Focus group interview at school “B” – 22.05.06

R: What are your thoughts on the importance of Film Study in today’s society?

I4: I think it’s very important cause we live in a very visual world. And children need to understand interpret a lot of the visual media that comes their way.

I5: I believe there’s a lot of propaganda. And they need to be able to what’s the big word um…

I4: Assimilate

I5: Yes, you know what is fact and what is fiction. Otherwise they’d be lead astray and yes, to be discerning viewers.

R: How did you experience the director’s commentary feature?

I5: From a teaching point of view I don’t really believe it was helpful at all. But I do believe that it is important for the children to believe understand what they see
on the film wasn’t just a once off. That there were reasons. That there was a thought process behind it. I think it was very interesting getting inside the characters. You know Sandra Bullock is such a spontaneous lovely girl and there seems to be a lovely bond between her and the director. And from that point of few as far as background information is concerned (Nods head yes). But as far as a teaching tool is concerned it wasn’t any help at all.

R: Can you think of any advantages that is associated with using the director’s commentary feature?

I7: For teaching purposes?

R: Or as a teacher’s resource.

I4: No I wouldn’t have used it as a teacher’s resource.

I5: But I’ll be honest I fast forwarded and because there wasn’t, we weren’t getting anywhere. You know it was very long winded and that sort of thing. Um…I think that perhaps from the view of the very intelligent children. They might be able to get something out of it. But, it will be you know flogging a head horse. I didn’t find it would help.

I4: Ja, it’s above them.

I6: It’s too long and they get bored very very easily. So as soon as you put that on they going to think it detracts from the film. And they’ll switch off straight away. They won’t be interested at all.

I5: I thought it was problematic. Instead of them focussing on one or two scenes it was sort of just a rambling discussion between producer and actress. And you know I couldn’t see the point in that.
R: If you consider the director’s commentary feature do you feel that the director merged theoretical film elements, for example zooming in, with the practical side. Did he apply it to the movie? From the teachers point of view would that have helped you at all, cause now he’s applied all these elements to the actual film. Would that help the teacher at all?

I7: I don’t think he really did that. It was more talking about what he based his characters on. Maybe if he had said in this particular scene we chose to position her over there and use this angle and this shot. That would have helped us, yes. But I didn’t see that he did that.

I8: I would go as far as so say, if he had stated a reason as to why he did it. Because I mean you can pick up the angles and things just by watching the movie. So sometimes it will help if they gave you the reasoning behind why they did it. As just opposed to they did it.

I7: That’s the thing. I mean we’re making educated guesses. As to why he chose that colour and camera angle. And we hope we’re right most of the time. But if he told us, that would be nice.

I5: The only problem is I then see it as stifling. Because I believe that the way we teach Film Study. I don’t believe there is anything wrong in you seeing one angle and somebody else seeing another angle. And the children then coming in with totally different angle. So if we were now expected to now just see that angle and that’s the point behind it and that’s it. I believe we would be teaching in total contrary to the way we normally teach. Because we encourage incredible lateral thinking in this school.

I8: Ja it would be too fixed.
I5: Yes and it’s in fact very exciting. Where as we teach the child that if they can back up the statement that they’re making, it is then acceptable.

I9: I think that is why children enjoy Film Study so much. Because it is not prescriptive. They can give their bit and it’s valid as long as they can back it up. And they thoroughly enjoy it because they’re all looking a for a different something to give, ja to add in.

R: And on that note, how is Film Study taught at your school?

I5: We start with the theory. And they obviously need to know all the film techniques so we teach them definitions. But we do not stick to the definitions, we teach the effects there of. So it’s not just a close up, what effect is created… And then obviously um…obviously view the movie. They’re allowed to watch the film once. And then we select certain scenes. And we usually, I don’t want to say teach towards an um… topic. But because of the shortage of time we select a theme or two, character development and then perhaps the essay. And then we select certain scenes which best portray those aspects.

R: And how do you overcome the stumbling block that there might be different learners in your class. Entering Film Study at different levels? For example some have been exposed to Film Study and others have not. Um…how do you bridge that gap?

I8: I think you just know how each of your classes respond. And you’re going to know, your one class you can talk quickly and they interact with you. And the other class you have to tell them exactly what’s going on. And they might not give you feedback. And they might not give their input because they just don’t catch it. And you’ve got to go on a more basic level. So it’s just reading your different classes and knowing how they’re going to take it. Um…
I4: We also start Film Study in Grade 8 and there we use a basic recipe if you will. Grade 9 it gets slightly more complicated. Grade 10 more complicated still. So you’re actually building on what you taught in Grade 8. By the time they get to matric, technically they can actually analyse a film themselves. You just need to point out various things you want them to notice. But they’re aware of camera angles and light motif and all of that sort of stuff by the time they get to Grade 10.

I5: I believe we teach very very thoroughly. I’m very proud of the knowledge sitting and expertise sitting around this table. And, um... as far as the different levels. I have a child who just arrived to Grade 11 and um I think because of the way we teach. In other words they don’t mess around during Film Study. They’re not allowed to talk, no. It’s not stifling but we encourage them to focus and take notes. And repeat frequently that the notes they take are the only notes that they are going to be able to refer to. So they don’t get handouts, on themes and everything neatly packaged. They have to compile their own notes. And I believe that the exciting part about it here is that even at Grade 11 respondent 4 and I will most probably teach totally differently. But at the end of the whole film course their essays will still be spot on. You know you might focus on certain angles styles in a certain scene and I might not. And I don’t believe that that is problematic at all.

I7: Ja we all seem to follow that recipe of “mise-en-scene”. Sound and editing …

R: And do you have many resources available on the topic of Film Study?

I7: Not really.

I4: No.

I5: No but as I put in my notes again I’m very proud of my staff’s attitude to Film Study. You are given the film and it’s not neatly packaged and it’s up to you to
make of it as you please. Obviously with guidance. Um…there are for my first
time teachers at senior level, we use the Witness guidelines and then Strictly
Ballroom guidelines. Just as an introduction on how to teach film. But there after
it’s up to each and every teacher to stamp their own personality on the way they
teach film.

I9: I’ve use the book called “Reel life” before. But I show the children the photos
and they think it’s hilarious. So I make my own things on what is a camera angle
or short, long whatever and that kind of stuff. Because it’s very old fashioned and
the children switch off.

I5: But it’s a solid book. For a total new comer, it’s a solid book it really is. From
the teachers’ point of view but not as a teaching link (word unclear) not at all. And
also we incorporate the filming techniques in the study of cartoons and visual
literacy. And um…you see your close ups so we reinforce it. It’s not as if it’s Film
Study and that’s it. We do take certain aspects into other areas of English as
well.

I4: Advertising as well.

I5: That’s it.

I9: Visual literacy as a whole.

R: Are you aware of any resources that encompassed special effects?

I6: What I use is featurettes from other movies. I always buy a DVD with two
discs so that I can get the bonus features. And then I find a short little 10min
featurette. And then when we get to that part in Film Study, when we are coming
to the notes, then I’ll show them that movie. Um…for example from the Matrix.
There’s a little featurette that I got um…on my DVD about the bullet time. Which
is a new type of slow motion they use. And I would show them that and as part of this is where slow motion is going. And they seem to be a lot more interested in that because it’s so cutting edge. And it looks so fancy the way they do it. It looks as though that, given the opportunity, they would probably like to try that.

I4: You can also get extra information from the Internet. But it’s particularly zoned for the American Colleges. Where the directors have given them what landed on the cutting floor and that sort of thing. That sort of stuff you can get from there. But in an actual book, no!

I5: But I’m happy with that because that’s what I enjoy about Film Study. It’s not prescriptive at all. And the children love it too because they don’t think that we all have to see that angle from that sequence you know. It’s absolutely open-ended and it’s very very exciting. So we have no problems with there being so few resources. The fewer the better. Because I believe, I don’t know, sometimes it encourages laziness on the teacher’s side and stagnation. So I…I don’t know if that’s the right answer.

R: Are you aware of any development opportunities, from the GDE’s side, with regard to Film Study?

All respondents start laughing.

R: Are they creating any opportunities for teachers to be developed in the area of Film Study?

I4, 6, 7 & 8: No.

I5: There might be in the Teacher centre you know and so on. I haven’t seen any of them I must be quite honest. Again coming back to what we said it would take a very bold person to present a course on Film Study. Particularly if there are any
knowledgeable or let’s say people who are comfortable with teaching Film Study in the audience. That person is going to be hung up to dry.

I4: But it would be nice.

I5: Sure

I4: For more disadvantaged schools. And that’s where I feel maybe a little bit of a resource would not go amiss. Because I sometimes wonder about what goes on in other schools. Where they don’t have the Internet access and they don’t have teachers who are thinking laterally and using you know little featurettes and so on. So where are they getting their information from? And that, that concerns me.

I5: But you see we’ve overcome that by team-teaching. We are completely over to it. You know a lot of us have been here for a few years. But if you think of the good old days, well not the good old days, a number of years ago, we use to team-teach. And there’s nothing more exciting than that. And there’s nothing more exciting then actually having another teacher in the class. And then sharing ideas. It really worked very well.

R: Back on the topic of the director’s commentary feature, if the director, as you mentioned earlier, would substantiate his views, would you think that might alleviate some of the schools’ as you mentioned in the rural areas, where the teachers don’t have too much background, do you think it would alleviate some of their frustrations?

I4: No I don’t think so, cause again those particular schools don’t have facilities. They don’t have access to um…DVD players and like some of them don’t have electricity. So I don’t think it needs to come from a director.
I5: See I’m worried about the subjective side of it. I really am. Because I believe that that would stifle lateral thinking. And that’s not what they need. I believe when it comes to helping disadvantages schools, is to go the way that we would. As I say there are very very comprehensive guidelines on Witness which might simple be an old film. But my golly that’s where we all started. And it was a very very firm grounding. I’m even running out of vocab trying to say what I want to say.

I4: I don’t even know if disadvantaged schools do Film Study to be honest with you. I don’t know if they do.

I9: But I think it’s also, it boils down to the teacher. What is the teacher going to do about it. You know, you can have all the resources in the world but if you’re not motivated and if you’re not interested in giving your learners the best you can do then it doesn’t matter. Whether you’ve got resources or not you’ll make a plan. You’ll educate yourself, you’ll do what you need to do.

I5: You know because for me doing it the way respondent 3 does it and everybody else obviously in their own different way, keeps it up to minute. Because in real life it would cause great hilarity because it is so old fashioned. So unless your resources are up to date, your examples to show children are completely up to date, they’re still going to look at you with a gaping eye. So, you know I don’t want to say that I’m anti resources. But honesty teachers who are qualified and who have a will a passion about their subjects, they will make a go of it. Because at certain schools you have a difference in just the two languages. Where one might be very forward thinking and the other language teachers might be. And there is a vast gap at certain schools.

R: So am I correct in my assumption that at this school the general conception is that you don’t agree the director’s commentary feature can be used as a teachers resource for development?
I4: Correct.

I5: Definitely.

R: Are there any other comments you’d like to make on the topic of Film Study or the director’s commentary feature?

I6: I also think when it comes to Film Study in the rural areas. I have seen books that go out. From companies that simply sponsor um... overseas books to underprivileged schools. And when it comes to things like movies um... or everyday life they’re very simple studies. Like, movie is shot with a camera and it shows you this that and the next thing. They don’t really go into depth like close ups, long shots anything like that. It’s simple just the basics like actually what is a movie? It’s not just go to the cinema and watch it on the screen, ok that’s movie. You know they kind of seem to want to give them that background knowledge of where it comes from. Rather then how to study the actual movie in depth.

I5: And you see that type of child wouldn't be exposed to frequent advertising watching things like that. Where as our children they are, they sit in front of the t.v. for ages.

I4: They are in outdated with visual image.

I5: They are, so ja, I think that that is a very valid point that respondent 3 has made. But it would actually be useless teaching it as in depth as we would. But yet again on the other hand when those children hit Varsity and that sort of thing... You know, I believe it’s very very sad that they haven’t had the base given by Film Study.
I4: Ja, I feel that it’s a under recognised aspect of our curriculum. I really do, there’s so much value in it.

I9: Definitely.

I4: One kind of gets the feeling that its, oh well do it don’t do it. And I think that’s very sad for me cause there are some stunning movies with wonderful themes. And in the world that we live in with some many children that have learning problems this is a way to reach them. And I don’t think it’s utilised to it’s full potential.

I9: When I did Film Study this year there were children that hadn’t said a word in my class. Then suddenly Film Study arrived and they were just about bouncing off the ceilings to get their word in. And now having done that form of literature, you know as a visual literacy, their approach to literature has been amazing. Because I draw links to film and I try to bring it in to make it more real to them. And they are responding to well to normal literature because you now looking at it from a film point of view as well and tying the two together. Definitely has boosted their enthusiasm.

I5: And also when we were at school, well please don’t ask me how many centuries ago that was. But I know we were discouraged and even in my early years of teaching, for children, let’s say we were studying Romeo and Juliet, for children to look at the film Romeo and Juliet. Where as, we certainly don’t hold that view point in this school. And which is very exciting. And again as you say respondent 9 to incorporate children who are turned off by the written work. When you look at the film of Romeo and Juliet and you then look at the film Shakespeare in Love as well with the Grade 11s. Then to look at the parallel you know the balcony scene, that’s just one example. It’s opened a whole new dimension and its made Romeo and Juliet far more better. And I think over the years with the children writing love poems and things like that. I honesty believe
that that was helped along by their having viewed the film. As well as having looked at the set work. And I believe that these parallel studies are very exciting. But again it takes confidence on the teacher’s part. Number one subject knowledge. Must have a sound knowledge. Or you must be over open to suggestions by the children. You must be able to check out immediately is this child trying to be funny, make a fool of me. Or is the child actually raising a point of view that I’ve never considered. And as I say I’m very proud of my people and they way they’ve worked. I believe preparation is the starting point and there after the world is at your feet.

R: How would you suggest teachers obtain Film Study content knowledge?

I4: Experience, practice.

17: On the job training.

I5: Ja, on the job training. And then I remember when we first taught Film Study, I literally sat scene for scene. And I wrote out notes more copiously then any other child has done. You know what I mean? I sorry it starts with the teacher. I think whoever made the point of having the books slapped in your lap. I’m sorry it may work with any other subject you know content based course but forget it Film Study, you’re in the hot seat. So absolutely I agree with you.

I7: Most of us here have degrees. It’s the same thing. We learnt about English literature but we didn’t learn how to teach it till you arrive here. And then first year you think oops, I need to learn grammar, I need to learn whatever. And other teachers help you and you muzzle along. Experience does it ja.

R: Can you suggest any resources for a teacher to use to develop her Film Study skills? You mentioned the Internet, you mentioned the extras on the DVD.
16: Reel life, is excellent.

14: It's excellent for basic camera angles and that kind of thing, ja.

19: Pincus, the English handbook, Pincus. That's also got a section which is quite good.

15: English in Context and what's the other one, Insights.

19: They've got a little bit.

15: Yes. And you know just as we say, plant the seeds and then it's up to you to grow the harvest. And it is possible to grow the harvest, I believe it is. I would have hated to be given a lesson, a book that I now have to weigh through. And I don't know how I would have taught if I've been given too many things.

17: Ja, they could even go sit in for a few sessions to see how a experienced teacher teaches it. Someone who is comfortable with teaching Film Study. And they can sit and see oh this is how it's done.

14: Like a workshop.

19: Ja, I learnt a lot from sitting in on one of the teacher's lessons. When I was a student I come and observed. And I learnt a lot about Film Study from that.

15: And it doesn't take long. You know it doesn't need 6 weeks of training. A week of just team-teaching. You share ideas; it's such an easy process. But you've got to have the passion and the courage. I believe the courage to go where no other study guide has gone.