

## A Good Film for Education



What is a good film for education? Opinions are many and varied. The definition of what an education film is has markedly changed over the years, including how it is viewed in different countries and in different educational environments and traditions. This article will focus on our thought process at the Danish Film Institute in selecting good films for educational use.

For many years, educational film was its own separate genre in Denmark and around the world. It was a subgenre of documentaries produced specifically for educational use. The films were generally based on school subjects and curricula and often featuring a voiceover explaining key factors and conditions. However, educational film or film for classroom as a separate genre has slowly faded away in Denmark. Indeed, the trend in contemporary documentaries has been moving in the opposite direction. Towards films that are observational and descriptive rather than didactic, and films that leave the conclusions up to the viewer. Films that allow for engagement rather than explaining the general context.

Educators' views of learning materials have evolved as well, including what constitutes a good classroom film. In today's educational thinking, learning materials do not have to be particularly didactic. On the contrary, it often contributes to a more open and flexible learning process if the pedagogical planning is not built into the learning material itself. From a teaching perspective, a good classroom film does not have to be didactic. It should not seek to replace the teacher. Indeed, a film generally has wider educational application if it does not.

How, then, do we define a good film for education today?

### **A good film!**

A good film for the classroom is above all a good film. A good classroom film should use the possibilities of the medium to provide an engaging film experience. Basic filmic qualities are paramount. If the film does not provide a

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good experience that touches and challenges something important in us, it will not be a good film for the classroom.

### **Films at the eye level of children and teens**

Because the students are of young age, it is important that the film speaks a language they understand. It is essential that the film focuses on aspects of a story or theme that the students can understand and relate to. The younger the children, the harder it is for them to relate to abstractions. Accordingly, problems and conflicts should be depicted in relatively concrete terms. Even into their teens, it is hard for kids to relate to very abstract issues.

Young people generally have a different level of sophistication than grownups. They cannot always be expected to have the prior knowledge necessary to understand the significance of a theme or issue. Therefore, it is important that the film show or explains why its theme matters, and that the film itself motivates the viewer's interest in its story. It should show both *what* is important and *why* it is important. Of course, it is the teacher's task to introduce the film and put it into context. However, even the best teacher cannot compensate for a film that in itself is unable to convince students that something significant is at stake.

Moreover, teaching practices in Denmark have changed a lot in recent decades. Students increasingly have a hand in deciding the aim and content of school activities, and their work is more project-oriented. Children's own interests and values – including those traditionally belonging to children's free time – play a much greater role in the classroom now than before. Consequently, demand is increasing for classroom films based on young peoples own world. This does not mean that students should only watch movies they think are fun or entertaining. Or, as a teacher, one should strive to show only films that the students themselves would choose. Films for teaching may very well challenge the students and give them new and surprising experiences with content, telling forms and genres that they might never have experienced before.

### **Education-relevant content and themes**

Topicality is often the be-all and end-all of a film's success in the commercial market. In the classroom it is rarely the most important parameter. It is far more important that a film is relevant than topical. Often, a film is shown in the classroom because it fits into the syllabus or curricula. At times, the class will work with current events, but most school topics and themes are defined by the goals and syllabi of the various subjects, exactly because they have general and principal significance beyond current events. The life of a good classroom film in the school market is rarely particularly tumultuous but often quite long. It takes time to find out whether a film is a genuine hit as a classroom film. However, education relevance is not just about content and theme. It is also very much about the way the film tells its story. When working with cinematic aspects of the film, it is of great importance that the film's form (narration) and style (aesthetics) are suited to be included in the teaching.

### **Short and sweet**

The length of the film is not irrelevant, either – simply because there is a limit to how much continuous time is available to work with any given film. Feature-length films are used in the classroom, but they are demanding in terms of planning, and there is only room for so many of them. Short films are easier to deal with and to fit into a learning situation, where there also has to be time and space for reflection and student activity. For the youngest students, the

length of a film is also important in terms of how long they are able to concentrate. In their case, the shorter, the better. As a rule, films for this target group should not run much longer than half an hour.

### **All categories and genres of film**

#### *Short fiction*

Short fiction films are widely used in the classroom today. The short format is manageable and practical, in part because there is time, within a lesson or module, to both watch a film and analyse it. The short format also uses a dramaturgical construction that is often simple and manageable. For many teachers it is important that the format of the short film in many ways is similar to that of the short story – a literary genre that is much used in schools.

#### *Features*

The status of feature films as classroom films presents a more mixed picture. For many years, literary adaptations have probably been the most used films. The film was either analysed as a book, using the terms of literary analysis, or the book was analysed and, at the end, the class would watch the film for entertainment or as a reward. However, as Danish teachers' film skills improve, there is growing interest in including actual film-analysis of features, as well, and features are gradually gaining a not insignificant place in the classroom.

#### *Documentaries*

Documentaries have been overtaken in the classroom by the two other film categories, shorts and features. As documentaries have evolved away from traditional educational films, they have to some extent been dropped by schools. Meanwhile, the documentary genre has been undergoing rapid development in terms of reach, form and, not least, artistic expression. There are signs that the tide is turning in education as well, so that documentaries can once again fulfil their great potential as teaching tools.

#### *New formats*

The concept of film has dramatically changed in recent years, with moving images as a form of expression spreading like wildfire across all digital media and platforms, not least social media. The evolution of film narratives into a much more complex concept presents a challenge for traditional film teaching. This does not imply that we should forget everything we have achieved in film teaching thus far, but it does require us to continue to develop, nuance and complement the ways in which we work with film in the classroom. Films in new formats and on social media are a new and important category of film to examine in the classroom.

Today's classroom films come from the whole spectrum of genres. While educational films used to be specifically made for the classroom, many different kinds of films are now being included. Accordingly, the concept of "educational film" does not make much sense anymore, since film teaching today includes a full range of film categories and genres.

### **Culturally and geographically diverse films**

Films can introduce us to very different societies and cultures, giving us an experience of sharing and taking part in other people's lives and actions. They enable engagement and an understanding that people around the world live under very different conditions.

Good film for education opens up a wider and different universes and worldviews. Films can have a significant influence on how we see and understand the world. In selecting films for classroom use, it is important to focus on representing a broad variety of films from different countries and cultures, providing insight into different cultural groups and social strata. And it is important that the films' stories overall reflect diversity in terms of gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, social background and more.

**Films for shared experiences and reflection**

Film provides a unique opportunity for many people to simultaneously share an experience, one that often entails considerable emotional and attitudinal involvement. Films are eminently suited for building a common foundation and setting a common theme for a course of lessons. The opportunity for a shared experience combined with the ability of films to foster engagement and reflection also opens up another important educational potential: the film experience as a shared *space for reflection*.

A film experience opens up an opportunity for shared reflection on deep and difficult subjects, because it is not directly about the students' themselves, but starts from somewhere else. Thus, neither the teacher nor the students have to divulge their own private stories or experiences. A good classroom film should foster student engagement and provide material for reflection and dialogue.

