

*Teaching Film Appreciation as a Theoretical and Practical Course:
A Pedagogical Reassessment*

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Abstract

Film appreciation is an academic course that teaches students the art of reading and analysing films. The study of films as an art involves analysing films through various lenses, including film history, narratives, technical aspects, school of cinema, genres, and film theories. Although the course is founded in theory, it has wider practical pedagogy as the course instructor, screens films in class and facilitates discussion based on the theoretical aspects of films. The larger aim is to critically analyse film either in the written or spoken form to appreciate film as an art. The fundamental objective of the course is to inculcate critical thinking, analytical, and writing skills among students. It can be argued that film appreciation is a combination of theory and practical course even though it is predominantly viewed as a theoretical course. This conceptual paper challenges the dominant notion of film appreciation course as a theoretical course pedagogy using the basic principles of distinction between a practical and theory course. It applies the theory of interconnectedness between theory and practical to support the argument. By emphasising active learning through experience and reflection, this paper re-envision film appreciation course as a combination of theory and practical pedagogy. This can help in reconceptualising and reenergising courses that are often viewed with traditional prism.

Keywords: Film Appreciation, Theoretical, Practical Course, Pedagogy

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Introduction

Film appreciation as a course is the art of understanding and analysing films. It is a course that is often opted by cinephile students, which can be perceived as their desire to study the art form that they revere. As a film enthusiast, I found myself drawn towards the course back in my college days, while pursuing post-graduation studies. Fortunately, the course instructor had structured the course to ensure that course included dedicated film screening hours every week along with film discussion, in addition to theory classes. It was an enriching experience to study the elements, aesthetics of films, philosophy, semiotics, among others. As I delved into teaching, I was keen on teaching the film appreciation course, but the experience was not as expected. It was a long haul of theory classes with no screening of films. The course was structured in a way that the total number of hours were divided into teaching theory hours for different units. It was an unthinkable scenario to teach films without film screening and discussion. I tried to improvise by screening films during the free hours of the respective class, which was met with fair share of protests from a sizable portion of students, who did not like the idea of forgoing their free hours. However, students would attend the classes due to attendance. Since it was a general course for the whole class, some film enthusiasts looked forward to the film screenings, while others grumbled and even sometimes fell asleep during the sessions.

When I moved to a different university, I tried a different formula. The course was four hours per week, and so I would screen film for two hours, and teach theory and lead discussions in the other. Since the overall evaluation was in the form of theory exams, I found it challenging to finish teaching all the concepts. When this did not work as it should, I devised a plan of converting the theory course into a practical or submission-based course, and changed a larger part of the syllabus. Until then I did not have the autonomy to decide if a course could be theory or practical. I planned the syllabus in such a way that I incorporated compulsory film screenings in each of the units related to the film concepts. Since it was a practical paper, the evaluations were based on assignments, and not written examinations. I had greater freedom to change my methods of teaching, the nature of assignments and naturally my satisfaction level with the teaching experience improved considerably. Students enjoyed some of the assignments, which were reflective in nature. Although I was able to bring in experiential learning, reflective discussions and critical thinking in my film appreciation course, traditionalists started asking questions. At different levels of presentations such as the Board of the Studies meeting, objections were raised regarding the practical nature of the course, as they strongly opined that it was a theory course. The conflict served as the starting point for this conceptual paper.

Is film appreciation a theory or a practical course? This question forms the fundamental basis for this conceptual paper that attempts to delineate the apt pedagogy to teach film appreciation in higher education. Film appreciation is a popular course often taught as part of programmes like film studies and communication studies at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. In India, it is often regarded as a theoretical course and the teaching method may primarily involve lectures and the method of evaluation is often written exams and assignments. However, the andragogy of teaching and assessments are also determined by the educational systems of countries where the course is taught, and may vary in teaching approach and philosophy. In countries, where examinations are the main means of determining the grades of students, courses like film appreciation or film studies are often treated as purely theoretical subjects with little or no room for film screenings, discussions, and creative assignments. This practice can take away the real essence of film appreciation course, which is largely experiential and introspective in nature. This paper argues the need and basis to treat and teach film appreciation

as a combination of theory and practical course to enhance the teaching and learning process of film appreciation.

Research Questions

Is film appreciation solely a theoretical course?

Can changing the teaching approach of film appreciation enhance experiential learning among students?

Dichotomy of Theory and Practice

The academic courses are often classified as theoretical or practical courses. A clear-cut distinction is established between the two types. A theoretical course is described as a course that deals with theories, concepts, and principles, and in doing so it provides foundational knowledge. Aside from this a theory course is said to enhance critical thinking and develops analytical skills. On the contrary, a practical course is often considered as learning by doing. It involves application of theoretical knowledge and includes hands on experience. It helps in development of applied skills.

The study of film appreciation includes the study of the history of cinema, elements of film, context of film, film movements, style of directors, themes, symbolism, film theories, film critique, and writing, among others (Monaco, 2009). However, it includes film screenings and discussions. In addition to this, it also involves writing film reviews and other form of film critiques. This brings us to our first research question if film appreciation can solely be considered as a theoretical course. Aside from learning theoretical concepts, the course should primarily involve films screening, discussion, and written analysis. This process is an active analysis of film in the form of viewing, critical thinking, spoken and written analysis. The analysis in the form of discussion and written analysis is practical application of learned knowledge.

While it is evident that courses such as film appreciation is a combination of theory and practical components, this will not be readily accepted due to the largely accepted dichotomous understanding. There is a common misconception that practical courses are taught in the laboratory using mechanical or electronic instruments.

The dichotomy of theory is thinking, and practice is doing is directly linked to theory as the realm of the mind, and practice is connected to the realm of body. There is a need to create a greater awareness that dividing line between theory and practice can be blurred effectively. The distinctness or closeness between theory and practice depends on school of thought. "The distinctness of theory and practice tends to fade under the influence of a naturalistic psychology which stresses a controlling cognitive function (explicit and implicit) in virtually all behavior beyond sheer physical movement." (Edel, 1988, p. 159) Historically, it can be seen that the distinction between such dualities have blurred. Further, the rigidity has transformed into contextual distinctions. In the due process, theory and practice are interconnected.

Conclusion

From the analysis above it is evident that there is a need for pedagogical reassessment of film appreciation course to understand the true nature of this course, which will determine its

authenticity. To enhance experiential learning among students this combination of theory and practical can be useful. This will encourage course instructors to change both teaching methods and give creative assignments to cater to the approach of course. This will reduce dependence on only lectures, exams, and essays. It will also create an atmosphere for dedicated film screening hours, discussions, and creative assignments. This conceptual study concludes that film appreciation is not purely a theoretical course; it is a combination of both theory and practice, as it employs theory to actively critique films in written and spoken form.

References

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