

IT ALL BEGINS WITH STORY

Using Film to Deepen Engagement and Build Critical Thinking Skills



Randy Testa has a message for all the ELA teachers who queue up a film adaptation as a reward after a challenging text: You're leaving half of your material on the table.

Testa, associate director of preK–16 programs in the Harvard Graduate School of Education's Professional Education division and educational director of Harvard's X-Media Lab, has been working for two decades to give teachers the tools to have more robust conversations about movies in their classrooms.

The cross-media approach he's helped develop at Harvard uses visual texts, from graphic novels to film adaptations, side by side with print texts to open conversations about how stories transform across genres and time.

"To really see how a story works on screen or in a book, you have to get inside it," Testa says. By teaching multiple versions of a story, teachers invite students to explore form and see how writers, directors, and students themselves can transform stories to create meaning.

Bryant Crisp, author of the NCTE book *Using Film to Unlock Textual Literacy* and a teacher at Myers Park High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, says his relationship with his English students transformed when he began incorporating film analysis and filmmaking into his classes.

"My experience is that it turned kids into readers," he says. "The historical model with a print text is that the teacher is expecting a certain meaning. Kids almost expect to be wrong. So there's a certain hesitancy they have with print."

When his students began transforming novels, poems, and other texts into film treatments and storyboards, it pushed them into a closer reading of the story. "We go back to the print text, and they see the stories in a whole different way," Crisp said.

And media scholar Renee Hobbs, founder of Media Education Lab (<https://mediaeducationlab.com/>) says using film in the ELA classroom opens the door to bigger questions about cultural production, including the NCTE question of "who gets to be in the book, who gets to be on the screen, and who's making those choices."

Left to right:
Randy Testa
Bryant Crisp
Renee Hobbs



A DEEPER CONVERSATION

Testa saw the power of using movies in the classroom early in his teaching career.

While working with third-grade boys struggling with dyslexia, he realized if he showed them a movie first— watching the 1958 film *A Night to Remember*, for example, before reading a book on the *Titanic*—they were more likely to persist in reading a challenging text.

Having a blueprint of the story, they were able to jump in more quickly and start actively reading, looking for words that told them what part of the story they were in, he says.

Fast-forward three decades and Testa is now using film adaptations and other visual texts not just to help struggling readers, but to open deeper conversations across the English curriculum.

He says Hollywood is in a golden age of cross-media adaptations, from Greta Gerwig's feminist remake of *Little Women*, which weaves in excerpts of Louisa May Alcott's diaries to address issues of sexism, abolition, and race, to *Passing*, which draws on Nella Larsen's 1929 novel, to superhero franchises like *Black Panther*, which began as a comic in the 1960s and was further developed in graphic novels by scholars such as Ta-Nehisi Coates and Roxane Gay.

"The most important thing that happens when teachers really start to work in cross media [is] they let go of their static view of stories and they begin to see that stories are dynamic entities. They move across time and . . . they're subject to culture, to politics, to changing views of representations of people; these are very fluid things," he said.

The approach Testa helped develop at Harvard's X-Media Lab uses three lenses—*aesthetic, academic, and ethical*—to examine stories.

Most teachers start with the academic lens, leading students to the story's big themes and their impact. But Testa says it is more effective with many students to start with aesthetics, the form of the story, and how that contributes to reaching audiences.

"You have to understand how a story is built to understand its content yield," he says.

DECONSTRUCTING WONDER

In a unit Testa helped develop on R. J. Palacio's middle grade novel *Wonder* and its film adaptation, students begin with a close reading of the first chapter of the book and the screenplay of the movie's opening scene.

They discuss vocabulary, considering multiple meanings of the word *wonder* and how it echoes through the book. They're also introduced to symbolism: the main character, Auggie, who has a facial disfigurement, wears an astronaut helmet to school, and the image of the astronaut reappears throughout the novel and the movie in different ways.

In a later scene, when Auggie comes to school for Halloween, students list the director's visual and audio choices, including a cut of "Monster Mash," and consider why he picked that sound track, and what the lyrics of the song might be subtly communicating.

The Halloween scene also offers an opportunity to engage the book's ethical questions—what does it mean to be a bully, or to stand on the sidelines and say nothing, and why do characters make the choices they do?

"What we're doing more than anything is showing teachers how to deepen their teaching of the story and extending what they already know how to do: vocabulary, main idea, plot, those are all things kids need to know about," Testa says.

When you choose the right set of cross-media texts, "The payoff is enormous."

CRITICAL LENS: WHO GETS TO TELL THE STORY?

Hobbs, a professor of Communication Studies at the Harrington School of Communication and Media at the University of Rhode Island, says teachers can add

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—Bryant Crisp, author of *Using Film to Unlock Textual Literacy* (NCTE, 2021)

another layer of analysis by having students examine the industrial nature of the film industry and how that affects representation.

One inquiry-based project could turn students loose to explore how their favorite films make money or flop at the box office. Using the trade publication *Variety*, they can research how the industry covers itself, how films make money, who gets that money, and how streaming and other forms of movie distribution are changing the industry.

This can open bigger questions of who controls what is produced, what it means when a small number of companies own our storytelling industries, from film and podcasting studios to TV networks to publishing houses.

For teachers who want a low-bar activity to help students learn the language of film, Hobbs suggests an analysis of a film trailer, a genre she says is “rhetorically very sophisticated.”

Using a resource like *Teaching Trailers*, which includes lesson plans for grade 4 and up, students can learn the generic conventions of a trailer and how sound, pacing, and editing help sell the film to audiences.

“It’s a great way to explore persuasive genres while deepening those visual literacy skills,” she says. “And you could do it in a single lesson.”

Hobbs, also likes to have students analyze YouTube video reviews, like those of movie critic Chris Stuckmann.

This opens up a conversation about fair use and the elements of an effective film review, both critically and visually. Students then write a three-minute script, pull clips, and produce their own video film review.

“Students understand that sharing your opinion about films and popular culture is a high-status activity in the worlds they inhabit,” Hobbs said. “It gets you likes. It gets other people responding to you. You get in conversations with other fans.”

FROM CRITICS TO CREATORS

Crisp jokingly describes his NCTE book as “how to teach film with a bare minimum of tech.”

His path to teaching—and making—films began with a music video unit that galvanized his English students.

He then helped overhaul a Literature and Film elective at his high school into a curriculum that he now teaches full-time.

“We went from one class every couple of years to eight classes, and they had to cap it,” he said.

Crisp says Literature and Film reaches many students who fall through the cracks in traditional English classes, including “arty students, who have personalities where they think outside the box, but are terrible at finishing their work.”

Students in his program have gone on to work in the film industry in New York and Los Angeles as writers, actors, makeup artists, production staff, and independent filmmakers, among other roles.

Using film and novels helps open up the box for many students, allowing them to see stories as a series of choices by writers and directors, and their own reading of those choices as valid.

In one exercise Crisp uses, students look at multiple versions of the same scene of Shakespeare’s *Othello*, comparing, for example, the 1951 Orson Welles version that casts Othello as an Arabian in furs to the 1995 Laurence Fishburne version where the character is worldly and sophisticated in silks and an earring.

“Students start to understand the issue of interpretation. We’re using film to show there’s no one answer,” Crisp says. “That gives them a freedom to manipulate text or engage with text in a way they hadn’t before.”

Crisp wants to be clear, though, that he’s still teaching an English class.

Students produce everything from 500-word film treatments to screenplays that they work as a team to turn into a final product.

“I’m not taking us away from print text, I’m trying to bring them back to print texts,” he says. Students “grew up on screens and that’s a language they’re used to. If I can teach them how to read a film, when they go back to the book, it’s a whole different ballgame,” he says.

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A CINDERELLA TALE:

Making Adaptations the Star of the Show

In the literary world, adaptations that reimagine familiar stories, from China Miéville's parody of *Moby Dick* in *Railsea* to Nghi Vo's recent *Great Gatsby* retelling, *The Chosen and the Beautiful*, delight readers with their playfulness and invention.

But in ELA classrooms, adaptations are more often seen as a supplement, secondary to the original work that inspired them.

Two University of Arkansas professors, Sean P. Connors and Lissette Lopez Szwydky, want teachers to rethink that approach.

Their summer institute course, "Remaking Monsters and Heroines: Adapting Classic Literature for Contemporary Audiences," invites K-12 teachers to dig into the scholarship of adaptations—and learn hands-on multimedia tools to create one of their own.

Many educators sign up because they're seeking a fresh approach to canonical texts, such as *Frankenstein* or *Don Quixote*.

"They say, I came because I was thinking about engagement," Connors says. "They leave with the sense that adaptations aren't purely contemporary and popular; they will engage kids and have merit in their own right."

Tales of Transformation

The institute uses two much-adapted tales, *Cinderella* and *Frankenstein*, to consider the way stories morph across cultures and time.

Before *Cinderella* was commodified into a Disney tale, it was a European folktale and has counterparts in many cultures around the world, Connors says.

And recent revisions of the story, from Trung Le Nguyen's graphic novel, *The Magic Fish*, to Kalynn Bayron's young adult novel *Cinderella Is Dead*, reimagine the story from queer Vietnamese American and African American perspectives.

Szwydky says it's important to remember that earlier creators, from Shakespeare to Mary Shelley, were also reworking earlier material. For *Frankenstein*, Shelley drew on *Faust*, *Paradise Lost*, and the Greek myth of Prometheus to create a story relevant to contemporary audiences, she says.

"Adaptation is the main way stories have moved through space and time. That's always been true," she says.

Many of the classics taught in ELA classes now were written centuries ago for a different audience, Szwydky says. So it's no surprise many students struggle to engage with them.

"You just don't give seventh graders *Frankenstein*," she says. "But you can give them a version that gets them interested in the world of the story and the characters, and later on, when they encounter the text, they're ready for it."

Multimodal Literacies

The second half of the curriculum teaches educators how to make their own literary adaptations, in media ranging from podcasts to graphic novels to animation.

The practice turns teachers into adaptors and illustrates how reimagining a story can build deeper engagement with the original text.

One teacher created a stop-motion animation of Thom Gunn's poem "Tamer and Hawk." The animation had five to six scene changes, which required the creator to break the poem into stanzas and think both visually and sonically how the poem moves. (<https://bit.ly/3uOXuTd>)

Such multimodal projects also have much potential in the ELA classroom, Connors and Szwydky say, by pushing students to do a deep read of the text to translate it to a new audience.

"Basically, they're doing a close reading, but what's on the other side is not a traditional five-paragraph essay," Szwydky says.

The end goal, after all, is not for students to memorize the works of Shakespeare or *The Scarlet Letter*, but to deepen their abilities to read and engage with texts.

"Let students fall in love with storytelling," Szwydky says. "They'll take that with them forever."

—Trisha Collopy