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# Using film in social work education: a medium for critical analysis

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# Using film in social work education: a medium for critical analysis

## **Abstract**

Whilst developing an undergraduate social work subject this year in group work practice I started to reflect on the number of films I had seen over the years where support groups or group process had been depicted as a component of the protagonist's life journey. Modern films such as Ruben Guthrie (2015) and Thankyou for Sharing (2012) came to mind, along with the classic One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975). As I started to think about this the list grew and I realised that social work students already had a wealth of representations to draw on when beginning to engage with group work practice. From there I became interested in the use of film as a medium for critical analysis and the development of practice skills more broadly in social work education, both with specific intervention methods and in the development of social work professional identity and socialisation to the profession.

## **Keywords**

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## New Voices in Social Work Research

### Using film in social work education: a medium for critical analysis

*Dr Mim Fox, University of Wollongong discusses her teaching and learning innovation for engaging students about group work practice. For more information contact Mim at [mfox@uow.edu.au](mailto:mfox@uow.edu.au) or [aumfox@uow.edu.au](mailto:aumfox@uow.edu.au)*

Whilst developing an undergraduate social work subject this year in group work practice I started to reflect on the number of films I had seen over the years where support groups or group process had been depicted as a component of the protagonist's life journey. Modern films such as *Ruben Guthrie* (2015) and *Thankyou for Sharing* (2012) came to mind, along with the classic *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975). As I started to think about this the list grew and I realised that social work students already had a wealth of representations to draw on when beginning to engage with group work practice. From there I became interested in the use of film as a medium for critical analysis and the development of practice skills more broadly in social work education, both with specific intervention methods and in the development of social work professional identity and socialisation to the profession.



Scene from *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) (Source: Youtube via Google images (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ehPcYibzUKc>))

There is a strong tradition of using film and video in social work education to critique social inequality, stereotype and sociopolitical context (Lee & Priester, 2015; Van Wormer & Juby, 2016). Principles of teaching and learning in social work education support the use of film both in the classroom and in remote learning, with transformational learning allowing for the locating of change to be within the student (Sandlin, Redmon Wright & Clark, 2013), and of great importance (Giles, Irwin, Lynch, & Waugh, 2010). Also crucial is the opportunity to engage with professional role models, learning from their practice wisdom. Practice wisdom is required in order to use professional judgement (Noble, 2011), grounded in professional values, and allowing for general social work theory to be applied to specific social work settings and context (Chu and Tsui, 2008). Practice wisdom is intimately linked to critical reflection, grounded in issues of power, privilege and inequality (Das and Anand, 2014). Critical reflection requires students to connect their personal experiences with social, cultural and structural context (Fook & Askeland, 2007). By engaging in transformative learning, practice wisdom generated from professional social workers currently in practice and a process of critical reflection, the student is able to foster self-reliance (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013), and develop their own practice wisdom (Marlowe, Appleton, Chinnery & Van Stratum, 2015). This is vital in the transition from university to career and in professional identity development (Cleak & Wilson, 2013). When students are able to “meet” professional social workers they are able to understand the experience of working in the human services sector, developing their social work identity in relation to organisational practice (Liles, 2007; Loya & Klemm, 2016). This, in turn, increases their transferable practice and eventual employability (Thomas & Marks, 2014).

To this end I undertook to embed film as a teaching and learning medium in the group work practice subject I coordinated this year. I did this in two ways. The first was relatively passive and benign in that I made accessible to students a list of links to various film trailers on Moodle that featured group work practice. I used one clip in class and actively demonstrated and engaged the students in critical analysis, but otherwise left them with the instructions to engage with the trailers and embed them as they saw fit in classroom discussions and in their assessment tasks. The second way was more direct

in that I recorded myself interviewing a series of social workers discussing their group work practice in their agencies. I edited three of these mini-films, made them accessible on Moodle and used them all in active teaching in the classroom.

Upon the conclusion of the subject, I invited students to participate in a conversation as to how they had used the film resources in their learning. The students anecdotally reported a high level of engagement when the film trailers were introduced in the classroom and they were invited explicitly to engage in a process of critical analysis and discussion. However, when they were at home engaging on Moodle they were passive, reporting feeling unsure what they were meant to do, beyond watch as they would any other film. The benefits the students found when viewing the interviews with social workers were as I predicted. They enjoyed the examples of social work practice in action, they got a sense of what practice looks like in an agency, and they engaged with the socialisation process i.e. the way social workers speak and act in the workplace. In addition, hearing social workers talk about the challenges they face with group work practice in their organisations it made real for students the challenges we were discussing in class. The next step for my teaching practice is to structure the learning so that students are supported to critically analyse as a matter of course when engaging with film content throughout and around their social work studies.

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