

National Archives Digital Testbed report: Using archive film in teaching



Report prepared by Prof John Gordon, August 2022

Introduction

This report describes an exploratory study conducted between October 2021 and August 2022, investigating uses of archive film in teaching and associated pedagogies. The report describes the two strands of our study. First, it summarises conversations with teachers about their use of archive film and film archives. Second, it summarises findings based on teachers' actual practices of using archive film, drawing on transcripts of their exposition around archive film during teaching. The report concludes with recommendations for further research.

Part one: Interviews with teachers

We conducted three semi-structured conversations with teachers working in Secondary education, in online meetings of up to one hour duration. The teachers we interviewed taught English Language and Literature (11-16), cross-curricular studies (11-16) and Film Studies (A-level) in East Anglia. The phases and subjects they teach represent different student age groups, different curricular content and objectives, and different subject pedagogies.

We explored these questions with each participant:

- Do you use archive film in your teaching and, if so, how and why?
- If you do not use archive film in your teaching, what do you think it could be used for in your subject?
- Are there particular types of film, or themes, that are of interest to your subject?

In each conversation, we considered links with subject curricula and students' learning needs. In relation to the last question, we invited participants' suggestions on categories of archive film that might be digitised for classroom use.

Uses of archive film in teaching

Uses of archive film related to curricula and examination specifications. In addition, participants reported using film as a 'hook' to engage students with subject content in other media, seeing film as a resource to 'bring it alive'.

In English, uses included providing a concise means of conveying information about the social, historical and cultural contexts of literary texts in the curriculum. One example provided was of the use of films of unionization in the early twentieth century to convey workers' experiences in the period represented in the play *An Inspector Calls*. Film use was also relevant to studying texts according to genre, where one teacher reported seeking films representing local architecture with Gothic features. This framed students' understanding of the Gothic genre, offering 'something that makes it familiar to them, that grounds it in local knowledge.' Film was described as a 'trigger to imagination' for creative writing. Examination requirements in English sometimes focus on narrative

structure, and short narrative films were proposed as an especially useful resource for stimulating and supporting writing with coherent structure. Discussion of advertising films in the archive was identified as useful as a basis for 'writing to persuade' in the curriculum, and films relating to staging Shakespeare plays were suggested as helpful content to build in future. The teacher of cross-curricular studies highlighted documentary film as a useful resource, citing a BBC example on air pollution and describing its power to engage students.

Narrative films were foregrounded by the teacher of A-level Film Studies, where specifications ask students to make their own films according to narrative briefs provided by examination boards. Archive films have the potential to demonstrate to students the 'formal elements' of narrative structure in film. The teacher reported providing students with a repertoire of approaches by introducing students to a range of films of around five minutes' duration, 'quite conventional ones, experimental ones, much older ones, more contemporary ones - I'd be looking to supplement what they've looked at already'. In addition, the teacher made links with units on early cinema, silent cinema and documentary film.

Experiences of using archive film in teaching

Experience of using archive film varied widely. Teachers were familiar with numerous online sources of film material including YouTube, BBC iplayer, and the websites of the British Library and the British Film Institute. Teachers were less familiar with their regional archive and the nature of its content. In conversation with us, teachers asked to what extent the archive comprised drama and fiction film material.

Practicalities of using archive film in teaching

Our conversations addressed how to use films in teaching presentations, encompassing the merits of linking or embedding films in slide shows, and copyright issues (for instance around screen capture of film stills). Teachers sought guidance on searching regional archives, discussion covering the use of catalogue numbers and differences in organisation of content relative to familiar sources such as YouTube. The option to save details to 'favourites' was highlighted as a helpful feature. Scope to introduce subtitling to presentations of archive film to classes was welcomed by teachers to support inclusive teaching.

Suggestions for developing film archive resources for teaching

In recent years online school portals have influenced how homework is set by teachers and completed by students. Teachers remarked on the ease with which homework might be set using archive film, especially where a link to specific archive films can be provided in text describing homework tasks, and where students directed to film archive sites do not need to log in.

Teachers felt it could be useful to organise film archive web pages to highlight content for schools according to curricular headings or subject keywords, possibly through separate tabs.

Teachers referred to films and artefacts they had seen at regional museums, suggesting that it could be useful for film archives to make links between their own content and these resources.

As teachers were not always familiar with the nature of archive content, summaries describing the range of material could be useful, for example to indicate that archives include film dramas and narrative texts as well as documentary texts, advertising, ephemera, and amateur footage.

Overall, responses suggested the value of providing an online 'how to use the archive' guide for teachers, possibly as a short video.

Part two: Using film archives in practice – transcript data

Teachers participating in the project shared with us short audio clips of their 'teacher talk' as they introduced film clips to their students. We made plain text transcripts of these mp3 recordings and made analyses of the data using methods developed by the lead researcher¹. The methods allowed reflection upon the data relative to how teachers introduce verbal texts to their students. Applied to data here, the methods suggest differences in how teachers introduce film clips to classes. Four teachers contributed audio recordings, two being university teachers and two being Secondary phase teachers.

Six transcripts from these participants represented teacher talk in lessons where teachers oriented the attention of their students (as a class) to short film clips. Each example was relatively brief, in a range between 20 seconds (a Secondary example) and one and a half minutes (university and A-level examples).

The transcripts suggest a number of 'moves' which feature across the examples. These moves have these purposes, not necessarily appearing in this order in teachers' talk:

- i) Teachers indicate to students that they are going to show them a film clip;
- ii) Teachers briefly describe the topic or theme of the film clip;
- iii) Teachers comment on the provenance of the clip;
- iv) Teachers set a focus for students' viewing, or a task related to viewing;
- v) Teachers invite some form of evaluation of the clip by students.

The fourth move in this list related to considering the purposes for which the film was made, or to considering its modes of communication. The examples in this study tended to focus on the vocabulary or register of speech adopted by people represented in the films. The fifth move in the list included evaluations of how the clips affected students (individually and emotionally), or how film techniques used in the films achieved specific effects. In three of the transcripts teachers indicated to students the duration of the clip they will see.

The framework adopted for this analysis was one first applied to teaching with narrative literary texts, which identified how teachers guide and promote students' engagement with those texts. It identified four broad approaches which included drawing students into the world of the story or text (for example, by dramatizing the dialogue of a character); directing them to close analytic attention of the text (using a detail or fragment of the text such as a quotation); orienting attention to aesthetic qualities (by emphasising qualities when reading aloud, such as rhythm); and supporting interpretations that draw on two or more textual details.

We should be cautious in this study about the extent to which this model can be applied to teaching with film, though the comparison suggests territory that is important to explore further in teacher exposition around film. One distinction is that teachers working with narrative texts in literary study usually introduce the study text by reading extracts aloud, or otherwise introduce them to the class in a recording such as an audiobook. The medium of the text, language, matches the medium of teacher talk, and the words of the text are often embedded in the utterance of the teacher, for instance as quotation. The way teachers in this study introduced film clips suggests that the different medium impels a different form of exposition. There were no instances of teachers inviting students' immersion into the world of the film clip, perhaps because a different relationship between student and film is assumed. Direct quotation of film, other than of dialogue, is not possible in speech as it is with verbal texts. The transcripts in this study suggest that when teachers introduce film they are in a different relationship with the clips and orient their students to texts differently too. The relationship is less direct in that there is a shift from the verbal mode of teacher talk the multimodal

text of the films. Consequently, teachers' talk seems to be *about* the text rather than combining with it through quotation or paraphrase. Some moves, such as commenting on the provenance of the text, are more common in these examples than they were in the study of literary texts, as are indications of the duration of the encounter with the text. Finally, it seems that moves requesting that students evaluate the text are more overt than in literary study, and in these instances they also tend to come at the point of teachers prompting the first 'reading'. Students had not seen the clips before, so viewed clips with a task orientation.

Conclusions

This is a small exploratory study, suggesting avenues for further research. It involved only a small number of participants, partly inhibited by continuing impacts of the Covid pandemic on schools, universities and teachers. Areas meriting further consideration in a larger study include:

- a) How regional film archives and their websites introduce teachers to their content;
- b) How to help teachers navigate the content of film archives;
- c) How to organise and present archive content relative to education frameworks, such as curricula, subjects, keywords and student age/phase;
- d) How film archive resources link with other heritage sector resources, relative to educational frameworks;
- e) How teachers introduce film clips for different educational purposes, and the associated pedagogic approaches;
- f) How teachers take account of inclusion and respond to student needs when they use archive film;
- g) How general conventions of introducing archive film in teaching relate to specialist subject-based approaches;
- h) Understanding the relationships between teacher exposition around archive film clips and how students respond to teacher talk and understand it in each subject, i.e. what characterises educationally effective practice with archive film?

This study also suggests a need to make the case for the distinctive contribution that regional film archives can make to education, and what they offer that differs from mainstream sources of film such as YouTube and BBC iplayer, or national sources such as the British Library and BFI. The study confirmed participants' enthusiasm for using film archives in teaching but indicated that simple but influential factors such as lack of familiarity with regional archives, or limited time to search beyond more prominent mainstream sources, inhibited their uptake.

In conversations of less than an hour with each participant we were able to respond to some of these factors and – through the project – encourage use of regional film archive content. We should bear in mind, however, that participants were self-electing. Engaging the wider teaching profession in using film archives more frequently in their practice will involve addressing these matters of teachers' familiarity with their rich resources and effective communication of their educational potential. Both are likely to require ready and easy access to well-designed film archive websites, supported by discussion and guidance for effective use of film archives in education.

¹J. Gordon, *Researching Interpretive Talk around Literary Narrative Texts: Shared Novel Reading* (London: Routledge, 2020)