

FILM EDUCATION: WATCH AND LEARN



Overview

'We live in an age when to be literate means to be as familiar with images on a screen as with text on a page, and to be as confident with a camera or a keyboard as with a pen.'

– 21st Century Literacy: A strategy for film education across the UK

Cinema is a window on the world. From the earliest silent shorts to newsreels, from the Hollywood blockbuster to world cinema, film gives us new insight into people, places, events and emotions.

One of the main reasons people join a Community Cinema (CC) is to find out more about films, so attracting people and getting them involved in choosing films is all part of the education process. One of the most important aspects that CCs offer is the chance for self-education by members and audiences. Many people actually choose to become members of their local CC because they want to learn more about the world around them. By choosing which film nights to turn up to and which films to programme, people can guide the direction of their self-education.

Thus, a CC expands audiences' knowledge of both themselves and the world simply by showing films. However, far more than the opportunity to access film, CCs offer viewers an experience to discuss and, critically, to engage with film.

Film education is central to the objectives of many CCs, and they deliver this in three key ways:

- **Enabling** access to film, discussion, involvement in choice.
- **Enhancing** the experience of audiences through the provision of programme notes, special events and so on.
- **Extending** opportunities of members and audiences through regional and national events, providing access to film professionals and film archives, and accessing external advice, information and training.

Learning and education are at the heart of the CC experience, and this is reflected in many CC constitutions.

'The object of The [Film] Society is to advance the education of the public in the knowledge, understanding and appreciation of the arts, particularly the art of film and allied visual techniques. In furtherance of the foregoing object, but not further or otherwise, The Society shall have the powers to promote 'the study, appreciation of films by means of lectures, discussions and exhibitions.'

– Extract from a standard community cinema constitution

Film education is a broad subject and can be far-reaching in its influence. This article aims to show how CCs can develop and expand on film education activities, enriching not only the experiences of their members and audiences but also the wider community.

You may find it helpful to read the articles on Growing Your Audience and Programming first, as one of the main reasons people join a CC is to find out more about films. Attracting people and getting them involved in choosing films is all part of the education process. Together, the three articles will help you develop a rounded audience-development strategy for your CC.

What is film education?

Film education is about making film more accessible to everyone – for enjoyment, as a means of understanding the world and as a medium of self-expression. It encourages learning, critical understanding,

debate and conversation about films and the issues and emotions they raise, while enabling audiences to use film as a vehicle for their own creativity.

In the course of 80 minutes, film can bring poetry and disaster into our lives in equal measure. Education about film offers a structure of understanding and the ability to articulate the immediate impact with fellow viewers.

Educational activity can be 'informal' or 'formal'. Informal education takes place outside of schools and colleges, is not assessed or accredited and is less structured and focused on attainment targets. It is the most common kind of education delivered by community and independent cinemas. Some venues, however, work with schools on national curriculum-related activity or with adult education providers in a more formal context to help deliver specific course modules. Informal and formal education options are explored in more detail below, together with ideas for outreach activity.

Broadly, there are two types of film education: using film as a tool for learning, and learning about film.

Using film as a tool for learning

Films can open up discussion and aid our understanding of a range of wider subjects. For example, the film *Slumdog Millionaire* could be used to explore:

- the social impact of poverty and industrialisation;
- modern India's development and popular culture;
- the moral and ethical choices of the central characters.

Screening different types of film can broaden your view (see *Programming*).

Learning about film

This refers to the filmmaking process and the language of film. A critical understanding of films combined with an understanding of production can add to an audiences' cinema-going experience and increase their thirst for more knowledge in this area. Your CC can only benefit from an audience that is more engaged and willing to take viewing risks.

Here are a few examples of the many areas that can be explored using *Slumdog Millionaire*:

- book to screen adaptation;
- comparisons of Bollywood and British filmmaking conventions;
- how what is on the screen tells a story and induces emotion in the viewer;
- Danny Boyle's film career.

This type of film education is also referred to as 'media literacy'. A current 'hot topic', 'media literacy' broadly encompasses all communications media, i.e., print, online, radio, film, TV, photo journalism, hand-held personal media devices and so on.

The Charter for Media Literacy and, more recently, the strategy for film education in the UK¹ promote the development of the so-called '3 C's':

- *Cultural access*: The opportunity to choose from a broad range of films and thus acquire a deeper understanding of other people's cultures, ways of life and history, as well as our own.
- *Critical understanding*: The confidence to look behind the surface of the screen, to understand a film's intentions, techniques and qualities.

- *Creative activity*: The opportunity to make film and moving image, to have some understanding of the technical and creative process that allows the effective expression of a story, a mood or an idea.

Providing any one of the three C's contributes to film education, but addressing all three at once will impact most significantly on media literacy.

All CCs, by definition, provide cultural access – the broader the programme the better access it will provide. A significant number of CCs deliver 'critical understanding' through the publication of programme notes and encouraging film discussion. Fewer CCs address the last element, creative activity, since their main activity is (typically) to exhibit film. However, a CC that wishes to develop a production strand, i.e., a university or college film club attached to a media department, may choose to pursue this element.

Making a start

If you are keen to broaden the reach of your CC by actively expanding film education, there are some questions to consider before you dig in.

First, set up a group of volunteers to develop education. Like Programming and Marketing, it is best to have a group of volunteers involved with delivering education activities rather than just one person. CCs are lucky to have members who love film and are keen to pass on their passion, knowledge and appreciation, so setting up a group should be easy.

General discussions

Next, encourage your members and audience to engage in general discussion using some or all of the following questions, which may help to draw out areas of enthusiasm and expertise and to identify the key volunteers who will form your education steering group:

- Which film genres do you like?
- Who is your favourite director and why?
- What was the last film you saw and what did you think of it?
- Has anyone studied film?
- Has anyone made a film?
- Has anyone recently been to a film festival?
- Which films do you think children/young people should watch?

Education activity will add value to the film programme (not the other way around), so be sure to form a close relationship with your programming team.

Finally, decide if you want to provide education activity to young people. If you do, you may need to create a Child Protection Policy that will reassure parents and carers that the activity will be safe. Among other things, this involves getting clearance of all adults working with children from the Criminal Records Bureau.

Update your knowledge of available education resources and current good practice. This information may help in developing new education objectives and is useful to keep in mind during the planning stage.

British Federation of Film Societies (BFFS): www.bffs.org.uk

The BFFS site is a good port of call for case studies and support materials for CC activity, including education and outreach.

Informal education options

Informal education activity is a great way for audiences to learn without being taught. If delivered in a way that adds value to the film-watching experience, it can really enhance audiences' understanding of what they see, enjoyment of the experience and overall engagement with the programme.

Programming

Programming itself is an educational process. Choosing a suitable series of films, explaining the selection process and basing educational discussions around the film choices, require an understanding of your audience's taste and a deeper understanding of the films.

Programme notes

These are information sheets explaining the background and context of the film being shown. They should be written to excite interest but should also provide some interesting, engaging facts and a critique of the film.

The notes might focus on the film itself, how or where it was made, the stars involved, or the social or historical significance of the film.

Spoiler warning! DO NOT risk ruining the film for someone by giving away critical plot points or the ending in these notes.

Try to prepare the notes and make them available to audiences a few weeks beforehand. You could encourage audiences to 'collect the set' if the notes are well designed and printed with nice images (make sure you get permissions). Work with the marketing team to establish a 'house style' for the notes to keep them consistent and of high quality.

It is also a nice idea to include a competition section of the programme notes that encourage the audience to delve deeper into the film's background afterwards. Enter all correct answers into a draw for free tickets or other prizes.

Audience involvement and interaction

Why not encourage your audience to get involved in film showings, such as delivering an introduction to a screening? Perhaps you have audience members with a special area of interest or expertise of a particular film type, genre or subject matter.

After-film discussions are a simple and direct way of enabling your audience to maximise their understanding and satisfaction of their film-viewing experience. Facilitated informal discussions can be achieved by providing a space for people to gather in after the film, with drinks to aid conversation. Have a few pertinent questions on hand to start the discussions and you should find that it flows quite naturally. This is a great way to build a community 'feel' within your audience.

Capturing audience views and deliberations and feeding them back in summary form after the discussion can be a fun task for a willing 'roving reporter'. You can also measure your audience's reaction to films by using a reaction index; this is covered in more detail in *Programming*.

In this way your audience will be allowed to vent the emotions induced by their viewing experience and share their thoughts on what they've just seen – both positive and negative – and find out what other people thought. How many commercial cinemas offer this?

This kind of audience participation will help to create a sense of ownership and inclusion within your organisation and can reveal the wealth of skills at your fingertips.

Film introduction and discussion

Inviting special guests with expertise or interest in the film can add value to a film show. The introduction might focus on an aspect of the film production or the subject it addresses, but it is helpful, if possible, to ensure the speaker is familiar with the film. It's also essential that the speaker is briefed clearly and told not to give away plot points, or to talk for too long. The introduction should be no more than five minutes, but if the speaker is willing, he or she can lead a more in-depth discussion after the film.

Suggestions for speakers: local filmmaker, producer, writer, animator or a special interest group. For instance, a speaker from a local Friends of the Earth group might discuss a film with a strong environmental message, like *An Inconvenient Truth*. Someone from a local Amnesty Group could talk on the human-rights agenda in *The Kite Runner*.

Website development

Many CCs have websites that offer plenty of scope for adding educational aspects:

- Signpost related websites next to each film in your programme.
- Make programme notes, quizzes or competitions available to download.
- Add a good links page for anyone keen to explore film more. Many of the best websites are listed throughout this sourcebook.
- Make room for reviews or feature articles by volunteers or guest contributors. Personal reminiscences about cinema-going can be as illuminating as reviews and could build up into an interesting community archive.
- Build an electronic archive of the films programmed.

Volunteer skills development

A CC also offers the opportunity for supporting development of skills: technical (film projection), creative (media literacy, programming and marketing) and practical (business, financial and strategic planning and working collaboratively as part of a small dynamic team).

Wider engagement with the film industry

CCs offer their members and audiences the opportunity to interact with film professionals, to access training opportunities and to develop a broader understanding of the film industry. They do this by extending access to regional and national organisations such as Regional and National Screen Agencies, the UK Film Council, the British Film Institute, regional and national film archives, the Independent Cinema Office, BFFS, film distributors and many more.

Film quizzes

Quiz nights are a fun way to develop film knowledge. These can be held in any venue and hosted in partnership with a popular local pub, or your usual venue could be opened up to non-members. This may help raise the profile of your CC, both attracting new audiences and members and broadening the knowledge of your current one.

Informal education sessions

If you're lucky enough to have in your CC someone with the interest in putting together a brief session on a film type, genre or area illustrated with film clips, this can be a very rewarding exercise.

Education partnerships

Working with a local book club, writers' circle, historical society or college/university film department can be an advantage. This may enhance both partners' educational value and is a good way of recruiting new members too. Find out what's going on in the area and develop a database of useful contacts. Your local authority's website (culture, leisure, community sections) should be a good starting point in researching potential partners.

The Workers' Education Association networks are often good partners too (www.wea.org.uk). They can arrange a specialist tutor to do a course on genre, directors, filmmaking or screenwriting. This could be offered as an additional activity to complement screenings.

Creative workshops

There are so many ways to turn a passive cinema experience into an active one for audiences, young and old. These activities are stimulating and enjoyable when combined with a relevant film. Why not try some of the following?

- *Model and set making:* Create characters and an environment for them, such as a park or street scene.
- *Location scouting:* Collect images of local buildings, beauty spots or industrial landscapes that could be used as film locations. Scouts could be asked to find a set number of locations for a genre film, e.g., a romance, science fiction, or thriller. This is easy, as most people have digital cameras or mobile phones that can easily be uploaded onto a computer and onto the website.
- *Filmmaking:* Working with experienced filmmakers will ensure a good product and a good learning experience. If possible, find a professional who has previously worked in informal education contexts and knows how to engage all the participants. Involving professionals can be expensive so keep it as simple as possible; your Regional or National Screen Agency should be able to help you construct an easy project and help you find the right assistance. Small-scale productions might include:
- *An 'ident':* This is a very short film (under 30 seconds) that identifies your cinema. BBC One's idents are a good example; think of the circling hippos, dogs, fairies and lawn-mowing housewives! Your own ident may also play with your logo, if you have one, and can be shown ahead of each film. It can also be uploaded onto your website or elsewhere, like YouTube.
- *A promotional film:* For your CC, it should not be too long (under eight minutes). If well constructed, it could be an excellent marketing and fundraising tool
- *An advert:* For a local business or organisation that can be shown before the film. The best adverts are mini-films with a clear narrative and memorable characters. The company in question should be approached with the concept as a sponsorship opportunity.
- *A newsreel:* These were once essential components of any cinema programme. Why not bring them back to your local CC? Old newsreels can be amusing to watch and contrast with today's TV news reporting. A modern newsreel pastiche about local events could be very entertaining. Your regional film archive might have some newsreels you can use for inspiration, and there will be some online.

In preparation for making a film, show other films that can be discussed for their narrative merits and visual creativity, to provide inspiration and to help you make your non-fiction films as engaging as possible, not just a series of talking heads. When or if your CC wants to develop a filmmaking strand, there is a wealth of more fiction and non-fiction possibilities.

Formal education options

Working with the formal education sector is considerably more challenging, whether it is with young people or older learners. In the formal education sector there is a pressure to measure learning outcomes and help learners achieve attainment targets. A CC thus needs to have a good understanding of syllabus and curriculum requirements and be able to offer a unique learning environment if they are to make a good partner for a school or college.

Primary schools are often the easiest to work with because the curriculum is more flexible and the timetable less rigid. However, students of all ages are potential audiences, so, if your CC is serious about engaging with them, here are a few things to consider:

'Film Club' and school film societies

Film Club is an initiative established in 2007 by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and supported by the UK Film Council. Its aim is to establish a network of 7,000 after-school film clubs and support them by providing information, guidance and access to films.

School film clubs already exist in a number of schools across the UK. Both present an opportunity for CCs, to work with schools on delivering screenings or to fill the gap in school holidays and at weekends. Alternatively, if the schools in the area do not already have an active film-screening programme, a CC can be instrumental in helping set one up. It is worth the effort: getting involved with young people will deliver your next generation of members and audience.

National Schools Film Week (NSFW)

Film Education is a national organisation and it runs NSFW across the UK every autumn. Thousands of school children are able to attend a cinema screening for free. Although the initiative mainly involves multiplex and independent cinemas, there is no reason why community-based exhibitors cannot participate and take advantage of the local promotion. A CC's involvement would be especially welcomed in rural areas where children do not have access to mainstream participating cinemas. Find out more at www.filmeducation.org

Subject-specific activity

Teachers (in school or in adult education settings) are often seeking new ideas for making the curriculum more creative and fun for their students. A CC could work with:

- Modern-language departments, showing French, German or Spanish films, for example.
- Special educational needs teachers, providing activities to develop key skills (such as literacy or numeracy).
- Art and design courses, providing an opportunity for students to work with the CC to build its website and create other promotional materials.

The opportunities are extensive but the key to getting this kind of provision off the ground will be finding one teacher, classroom assistant or head teacher who is supportive and willing to work with you.

Community-focused schools

By 2010, the government aims to give all children access to a variety of activities beyond the school day. Schools are also required to open their doors and play a more active role in the wider community. Many schools are being renovated or rebuilt to provide new facilities to enable them to achieve this, providing an opportunity for CCs to build partnerships with schools and raise their profile among children and parents.

Mixing formal and informal – intergenerational activity

The silver screen, its stars and the movie industry have always prompted reactions in audiences. Most people have a favourite film, genre, actor or memorable movie moment. These all act as triggers for memories that can be shared and enjoyed.

The British Film Institute's Screen Dreams project uses cinema-going and films as the stimulus for a national intergenerational reminiscence project. It focuses on valuing the past, creating new memories, sharing old ones and bringing youth and experience together. The idea behind the project is to bring together older volunteers in the local community and younger people, to explore memories triggered by films and talking about the cinema-going experience.

Gains for the younger people:

- Innovative, formal and informal learning opportunities
- Developing respect for other generations and communities
- Sharing skills and experiences

Gains for the older people:

- Meeting and working alongside other members of the community
- Seeing some common threads between generations
- Passing on skills and knowledge whilst developing new skills learned from others

For more information: www.bfi.org.uk/education/teaching/screendreams

Measuring the effects of education activity

From all the above, you can see what the potential impact of education activity on individuals can be. Educational activities and an education outreach programme, however, are not just about benefiting the community but also about benefiting your CC through audience development – building a more informed, engaged audience and bringing in new people.

If your CC is committed to providing education, it should begin to collect evidence of its impact, i.e., that the CC is a valuable learning resource and is reaching new audiences. Having this evidence will not only help the volunteers feel a sense of achievement but may also help you raise funds. No one wants to get bogged down in endless monitoring and evaluation, so keep it simple and attractive for people to complete. Here are some tips:

Before the activity

- Decide what you want the participants to get out of it. What do you hope they will they learn? Limit this list to two or three things only because fewer outcomes can be measured more effectively and convincingly.
- For each 'outcome' think about what data (indicators) you will need to show if it has been achieved. There needs to be a balance between quantitative or hard data (statistics, facts) and qualitative or soft data (feelings, opinions). Together, they will provide a rounded picture of your achievements.
- Decide how you will collect the hard and soft data and make sure volunteers are assigned to data collection tasks. Techniques include: questionnaires, photos, focus groups, observations, box office receipts and so on. For good, simple advice on evaluation methods. look at Partnership for Learning – a guide to evaluating arts education projects:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/publications/publication_detail.php?browse=recent&id=200

During the activity

- Carry out all the data collection as unobtrusively as possible (and don't let it eat into the activity time). If you only collect information after the activity has finished, you may miss an opportunity to get some useful material.
- Make incentives for participants to give feedback to ensure you get as much information as possible. Completed questionnaires, for example, could be entered into a prize draw, or focus group members can be given free tickets.

After the activity

- While it is still fresh in everyone's minds, take the time to look at the data you have collected and make an assessment about how well it demonstrates what you wanted to prove. You have a chance to collect more information at this stage if there isn't enough to go on.
- Write a short, informative and inspiring summary of the education activity containing headline statistics, images, activity descriptions and participant quotes. Share this document among the volunteers, funders and potential funders via email or hard copy, or by uploading it to your website.

Having a series of these documents to hand will make writing annual reports or funding bids much easier.

Don't, however, just focus on the successes of the project. For the benefit of developing education programming at the venue, use the information you've gathered to discuss improving activity in the future.

Your CC will have as much to learn from delivering the education activity as the audience will learn from participating in it.

Conclusion

Learning and education are at the heart of the CC experience. Many CCs offer their members and audiences opportunities for using film as a tool for learning and learning about film. Primarily, this is done by informal education (such as programme notes and introduced screenings); however, some CC's develop partnerships to also deliver formal education opportunities.

CCs occupy a unique position within the film industry, specifically in film exhibition. They respond directly to the needs of their members and audience and deliver programmes that reflect the wide knowledge-base and interests of those members and audience. Film education can be a way to promulgate self-education in film and film culture, develop new skills within this group and to begin to feed this knowledge out to the local community. As outlined above, film education can be pursued at whatever level the CC deems appropriate, so that the passion we all feel for film can be shared with more people while simultaneously developing an appreciative and discerning audience for your CC's activities.

Any contribution to film education is important and will enrich and develop your audience. We hope this article has given you further ideas and inspiration for developing initiatives and will help you in reaching out with your CC's objectives.

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