

In-class Film-viewing for Empathy Development in Higher Education

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Abstract: In the 2016 winter term, I taught a French communication course for English as a Second Language pre-service teachers (PST) in the Department of Education of a Canadian university. In this narrative autoethnography, I present the perspectives emerging from a university teaching experience of “teaching through film”, with undergraduate students enrolled in the latter course. In-class discussions gravitated towards values and morals—notably empathy and caring—in relation to the significance of embodying “good teacher” morals, following the viewing of *Monsieur Lazhar* (2011). Drawing on William Ayers’ philosophy of good teaching, among others, I present the implications of these discussions for teacher education and their significance for teacher education programs.

Keywords: Film; Empathy; Artwork; Teacher Education; Narrative Autoethnography

Art-making (Chilton et al., 2015) and artwork reception (Carroll, 2003; White, 2009) have proven to heighten emotional responses, bolstering empathetic skills in the process. Drawing on inspirational work on empathetic meaning-making (Barthes, 1977; Nussbaum, 1998; White & Costantino, 2013), in this narrative autoethnography (Ellis, 2004; Ellis, Adam, & Bochner, 2010), I argue that empathy and caring are social and emotional skills that ought to be taught holistically and included in pre-service teacher (PST) courses. By pre-service teachers, I mean those undergraduate students who are enrolled in the bachelor of education with the hopes of being employed elementary or high school teachers upon graduation. This paper shows how teaching through film has the potential to revitalize empathy and caring in pre-service teacher courses. This type of awareness helps “teachers-to-be” in making sense of their ontological selves, that is, the layers of self *through* which they will teach in upcoming years. Film-viewing and subsequent in-class discussions are thus seen as processes leading to empathy-oriented reflections, a most desirable function in the teaching profession.

In a special issue on Aesthetics, Empathy, and Education (Volume 42.1), the *Canadian Review of Art Education* recently disseminated the epistemological and practical need to include empathy as a core element of teaching and learning in the 21st century. The need for empathetic meaning-making and understanding is sometimes taken for granted, and it is crucial to reinforce its educational powers (Carroll, 2006; Lawrence, 2008), especially in higher education. One entry point for learning to be empathetic is with film-viewing, for it allows viewers to empathize with characters’ situations¹.

Researcher’s Stance

Following Ellis’s autoethnographic method (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Ellis, 2004), I position myself as a lecturer and teacher with notable experience in multimodal training, including film studies, and analysis. In the footsteps of my own teachers, I maintain that film, as an art form, can

offer valid knowledge that solicits human skills (Carroll, 2003). Meaning-making and film-viewing have played an undeniable role in my learning, whether it be in research (Lemieux, 2016), or in applied course settings (e.g., multiple qualitative analyses of Daldry's *The Hours* or Almodovar's *Volver*). I also use film in my grade 7 English as a Second Language (ESL) class to teach vocabulary lessons about cooking and comic book design. A recent example of this method was when I had students invent their own recipe after watching an episode of *Masterchef Junior*. Students could identify with the contestants for many reasons, one of them being they were the same age. Another use of video is to show students how multimodal design is made, and how certain angles intensifies catharsis in certain situations. Film helps students empathize with characters' situations (Lemieux, 2016), as will also be demonstrated in this article.

There were 20 registered undergraduate students in my class, a relatively small group compared to the usual university course enrolment for this class (35). Students came from a variety of backgrounds, and most of them were primarily Anglophones. Seldom were these students exposed to French, except in cases where they could hear it in the workplace or in public transportation. I gave the class exclusively in French, with occasional translations into English, in moments where I needed to emphasize reminders and course deadlines. The latter procedure allowed me to clarify course requirements in English, and eliminate any possibilities that the guidelines had been lost in translation.

The department designed this course given to guide pre-service ESL teachers in their learning of French for the workplace. That is, these future teachers would use French in their teaching institutions to communicate with colleagues, parents, principals, and students. Language is thus more than a simple communication tool insofar as teachers use it to help students when instructions are unclear or misunderstood. In other words, teachers often play the role of translator-educators. Language serves as an empathetic outlet, as teachers must put themselves in students' shoes when they do not respond to English guidelines or remain stoic when given directions. This course was thus designed for PSTs to acknowledge that students are sensitive beings who are learning a language. The course was also meant to help teachers understand that in order to teach positively and constructively, they need to put themselves in the place of the learner. In addition to oral and written French communication skills, the PSTs and I discussed empathetic issues in relation to language throughout the course.

Teaching through film

Students can undergo meaningful learning when they view films that spark conversations around values, ethics, and moral questions. As Barthes (1977) notes, film provides viewers with direct and authentic experiences that are the result of a "third meaning." This "third meaning" refers to the viewers' meaning-making of a film and is infused by "obtuse meanings." "Obtuse meanings" are what Barthes refers to as viewers' emotional reactions to images in movement and elements present in the frames. The process implies that viewers can arrive at meaning-making without prior access to words. Emotional responses and reactions are therefore a matter of necessity when it comes to meaning-making through film.

Drawing on Barthes' philosophy, I had decided in my course planning to teach through cinematographic art. Considering my background, the adage "we teach who we are" (Palmer, 1998), rings true to me. Choosing to teach through film, I also encouraged my students to repeat the exercise in their own ESL classrooms. I stressed the importance of teaching *through* film, as opposed to teaching *about* film. The distinction is important because the former opens a path for

discussions around human matters and values, while the latter tends to focus on investigating movie facts and details (e.g., character A went to school, while character B stayed at home). In the context of my course, film-viewing was not based on assignments, but rather conceived as a learning method. Film, as an art form, has the potential to stimulate transformative experiences. And, as Carroll (2003) reminds us, it is a legitimate act to conceive art through such doxa: “Not all art is for art’s sake. Some art is expressly designed to foster such useful activities as inquiry, education, and learning, and there is no reason to suspect that these functions and the responses they elicit are any less art-appropriate ones than the contemplation of form” (p. 382).

Teaching aims

Teaching with film, albeit useful in secondary school settings for language test preparation, was destined in this course to help PSTs frame their teaching philosophy through value-based discussions. Another aim was to provide PSTs with the opportunity to familiarize themselves with French, not only as an additional language, but also as a future frame of reference, a *joual*, or Québécois, dialect with which they would be confronted should they land a job in a French-Canadian school or school board. Given these PSTs’ specialization in teaching ESL, it was very likely they would find work opportunities within the French market. Their future spoken and written interactions in French would take place not only with students, but also with parents, administrators, consultants, and staff. Therefore, choosing how to teach grammar and functional French for the workplace was a two-fold act. By learning an additional language, they experienced a second language learners’ mindset, thus shaping their teaching philosophy and preparing them for the realities of the workplace.

Monsieur Lazhar and the pedagogy of possibility

During the last class of the semester, I introduced the PSTs to one of the films that marked my own path as a teacher, Falardeau’s *Monsieur Lazhar* (2011), a film adaptation based on the acclaimed play *Bachir Lazhar*. Nominated for an Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film at the 84th Academy Awards, *Monsieur Lazhar* generated international attention for its reflections around ethics and professionalism in the teaching profession. The plot depicts the journey of Bachir Lazar, a recently Quebec-immigrated Algerian, who offers his teaching services to replace Martine, an elementary school teacher who committed suicide by hanging herself in her classroom on a week night. Students in Martine’s classroom find themselves utterly affected by the inherent violence caused by the event. The school administration hires Lazhar as a substitute, without making proper background checks, thinking he had previously taught in his home country. With mounting evidence of unusual teaching practices, parents and the teaching staff soon discover that Lazhar does not hold any formal teaching certification, and he is promptly dismissed. The film ends on a scene where Alice, one of his favourite students, hugs the teacher goodbye. The significance of this final scene will become apparent in the conclusion of this articleⁱⁱ.

Recent studies (Griffith & Hébert, 2015; Michael, 2013) have demonstrated how *Monsieur Lazhar* provokes conversations about teaching, immigration, personal growth, belonging, and trauma in classroom settings. Conceptualized as a movie starring a hero in charge of teaching diverse students, *Monsieur Lazhar* suggests societal issues that go beyond sole character agency (Michael, 2013). There is a possibility that PSTs will face similar problems over the course of their career, hence why I showed the movie during class time and planned for a post-movie discussion. I purposefully did not plan for a pre-movie discussion for two main reasons. First, doing such preparation exercises, especially for this movie where the plot twist tends to spark cathartic

reactions (Michael, 2013), would likely have dissipated the film's affective and moral impact. Second, the exercise's objective was to focus on the film's intention in post-discussions, urging students to think about life issues as portrayed in film and how their future selves would deal with such issues in the classroom.

As such, students in my class expressed on numerous occasions how this film emotionally overwhelmed them and affected their teaching philosophy. We discussed affective and ethical themes related to 1) the teacher-as-professional, and 2) the teacher-as-human. From cultural gaps becoming flagrant in Lazhar's first day of class, to his rigorous, traditional, text-oriented ways of teaching French, conversations gravitated around the legitimacy of Lazhar's actions, as well as his intentions and ways of addressing problems in the classroom. The overall subject of overcoming the loss of a community member became important as our discussions went on (e.g. How do we, as teachers, prepare our school community for traumatic events such as death or suicide? How can we address self-inflicted violence in the wake of a suicide?).

Such questions were also asked in a recent television series, *13 Reasons Why*, aired on Netflix (Incaprera, 2017), where considerable controversy was sparked about the show's tackling of heavy issues such as adolescent suicide and depression. Despite early backlash from critics, the thirteen episodes generated important humane discussions and awareness about life issues. In other words, film and television have the potential to bring awareness about sensitive matters like suicide and depression that are at times talked about in educational settings. The National Association for School Psychologists (NASP) warns, however, that *13 Reasons Why* should not be taken up lightly; while the show can help clarify perceptions about suicide, it is not recommended for "vulnerable youth" (NASP, 2017). The main reason is that:

[The show's] powerful storytelling may lead impressionable viewers to romanticize the choices made by the characters and/or develop revenge fantasies. They may easily identify with the experiences portrayed and recognize both the intentional and unintentional effects on the central character. Unfortunately, adult characters in the show, including the second school counselor who inadequately addresses Hannah's pleas for help, do not inspire a sense of trust or ability to help. Hannah's parents are also unaware of the events that lead to her suicide death. (NASP, 2017)

Therefore, post-discussions are recommended to challenge viewpoints that are portrayed on this show, and any movie for that matter that tackles such serious topics. It is a risk-taking activity, which demands sustained attention, care, time, and follow ups. It requires humanity and heart, and most importantly it needs listening ears and the rare but needed ability to take action when it is most needed.

Aesthetic experiences, sorites and gestalt

A branch of research on aesthetic experience and artwork reception focuses on its definitions and limitations. Boyd White's (2009) *Aesthetics Primer* is an example of this important work for developing values awareness through aesthetic experience, and so is the work of Marcia Muelder Eaton and Ronald Moore in that regard. Indeed, Eaton and Moore (2002) describe *sorites* as a phenomenon that becomes complete when all moments of reaction are added to a sum. This sum, however, cannot be predictable as the moments of response are cumulative. That is, there exist multiple viewings of a film, with equal validity—if one disregards potential solipsistic moments. When we bring together these moments of reception, it is possible to arrive at a *gestalt* (Fronzizi, 1971; White, 2014), or an overall aesthetic experience. Drawing on Fronzizi (1971), White (2014) refers to *gestalt* as a sometimes inchoate (or wordless) understanding, and stresses

that “aesthetic experiences are essentially gestalt-grasps of objects or events” (p. 36). There are no ways of predicting when and how gestalt, as a result, will manifest itself. Meaning-making depends on individuals, and the nature of these humane interactions with artworks is not yet known as humans are constantly evolving, changing ontologically. But as Eaton and Moore (2002) maintain, “the point of stimulating these sensibilities and receptivities is to make students *aware* of ways of perceiving, portraying, and responding to the world” (p. 13, my emphasis).

Learning through movies is thus an exercise in both equality and phenomenology; in equality because moments of reception are to be valued and considered equally in the classroom, and in phenomenology because those moments, sometimes ephemeral, are the property of the individual that experiences them. Suggesting this ideology in my class, I guided students in their learning by valuing their points of view, fostering discussions around core values resonating with them as PSTs.

A conversation about values

Film-viewing makes students think about their positionalities as teachers, and the roles they choose to take on in their profession. The meaning-making and epiphanies that result from a viewing experience create, according to Carroll (2006), an opportunity to reminisce “simple truths” that “lie latent in our consciousness” (p. 378). I argue that empathy may well be one of these features.

By acting as spectators, PSTs can both identify with Lazhar as he navigates through his journey as a new teacher, confronted daily with the professional attributes and expectations of a licensed teacher. In the film, these perspectives on the nature of professional teaching, as voiced by colleagues, administration, parents, and students, reflect the norms established by our Ministry of Education programs. There are multiple examples in the movie where my students identified that Bachir Lazhar failed to comply with these norms.

For instance, the Canadian Criminal Code (2008) stipulates that “Every schoolteacher, parent or person standing in the place of a parent is justified in using force by way of correction toward a pupil or child, as the case may be, who is under his care, if the force does not exceed what is reasonable under the circumstances” (Section 43). During an in-class exercise, Bachir Lazhar uses physical force to reprimand a student, slapping him behind the head, as the child fails to listen in class. As professionally educated teachers know, such behaviour is unacceptable and punishable by law. Students in my classroom voiced their concerns during discussion. The movie’s characters expressed reticence towards Lazhar’s methods. Similarly, my students asserted their disapproval of Lazhar’s use of physical force and violence.

Other examples of questionable teaching practices ensue throughout the film. Indeed, when Bachir Lazhar is given his teaching load for the remaining months of the year, he soon realizes he will need to prepare students for the end-of-year exams. Rather than teaching contemporary materials designed to develop students’ literacy competencies, as required by the Quebec Ministry of Education, he prefers giving students difficult, lengthy dictations taken from Balzac’s novels. The latter method is scarcely used in classrooms today, as it is considered too traditional and unengaging for students. In the film narrative, students even opposed doing the exercise and claimed that they did not understand what a dictation was. Obligated to follow orders, as they would in a traditional banking education model (Freire, 1996), students attempted writing the phrases filled with extremely complex vocabulary, leaving behind comprehension and logic. As a result, most of the class failed as the evaluation method was inappropriate for their literacy level and unrepresentative of their literacy practices. This incident shows viewers how teaching is about

engagement and caring. In other words, unengaging examinations are detrimental learning. Viewers come to an understanding that teaching goes beyond reproducing traditional methods; teaching is about adapting to students' needs and caring for them.

Not surprisingly, in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1996) condemns the banking education model, a system in which, “knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing” (p. 72). Within this spectrum, Freire argues, there is no dialogue between the student (or the “depository”) and the teacher (or the “depositor”). Teachers deliver the content they deem most valuable to students, and pupils take in the lecture without showing interest in its content or form. This procedure tends to generate apathy in the classroom and often results in pedagogical failure. The absence of democratic educational spaces engenders fear from both parties, and hinders any type of learning, whether it be of social, emotional or intellectual nature. Building on Elliott-Johns, Booth, Rowsell, Puig, & Paterson (2012), teachers can valorize students' voices to guide teaching and learning in the classroom. In Lazhar's classroom, this proposition was not considered nor applied, at least in the beginning of his journey. In fact, Lazhar was trapped in his own authoritarian mentality, which created a disconnection with his students. As Hannah Arendt (1968) famously pointed out, abuses of power in educational settings can only provoke negative situations and prevent students from flourishing:

The authority that tells the individual child what to do and what not to do rests with the child group itself—and this produces, among other consequences, a situation in which the adult stands helpless before the individual child and out of contact with him. He can only tell him to do what he likes and then prevent the worst from happening. (II, p. 5)

Teacher authority can be observed in the smallest, most intricate cinematographic details of *Monsieur Lazar*. For example, Lazhar's approach when correcting papers gave a very negative, teacher-oriented impression. Camera shots showed papers filled with the dreaded red correction ink and capital letters, pointing at students' faults rather than fostering progression. Overly unfavourable feedback has a negative impact on students' performances and well-being in class (Durand & Chouinard, 2012), which viewers soon understand.

With a main character who displays no evidence of teacher education, the film portrays a teacher that likely reminisced about his own schooling and reproduced it in his classroom. This representational way of “doing” teaching, and lack of professionalism, made pre-service teachers aware of how their background and personal values have the power to influence their judgment and decision-making in the classroom in all stages of teaching and evaluation. The two main errors in the lack of teacher education which are evidenced in the film are: 1) the inappropriateness of the assessment methods, and 2) the level of difficulty of the work assigned to students. As the plot unfolds, however, students' performances proportionally grow. Nonetheless, their good results can be attributed to their growing appreciation for Bachir Lazhar, or to a myriad of other factors (Ayers, 2001), more than the dictation activity itself, considered obsolete in most Canadian schools and internationally. Indeed, in Northern European countries like Denmark and Sweden, cursive writing is no longer taught in elementary school, although this method provokes much controversy. Keyboarding, now privileged, implies that correction software will correct orthographic and syntactic mistakes directly. In these contexts, learners are now assisted by technology in- and outside of the classroom, which reflects youth literacy practices (Lebrun, Lacelle, & Boutin, 2013; Rowsell, 2013; Rowsell & Walsh, 2011; Walsh, 2010). That is, for written literacies, dictation exercises are dated and unsuitable for the world in which students live.

Lazhar attempted to discuss the very sensitive topic of suicide in his classroom. On numerous occasions, the school community expressed its disapproval towards the topic, saying how inappropriate it was to discuss death in a school setting. Confronting the school principal when called in for inappropriate pedagogical methods, Lazhar explained that Martine committed a violent act towards her students by hanging herself in her classroom. This key moment in the film sparks reflections on Lazhar's role in the school's own grief, that is, he guides students not only in their learning of French, but most importantly in their difficult grieving phase. This act, which caused moral issues in the school, is arguably a sign of caring and thus, of good teaching (Ayers, 2001). Following the viewing, we discussed whether talking about "life issues" was an appropriate class topic. Despite considerable differences in PSTs' opinions, all agreed that emotional responses ought to happen in the classroom, and we must find ways to address them both as professionals and humans. Once again, discussions around the different receptions of visual narratives allow for rich, balanced, and authentic exchanges that carry value (Maine, 2015b).

Qualities of an experienced teacher

During in-class discussions, my students reflected on Lazhar's teaching abilities and on the meaning of being a "good teacher", much like when Ladson-Billings (2001) asks, "what does it mean to be a good teacher?" while teaching a graduate class on culturally-relevant pedagogy. Students focused on moments where Lazhar made efforts to integrate the school community by attending meetings, going to school-related events, and supporting student-led initiatives. The latter activity proves significant for good teaching, i.e., "good teaching requires most of all a thoughtful, caring teacher committed to the lives of students" (Ayers, 2001, p. 18).

Concurrently, Bachir Lazhar brought books to gifted students who showed heightened interest in literature to challenge their learning. Furthermore, he rewarded struggling students for using dictionaries during assignments. While giving rewards in classroom settings is a debatable action, many would agree that good teaching follows this type of teaching. Lazhar further demonstrated caring when he taught through storytelling. That is, he made a deliberate effort to engage students in French through his tone and acting skills. While Ayers (2001) maintains that one of the myths of good teaching has to do with teachers' acting skills, one can certainly understand the impact of Lazhar's performances on students' embodied engagement.

Concluding thoughts

In this article, I have showed with the example of *Monsieur Lazhar* (and briefly with *13 Reasons Why*) that teaching through films that ask moral questions can prove useful for PSTs in higher education courses. Particularly, I have found that subsequent, in-class discussions might shed light on the multiple meanings and definitions of "good teaching," an important part of student-teachers' professional and human development. This article ultimately contributes to ongoing research on effective teacher education university programs, and shows the importance of meaningful discussions about ethics and morals in higher education.

One of the major contributions of this article corroborates that "good teaching" involves caring (Agne, 1999; Ayers, 2001; Noddings, 1992) and empathetic skills or abilities (White & Costantino, 2013). Insights from this article have illustrated how teaching languages should go beyond language acquisition and vocabulary development. In fact, Lazhar's class seems to be a pretext to teach with ontological aims. Similarly, teaching in my undergraduate classroom began with language development, but unfolded as an opportunity to fine-tune conceptualizations of teachers' roles and ethical standpoints in the classroom.

Finally, and as Ayers (2001) notes, “a common experience of teachers is to feel the pain of opportunities missed, potential unrealized, students untouched” (p. 6). In presenting my students with sensitive material that allowed them to reflect on their future teaching practices, I hope that I assisted them in gaining sufficient, meaningful insights that will help them navigate throughout their first years in this profession. One significant demonstration of the film’s impact on my students was embodied minutes before my undergraduate course ended in a moment where opportunities were seized, potential was achieved and students were touched. Echoing the movie’s closing scene where Lazhar embraces one of his students, my own students approached me and asked: “*Madame, est-ce qu’on peut vous donner un ‘hug’?*”ⁱⁱⁱ

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ⁱ See Maine, 2015a for research on animated films and picture books which can provoke empathy in child viewers; and Maine, 2015b on how short films are viable sources to help children understand narratives holistically.

ⁱⁱ For further discussion on historical and emotional trauma in *Monsieur Lazhar*, see Griffith and Hébert, 2015.

ⁱⁱⁱ This statement translates into English as: “Miss, can we give you a hug?”