

The Director in the Classroom

How Filmmaking Inspires Learning

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How Filmmaking Develops Higher Order Thinking Skills

In this chapter, we look at some of the ways that filmmaking helps develop higher order thinking skills. The filmmaking process in the classroom invites a variety of skills to be explored and developed as the students journey from the creation of the original idea to the first presentation and beyond.

Visioning Skills

Filmmaking is about turning the intangible into the tangible. Regardless of the size of the film, whether it's *Ben Hur* or *My Science Experiment*, movies start with that wonderful thing called "the idea." As the idea formulates in the mind of the filmmaker, a vision of the final film begins to develop. When the idea becomes a script, the challenge for directors is to hold a clear picture in their minds of what they want to communicate and then to guide their crew towards that vision. The goal of the filmmaking process and all involved is to put that vision on the screen.

When students create a film, it is an opportunity for them to develop a vision of what they want to explore and to see how the vision changes or remains the same as they set out and make it happen. It is practice in turning the intangible into the tangible.

It's also about learning the process of looking at where you want to be, looking at where you are now, and constructing a plan to connect the two. The skill of working backwards from a goal, and translating it into a plan of action, can be transplanted for personal achievement in many fields.

It can also lead into a discussion of what 'vision' itself is, as filmmakers telling stories, as teams of people following a common goal or as individuals pursuing a dream.

It's about exploring not only what the vision is, but also what the vision does. How it moves you into action, gets you up on your feet, makes you advance in order to crystallize what you have in your mind.

It is important that students develop visioning skills for both their present and future worlds. We need students to see how ideas can be transformed into action and how if they want to reach for something, if they can dream it, they can do it. But for them to realize the dream, the idea, the target, it begins with being able to articulate clearly the vision they hold in their minds to themselves and to others.

Films get made because a vision can be imagined, articulated, realized and shared. If we believe that students would benefit from this entrepreneurial approach to learning, then this is another benefit that filmmaking gives them.

Research

When audiences go to see a film in the theatre, they seldom realize how much research goes into the making of the movie. The filmmaking process uses extensive research throughout. In the formative stages, writers, directors and producers research story ideas that relate to the idea they are imagining. They interview people, read books, clip magazine articles, scan the Web, draw upon personal experiences and look to uncover information from anywhere they can, knowing that key secrets can be revealed in the least likely of places.

Once an idea is decided upon, the writer will usually research as much material as they can find in order to get a better understanding of the context and content of the story.

My wife, Linda, is a writer. One of the characters in her latest screenplay works with autistic adults. Linda has been researching autism on the Web, interviewing caregivers who work with autistic adults, and has arranged to work-shadow some of these caregivers and their clients. The more she researches, the more it informs her story. The more facts and truths that she uncovers, the better the possibility that the story will ring true to her audience.

As a director, I also conduct research as I endeavor to become

familiar with the story and setting of the project that I have undertaken. I research story facts, location characteristics, design elements, themes, characters and many other components.

In addition, our cameraman (man or woman camera operator) might research lighting, colour, design and visual styles for his or her subject, perhaps choosing to contrast harsh institutional lighting in some scenes with warm comforting tones in another.

The production manager will research what resources are available at the location where the film is to be recorded. He or she will investigate where to rent equipment, vehicles, facilities and where to hire local cast and crew.

There is an exhaustive amount of invisible research undertaken by almost all the members of the creative and production crew. Because there is so much investigation embedded in the filmmaking process, it fosters the development of research skills as students prepare and produce their own videos. As information exponentially explodes all around us, the ability to effectively mine that information also increases.

If we are to prepare students to make sense of all that information, then familiarization with good research skills—knowing where to find things, how to find things, who to ask, how to collect it and how to organize it—becomes another important skill developed by filmmaking.

Problem Solving Skills

Filmmaking is problem solving. Turning the vision in the creator's mind into the finished movie on screen requires a seemingly endless journey into problem solving, not only in terms of what do we want to show, but also, how we will show it.

Regardless of budget, filmmakers always come up against obstacles in filming. It could be that the actor you would like is not available, or possibly you were hoping for a sunny day but it



“Some of these big American films get made in this very efficient way, where a script is written by a scriptwriter and the director comes in and makes his comments, gets a storyboard artist to draw the thing up, and he hires a designer who designs it, a costumer comes in to do the costumes, and the films get made and they’re fine, and they work in a system that works very well. I just try to break that down, by trying to get everyone involved in doing everything on the film. So the costumer is coming up with ideas for sets, and the set designer might be coming up with an idea for the costumes. You try to get the right team of people to feed it and then they feed you, and it goes back and forth. I think that’s why there’s so much detail, because people are thinking about it and the detail becomes as important as the characters in the film.”

Terry Gilliam

is raining. It could be that you do not have enough money for the budget you require. It may be that you do not have the equipment you need. You might not have access to the location you wish you could shoot at. Or you may simply need more time. The list, unfortunately, is endless. But what the appearance of problems does is create a perpetual arena for problem-solving opportunities.

Since some of our greatest challenges in education today are to stretch already tight budgets, to share limited resources, and to accommodate multiple objectives within limited time constraints, there exists a great opportunity to take advantage of what these challenges offer.

In other words, as students set out to create their films and discover obstacles of time, equipment and other resources, they learn to identify and solve their own problems, and to own the process for finding solutions. It is then that these multiple, real world filmmaking challenges have become a great opportunity to experience real world problem solving.

Logic Skills

Sometimes when I am putting together a film, I feel like I’m in the middle of a giant algebraic equation. So many decisions in filmmaking are affected by so many other decisions. If this happens, then that can happen; if this does not happen, then this other thing has to happen. IF it is sunny, we will shoot Scene 16 by the lake with all the actors and props required for that scene; IF it rains, THEN we will shoot the interior scene in the cabin living room. There are so many decisions that are interwoven into so many other decisions in filmmaking. This decision-making process requires the development and utilization of good logical thinking skills. It is like playing a game of chess and imagining the impact a move now will have, six moves in the future.

In the classroom the process of filmmaking requires students to imagine what they will need to make their movie. As they are asked to develop a strategy of planning, production and editing, they start assembling a logical series of events and resources to make it all come together. Regardless of whether this process is articulated on paper, or simply considered in their minds, that process will occur.

Planning Skills

Again, one of the invisible skills that ties the filmmaking process together and allows movies to be created is the critical skill of planning and time management. Estimating how long things will take and how they will get done is extremely important to the filmmaker. Because the cost of actors, equipment and resources is so expensive, a great deal of time is spent planning when and how those elements can best be used.

In fact, the Production Department is a whole team of people on a film crew that is dedicated to planning, organizing and scheduling. The team meets with the other departments well before filming begins and examines the details of each of the production elements that are, or might be, required. Once they have investigated what resources are required, they then create a plan for its realization.

A feature film is very rarely filmed in sequential order. This is because time, money and other resources can be better utilized if similar scenes are shot at the same time. Often these scenes are grouped by location, or by actors, or by equipment availability. A richly detailed tool called the Production Board and planning documents like the scene breakdowns (a dissection of each scene that lists what actors, sets, props and other key ingredients are required for each scene), location breakdowns (a list of where the filming will take place), cast day out of days (a list of when

the actors work each day) and other planning documents are used by the production team to detail the requirements of each of the scenes. In the next part of this book, we will look at them in more detail and see how they might be used in the classroom.

Filmmaking in the classroom allows students to explore their own planning and time management skills, both in terms of managing their own time and resources, as well as those of the whole group, for example their crew. The results of poor or good time management can be examined and used as another learning tool in this process.

If the students' attempt at scheduling did not meet their expectations, the feedback is immediate. This can lead into an exploration of what they would do differently on the next day of shooting or on the next project. If things took longer than they thought (a common occurrence in both professional and student filmmaking), how do we learn from that and change how we estimate and plan our time?

As with all the skills, it is, of course, intended that the students' understanding and abilities transcend video production and become useful across their whole learning and living experience. Since planning is a critical component of filmmaking and also a critical life skill, the experiences students learn in time management and planning will benefit them for all their lives.

Analytical Skills

Another skill which is invisible to the movie audience, but which is essential to the filmmaker, is the ability to critically analyze information. As a director, when I am standing on a film set, my role is to take in all the information about the scene that I have researched, or experimented with, and all the new information that I am receiving from the actors, the crew or the location, and analyze it against my vision for that particular scene. It is about looking at all the information and deciding what should be included and what should be left out. It is about 'filtering' information on your feet.

Later, during the editing process, I will look at multiple takes of the same shots, and multiple shots of the same scene, and decide, after I look at all of this information, which film footage best illustrates what I am trying to communicate and what I want to explore. As long as we continue to be overloaded with information and continual decision making, the development of analytical processes will be an important survival skill for students.

Although there is a lot of information on the Internet, in libraries, in books, in magazines and in conversation with the people all around us, it is best turned into knowledge by students when it is gathered, analyzed, and represented in accordance with their points of view. Because students must analyze information in order to produce their individual videos, we create opportunities to exercise this critical skill.



“I feel, a lot of times, like I’m a football player and the football is the movie. And on that field, with all those people running interference to me—studio executives, managers, agents, publicists, critics, journalists—I’m just trying to get the ball past the goal line and into the stands to the audience. Sometimes it’s very pleasant, sometimes it’s an obstacle course.”
Joel Schumacher