



Using Film to as a Resource for Teaching Speech Writing

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Heather uses examples of speeches from movies/programmes as illustrative examples. Learners find this material an interesting and enjoyable way of learning about speech writing. This practice has been shown engages learners deeply with communication concepts.



Background

Educators in diverse fields have used movies as a tool to intensify learning (e.g., History, Sociology, Geography, Psychology, Education, Counselling, English, Science, Management, French, and Politics). However, film seems especially well suited to communication subjects.

One reason for this is that film has — as Champoux (1999) explains — unique characteristics that demonstrate aspects of communication we would not ordinarily see. For example, close up shots of public speakers enable us to view the speaker's subtle emotions that we would miss if sitting in the audience. Similarly, shot/reverse-shot editing techniques help us view both the speaker and the audience, while in real life we would be unlikely to be shifting position to see both parties.

Resources

To gather my collection I studied the TV guide each week, looking for programmes and films that might contain public speaking scenes. I also explored American Rhetoric and YouTube websites where I found ideas for movie speech scenes, although copying videos from these websites is prohibited. Additionally, the books of Joseph Champoux (2001, 2004) offer suggestions for films that relate to communication generally.

An equally fruitful source was simply word of mouth. A colleague, for example, videoed David Brent's humorous motivational speech in *The Office*, and another directed me to the President's speech in *Armageddon*.

Recording

I recorded the material using the Australia New Zealand Screenrights license, which allows footage to be taped from public broadcasts for educational purposes. In keeping with the license requirements, I

labelled each recording with the name of the programme plus the date and time of broadcast, knowing that if I forgot to do so it could take hours to check back-copies of the Listener to find when the episodes were screened.

Initially I taped the programmes using a video recorder. However, when the clips were projected on to a large screen in the lecture theatre, the image quality was poor, so I changed to DVD recording. As well as having a clearer image than videos, DVDs have a longer life expectancy and are not subject to mechanical wear.

There were some frustrations in the recording process: primarily missed opportunities when I discovered too late that a film containing a good speech scene had been screened. There was also the disappointment that films containing famous speech scenes, such as *Braveheart* and *Any Given Sunday*, were not shown on TV during the period I was recording.

Gender and Ethnicity

One challenge was finding material that represented both sexes. Unfortunately, I was unable to locate many film examples of women giving great speeches. Of the twenty five speeches I recorded, only four were given by women, plus one from a transsexual (Georgina Beyer). Moreover, most of the women's speeches illustrated a mistake, such as Cher's inapposite speech in *Clueless*, and Hillary Clinton's loss of credibility when embellishing her account of arriving in Bosnia.

As Massey University is committed to export education, I searched for material that would also appeal to second language learners, even though only a small number of these students enrolled in Speech Writing. Asian second language learners seem to enjoy humorous speeches, (although they sometimes have difficulty grasping the speeches' subtleties). They usually like scenes from *Fawlty Towers*, but I did not have footage of this programme. Therefore I quoted in my lecture notes a brief excerpt in which Basil Fawlty talks about building a wall, and I used this as a metaphor for writing a speech.

Recency

A further challenge was to find material that would not date too quickly. This was less of a problem with movies as they are often re-screened, and some appear to be almost timeless. *Twelve Angry Men*, for example, was made in 1957, yet is still used by educators across the world to demonstrate group communication. However, television series, especially those in which the cast members change each season, date quickly, and are best used only if the scene is particularly compelling or pertinent.

Choosing the Clips

I selected 28 film clips – approximately three for each lesson. The clips averaged four minutes duration. In my experience, using clips longer than 10 minutes risks boring students.

I selected the film speeches from a variety of genres. Most speeches came from movies (e.g., Jerry's speech after being fired, from *Jerry Maguire*, John Nash's Nobel Prize acceptance speech from *A Beautiful Mind*). Others are from documentaries (e.g., David Lange's speech at the Oxford Union debate from *Reluctant Revolutionary*, George Bush's speech to Yale graduates from *The Power of Nightmares*, part 3), news items (e.g., Hillary Clinton's speech about landing in Bosnia, Nándor Tanczos' speech in Parliament) and television programmes (e.g., *Boston Legal* and *The Office*).

I also incorporated material that related to speech writing, but was not in itself a speech. Examples include psychologist Clotire Rapaille's discussion of the deeper connotations of words on *Frontline*:

The Persuaders, John Wall's advice on how to give a sales speech from The School of Success, and record producer Sam Phillips' exhortation to the young Johnny Cash to sing with passion in Walk the Line.

DVDs

As many of Massey University's students are distance students, I arranged for a technician to put the clips on a DVD, using DVD Studio Pro software. The DVD was copied and distributed to students.

The advantage of sending students a DVD rather than asking them to view the material in the online learning environment is that students can keep the film. Also, it is quicker and more straightforward for distance students to play a DVD than to download large files online, especially those in rural communities who may not have good Internet access.

Appeal

I was able to gauge student preferences by their responses in online discussions. By far the most popular clip was a slightly cut scene from Stephen Fry: The secret life of a manic depressive in which Fry anxiously prepares his speech for the Bafta awards. Several students commented that they felt reassured that even an experienced performer like Stephen Fry felt as nervous as they do when preparing a speech, and yet ultimately gave a stunning performance.

New Zealand film was also popular, even when the content – such as Aragorn's call to battle in the Return of the King – was not indigenous. As most relevant websites are American, and the academic literature is mainly published in American journals, the students' preference suggests that educators from other countries should balance their collections by incorporating indigenous material.

Not unexpectedly, students also showed a preference for humorous speeches. Excerpts from The Office and Boston Legal provided variety and light relief after more melancholy speeches, such as Captain Miller's speech in Saving Private Ryan, Jim Jones' call to followers to commit suicide in Real Crimes, and Earl Spencer's eulogy to Diana in The Queen.

However, some speeches, such as Malcolm X's address to Harlem, polarised the class. While most found the speech inspiring, others found it too zealous.

Assessments

To ensure students gained maximum benefit from the clips, I incorporated them into the first course assessment. I asked students to analyse scenes in the light of rhetorical theory and to identify features that made speeches 'work'. When I graded the speeches they wrote for subsequent assignments, it was evident that the speech writing techniques the students had mastered best were the ones illustrated by the DVDs.

Benefits

While some of the advantages of incorporating film were predictable, such as students' enjoyment and engagement with the subject, the film clips also yielded unexpected benefits. For example, students shared the activities with family and friends, and told me stories about people who would not ordinarily be interested in the subject matter finding personal meaning in the material. These comments demonstrate the importance of film as a resource students can use to study collaboratively within their social contexts.

In online discussions and in class, students seemed much more comfortable discussing issues raised by film, and more open with their comments than they were when discussing material from lectures and textbooks. They became emotionally involved in the speeches (particularly Martin Luther King's I have a dream and Earl Spencer's Eulogy to Diana). Therefore their recall of the speech writing techniques was high.

Equally important was that the course was highly enjoyable for me. The usually onerous task of grading dozens of assignments became exciting as I was keen to see how students had responded to the film clips. As they sometimes interpreted speeches in different ways to what I expected, I too learned from the process.

Moreover, in course evaluations, students recognised the value of the films and appreciated the extra effort I had put into the course. When 100% of students reported in an anonymous survey that they would recommend Speech Writing to other students, I knew the effort was worth it.

Recommendations

1. Choose film from a variety of genres.
2. Look for clips that will appeal to both sexes and other demographic characteristics of the student audience.
3. Search for material that is relatively timeless, e.g., segments from classic films.
4. Include indigenous material.
5. Record on DVD, rather than video tape. (If using video, use standard play.)
6. Check copyright laws, and whether your institution has a Screenrights license.
7. Label the recorded footage with the date and time of broadcast, as well as the name of the programme.
8. Use clips of less than 10 minutes.
9. If footage is unavailable, include written excerpts from the script in lecture notes, or direct students to YouTube (if the film is there).
10. Incorporate the film clips into assessments.

References

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