches at Garfield High School in an urban district in Connecticut and Mr. Guthrie, who teaches at Torre High School on the outskirts of the same urban center in a suburban district.ⁱⁱ Both classes were United States History courses. Mr. Thackeray's class was a heterogeneous tenth grade class that studied Civics the first half of the year and United States History from 1830-1910 for the second half of the year. Data were collected in his class during the U.S. History portion of the course from January to June. Mr. Guthrie's class was an eleventh grade honors class covering the period 1870 to the present. Data were collected for the entire school year from September to June. Data were collected and triangulated using five instruments, including a pre-post assessment and pre- and post-survey given to all students, in-class assessments for each film shown during the year, teacher and student interviews, and classroom observations.

Are films accurate and trustworthy sources of historical information to students and do they believe film is a valuable pedagogical tool? The students at Torre High and Garfield High began the year skeptical of film as an accurate and trustworthy source of historical

knowledge when compared to other sources, such as the teacher and textbook, yet overwhelmingly supported film as a means of learning about history generally, and as a tool teachers should employ in their classrooms. By the end of the year, students remained critical of film as a source generally, though to a lesser degree, and even more emphatically espoused film as an effective learning tool in class. In addition to questions about accuracy, students responded to prompts requiring them to make sense of specific films. When asked to reflect on the films shown in class during the year, students pondered the problematic nature of these films in terms of accuracy and Hollywood “interference,” but for the most part failed to examine the films through a more sophisticated lens. Still, some of the results are encouraging in that students do not always accept film at face value, which offers important lessons for teachers and historians. Other findings from the research include:

- Specific teacher practices appear to influence the way students consider a film as evidence of the past. When the teachers in this study previewed a film by placing it in its historical context and asked students to research a film’s real life characters or other aspects of the film’s narrative, students found the film to be more trustworthy and accurate. A film’s perceived accuracy may have also been enhanced because the teachers did not provide any conflicting narratives.
- Several features of the specific films shown may also influence students’ interpretations of the films. Films using more modern film-making techniques (music, camera angle, etc) and films that were based on “real-life” events or people, were perceived by students as more accurate and trustworthy.
- While most student responses were similar at Torre and Garfield High Schools, one notable difference was in student responses to prompts about how they personally related to a film and how well a film brought a time period to life. For these questions, students at Garfield High, all African-American and Hispanic, were more likely to cite their own identities and personal experiences as influences on how they interpreted a film.
- The film *Iron Jawed Angels*, about the women’s suffrage movement during the Wilson presidency, was chosen by students in both classes as the most accurate and trustworthy film shown during the year. However, on three film assessment items, there was a statistically significant difference between male and female student responses. Females were more likely to be familiar with the content presented in the film, were more likely to be familiar with the perspectives presented in the film, and more likely to make personal connections to the film.

Report on end products related to the research

Building on my previous research which examined film as a teaching tool in history classes broadly and collected data for a short period of time, this study sharpened the focus of my work and added the dimension of a longitudinal data collection period. This TNE funded research contributed to my growth as a researcher and teacher in numerous ways and is a core component of my scholarship. The following presentations, publications, projects, and professional development sessions are a direct or partial result of this work:

- Early results were presented to members of the Neag community at a “Research in Progress” lunch sponsored by the Dean’s office.

A paper detailing the study and results was presented at the College and University Faculty Assembly –National Council for the Social Studies annual conference in the Fall 2005. “Students Making Sense of the Past Through Film: ‘It’s Almost Like Living the Event’ vs. ‘Fluffed-up with

Hollywood Garbage.” Paper presented at annual meeting of the *College and University Faculty Assembly/National Council for the Social Studies*. Fall 2005.

-
- A paper reporting on the TNE research and previewing a book chapter on the research was presented as a paper at the 2006 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association in April, 2006.

"Using Film to Teach History." Paper presented at annual meeting of the *American Educational Research Association*. Spring 2006.

- An education honors student used a portion of the data from the study as the basis for her honors thesis.
- Working with two local schools I developed a 5th year IB/M Internship focused on using film to teach history for the 2005-2006 school year. This internship continued during the 2006-2007 academic year.
- Based partially on the research I co-taught (with a member of the history department) a course titled: *Teaching History Through Fiction and Film*. This was done as a "special topics" course so there is not course #.
- Expanding beyond film and history, I developed a course titled *Education and Popular Culture* – now an official course approved by the university. The focus of the course is an exploration of how teaching and learning are portrayed in film. EDCI 385
- I received a Faculty Small Grant in order to continue in-depth analysis of the data and develop conclusions to incorporate into professional development for teachers.
- During the Summer of 2005 I conducted two professional development workshops around using film to teach history. One to history teachers from ten Connecticut school districts involved with a Teaching American History Grant through CREC and a second to all social studies teachers in the state-wide technical school system. In addition, in July 2006 I conducted an all-day professional development workshop on using film to teach history to history teachers from Connecticut involved with a Teaching American History Grant through East Conn.
- A paper on a segment of the research findings, co-authored with my doctoral advisee, was presented at the Fall 2006 College and University Faculty Assembly – National Council for the Social Studies annual conference. This paper will be submitted to a national peer-reviewed journal this spring.

"Tasting the fluoride: Using feature film to inspire modern-day critical consciousness."

Paper presented at annual meeting of the *College and University Faculty Assembly – National Council for the Social Studies*. Fall 2006.

- Based on an invitation by members of the College and University Faculty Assembly I co-presented a "research into practice" workshop at the Fall 2006 National Council for the Social Studies Conference. Teachers explored how research findings about students and film can directly impact their practice.

"Teaching History with Film: Promises, Pitfalls, and Pedagogy." Presentation at the annual meeting of the *National Council for the Social Studies*. Fall 2006.

- My edited book, *Celluloid blackboard: Teaching history with film*, was published in November, 2006. In addition to acting as editor, I contributed two chapters to this volume, including one reporting research findings from the TNE funded study. See: <http://www.infoagepub.com/products/series/titles/978-1-59311-573-9.html>

- During the Fall of 2006 I was appointed as an Associate Editor for the journal *Film & History*. I will serve as co-Associate Editor for Pedagogy. This appointment is directly related to my scholarship in this field.
- I have also been appointed to be guest Editor-in-Chief of *Film & History* for the 2009 issues. The journal is published twice a year.
- I have applied for a grant from the Connecticut Humanities Council to conduct a week-long summer institute for high school history teachers on using film to teach history. This institute, to take place during July of 2007, includes a “research into practice” component and will draw on my research findings to help teachers develop effective pedagogical practices with film.

Meeting TNE goals

This study contributed to several TNE goals. First, the research supported the development of a new course, *Teaching History Through Fiction and Film*, jointly created and taught with Michael Dintenfass from the History Department, thus promoting engagement and cooperation between Neag and the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

Second, a formal working relationship was established that engaged faculty from Neag (Alan Marcus, Tim Weinland) and the History Department (Jacqueline Campbell, Walter Woodward) in joint activities. The research team participated in various aspects of the study including instrument development and data analysis.

Third, the project generated research related to TNE design principles (decisions driven by evidence) through collaboration among Neag, CLAS, and Connecticut public school teachers. The results are now being presented at various professional development workshops and being submitted for publication, thus encouraging teacher practices based on empirical knowledge.

ⁱ Marcus, Alan S. (2005) “‘It is as it was:’ Feature Film in the History Classroom.” *The Social Studies*, 96 n2, p.61-67.

ⁱⁱ All names are changed for confidentiality.