



## Viewing Giftedness through Different Lenses: Film Character Analyses

### Author

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Tracy has successfully used film character analysis with undergraduate pre-service student teachers to help them understand the nature of giftedness. She has also used this practice with students who are currently teaching and completing their undergraduate degrees or postgraduate qualifications.



Basically, students undertake a character analysis of a gifted individual as portrayed in a contemporary film, comparing and contrasting his or her unique behaviours and characteristics with theory and research. The portrayal of giftedness by characters like Billy Elliot the dancer, mathematical genius Will in *Good Will Hunting*, Jamal, the gifted writer in *Finding Forrester*, or Fred Tate, the child prodigy in *Little Man Tate*, is not only entertaining, but also educational. Hollywood's portraits of giftedness raise thought-provoking questions as to what constitutes giftedness and the issues faced by gifted individuals, including their social-emotional trials and tribulations, appropriate educational practices, relationships and acceptance.

### Why a character analysis?

One of the issues faced in working with student teachers is their lack of experience with, and access to, children, coupled with their youth. For my students who are teaching in schools, there are ethical considerations (e.g., informed consent and potential conflicts of interest) if they wish to analyse a student they teach. In a single semester paper, there simply isn't the time to manage this carefully.

Some students' pre-conceived ideas about diversity are derived from these cinematic, and other media, portrayals of giftedness. I can use these same films to de-bunk those myths. Popular movies are accessible, memorable, and thought-provoking, and can be connected to key curricular concepts. In addition, video media have the power to harness students' attention and emotions through storylines that capture their interests. For students who are visual learners, films offer a positive learning experience, stimulating many senses. Films provide a shared context for class or web-based discussions of, in this case, giftedness. This type of work also helps the students read the media critically, a crucial skill in today's media-saturated world.

Finally, this practice uses a differentiated teaching method that is important for teaching gifted and talented children. One of the principles of differentiation is to allow students opportunities to explore giftedness through the study of people. I place great value on giving my students the opportunity to experience differentiated learning, knowing that this will impact on their own teaching and learning.

## Structure

Students are provided with guidelines for the assignment. First, they are given a list of films that I have compiled from articles related to using movies as a teaching tool for gifted students and their teachers (e.g., Nugent & Shaunessy, 2003; Hebert & Speirs Neumeister, 2001, 2002) and a website that is continuously updated ([www.hoagiesgifted.org/movies.htm](http://www.hoagiesgifted.org/movies.htm)). Students are instructed to select and watch a film of their choice and encouraged to watch it several times. The first 'screening' is to get an overall feel for the movie and to select the character for analysis (some films portray more than one) – and just for enjoyment (I suggest they pop some popcorn!). Later viewings are to focus their attention on the character, and specifically on his or her behaviour associated with giftedness and talent. With today's technology, students can select scenes and pause or freeze frames, as well as download dialogue, access reviews and critiques, locate character reviews, and in the case of real-life portrayals, like Prof Nash in *A Beautiful Mind*, access biographical material.

As well as lectures and online discussions, students are given readings and resources related to gifted behaviour that enable them to start relating the character to theory and research. There are a few discipline-based articles on the use of film for gifted students and their teachers that I encourage students to read. I also provide them with readings and resources about the skills they will need to develop their assignment:

- how to analyse a character,
- how to write an academic paper,
- a guided viewing of film, and so on.

This ensures students have both the content knowledge and process skills needed to produce the assignment.

Students present a written assignment to demonstrate their learning, which accounts for 25% of their final grade for the course. The assignment guidelines explain the major components of the final essay:

- a character sketch describing the type(s) of giftedness and related behaviours;
- an analysis of the portrayal of giftedness in relation to theory and research;
- a 1–5 star rating of the movie as a tool for helping others understand giftedness;
- and the development of at least five different strategies that could be used alongside the film to help teachers or parents of gifted students understand their abilities.

Students are also provided with guidelines related to word length, referencing styles, formatting and the like.

The criteria for marking the assignment are also provided in advance and include content, evidence of wide reading, and presentation and structure. These criteria are used in a marking schedule that provides both quantitative (based on a rating scale and to provide a numerical grade) and qualitative feedback for students, supported by constructive criticism and feedback on the assignment (either hand-written or using the comment function and track changes in an electronic submission). A summary of class results and feedback is developed via "Tips from Tracy", highlighting overall strengths and areas for improvement. These are provided both in class time and online.

Finally, students are given the opportunity to provide feedback on the effectiveness of the assignment in their overall evaluation of the paper, both formally (through the university's systems) and informally (through questionnaires I have developed). Students are explicitly asked to rate and comment on assessment and teacher feedback (in general), but other indicators include probing the balance between theory and application, their perceptions of opportunities for active learning through reflection, and the match between learning outcomes and teaching materials.

To date, I have not gathered detailed, specific evidence of the effectiveness of this practice in isolation of other teaching and learning outcomes and opportunities. However, informal and formal feedback indicates positive perceptions of this practice as one of the teaching and learning tools used to meet the learning outcomes. Student ratings (2006) for the paper provided evidence that my intentions for using this practice are being met: 'has a good balance between theory and application' – 4.6 of 5; 'promotes active learning and reflection' – 4.5 of 5. In 2008, internal students rated the interest and value of the paper as 4.5 of 5, and 4.2 out of 5 to further their understandings gifted and talented students. Student comments also support this as an effective teaching practice, with many students making comments like: "*The assignments are FANTASTIC and offer a varied approach which I have thoroughly enjoyed.*"

Film has become a more integral part of my teaching, based on feedback requesting more media usage. My students have greater engagement in discussions and conversations through a common task that bridges the gap between theory and their experiences. These student comments further support this practice:

*"It's good to see Tracy using a variety of media – OHT, slideshows, film, etc. This makes learning more interesting and engaging."* (formal evaluation, 2007)

*"Use of You Tube is excellent. I wish other papers used this."* (informal evaluation, 2008)

## What makes this practice interesting and creative?

The viewing of film provides different lenses through which to examine concepts. It is a creative solution to a number of real problems faced by tertiary teachers. What is unique is that the practice offers students, who have limited practical experiences of giftedness and talent, opportunities to observe and benchmark characteristics against theoretical constructs. The films make sense of theory in practical, realistic, and often appropriate ways. Through multiple viewings, students gain empathy and understanding of the character, and ultimately giftedness. Because movies are entertaining, implicitly presenting complex ideas in more personal ways, chances are, students are more likely to retain conceptual knowledge. These films were not designed specifically for the 'training of teachers' so they do not present neat, straightforward portrayals of case studies – rather they demonstrate the complexity of giftedness as students engage with the character and the catalysts for his or her development.

Students are able to develop a strong rapport with me, as their teacher, and with their peers as our perspectives of characters are shared. While we may not have watched the films together, as it happens, many students often select the same films or may have seen them previously. In discussions, we can build on each other's ideas, as our perspectives sometimes differ, with each individual viewing a character from different personal and professional lenses.

## How could other tertiary teachers use this practice?

Films can be used in the teaching of many disciplines within the tertiary sector – law, sociology, psychology, business, special education, medicine, history, and arts, for example – and offer a variety of pedagogically sound activities. Across disciplines, films provide a platform for examining:

- techniques and methods of practice
- legal and ethical issues related to practice
- cultural, learning and other individual differences
- behaviours and characteristics associated with different 'labels' or professions
- stereotypical perspectives
- social and emotional issues
- relationships
- historical contexts.

My use of film is a way to get students to better understand giftedness through character analysis, but there are other strategies tertiary teachers can use. These include guided viewing or the use of screenshots for generating in-class discussion. Guided viewing means the teacher views and annotates a film in advance. The entire class of students watches the film together with different passages or scenes acting as discussion prompts, and a set of discussion questions and follow-up activities are planned. Guided viewing is obviously time-consuming for both the teacher and students, but it is a recommended practice in gifted education (Hebert & Speirs Neumeister, 2001, 2002; Milne & Reis, 2000; Nugent & Shaunessy, 2003). One way to condense guided viewing into manageable chunks is by showing specific scenes in a film. Again, it is important the teacher is prepared, outlining the context of the scene, the topics it portrays, and specific points for discussion. Another approach might be through individual or group activities in which students view a film with specific tasks, e.g., to present a written or oral critique of a practice or character, participate in a role play, review a film, develop a guided viewing resource, participate in an 'expert' panel discussion, complete a Venn diagram comparing and contrasting characters or practices, or design a poster, website, powerpoint slide or photographic collage.

## Barriers and how to overcome them

This practice takes place within my teaching at Massey University, which has the infrastructure to support it, but particular pragmatic teaching and learning barriers have had to be overcome. Questions over the legality of using films for educational purposes have been asked. The copyright law does enable teachers to show a film (hired or purchased), in an educational setting, for instructional purposes, provided the audience is only students and teachers. Because this assessment is directly connected to one of the educational outcomes of the paper, this use of film is indeed instructional and educational.

Another issue has been the lack of access to films for some students, mainly due to cost factors. I now provide a list of movies freely available at the local public library. Some films are also available through the University's library. Although the Copyright Act would enable both me, as a teacher, and my students to copy a film for research or private study, I have not pursued or encouraged this, but rather guided my students toward library holdings and rental companies. Many of these films are often in the discount bin at retail stores, and their purchase is sometimes cheaper than long-term rental fees – as some students have discovered.

I have also had to be sensitive to cultural, religious, ethnic and social differences among my students. For example, some films depict violence or use offensive language; others depict cultural, religious,

ethnic or social mores that may clash with those of students. To overcome this, the films I recommend are wide-ranging, and include films for children and general audiences (like *Matilda* and *Whale Rider*). Students are given a choice in the films they view, rather than having a film imposed on them, which might make them upset, uncomfortable or offended. In classes, when clips are used, I am highly selective and embed the film within the context of discussion, explaining the background and relevance of the clip.

From a teaching and learning perspective, some depictions of giftedness are stereotypical and even negative, portraying all gifted students as 'geeks' or 'nerds', super-geniuses or prodigies. Some teaching or intervention practices portrayed in some films may not align with New Zealand's education system, may be unethical, or may simply be unrealistic. This actually creates a springboard for discussion and investigation, and I make it clear to students from the outset that the portrayal of giftedness may be accurate or very inaccurate. Another pre-caution here is that some students may get so caught up in the stereotyping or inaccuracies that they fail to see the 'bigger picture' or remember that the film is really just a story, and often a well-told story.

## Different lenses, one picture?

As tertiary teachers, we strive to create relevant learning opportunities for our students. The use of film for character analysis is one approach that has been successful in my teaching, but it is just the tip of an iceberg of possibilities. 'A picture paints a thousand words' – and films can paint many possibilities on the canvas of tertiary learning, and from different disciplinary, personal, professional and pedagogical lenses.

## References

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