



Using documentaries in the classroom to develop critical thinking skills

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Presentation abstract

Documentaries are enjoying unprecedented popularity and prestige, with 2019 marked as a pivotal year in what some call ‘a new golden age’ (Stone, 2023, p.1). Increased accessibility, cost-effective production, diverse content, cultural relevance, and the impact of COVID-19 have driven this surge (O’Connell, 2020; Berman, 2021).

In business education, Netflix documentaries such as *The Social Dilemma* (2020), *Downfall: The Case Against Boeing* (2022), *White Hot: The Rise and Fall of Abercrombie and Fitch* (2022), and *American Factory* (2019) provide rich material for classroom discussion. These films prepare graduates for workplace challenges around ethics, transparency, inclusivity, and sustainability, while aligning with Generation Z’s visual learning preferences (Töröcsik et al., 2014; Pearson, 2018; Chalk, 2022).

An often-overlooked aspect of business education is visual literacy, comparable to training in Film Studies. Preliminary findings from this research echo Hayward and Jiang (2016), indicating that documentaries, as windows to the world, can effectively foster critical thinking.

This presentation shared theoretical and practical insights from a mixed-methods study (2023-2025) exploring the use of business documentaries to teach critical thinking and ethics to second-year undergraduates. In an era where fake news spreads up to 20 times faster than factual content (Dizikes, 2018) and student attendance is declining (Otte, 2024), the session aimed to inspire learning developers, academic skills advisors, and EAP professionals to integrate documentaries into their pedagogical practices.

Keywords: documentaries; business ethics; critical thinking; multimodal literacies; relational pedagogy.

Community response

This session explored how documentaries can be used as powerful educational tools that are particularly well-suited to a generation of learners accustomed to digital media. By combining topical, engaging content with the immersive qualities of storytelling, documentaries offer a unique way to foster critical thinking skills (see Figure 1). In business education, especially, they may serve a similar purpose to written case studies. However, unlike their often wordy counterparts, documentaries benefit from the impact of dynamic audio and visual elements, making them an engaging and compelling option for educators.

Figure 1. Presenter's slide: quote from Hayward and Jiang (2016).



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“The inherent biases within documentaries provide an opportunity to guide students towards critical thinking” (Hayward and Jiang, 2016).

There are, of course, challenges when using any learning tool, and as highlighted by the author in his presentation, while documentaries can be useful in developing critical thinking skills in learners, barriers still remain. For example, the presenter, explaining his preliminary findings, revealed that ‘many students perceive documentaries in a similar way to textbooks - they are always correct’. The presenter, therefore, concluded that ‘what to

show, when to show it, and how much to show are important'. Nonetheless, the use of documentaries in the classroom sparked interest and excitement from the audience, who were eager to explore the potential of using documentaries in their own practice.

Opportunities for practice

Sam Gridley: I am always looking for accessible, interesting ways to present and teach critical thinking skills to students, especially for sessions where I may only meet students once and need immediate impact. This paper gave me some great ideas for how to engage students critically by using short clips to raise important questions and provoke discussion. Daniel made it clear that students need to have a good understanding of critical thinking to be able to evaluate the content they're viewing and spot inherent biases, as well as think carefully about the length of clips used. I would be interested to explore how this could be used beyond the business cohort and if other disciplines are as open to this type of learning.

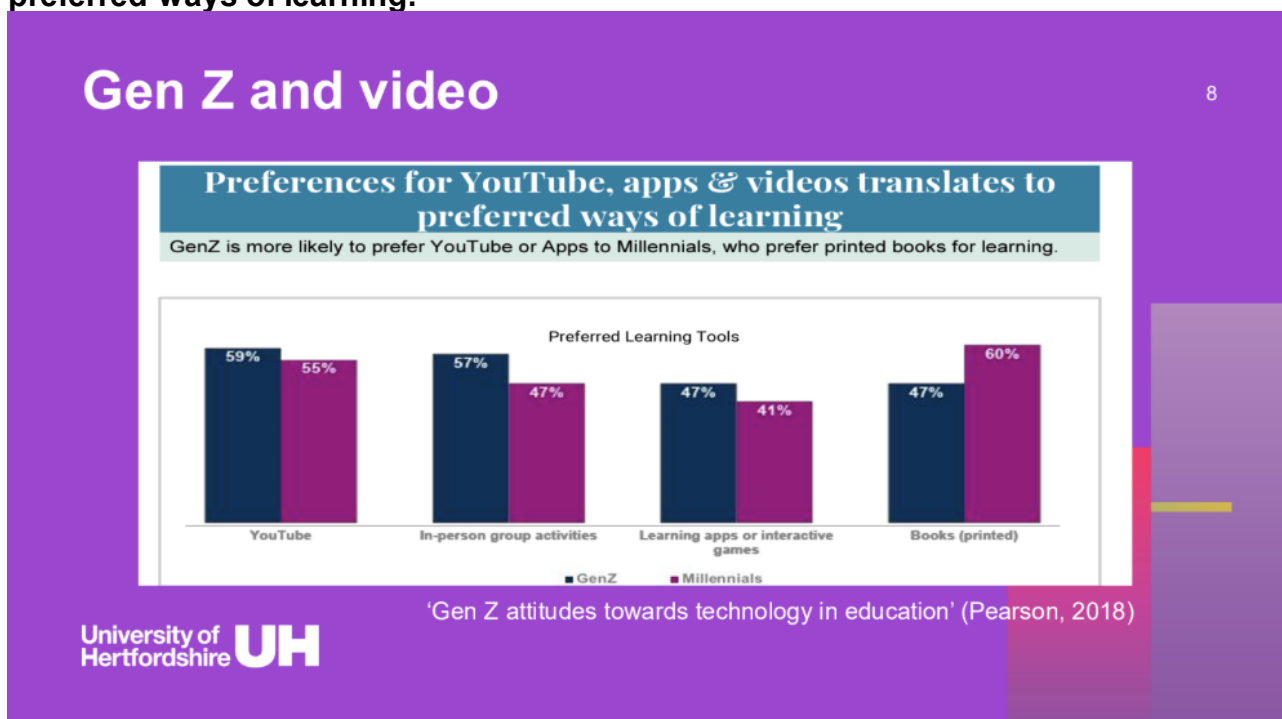
Mark Holloway: I love that Dan is working with Netflix documentaries as a genre, which will clearly be engaging but also ripe for critique, and that his students will come to the table with some knowledge of the genre and its tropes. I suspect that knowledge may well be tacit, but that in itself is quite a welcome dimension; it's an uphill struggle to unlock and unpack the tacit knowledge of subject specialists around academic literacies within their fields, so starting instead by unlocking and unpacking the tacit knowledge of our students around their multimodal literacies seems like quite an exciting opportunity.

Meeting students at their level

Mark Holloway: It was great to see Dan going into depth about some of the pedagogical affordances of his DBA studies, and what he presented made me think of two other conference talks I've seen this year: most recently, Deirdre O'Neill presenting at the University of Hertfordshire Research Impact Symposium, and back in May, Ryan Arthur's keynote talk at [the] inaugural Herts Academic Skills Conference (also University of Hertfordshire). Deirdre was sharing her brilliant work, which involves taking filmmaking equipment into a women's prison and empowering the women to be creative and make

films that they want to make. Deidre argues that, through their own histories of watching film and television, the women come to the task with literacies already primed for the writing, shooting, and editing of productions of their own. Ryan, meanwhile, had challenged his audience to question deficit models in higher education and to look for ways to appreciate rather than merely accommodate students. It strikes me that what Dan and Deidre are opening up for students is a space in which to bring their own multimodal literacies into play in a way which allows for their appreciation (see Figure 2).

Figure 2. Presenter's slide: preferences for YouTube, apps and videos translates to preferred ways of learning.



Author's reflection

The session generated some interesting questions from attendees. One attendee suggested sending the documentary tutorials to LearnHigher; they were curious about how the tutorials were packaged in Articulate Rise, which allows for a variety of media uploads, for example, MP4s and YouTube/Vimeo clips. Another attendee was interested in the active learning aspect of learning through documentary clips, and I was very happy to explain the 'second screen/watch along' expectation, where students could discuss their reflections in a chat forum while watching the clip. This has generated a lot of learning in the past; students like to write and discuss while watching.

Another question asked about the length of the documentary clips, and I explained that the shorter the clips the better, and what I was hoping for in my sessions was that the short clips would whet the students' appetite to watch more of the documentary afterwards; ideally the students would read about the documentary from additional sources which they might go on to synthesise with the original claims of the documentary film-maker.

Another attendee wanted to know how I became involved in using documentaries in my teaching practice, and I explained my various roles as a Film Studies lecturer, Business lecturer, and learning developer. I think this kind of flexibility is useful in a higher education climate where we may want to be careful putting all our eggs in one basket.

I was also encouraged to think about multimodal literacy, and this has given me a new angle on my research. Since reviewing the community comments and comparisons with the work of O'Neill (2015) and Arthur (2022), I have adjusted the focus of my investigation to accommodate these researchers' ideas in addition to the core principles of relational pedagogy (Ollis and Gravett, 2020), which are central to the recently validated undergraduate business curriculum at Hertfordshire Business School where I work. I see now that documentary-based learning meets students where they are as visual learners and can contribute to institutional pedagogical goals like student mattering and agency.

In terms of whether this intervention could be used beyond the business cohort and whether other disciplines are equally open to this type of learning, I think this is a very interesting avenue to pursue. Prior to joining Hertfordshire Business School, I had been active in using documentaries at Level 3 to teach the sciences and economics, for example, *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Capitalism: A Love Story* (2009). Across disciplines, I think documentaries are an effective springboard to engage students with independent research projects, especially when they consider relevant ethical issues. Ethics allows all students to adopt a discursive approach where they can critically evaluate documentaries. The challenges involve teaching students how to do this and creating a learning environment where they do not see it as an unnecessary risk, afraid they might be marked down for not using 'academic texts'.

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Author details

Dan Pearce is a fourth-year DBA candidate at Hertfordshire Business School. Passionate about film-based learning, he has used documentaries to foster critical thinking since his 2003 MA in TESOL, where he explored student engagement with academic writing through film. Dan is enthusiastic about educational technology and spends much of his time innovating ways to support students' academic development in both online and on-campus settings.

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