
**Categories:** active learning, visual learning, movies, simulations, political science, international relations

**Summary**

This article examines the use of movies as a learning tool in International Relations courses. In their introduction, the authors note that movies have been used for a long time in political science and international relations classes. They also recognize the potential that movies offer as a learning tool, as they often effectively illustrate concepts that are “normally abstract and distant for the students.” Unfortunately, contend the authors, movies in the classroom are typically employed in highly passive fashion, and therefore fail to maximize the opportunity for learning that they represent. In order to avoid this pitfall, the authors suggest that instructors draw upon the lessons provided by the use of simulations in political science courses, in order to utilize movies in a more active learning fashion.

In order to exemplify the use of movies as an active learning tool, the authors utilize a case study involving the Rwandan massacre. This particular topic offers an excellent content area for developing a more active role for movies in the classroom, as it highlights several key concepts taught in international relations courses and has the added benefit of having had several movies made about it. These film choices include both documentaries and dramatic films, including those chosen by the authors: *Ghosts of Rwanda* and *Hotel Rwanda*.

According to the authors, the key to maximize the benefits from the use of movies is to ensure that teachers take advantage of the possible learning opportunities before the movie, while it is being shown, after it is over. Prior to showing a movie, professors can do several things to make sure that the movie is not presented in a passive learning context. The first consideration is to take stock of the syllabus and show the movie at an appropriate point in time during the semester. Second, professors can galvanize active learning by teaching a lesson on the key concepts illustrated in the film, just prior to its showing. This effort to build students background knowledge and information base on the subject/concept base can be further bolstered by assigning relevant primary or secondary source readings before the screening of the movie.

Professors can also undertake several measures to ensure that students engage in active learning while movies are shown. One useful step is to provide students with a handout that lists discussion questions prior to beginning the movie and instruct students to take notes during the showing. The authors also suggest stopping the film at critical moments to offer insight or to ask students questions. Both of these recommendations are intended to ensure that students neither zone-out nor fall into a purely passive form of learning.

The conclusion of the movie offers, according to the authors, a final opportunity to engage the students in active learning. One simple method of doing so, time permitting, is to engage in a discussion focused on the questions provided to the students at the start of the class. Given the context of the authors’ case study, they also suggested that the movie could form the basis of simulation exercise; in this case
they offer the example of creating an International Court tribunal to try cases of genocide. Finally, professors could take advantage of one last learning opportunity by assigning students a critical thinking exercise that draws connections between the movie and key course concepts.

Conclusions

According to the authors, movies offer an excellent opportunity to utilize visual sources to stimulate learning. To do so in an effective and active manner, however, several steps must be taken by teachers. In particular, instructors who choose to use movies must work to ensure that the film is appropriate, that it is employed at a relevant point in the course, and that the event itself is developed in a manner that will promote active learning. By using movies in a way that engages students in active learning before the movie, during it, and after its conclusion, instructors maximize the benefit of the medium.

Applications

This article is fairly strongly grounded in the specific context of teaching in an international relations/political science course. Both the discussion of the case study involved and the application of principles derived from simulation techniques are focused heavily on the aforementioned fields. In this sense, the article certainly offers considerable opportunities for adaptation and usage within those content areas. In a broader sense though, this article offers some useful suggestions for any course in which movies may form a viable teaching tool. In particular, this article is helpful in laying out a basic/general approach for employing films in a manner that facilitates active learning. By stressing the need to develop a lesson plan that engages learning opportunities before, during, and after the showing of the film, the article also presents an approach to movie usage that maximizes its benefit to the students and the course itself. What is, perhaps, missing here is discussion or detail of any particularly innovative techniques. Ultimately then, this article offers more in the way of providing an overarching structure for effective use of movies in the college classroom than it does in terms of creative strategies for promoting student learning through film.

Citations of Interest


