

Using Films to Teach Counseling Psychology in a Media-Drenched Culture

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Abstract

Most studies of the use of feature films in psychology classrooms focus on undergraduates and on aspects of psychology that are unrelated to counseling. However, the study reported here explores the way graduate students in counseling psychology responded to feature films that were integrated into three courses during an eight-week summer term. Results showed that almost all participants demonstrated highly favorable or favorable attitudes toward the use of films for teaching and learning counseling psychology. Most students believed that feature films enhanced their classes and improved conceptual understanding and discussion. Additionally, written comments by students indicated that the use of films influenced the way they viewed future clients and helped them understand professional issues and case assignments more deeply.

Video images are omnipresent in our media-drenched society. Feature films are instantly available on Youtube, on DVDs, and at local movie theaters. Because of the importance of feature films in society at large, students have come to expect their curricula at universities and in graduate schools to refer to such films, and some innovative teachers of psychology have incorporated feature films into their courses (see, e.g., Christopher, Walter, Marek, & Koenig, 2004; Roskos-Ewoldsen & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2001; Simpson, 2008).

Almost all articles on the use of feature films for teaching psychology have centered on undergraduate psychology courses, as will be shown in the literature review. There is a serious gap in research on the employment of feature films in graduate courses in psychology. Our study bridges the gap, providing evaluative data on the impact of feature films on students in three graduate courses in counseling psychology, a field that has been largely ignored in discussions of using films to teach psychology. At the same time, the ideas presented in the current article are useful for teaching undergraduate psychology as well.

Another contribution of this article is to show highly divergent ways to use feature films for teaching psychology. The three courses highlighted in the current study used well-chosen films to reflect particular themes and stimulate students' understanding and discussion, but we used films in different ways across the three courses. In addition, the number of films used in each of the three courses differed. These points make this article important for teachers who are interested in potentially increasing the presence of the media in their psychology courses.

The following questions are addressed in the current study:

1. In three graduate courses, what diverse ways were employed to use feature films to teach counseling psychology?
2. Which themes were tapped by the feature films as used in these courses?
3. What did the students think of the effectiveness of using feature films in these courses?
4. What additional suggestions or comments did students have for improving the use of film in these courses?

The next section presents the literature review. Other sections include (a) methods, (b) results, and (c) discussion and implications.

Literature Review

Most of the articles reviewed were centered on the teaching of social psychology concepts at the undergraduate level. For instance, Roskos-Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2001) showed short clips of feature films, such as “Babe,” “Princess Bride,” “Monty Python and the Holy Grail,” “Field of Dreams,” “Tin Men,” “The Wizard of Oz,” and “Who Framed Roger Rabbit?,” in class as an addition to lectures on social psychology. They began most of their classes with a short (two- to six-minute) video clip after briefing the class on the key characters and a scene synopsis. After the video clip, questions and discussion of the clip helped to highlight the key concepts, such as causes of behavior, schemas and interpretation, heuristic decision making, person perception, attribution theory, persuasion, stereotyping, and obedience. Results based on student perceptions showed that video clips heightened understanding and application of the concepts, enhanced learning, and made the class more enjoyable but did not appreciably increase attendance.

In a social psychology study using a quasi-experimental design, Lakin and Wichman (2005) explored the short-term and long-term effectiveness of an assignment involving multiple media, such as articles, cartoons, advertisements, television shows, and movie clips. Participants were 126 students from six sections of a social psychology course. Three sections served as the target group and three as the control group. The target assignment consisted of finding out-of-class examples of social psychology concepts in a range of media and explaining in a paper how and why the concepts were displayed. After completing the control or the target assignment, students rated the ease of the task and concept application. Nine months later they were asked about the ease of concept application. Compared to the control group, students who completed the target assignment found that it was easier to apply social psychology concepts to the real world, and a follow-up nine months later showed that these results were maintained. Students in the target group valued social psychology more and believed they learned more.

Another social psychology study, by Simpson (2008), used a quasi-experimental design to assess the effectiveness of using clips from two documentary films – Riefenstahl’s “Triumph of the Will” and Moore’s “Fahrenheit 9/11” – to teach persuasion and propaganda. Students in Simpson’s study read the textbook and other materials and participated in initial 80-minute discussion of persuasion. Three subsequent class sessions offered lectures and, as the target for the target group, integrated brief clips the two films. The teacher led a debriefing with a direct explanation of persuasion concepts, and student-led small group discussions identified the persuasion techniques in the video clips. The group that saw the film clips scored significantly higher on a persuasion-focused test than did the control group. Students who saw the film clips believed that this teaching technique (a) provided a balanced approach to alternative perspectives and (b) allowed academic freedom to dissent.

Social psychology was also the basis of a study by Christopher, Walter, Marek, and Koenig (2004), who examined the effectiveness of using the film “The Breakfast Club” to increase students’ understanding of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination. This film illustrated the contact hypothesis, which included criteria for dissolving stereotyping and prejudice. According to the contact hypothesis, out-group members must possess traits that go against a stereotype, norms and authorities must support contact between in-group and out-group members, members of the two groups must of equal status, and contact should involve personal interaction and a common goal. Students read textbook information about discrimination, prejudice and stereotyping. The teacher showed the film, and students then rated the effectiveness of the film in teaching concepts related to stereotyping and prejudice. Results indicated that the film offered greater understanding of the concepts, made understanding easier than the textbook alone could do, and was a good supplement to lecturing.

The same film, "The Breakfast Club," was used by Desforjes (1994) to teach developmental psychology. Before the film was viewed, the main characters were listed, and the general plot was described. Students were told to identify the characters' developmental stages in relation to each of three theories by Kohlberg, Erikson, and Marcia and to take notes about specific, theory-related behaviors and developmental shifts seen in the film. Students then enthusiastically discussed their findings in small groups and the large group. The end-of-course evaluation showed that the exercise was very enjoyable and important to students' understanding of the developmental theories.

Davidson (1990) asked students to select film scenes displaying certain aggression instigators, such as insult, attack, bad intentions, unexpected interruption of progress, thwarting of a proximal goal, illegitimate or arbitrary blocking of progress, relative deprivation, aggressive cues or models, deindividuation, dehumanization, and environmental factors. In a contest, each voluntarily participating student selected and showed a short film scene to classmates, who identified the aggression instigators in the scene. The student who showed the most instigator-rich scene and the student who best judged the instigators received grade incentives. As a result, case studies submitted by the students revealed better sections on aggression, thus fulfilling the main goal. A secondary goal, i.e., better understanding and identifying causes of other social behaviors, was indirectly fulfilled but only for certain students.

Hemenover, Caster, and Mizumoto (1999) employed a six-stage progressive writing technique focused on popular movies to teach introductory psychology. The authors speculated that progressive writing could diminish the restrictive content choice and high ambiguity that often plague writing assignments. They also hoped that popular films would improve various students' discussion, enthusiasm, enjoyment, self-reported learning, and critical thinking. Participants included 173 introductory psychology students, who were asked to select their own paper topics and related films. Examples of films included "Sybil" to reflect dissociative identity disorder, "Falling Down" to illustrate stress, "Regarding Henry" to show amnesia, and "What's Eating Gilbert Grape?" to represent mental retardation. The writing process involved six stages: topic choice, summary of relevant textbook material, viewing of the whole film outside of class, summary of relevant film aspects, outline of the paper, and writing of the paper. Results showed that students believed that progressive writing with teacher feedback at each stage resulted in a high-quality paper and that they liked choosing their own topics. However, the students did not agree that they were more motivated to complete the assignment than paper-writing assignments in previous courses. The researchers concluded with suggestions for teachers: spreading the writing assignment across the semester, allowing students to complete the assignment in pairs, and ensuring that instructors have viewed the films before grading film-related papers.

Images of madness were the theme of a study by Fleming, Piedmont, and Hiam (1999), who described an interdisciplinary course using feature films. After reading relevant materials and listening to diagnosis-related lectures, students were asked to view and discuss films related to psychopathological problems. Altered media perceptions of madness were investigated by viewing pairs of feature films, which were separated by at least 20 years, concerning the same psychiatric motif. A few examples of pairings were "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" and "The Exorcist" as examples of possession, "The Snake Pit" and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" as reflections of institutionalization, and "Rope" and "The Invasion of the Body Snatchers" as illustrations of paranoia. Student discussions concerned the films' emotional impact, visual and auditory stimuli in films, and links among readings, lectures, and films, which touched on social and economic forces influencing diagnoses and highlighted "nature vs. nurture" issues. Thirty-five students from communications, psychology, and liberal arts completed a 10-item questionnaire. Results showed that the films promoted discussion and portrayed very accurate descriptions of PTSD, substance abuse, antisocial behaviors, and depressive disorders but not of eating disorders and sexual disorders. Students believed that the general public's understanding was shaped by film images of mental problems but that psychiatrists and informed students were less likely to be influenced by these images. Students evaluated the course as relevant, clear, and useful.

Connor's (1996) study involved 39 students, almost all psychology majors, who were taking an introductory cognitive psychology course. Each pair of students selected a film to illustrate a topic in cognitive psychology that had not been touched on in classroom lectures. Students also wrote a short paper that examined the chosen topic, described the selected film, and highlighted relevant film scenes. Examples of films were "Lawnmower Man" to show memory storage and retrieval, "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" to reflect syllogistic reasoning, "Rain Man" to exemplify an autistic savant, and "Total Recall" to illustrate neural networks and artificial intelligence.

The final course evaluation revealed that almost nine out of ten students were pleased with the film activity. Students found the activity to be highly enjoyable, helpful, and not too difficult. Open-ended comments revealed that students found the activity to be beneficial in helping them define parameters of cognition, make connections, and apply cognitive concepts to the real world. The cooperative nature of the activity increased student interest, participation, and knowledge of cognitive processes.

Paddock, Terranova, and Giles (2001) explored the effectiveness of teaching personality theories via film using structural analysis of social behavior (SASB), which identifies interpersonal and intra-psychic interactions in terms of three dimensions: (a) focus (other, self, introject), (b) affiliation-hostility (love-hate), and (c) interdependence-independence (enmeshment-differentiation). Ninety students in introductory psychology classes listened to a lecture on relationship messages and watched a scene from the film "Independence Day" in which a husband abused his wife. To demonstrate how the superego manages unacceptable sexual impulses, students viewed scenes from the film "Risky Business." Students saw video clips from "Ordinary People" to understand humanistic concepts. In each case students used SASB to help them analyze what they viewed. For future classes students recommended the use of SASB, which encouraged them to gather data as participant-observers, heightened their awareness of their own communication styles, and enabled them to think more precisely about social reinforcements that influence interaction patterns. Students found the film clips interesting, entertaining, relevant, and helpful.

In summary, students in all of these studies expressed their belief that viewing films was useful for learning, analyzing, and/or applying psychological concepts. Watching videos or video clips was typically rated to be a highly valued, engaging activity. Most of the investigations used students' reactions as a key criterion of effectiveness, but some also employed performance measures, such as tests, papers, and course grades. Two of the studies used quasi-experimental designs. All of the reviewed studies focused on the use of films for teaching psychology, but none employed video for teaching counseling psychology. We now turn to the methodology of the current study.

Methodology

This investigation was a single overall study with three parts. The study occurred during an eight-week intensive summer term at a historically black university in the southeastern U.S. Each part of the study concerned a different graduate counseling psychology course. The three courses were Professional Orientation and Issues (N=14), Group Dynamics (N=5), and Practicum in Counseling Psychology (N=5 students). One instructor taught the first course, and a second instructor taught the second and third courses. All three courses integrated feature films as an instructional technique to enhance learning. The three courses encouraged students to view, assess, and discuss feature films as part of their learning experience. At the end of each course, each instructor administered an evaluation to assess students' perceptions of the effectiveness of the use of films in the course. Students were asked to indicate their degree of agreement (4 = strongly agree, 3 = agree, 2 = disagree, 1 = strongly disagree) with the following statements:

1. The use of video(s) as a teaching technique for this course was enjoyable.
2. The video(s) enhanced my understanding of the concepts.
3. The video(s) stimulated classroom discussion.
4. I would recommend the use of video(s) for future use in this course.
5. I am satisfied with this course overall.

The students were also invited to provide additional written comments about the film experience and offer suggestions for improving the use of videos as a teaching tool.

Methods for Part 1 of the Study: Professional Orientation and Issues Course

This course employed feature films highlighting major ethical and legal issues raised in the course. "Good Will Hunting" revealed the personal grief and courage of a psychiatrist treating an initially recalcitrant young man. In "Shrink," a burned-out therapist renewed himself personally and professionally. "Girl, Interrupted" and "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" helped students consider gender, ethnicity, age, and group influence, and the latter film pointedly displayed brutality resulting from ignoring clients' rights. The therapist's actions in "Sybil" raised issues about when to break confidentiality and how to deal with client-therapist boundaries. Both "Prince of Tides" and "Antwone Fisher" showed unethical boundary-crossings but ultimately positive therapeutic outcomes. "David and Lisa" portrayed the exceptional competence and humanity of the head psychiatrist.

The film “Nell” exhibited the shifting roles of a supervisor, a consultant, and a medical doctor, who blurred their personal and professional boundaries to treat a young woman who had been raised in an isolated cabin. “Ordinary People” revealed ethical and therapeutic issues in treating a boy whose older brother had been drowned and whose parents were filled with conflicts. In “Freedom Writers,” a high school teacher passionately took on the unofficial role of a community mental health worker. Each student (or in some cases, pair) was assigned to watch one of the above films outside of class, write a three-page paper applying the film to course concepts, and formally present and discuss relevant film scenes in class.

Methods for Part 2 of the Study: Group Dynamics Course

The Group Dynamics class, consisting of five students, met for six hours per week (twice a week for three hours each) for eight weeks. The students were assigned two feature films to view: “Remember the Titans” and the second version of “Twelve Angry Men.” These films were chosen because they center on group dynamics. The first concerns a football team, and the second shows a jury discussing a conflicted court case. Students were divided into groups of two or three and were given critical debriefing questions, 20 for the first film and 13 for the second film. To answer the questions, students relied on knowledge gained from the textbook, lectures, previous courses, and professional journals. They then formally presented their responses to the questions.

Methods for Part 3 of the Study: Practicum Course

The third course, Practicum in Counseling Psychology, met once per week for three hours for eight weeks, with additional work at practicum sites. As therapists-in-training, the five enrolled students were required to conduct 100 hours of on-site counseling work at local agencies, so the majority of the practicum coursework thus occurred outside of the classroom. Practicum students were assigned to watch the film “Antwone Fisher” at home. This film concerns an anger-prone African American sailor who is treated and ultimately befriended by a skilled African American psychiatrist, who struggles with his own personal problems. Practicum students were placed into groups of two or three and were given a 20-item list of critical debriefing questions to answer in a formal presentation. The questions allowed students to analyze the film through the eyes of a therapist and challenged them to integrate the knowledge they had obtained through previous counseling psychology courses, current on-the-job practicum training, and professional journals.

Results

The results are presented below for each part of the study.

Results for Part 1 of the Study: Professional Orientation and Issues Course

Table 1. Quantitative Results for Film Use in the Professional Orientation and Issues Course, N=14

Criterion	Results on a Four-Point Likert Scale
Enjoyment	3.86
Enhancement of conceptual understanding	3.71
Stimulation of classroom discussion	3.79
Recommendation of future use	3.86
Satisfaction with the course	3.86

As Table 1 reveals, the 14 students in the Professional Orientation and Issues course felt strongly that the use of films was enjoyable, enhanced conceptual understanding, stimulated discussion, and should be recommended for the course in the future. The students evinced strong satisfaction with the course. These results were similar to those in Part 2 (the Group Dynamics course). For the Professional Orientation and Issues course, students provided many written comments, often referring to specific films:

- “I felt that all films had something to offer, although some of the therapists’ methods were unorthodox. All in all it was a good learning practice.”
- “Unique way of stimulating classroom discussion. Great movie selections. I especially found ‘Antwone Fisher’ relevant because of dual relationships, confidentiality. ‘Nell’: showed supervision issues, informed consent, privacy. ‘Sybil’: confidentiality, duty to warn when confidentiality can be breached. ‘Ordinary People’: rapport, open-ended questions, managing silence.”
- “‘Sybil’, ‘Nell’, ‘Good Will Hunting’ were the most relevant.”

- “[I preferred] ‘Good Will Hunting’ and ‘Antwone Fisher’ because of the ethical concepts experienced between the counselor and client in each film. ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ because of the concepts of nonmalificence/beneficence, disclosure of diagnosis, and timeline for a client to ‘get well.’”
- “All of the films pretty much gave us a chance to look at examples of what might happen while you’re out practicing and what may not be the best approach or what could be a good approach.”
- All of the movies were wonderful, but ‘Good Will Hunting’ was remarkable and blended well with the chapter.”
- “The videos promote dialogue appropriate to the topics at hand. Also, they are a great warm-up to use at the beginning of class. Good job!”
- “All of the videos are relevant to the chapters in the book.”
- “‘Antwone Fisher’ was a good film that analyzed the client-therapist relationship. ‘David and Lisa’ analyzes multiculturalism and the competence of the therapist.”
- “Most relevant to me were ‘Antwone Fisher’ and ‘Nell’.”
- “The video about Nell was relevant to our course because it shows how privacy was violated by the two doctors.”
- “ ‘Nell’, ‘Antwone Fisher’, and ‘One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest’ all exhibited counseling techniques and revealed ethical issues and multicultural aspects of life. Each film allowed me to see an example of what we have read in the book. I really enjoyed the class.”
- “I think the use of videos is very good for the students that are visual learners. I myself learn better by watching or having visual aids. So thanks!!! for incorporating it. All of the videos showed/gave a very good description of actual therapy sessions with different techniques/issues that were important to the course.”

Two students gave specific written suggestions. The first stated, “Maybe provide some class time to watch whole movies. It would be nice to have Mondays dedicated to watching a movie and discussion immediately thereafter.” Another remarked about the need for him or her to be familiar with the computer system before making a presentation involving film clips.

The evaluation was given before students had the opportunity to view “Freedom Writers.” After watching that film, several students orally commented that “Freedom Writers” was important because it showed how a highly motivated helper can inspire others, lead groups, and transform a community. The film also, students noted, revealed that professionalism, if not balanced by rest and support, can harm the helper’s own personal life.

Results for Part 2 of the Study: Group Dynamics Course

Table 2. Quantitative Results for Film Use in the Group Dynamics Course, N=5

Criterion	Results on a Four-Point Likert Scale
Enjoyment	3.80
Enhancement of conceptual understanding	4.00
Stimulation of classroom discussion	4.00
Recommendation of future use	3.60
Satisfaction with the course	4.00

Table 2 indicates that students in the Group Dynamics course were highly positive about the use of films. They strongly felt that film use was enjoyable, enhanced conceptual understanding, stimulated discussion, and should be recommended for the course in the future. They also showed strong satisfaction with the course.

One of the students conceded that “‘12 Angry Men’ might be hard to watch for some people who have a hard time paying attention and sitting still” but also stated that films helped teach “how to conduct a group.” Based largely on the film experience, another student wrote, “I have learned a lot in this class. Really enjoyed group dynamics!!!” Still another student wrote that though he or she appreciated the use of feature films, it might be possible to show more current ones.

Results for Part 3 of the Study: Practicum Course

Table 3. Quantitative Results for Film Use in the Practicum Course, N=5

Criterion	Results on a Four-Point Likert Scale
Enjoyment	3.20
Enhancement of conceptual understanding	3.40
Stimulation of classroom discussion	3.20
Recommendation of future use	3.20
Satisfaction with the course	3.40

As Table 3 shows, students in the Practicum course found the use of film moderately enjoyable, felt that it moderately enhanced learning and stimulated classroom discussion, and moderately recommended the future use of films in this course. They were generally satisfied with the course.

Let us look at the data more closely. Most students responded very positively to the use of film, but the group means were affected by the responses of one student who was highly negative about the film experience. This student disagreed with every aspect of film use and with course satisfaction and wrote the following comment: *“All students should have respect for other students’ viewpoints when deliberating or discussing the video.”* The comment implies that this student felt his or her viewpoint was not accepted by other students, leading to this student’s discomfort with the use of film as part of classroom instruction.

In contrast, other students wrote comments that were very supportive of the use of film in the Practicum:

- *“Videos are very good, they lend to the interactive atmosphere of the overall class.”*
- *“The utilization of videos in this course is very helpful because they give a visual picture on the role of a counselor, ethical considerations, counseling techniques, etc. In reference to the movie ‘Antwone Fisher,’ observing Major Davenport really helped me to know what not to do ethically and it also helped me to understand ways to deal with a client who is not initially talkative and [who is] unwilling to receive therapy. As a future counselor, this video was very beneficial.”*

Discussion and Implications

Except for the single negative student in the Practicum class, all other participants demonstrated highly favorable or favorable attitudes toward the use of films for teaching counseling psychology. Most students believed that the use of feature films enhanced their classes and improved conceptual understanding and discussion. Comments by students indicated that the use of films influenced their thinking about professional issues and case assignments. More studies like this one should be done with graduate students in counseling psychology and other areas of psychology. Moreover, larger-scale studies should be conducted with graduate students.

Although the current study was not quasi-experimental, we see value in that research mode. A future quasi-experimental study might formally contrast two or more ways to employ feature films for psychology instruction, along with a non-film-exposed control, though this would require a sufficient number of students and excellent planning. Prior quasi-experiments using films for teaching psychology have compared a single treatment with a control.

Additionally, it might be useful to allow students, with the approval of their professor, to choose the films they view for classes. For some students, having the opportunity to make a film selection might increase still further the enthusiasm for the activity. In the Professional Orientation and Issues course, students showed satisfaction in selecting the film scenes to show in their class presentations.

As noted earlier, individual students made instructional recommendations such as the following: (a) Allow students to see all films in their entirety if logistically possible, and ensure that all students know how to use film-presenting equipment (Professional Orientation and Issues). (b) Consider up-to-date films (Group Dynamics). (c) Encourage acceptance of divergent viewpoints during group film discussions (Practicum). At least some of these suggestions might be meaningful for the use of feature films in future psychology courses.

The use of films can be labor-intensive for students and instructors, so the amount of time needed outside of class and in class must be carefully judged. Nevertheless, most students in the current study were very enthusiastic, and none mentioned workload as a factor in written, open-ended responses.

The study provided new evidence that using films in psychology courses – and specifically in counseling psychology – can be a stimulating and rewarding experience. As a result of this study, we contend that the use of feature films in teaching psychology can be a very effective springboard to student involvement with issues they might not otherwise think about or that might not be explicitly mentioned in textbooks. This applies to graduate students and undergraduate students alike.

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