

HOW TO ORGANIZE A FILM AS LITERATURE CLASS

Michael Vetrie

If a school has the flexibility of arranging block time, the best schedule for presenting the film class is to block an entire day of four to five hours. This permits time for presenting previewing activities such as the KWL or previewing prompts, time to view the film with only minor breaks every hour, and time to hold a complete and thorough discussion of the film (very important).

FRIDAY, A DAY OF FILM

My school has a small staff and specializes in at-risk students. We have the kind of flexibility that many large schools lack. Our staff has chosen Fridays for scheduling the film class. In the past, this was a problem day because many students would be absent on Fridays to get a head start on the weekend parties. Our attendance would fall as low as 30 to 40 per cent of normal. After initiating the film class to run all day long on Fridays, it became our best-attended day.

THE FIVE-DAY SCHEDULE

If it is not possible to implement an all-day Friday schedule or the decision is made not to do so, here is a technique for presenting the film using a schedule based upon five, one-hour periods. These periods may occur on one or several days or even stretched out over five days. If the viewing must happen over several days, there are advantages even in light of one major disadvantage: students (especially at-risk) may not attend all the days of the viewing of the film. Then there is the problem of students who have not viewed the entire film attempting to analyze very difficult writing and discussion prompts.

THE FIRST HOUR (NON-VIEWING)

Regardless of whether the class is scheduled for one day or over five days, previewing activities should take place during the first hour. This is the phase of the *connecting into*. This is the time in

the teaching schedule that the instructor attempts to tap into the *schemata* and prepare the students for the literature (film) that follows.

GRAPHIC ORGANIZERS

I have included three examples of graphic organizers that work well with tapping into the *schemata* activities: the KWL, the Anticipation Guide, and the Concept Questioning, which is Janet Allen's Word Questioning graphic organizer adapted from the simple word to the concept. (Allen)

THE KWL

K	W	L
What I know <i>Brainstorm with your class and chart their responses on the subject related to the viewing.</i>	What I want to know <i>Chart any questions the class has about the subject.</i>	What I Learned <i>Have the student complete this section either before or after the viewing.</i>

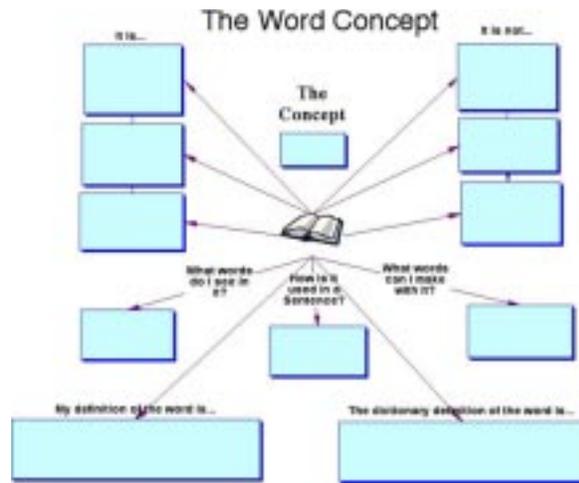
The K part of the KWL represents what the students know about the issue. For example, if the film *Platoon* is the featured film, the instructor might begin previewing activities with a KWL on the Viet Nam war. Using large chart paper or a white board, the instructor could label three columns

with a K, a W and an L. In the first column, the students brainstorm everything that they *know* about Viet Nam. The teacher should serve as facilitator, but not hesitate to correct anything that is not factual during the brainstorming. After the students have explored what they know about the subject (guided into areas related to the film), the instructor should move into the W phase of the organizer, *what* the students want to know. Here any questions that the students might have that were not answered by the K phase can be charted. The L phase, or what the students have *learned*, can be charted either before the viewing of the film or afterward. I prefer to use that part of the organizer as the final project for the day. It is also possible to have the KWL as a part of the film study guide for the students to complete individually, but I like to conduct this part of the *connecting into* as a charting exercise as outlined above. Sometimes I have the students break into small groups to work cooperatively and then report out.

THE CONCEPT QUESTIONING

This organizer works very well when one particular concept can be applied to a film in some way. For example, before showing *To Kill A*

Mockingbird, the concept, *prejudice*, might be taken and broken down into a whole group discussion with the teacher charting while the students discuss the concept according to dictates of the graphic organizer. (See the included example.) The concept questioning organizer looks at a particular concept from every approach and angle and therefore is very effective for understanding complex or difficult concepts. Also, as in the KWL, cooperative groups who discuss and report out their results can use this device.



other graphic organizers that can be used in the *connecting into* phase. Almost any organizer used for literature can be adapted for the film.

THE PREVIEWING PROMPT

It is at this point (the opening, or first hour) that any previewing writing prompts may be introduced. Previewing writing prompts should be associated with the theme of the film to be shown. For example, before showing *The Bronx Tale*, the students might be asked to identify what role peer pressure plays in their lives. How influenced are they by the attitudes and customs of their friends? Have they done anything they regretted under the pressure of their friends? This, of course, leads into the theme of growing up in a working class Italian neighborhood and the decisions that a young man has to face on his journey to manhood.

THE ANTICIPATION GUIDE

With this guide, the students' attitude about the theme of the film is charted and then charted

again after viewing the film to see if there has been any movement in attitude. It is a very effective device if the film has impacted on the students and a true movement has occurred. A discussion about why such movement has taken place can be initiated.

I have only mentioned three, but there are many

THE DOUBLE ENTRY LOG

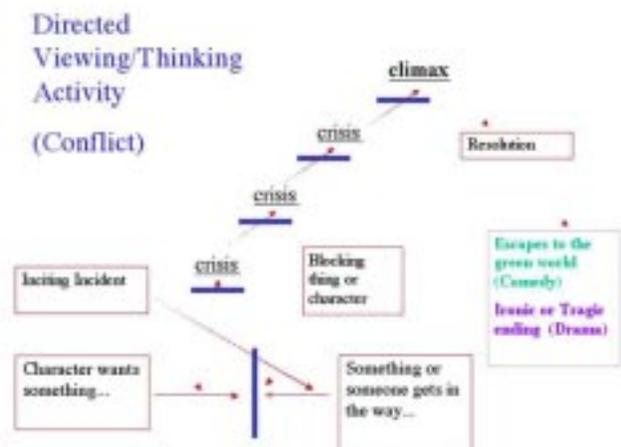
Just before starting the film, I once again emphasize the importance of the double entry log or journal that is included in almost every film study guide that I prepare. On the left hand side of the log, the

students are asked to note the scenes in the film that have an impact on them (either favorably or unfavorably); in the right hand column, they are asked to react to the scenes they have noted in the left hand column. The double entry log or journal is an important part of each student's evaluation of the film being shown. They are reminded that they can note the scenes during the showing of the film and wait until the end of the

film to record their reaction.

THE SECOND HOUR (BEGINS THE VIEWING)

After using the first hour to prepare the students for the film (the *connecting into*), the instructor should attempt during this second hour to show the first third of the film. When at all possible, time the film so that the break in the second and third hours occur at critical moments in the film, called the “crisis points”. (See the accompanying graphic.) These are the times in a drama when a character in conflict has to make a decision. These are turning points in the flow of the drama and good places to pause and ask for predictions as to what the character might or might not do. Obviously, asking for predictions will only be effective if the students have not seen the film.



THE POWER OF PREDICTING

Predicting is a powerful tool to be used in reading or in viewing films or in any kind of presentation of a narrative where a story is being told. By asking students to make predictions about the outcome of a story, they are asked to “buy into” or take a risk that their judgments are correct. Predicting adds an additional level of engagement to the film. When students make predictions, they hypothesize what the film will be about. To do this, they must activate relevant background knowledge (*schemata*) that they possess. The students then have a purpose to increase their engagement in the film, either to confirm or disprove their hypotheses. Also, they can link the new knowledge to what they already

know because they have already activated and made current their *schemata*. This strategy increases the students’ awareness of attempts by the director of the film to foreshadow or plant plot points for surprises or unusual twists in the story. It also alerts the students to crises or turning points in the plot where characters must make important decisions.

If the film is one that is well known to the students, such as *Silence of the Lamb* or *Goodfellas* (both favorites with my students), instead of asking a predicting question, the students might be asked to reflect on or interpret certain behaviors of the characters. Giving the students something to consider between the different hours of the film viewing is important. If the break between viewing the different sections of the film stretches over night, as in the five day schedule, the question asked could be a writing prompt that is more involved than a prompt for the students to consider over a ten to fifteen minute break.

THE THIRD HOUR

The third hour actually begins the second hour of viewing the film with a discussion of the question or writing prompt assigned at the first break. Keep the discussion brief because the students wish to get back into the film. (How long a discussion is held, of course, depends on the length of the break.) But remember, this is a good time for guiding the students in building or connecting to their schemata. Answer any questions they might have and mention points in the film that might help them understand and better appreciate the film.

For example, it is very important in *The Truman Show* to point out and define Truman’s normal world and the parts of it that have begun to unravel (the dropping of the light, for example—what does this mean?). Point out the role of the TV viewers in the film. You might equate the role of the viewers to the Greek chorus of Greek drama. Answer any questions they might have about the film. Just before the break, give the students something to predict or think about over the next break.

THE FOURTH HOUR

Begin with short discussion or answer, but keep it short for the film is probably nearing the

climax and the students will wish to get back to it. At the end of the viewing of the film and before beginning the final discussion, I ask students to write their immediate response to the film before speaking with anyone about it. This is to create a climate so that everyone can react to the film without the influence of peer pressure (of course, some is inevitable). I then “go around the circle” and have everyone speak on their reaction to the film and how they rate it.

BEGINNING THE DISCUSSION

The questions I include in my study guides are demanding and challenging. I have taught for many years in different colleges and universities and would not hesitate to ask these questions of my college students. The complexities of the questions require the instructor to go over each one with the students before turning them loose to answer. If the students simply view the film and the instructor hands the questions over to the students to work on individually, then the complex study guides I prepare should not be used. The instructor will have to work much harder from the confusion of the students than if the questions had been discussed thoroughly from the beginning. They at least must be allowed to work in small cooperative learning groups. The discussion aspect of the study guides is the bridge from the student’s *schemata* to the writing prompts. It helps students formulate their ideas, gain confidence, forge and temper their reactions and prepare themselves to put their ideas to paper.

NO ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

I do not provide answers to the questions on my study guides because I believe that the most important aspect of questioning students about literature is to elicit their responses (make meaning), and later, to have them put their responses (or meaning) on paper. It is hoped that without my formulating answers to questions, the students and I undertake a journey of mutual discovery from our group discussions and arrive at a conclusion I may or may not have anticipated. Many times I have been pleasantly surprised by an answer.

ENGAGING FILMS

The following films appear to engage my students more than others:

Amistad
American Beauty
American History X
Antwone Fisher
A Bronx Tale
Braveheart
Cider House Rules
El Norte
Erin Brockovich
Godfather Trilogy
Goodfellas
Forest Gump
Glory
L.A. Confidential
Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of
the Rings
mi familia
Mississippi Burning
Murder in the First
Platoon
Saving Private Ryan
Scarface
Shawshank Redemption
Silence of the Lambs
The Matrix
A Time to Kill
Toystory
Traffic

Although these films usually stand alone with little or no connecting into preparation, other films can be used with the proper preparation.

AN EXAMPLE OF A STUDY GUIDE

For an example of a typical study guide, please see the accompanying pdf file which I have included of the study guide for *Amistad*.

Sources Cited:

Allen, Janet. *It's Never Too Late: Leading Adolescents to Lifelong Literacy*. New York: Heinemann, 1995.

