“Edutainment“

“Twelve Years a Slave” in the Classroom

Why not choose an authentic and interesting way of improving your students’ language skills and their intercultural competence at the same time? This movie provides content for both aspects and combines education with entertainment - “Edutainment”

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The movie “Twelve Years a Slave” is not only useful for language purposes, but also for including historical topics in class. We chose to divide our teaching idea in pre-, while and post-activities. The “segment approach” helps to split the movie in meaningful parts with corresponding tasks. The historical background will be discussed predominantly in the post-activities.

Why this movie?

“Twelve Years a Slave” is based on the life of Solomon Northup. He is a free black man who lives in the north of the United States in the 1840s. After being captured by two men, he is sold into slavery. He has to endure the hardships of this life for twelve years before he is able to send word to his family. Finally he is freed in 1853.

Dealing with the life of a real person, the movie is authentic as well as captivating. The historical topics such as slavery and the conflict between the North and the South can be used to improve the students’ intercultural competence. According to Byram there are four skills to be developed, when it comes to intercultural learning. Savoir être, savoir, savoir comprendre, savoir apprendre et s’avoir engager. By watching the movie we want the students to develop right attitudes and values. Furthermore, we want to encourage them to actually analyse and interpret cultural issues and to share their views in social interaction. Last but not least we want to support them to accept and tolerate the differences between the target culture and the own culture. Also their social skills like empathy and their sense of justice are also addressed by the brutality of the topic. Due to the southern accent of some characters in the movie, it also helps to improve the students’ listening and viewing skills. Therefore, the movie is an ideal choice to combine English language learning with some historical background knowledge of the United States.

First considerations

In order to use the movie in class, we first had to make some general decisions on how we want to present it to the students. We chose to create a teaching idea for 12th grade, since the language and topic of the movie are appropriate for that age. One of those aspects is the use of subtitles. Most students prefer them, because it is easier for them to understand every word the characters say. However, this improves their reading skills far more than their listening competence. Since the plot of the movie takes place in the South of the United States, it is necessary to use subtitles in some scenes to avoid frustration among students with regard to the difficult dialect. We recommend that teachers who want to realise this teaching idea should use subtitles based on the abilities of their class.

Another problem arises due to the brutal and sexual scenes which occur throughout the movie. Although the FSK approval is for age twelve, we decided to cut out two short scenes containing sexual actions. Each of them is about two to three minutes long and will not affect the understanding of the plot. The last decision we had to make before starting to design the teaching idea was the presentation of the movie. Since the movie is 143 minutes long, the straight through approach would not be easily realised in the classroom. Furthermore it would be hard for the students to concentrate for such a long time without a break. That is why we chose the segment approach.¹ We divided the movie in four segments, which are roughly thirty minutes long. This leaves some time before and after each segment to do some pre- and post-activities.

And action!

Previewing-activities:

Listening comprehension not being the only important competence, we decided to also use the book “Twelve Years a Slave”. Before the movie was broadcast, the story of Solomon Northup was already known because of this book. The aim of using the book is to raise the students’ interest in the topic, without telling them exactly what the next lessons would be about. The excerpt we chose as a pre-activity is from chapter two and about four pages long. In chapter two Solomon Northup meets Mr. Brown and Mr. Hamilton who later take him prisoner. The excerpt does not reveal the intrigue of the men yet. It ends when they enter a dark passageway. In addition to the text, the students get a worksheet with two questions about it. While reading the chapter silently, they have to deduce the meaning of unknown words from the context or look them up in a dictionary. The first of the two tasks is to describe the appearance of Mr. Brown and Mr. Hamilton. Their description in the book is very elaborate and already gives some hints about their character. Then the students have to describe Solomon Northup’s reasons to go with them. This question should help the students understand the circumstances of Solomon’s life and why he leaves with two strangers without informing anyone about it. Since Solomon’s reasons for this are not stated directly in the text, the students have to interpret his situation. Having discussed the questions in class, the students get their homework. They have to invent an ending for the story which should improve their creative writing competence and gives a good opportunity to start into the next lesson.

The second lesson of our teaching idea also consists of pre-activities. The difference is that the students will now discover what the next lessons will be about. We start by discussing the different endings of the students. At least two students should read out their ending, ideally one with a positive and one with a negative one. Then they can be discussed and compared in class. Afterwards, we watch the trailer of the movie. To ensure that the students also understand the parts of the trailer which are difficult to understand, like the one where Solomon is shouting, we recommend watching it twice. If necessary, we watch it a second time with subtitles. In the trailer it becomes obvious that Solomon is captured by the two men and then sold into slavery. Now the students are asked to share their expectations regarding the movie. Some questions for the teacher to lead the discussion could be about the students’ feelings after having watched the trailer and whether they are interested in the topic and why. At the end of the trailer it is pointed out, that the movie is based on a true story. This also should be emphasized and discussed. At the end of the lesson, the students get a list with some important unknown vocabulary in the movie and a character list of the main characters. Their homework is to look up the words and read through the character list as a preparation for watching the movie. This is important since the movie is sometimes hard to follow and even more so in a foreign language. The preparation will make it easier for the students to understand the plot of the movie and will prevent too much frustration with unknown vocabulary and the constant changes of main characters.

While-activities:

As mentioned before, we chose to divide the movie into four sequences. This gives the opportunity to embed each of them in a pre-, while- and post-viewing phase inside the while-activities. Each lesson starts with the previewing-activity, which is discussing the homework of the lesson before. Then the segment of the movie is watched while the students are doing a while-activity that is not too complex to distract them from the movie. Afterwards, the while-activity is discussed and they get their homework for the next lesson, which is the post-activity for the segment they just watched. Using this method, the homework always is the post-activity of one lesson and its discussion the pre-activity of the next lesson.

In the third lesson of our teaching idea we talk about the vocabulary list and the character list we gave the students as task support. They get the chance to ask questions if they have problems understanding something. Then they watch the first segment of the movie. It is about half an hour long and we cut out one short scene from minute four to six. The scene shows sexual interaction between Solomon and an unknown woman. Since the meaning of the scene is not clear and it

2 Northup, Solomon (1853): Twelve Years a Slave. Whitehall, Leipzig: Amazon Distribution, p. 5-9.130
3 Worksheet 1
4 http://www.ish-gym8-lehr-plan.de/contenterv/3.1.neu/g8.de/index.php?storyID
5https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z02le8wKRG
6 Worksheet 2/2
7 Minute 1-28
is not necessary for understanding the movie we decided to not show it in class. In the first sequence some of the plot is already known from the excerpt of the book. The movie alternates between scenes from Solomon’s life as a slave, flashbacks of his old life with his wife and children and some outlooks of how he tries to escape from slavery. The while-activity for the students is to write down some keywords of how Solomon is treated without any respect in the south slaves who were captured do anything. When Solomon and the mission and he is not allowed to say his captors beat him into sub- mission while watching the movie and will not distract the students too much.

As homework, the students have to explain what Solomon means with the sentence “I don’t want to survive, I want to live.” Given that not all the students know when exactly he says this, it should be shortly revised in class. Solomon says this to his fellow prisoners when they spend some time on a boat which transports them to the south. This is one of the most important scenes of the movie, because it shows that he will not give up until he finds his way back to his family.

At the beginning of the following lesson, we discuss this homework. Then the students watch the next segment of the movie. Now the students have to write down the synonyms for “slave”, which occur in this part of the movie. Those are “beast”, “property”, “nigger”, “prized livestock”, “dog” and “black bastard”. All these words show that the slaves are seen as animals and that the slave owners think they have the right to do with them whatever they want.

This time the students have to analyse a song text from the movie as their homework. When Solomon is bought by his first master, he and the other slaves are introduced to the overseer of the farm. After explaining to them what they have to do and how to address their superiors, he forces them to clap their hands while he sings a song about a slave who tries to flee. This song does not only exist in the movie but is an African-American folk-song. It is about a slave who flees from a slave patrol and tries not to be recaptured. The students first have to sum up the content of the song. Then they should explain why the overseer teaches them the song and what message he wants to give them. The overseer wants the slaves to know that they have no chance at all to escape from their fate. What is striking about the song is the lively tune despite its brutal message.

After discussing this homework in the next lesson, the students watch the third segment of the movie. It is about Solomon’s life with his third master, who is very cruel to his slaves. The while-activity for this lesson is to write down keywords which describe the relationship between Master Epps, his wife and the slave Patsey. She is the master’s favorite slave because she is very fast in plucking cotton and he rapes her regularly. There we would recommend cutting out a second scene when Master Epps rapes her. It is from minute 73 to 76. Patsey also has some liberties because she can make some straw puppets in her leisure time or leave the farm for a short period of time. Mrs. Epps hates Patsey, which is shown clearly in several scenes of the sequence. The slaves are woken up in the middle of the night and have to dance for their white masters while they are having a party. Mrs. Epps throws a bottle of alcohol at Patsey and tells her husband to sell her immediately. Mr. Epps refuses and threatens her. In another night when the slaves have to dance again, Mrs. Epps gives

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9 Minute 28-54
8 Minute 54-93
9 Worksheet 3
everyone a reward except for Patsey and then persuades her husband to beat her.

At the end of the segment, a white slave named Armsby is brought to the farm. He is an alcoholic and became a slave because he was in debt. Armsby is treated better than the other slaves. He has his own room to sleep in and is not whipped when he plucks only a small amount of cotton. At the end of the segment, Solomon secretly asks Armsby to post a letter to his family for him. When Solomon offers him some money, he promises to post the letter. For their homework, the students are supposed to speculate whether Armsby keeps his promise or breaks it. At the beginning of the next lesson, the students have to vote on this topic before we continue watching. They can explain why they think Armsby helps Solomon or betrays him. Then we watch the last part of the movie.  

It turns out that Armsby lied to Solomon. He tells Master Epps about the letter and the master confronts Solomon with it. Solomon denies it, tells him that he never wrote that letter and man- ages to convince his master that Armsby lies to get the job as an overseer on the farm. The while-activity for this last segment of the movie is to write down keywords that describe Mr. Bass’ opinion about slavery. Mr. Bass is a white carpenter from Canada, who is paid by Master Epps to build a house on the plantation. He is very friendly to the slaves and treats them with respect. When Master Epps comes to the construction site, he offers Mr. Bass refreshment and a break because of the heat. Mr. Bass declines and when he is asked why, he says that he finds it amusing that Epps is so concerned about his wellbeing but keeps his slaves under horrible conditions. Epps argues that slaves are no paid help but his property and that he can do with them whatever he likes. They start a discussion about slavery and Mr. Bass’ opinion becomes quite clear. He acknowledges that there are laws that allow slavery but he still thinks slavery is not right. His opinion is that black and white men are equal in God’s eyes and that there will be a day of reckoning soon. Epps is not happy about Bass’ opinion but since he is a white man he cannot do anything about it.

When Solomon is alone with Mr. Bass, he asks him for help and finally finds someone willing to write a letter to his family. Shortly after that, a lawyer and a friend of Solomon arrive at the plantation. They take him with them back to his family. The movie ends with a family reunion. Solomon sees his wife and children again and he also meets his son in law and his first grandchild, who is named after him. In the closing credits, the audience is informed that Solomon brought his abductors to trial but they were never convicted. He also joined the abolitionist movement, held several speeches and helped fugitive slaves. After watching the end of the movie, the students get the homework to write a speech that Solomon would hold in front of the abolitionist movement.

**Post-activities:**

After letting some students read out their speeches, we start with the post-activities. First, we want to talk about their impressions of the movie. Some leading questions for this debate would be whether they liked the movie or not. What did they feel while watching it? What do they think about the topic? Would they have watched a movie like this on their own?

Then the students get the task to write a film review about the movie, so that they can explain their opinion of the movie and improve their creative writing skills at the same time.

**Conclusion:**

The activities of our teaching idea should help the students to develop several competences. As already mentioned, the movie helps students to improve their intercultural competence.

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The combination of listening, reading, speaking and writing activities about the movie enhances their abilities in these skills. These skills are also mentioned in the beginning of the curriculum for 12th grade. Other aspects mentioned in it are also included in our teaching idea. Another example for this is the use of authentic material which contains historical knowledge. We hope this teaching idea inspires some teachers to use it in their classroom.

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11 Minute 93-The End


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http://www.thelyricarchive.com/song/119334-15182/Run,-Nigger,-Run (07.08.2015)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z0Ie8wKKRg (03.08.2015)
Part 1
1. Please read the text silently.
2. Describe the characters Merril Brown and Abram Hamilton.
3. Explain Solomon's reasons to go with Brown and Hamilton.
4. What do you think will happen? Give a guess and write down the end of the story. (500 words)

Part 2
1. Watch the trailer. What do you expect from the movie?
2. Take a look at the vocabulary list provided below and look up the meaning of the words in a monolingual dictionary.
   • bravery
   • superb
   • to smile someone
   • to dawdle
   • carpenter
   • patrol
   • pack
   • bushel
   • to beguile
   • countenance
   • to truckle at someone's boot
   • brute
   • clapboard
   • predilection

3. Look at the list of characters and draw a constellation of their relationship.

Solomon Northup, aka "Platt" A free black man who lived in the northern United States in the 1800s. Solomon was kidnapped in 1841, at age 33, and sold into slavery in the South. Solomon was married to Anne (Hampton) Northup and with her had three children: Elizabeth, Margaret, and Alonzo.

Merrill Brown One of two white con men who, with Abram Hamilton, deceived Solomon Northup and orchestrated his kidnapping. About 40 years old, short, and thickset, Brown, with Hamilton, promised Northup lucrative work as a violin player in a circus, and thereby convinced him to accompany them to Washington, D.C. There they drugged him and allegedly sold him to slave trader James H. Burch while he was unconscious.

Abram Hamilton With Merrill Brown, co-kidnapper of Solomon Northup. Around 25 years old, tall, thin, and somewhat effeminate.

James H. Burch A brutal slave dealer who first kept Solomon Northup in captivity in Washington, D.C.

Eliza Berry A fellow black captive in James H. Burch’s Washington, D.C. slave pen and lifelong friend to Solomon Northup. She was the mother of both Randall Berry and Emily Barry. She had been the slave and mistress of a rich white man named Elisha Berry, who treated her kindly and fathered her daughter, Emily. Elisha Berry promised emancipation for Eliza and her children upon his death; however, when he passed away, his heirs reneged on that promise. Under the ruse of taking her to get her free papers, the heirs sold Eliza and her children into Burch’s slave pen. From there, she was sent downriver, where Theophilus Freeman cruelly separated her from her children.

She was sold, with Solomon Northup, to William Ford in Louisiana.

Part 4
1. How is Solomon treated in the North and in the South? (Write down some keywords)
2. Explain the sentence: “I don’t want to survive, I want to live.”
3. List six synonyms used for the word “slave” in the movie.
4. Have a look at the lyrics of the song below and sum up the content of the song in three sentences.
5. Who teaches this song to the slaves? What is his intention?

“Twelve Years a Slave” by Solomon Northup

Theophilus Freeman A New Orleans, Louisiana, white slave trader who worked in association with James H. Burch. He took possession of Solomon Northup in New Orleans and there forcibly assign him the name “Platt.” He ran the slave auction that sold Platt to William Ford of Louisiana.

He was responsible also for separating Eliza Berry from her children.

William Ford The white man who bought Solomon Northup and Eliza Berry from Theophilus Freeman. Described by Northup as a “noble, candid, Christian man,” he owned a large plantation as well as a lumber mill. He was forced to sell Northup after facing financial setbacks.

Edwin Epps Solomon Northup’s final, and cruelest, master. A cotton planter, he owned Northup for about ten years. Epps was heavy, tall, with high cheekbones and blue eyes. A frequent drunk, he was given to fits of rage and violent mirth. He delighted in both whipping his slaves and in making them dance all night in false exhibitions of happiness. Crueling, shrewd, and merciless, he was known as a “nigger breaker.” His own slaves nicknamed him “Old Hogjaw.” He was guilty of frequently raping and whipping the slave girl Patsey.

Mistress Epps Edwin Epps’ wife. Well-educated, attractive, and from a respected family, she was generally kind to her husband’s slaves—except Patsey, whom she hated as a jealous rival.

Patsey A 23-year-old black slave of Edwin Epps, and the most tragic figure in 12 Years a Slave. Naturally “a joyous creature, a laughing lighthearted girl,” frequent beatings and abuse made her despondent and suicidal as the years went on. She was a victim of repeated rapings by Edwin Epps and also of the jealous cruelty of Epps’ wife.

Armsby A poor white man who worked alongside field slaves at Edwin Epps’ plantation for a short time.

Mr. Bass A white carpenter working to build a house on the Epps’ plantation. Bass was a native of Canada and an outspoken abolitionist.

Source: https://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/t/twelve-years-a-slave/character-list
The Skillet Lickers - Run, Nigger, Run

Oh run nigger run wall the pattyroller will get you
Run nigger run well you better get away
Run nigger run well the pattyroller will get you
Run nigger run well you better get away
Nigger run nigger flew
Nigger tore his shirt in two
Run run the patty roller will get you
Run nigger run well you better get away
Nigger run, run so fast
Stoved his head in a hornets nest
Run nigger run well the pattyroller will get you
Run nigger run well you better get away
Nigger run through the field
Black slick coal and barley heel
Run nigger run the pattyroller will get you
Run nigger run well you better get away
Some folks say a nigger won't steal
I caught three in my corn field
And one has a peck
One had a rope and it was hung around his neck
Run nigger run well the pattyroller will get you
Run nigger run well you better get away
Run nigger run well the pattyroller will get you
Run nigger run well you better get away
Oh nigger run and nigger flew
Why in the devil can't a white man chew
Run nigger run well the pattyroller will get you
Run nigger run well you better get away

“Twelve Years a Slave” by Solomon Northup

Part 5
1. Describe the relationship between Master Epps, his wife and Patsey!
2. Will the white slave help Solomon? Give a guess and explain why.
3. Explain the opinion of Mr. Bass with regard to slavery.

Part 6
1. What do you think of the movie? Share your opinion with your classmates.
2. Write a film review. (500)