Film & History: A Pedagogical Exercise in Interdisciplinarity

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Abstract and Research Question

As a historian, I find it essential that students be able to grapple with the complexity of the past to better understand the present. However, as Boix-Mansilla and Dawes-Duraising contend, "to thrive in contemporary societies, young people need not only to develop insights and modes of thinking that are informed by a variety of disciplines but also to integrate these forms of knowledge effectively." Thus, given the prevalence of historical films and the historical importance of film, I chose to facilitate a black film history honors option in James Madison College. The course was designed to investigate if students could blend both film studies and history to develop a deeper understanding of African American history and use these skills to grapple with contemporary social and political issues.

RQ: Can students successfully integrate history using film studies?

Design and Pedagogical Reasoning

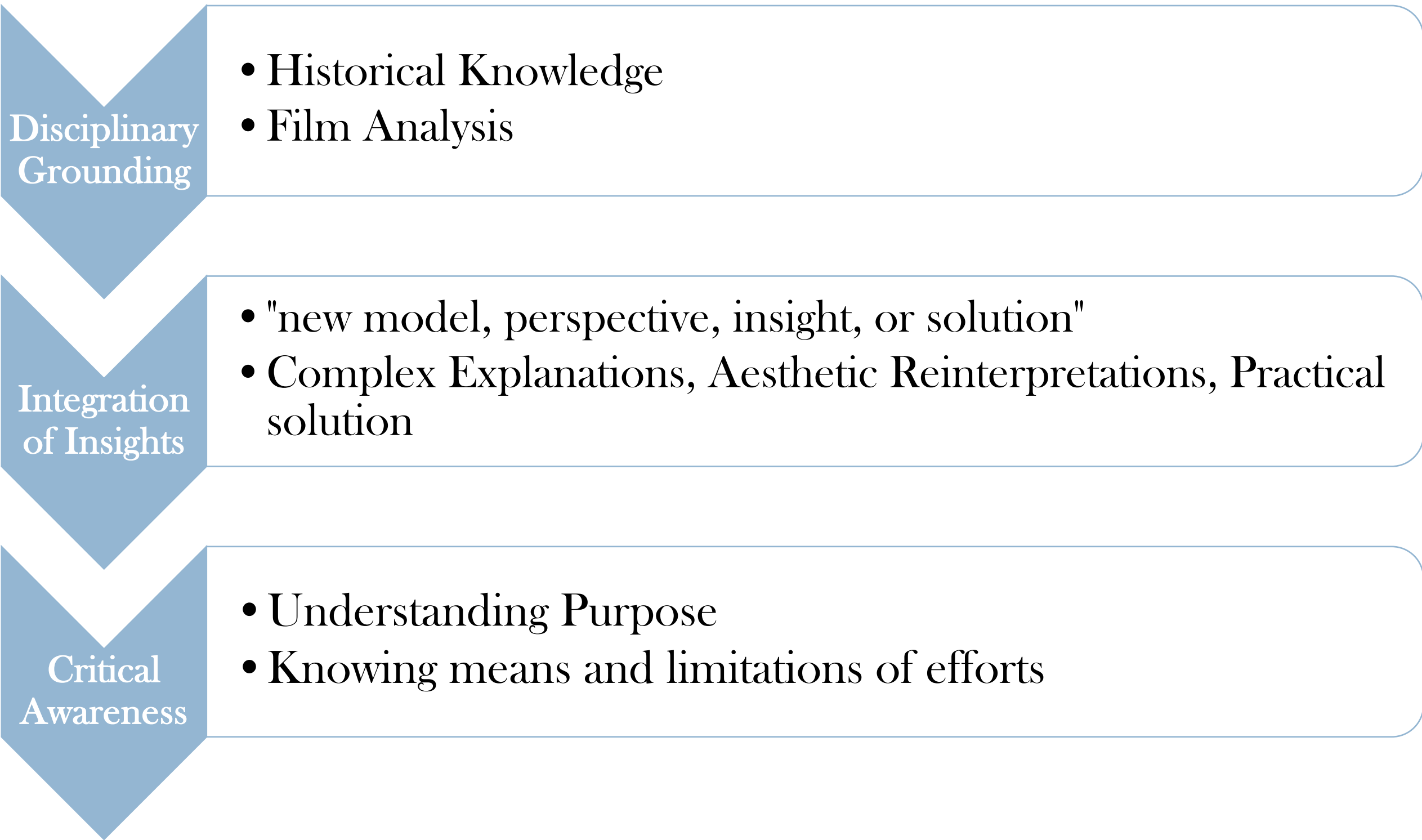**Bi-weekly meetings with seven students and two professors**
→ First two sessions – readings beforehand, clips in-class
→ Subsequent three sessions – readings and clips/film beforehand
→ Semi-structured discussion

Course Website & Online Discussion Posts
→ All course material available online
→ Mostly open-ended prompts
→ Posts due four days in advance of meeting

With the materials and discussion online, I aimed to **increase student interaction** before even getting into the classroom and between meeting times. I also felt that having students publish their thoughts before meeting would limit the possibility of aggressive disagreement within the class space.

Methods

Disciplinary Grounding	• Historical Knowledge • Film Analysis
Integration of Insights	• "new model, perspective, insight, or solution" • Complex Explanations, Aesthetic Reinterpretations, Practical solution
Critical Awareness	• Understanding Purpose • Knowing means and limitations of efforts

Results

Disciplinary Grounding

"...really got me thinking...In the past, I had watched old movies wondering..."

"It shocked me with it frenetic editing and montages of urban black life."

Integration of Insights

"...Our understanding of slavery or the system of slavery is flawed."

Critical Awareness

"It is difficult for me to reflect on this topic...I am not a woman of color and do not have the additional experience of having ancestors who were enslaved. I think it might be interesting to have a class discussion"

"the film showcases that expression through both the actors and actresses wearing an Afro....the characters donned African themed clothing that showcased African patterns. The music had a funk like feel. Much of the scenery gave the impression that it was a low budget film."

Several examples of students seeking or referencing outside material to grapple with film

Discussion

The students generally succeeded in demonstrating a **Disciplinary Grounding**, most strongly in history. Some students excelled more than others at picking up film analysis skills along the way, mostly from my own demonstrations. They drew on their own knowledge and also the readings, most of which provided the historical context for the film's release.

Integration of Insights and **Critical Awareness** proved much more difficult to find examples of in the students' posts and discussion sessions. On some occasions, it was clear that film had helped deepen students' knowledge of a particular historical moment. In addition to the few times that students sought outside material for further guidance on films or shorts, only one student questioned her ability to have the answers based on given material.

Conclusions and Limitations

Conclusions

The posts were not demonstrations, in their totality, of interdisciplinarity, but there are brief moments in the students' reflections/thoughts of the possibility. **Thus, I believe that history and film can be integrated, but when executed the right way.**

The study, while focused on interdisciplinarity, made it possible to recognize a whole host of other significant observations in teaching film and history.
→ Connections between past and present
→ Deeper engagement with film and readings over time
→ Grappling with their own conceptions of African American history and its complexities as they learned more through readings and film
→ Seeking more historical context to gain that deeper understanding from sources other than what was assigned
→ Connections from other classes and disciplines

Limitations

Because the class provided so many alternative observations, I do not consider it a failure. Yet, there were a number of limitations that may have produced a more direct answer to my research question.
→ Small sample size
→ Short amount of time: 5 sessions over 10 weeks
→ Varying degrees of participation
→ Shift of film viewing structures halfway through
→ Change in relationship between film and history
→ Mostly watching clips as opposed to full-length films

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Select References

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