

Teaching Philosophy Using Music Videos



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Abstract

The use of music videos as a pedagogical tool continues to be a new idea in schools and institutions of higher learning. Although there has been substantial literature and empirical studies on teaching using music and films, there is no known in-depth study to date on using music videos in teaching. This paper explores the possibility of teaching philosophy using music videos by highlighting the benefits of teaching using films and music. By focusing on two areas of philosophy - critical reasoning, and epistemology - the paper explores the possibility of using two popular music videos for the teaching of deductive and inductive arguments, and the concept of knowledge.

The Benefits of using Music Videos

A music video is a video with visual images and music. Music videos can be classified into three main types (Tan, 2007). The first type features a videotaped rendition of a musician performing the song. This could either be a pre-recorded performance in a studio (e.g. Whitney Houston's "How Would I Know") or some outdoor venue (e.g. Westlife's "If I Let You Go"). It could also be a taped recording of a live performance of the musician during a concert (e.g. Madonna's "Blond Ambition Tour"). The second type shows the musician performing the song, but includes static or visual images interpreting the lyrics (e.g. Def Leppard's "Photograph"). The third type is essentially a mini film featuring either the musician or actors acting out a story which illuminates the song (e.g. Pink Floyd's "Another Brick in the Wall"). With modern technology, the launch of the MTV video channel in 1981, and the trend of pop stars using music videos to market their songs, music videos have become increasingly sophisticated and appealing, with captivating images, special effects, and storylines.

By combining film and music, music videos can enhance the students' learning in various ways. A number of

writers have pointed out the salubrious effects of music on learning. Music is primarily used in first and second language vocabulary acquisition. Empirical studies show that music helps in promoting understanding and memorization in students, especially children (e.g. Botarri & Evans, 1982; Calvert, 1991; Chong & Gan, 1997; Gfeller, 1983; Kilgour, Jakobson & Cuddy, 2000). Music has also been found to be effective in enhancing pre-reading and writing skills (e.g. Register, 2001; Standley & Hughes, 1997). By activating the learner's prior knowledge, music also aids the learner in acquiring and digesting new information on that subject (Harris, 2005). Music also creates a conducive learning environment, reducing stress, increasing interest, and setting the state for listening and learning (Woodall & Ziembroski, 2005).

But music videos do not just rely on music to attract the viewers; the music is juxtaposed with visual images. The images usually consist of the musicians performing the song, or a story interpreting the song. The latter, popularised by Michael Jackson in his 1984 music video *Thriller*, is similar to a film in which a plot and specific ideas (explicit or implied) are conveyed to the viewers. The use of films in teaching has become increasingly popular, although it is used predominantly in language teaching (e.g. Braddock, 1996; Garçon, 2001; Hasselbach & Dickel, 2003; Karpinski, 2003; Mejia, Xiao & Kenney, 1994; Sherman 2003; Stempleski, 2000; Stempleski, Tomalin & Maley, 2001). By presenting various communicative situations, films can generate interest and motivation and lead to successful learning (Guest, 1997; Longergan, 1994). The realism in films also offers rich contextualised and cross-cultural information to the viewers (King, 2002; Summerfield, 1993; Summerfield & Lee, 2001).

Interest is growing among philosophers in the use of films as a conduit for conveying philosophical ideas. Given that movies are prevalent in today's culture, Porter (2004) argues that an exposition of the film will easily bring out the philosophical meanings to the audience. Others like Falzon (2002), Liitch (2002), and Tan and Crawford (2006) have also relied on films to expound such broad philosophical themes as epistemology and ethics to readers. Philosophical books devoted to a particular film or television show such as *The Simpsons and Philosophy* (Irvin, Conrad & Skoble, 2001), *The Matrix and Philosophy* (Irvin, 2002), *Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Philosophy* (South, 2003), *The Lord of*

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the Rings and Philosophy (Bassham & Bronson, 2003) and *Harry Potter and Philosophy* (Baggett & Klein, 2004) have also proliferated. There are, however, no known materials or research on teaching philosophy using music videos. Music videos have a lot of potential as a teaching tool since they share the benefits of teaching using music and films, and are accessible and popular with the masses, especially young people. Unlike full-length films, they have the added advantage of being concise and short, averaging about five to ten minutes. Of course, the disadvantage is that they may lack the depth and nuances of full-length films. Music videos therefore should be seen as a complementary tool to longer films, and not a replacement of them. This paper explores the possibility of using two music videos to teach philosophy in two areas: deductive and inductive arguments, and the concept of knowledge.

Teaching Critical Reasoning (Deductive and Inductive Arguments) using Michael Jackson's *Heal the World*

Michael Jackson's music video *Heal the World* is a well-produced short film suitable to promote critical thinking in students. The music video flashes pictures of innocent children playing and fierce-looking soldiers in tanks and holding guns. Such juxtaposition of images climaxes in a child giving a flower to a soldier, and the soldiers discarding their weapons. The video concludes with hundreds of children holding lighted candles and dreaming of a better place. This music video could be used to teach deductive and inductive arguments. Teachers may begin by introducing basic philosophical concepts such as the definitions of "argument", "premise", "conclusion", "deductive arguments", "inductive arguments", "validity", "soundness" and "cogency". The teacher could then play the music video, and ask the students the following three questions:

- (1) What is/are the premise(s) and conclusion? Identify them.
- (2) Is this a deductive or inductive argument? Explain.
- (3) Is this a good argument? Explain.

(1) What is/are the premise(s) and conclusion? Identify them.

The song has Michael Jackson repeating the chorus: "If you care enough for the living, make a better place for you and for me." Teachers can lead the students to construct the following deductive argument:

Premise 1: If you care enough for the living, make a better place for you and for me.

Premise 2: You care enough for the living.

Conclusion: Make a better place for you and for me.

(2) Is this a deductive or inductive argument? Explain.

It is a deductive argument. A deductive argument is an argument in which it is claimed that the reasons (premises) necessarily lead to the claim (conclusion). In this case, given that the premises are true (If you care enough for the living, make a better place for you and for me, and you care enough for the living), then the claim is that the conclusion must be true, not only probably true (Make a better place for you and for me).

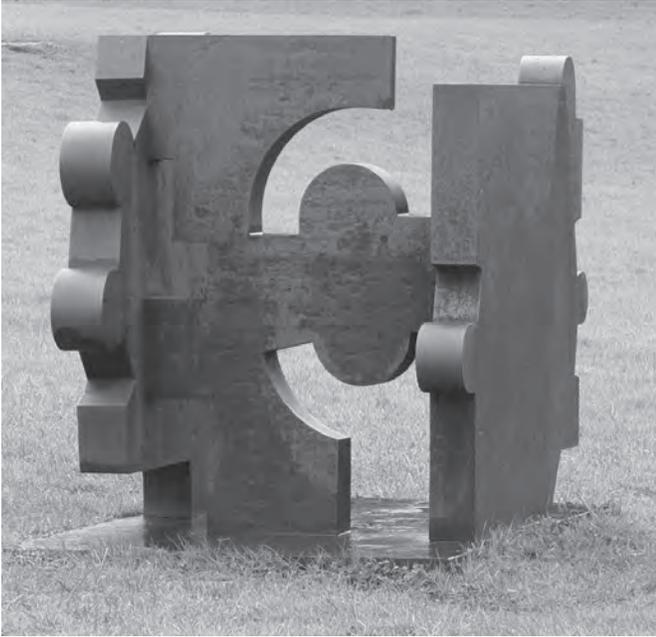
(3) Is this a good argument? Explain.

Applying the criteria of a good deductive argument, the teacher can discuss with the students whether the premises are true, and whether the conclusion must follow from the premises. Students should be able to tell that the conclusion necessarily follows from the premises. Premise 2 makes a debatable point where it states "You care enough for the living". The truth of this premise of course depends on who you are referring to. Teachers may wish to get the students to reflect on themselves and judge whether they think they care enough for the living. Or the teacher may cite examples of people who care for the living (for example Mother Teresa who devoted her life to care for the poor in India) and those who do not (for example Hitler who killed 6 million Jews). This could be a moral education lesson on how we should do our part to make this world a better place because we care for the living. For older students such as those in high schools, the teacher could introduce the concept of a complex argument where the conclusion of one argument forms the basis of another argument. After exhorting the listener/viewer to make a better world for everyone, Michael Jackson goes on to sing: "And the dream we were conceived in will reveal a joyful face, and the world we once believed in will shine again in grace. ...We could fly so high... We could really get there." We could summarize all these outcomes as "We could achieve our dream." So the structure for the two arguments would be as follows:

Premise 1: If you care enough for the living, make a better place for you and for me.

Premise 2: You care enough for the living.

Conclusion: Make a better place for you and for me.



Premise 3: If you make a better place for you and for me, we will achieve our dream.

Premise 4: You make a better place for you and for me.

Conclusion: We will achieve our dreams.

For older students or high-ability students, the teacher may also wish to discuss how the music video attempts to use a variety of ways to persuade the viewer to “heal the world”. Examples are the use of heart-rending images, soft music and emotive words. The discerning listener can also uncover assumptions in the song which support the arguments. For example, the song assumes that everyone has love deep inside one’s heart, as evidenced in the opening lyrics: “There’s a place in your heart and I know that it is love.” Students could discuss how Michael Jackson knows that there is love in the viewer’s hearts, and explore the epistemological foundations of love and their manifestations in different societies.

Teaching Epistemology (the Concept of Knowledge) using Avril Lavigne’s *My Happy Ending*

The music video *My Happy Ending* by Avril Lavigne is another excellent multimedia tool for helping students understand the nature of knowledge. The song is about a girl (portrayed by Avril) who breaks up with her boyfriend. The song starts with Avril recalling the good times she had with her boyfriend, before they quarreled and broke up. The song expresses Avril’s negative feelings towards her ex-boyfriend, telling him that he was mistaken about his impression of her. The word “know” and “knew” are

mentioned eight times in the song.

This music video could be used to teach the concept of knowledge. Teachers may begin by introducing basic philosophical concepts such as the different types of knowledge (competence, acquaintance and information) and the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge (justified true belief). The teacher could then play the music video, and ask the students the following three questions:

- (1) What are the different types of knowledge portrayed in the music video?
- (2) What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge?

(1) What are the different types of knowledge portrayed in the music video?

Two types of knowledge are referred to in the song:

- (1) I know what they say. They tell you I’m difficult.
- (2) But they don’t know me.

The first type of knowledge is information. Here “they” refers to the ex-boyfriend’s friends. Apparently, these friends told her ex-boyfriend that she is difficult. So the statement can be rewritten as: “I know that they say I am difficult.” In the second case, the knowledge is acquaintance. Avril is refuting the claim by her ex-boyfriend’s friends that she is difficult. By asking whether these friends really know her, she is effectively saying that they do not know her well. The music video ends with Avril playing the guitar in a band. This is the third type of knowledge – the competence to play the guitar.

(2) What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowledge?

The teacher could also apply what the students have learnt about knowledge as justified true belief to the song. Avril told her ex-boyfriend in the song:

“You were all the things I thought I knew.”

What does “I thought I knew” mean? Avril is saying that all that she believed about her boyfriend turned out to be false. So it was not a case of “I know” but “I thought I knew”. We can identify a few characteristics about knowledge from here. The first point is that there is a kind of knowledge which involves belief. To know that x is to believe that x . The teacher can point out that a person S cannot be said to know p , even if p is true, if he or she does not personally believe it. Lehrer (1990) argues that the belief or acceptance

in knowledge refers to accepting something for the purpose of attaining truth (or epistemic purpose) and avoiding error with respect to the very thing one accepts. He points out that sometimes we believe things that we do not accept for the sake of felicity rather than a regard for truth. For example, a mother may believe that a loved one is safe for the pleasure of so believing, although there is no evidence to justify accepting this out of regard for truth. Secondly, there is a difference between knowledge and belief with respect to truth. One can believe that something is true when it is actually false, yet this is not knowledge. From the music video, we see that Avril had initially believed that boyfriend was a good person (probably with attributes such as being honest, kind and faithful). But her assertion that “I thought I knew” shows that this belief is false; therefore this cannot constitute knowledge.

Thirdly, knowledge involves evidence to justify one’s claim. The teacher can explain that a belief that is true just because of luck does not qualify as knowledge. Beliefs that are lacking justification are false more often than not. However, on occasion, such beliefs happen to be true. The reason why knowledge is not the same as true belief is that knowledge requires evidence. To be justified is to have good evidence for believing in something. Avril had initially thought that her boyfriend was honest, good and caring. From the song, we see that Avril gives evidence of what her ex-boyfriend is really like, in her view: “All the things you hide from me, all the s*** that you do. ... thanks for acting like you cared”.

Recommendations and Conclusion

To guide teachers who wish to include music videos in their teaching of philosophy, here are some recommendations:

- Select music videos which have a clear plot with a beginning, middle and end. Also choose those which are well-produced, visually powerful, meaningful and even controversial. Examples are music videos by Michael Jackson (e.g. *Thriller*, *Bad* and *Remember the Time*), *In the Shadows* by The Rasmus, *A Brick in the Wall* by Pink Floyd, *Numb* by Linkin Park, and *(There’s Gotta be) More to Life* by Stacie Orrico.
- Scaffolding in the form of introducing philosophical concepts, along with background information on the music videos, should be given to students. Guiding questions such as the ones mentioned in this paper can also help the students to link and apply the concepts learnt from the music videos.

- Follow-up could be done in the form of showing another music video which features the same philosophical concept. For example, Whitney Houston’s music video, *How Would I Know*, and Alicia Keys’s music video, *You Don’t Know My Name* complement Avril’s music video on the nature of knowledge. Alternatively, the teacher could show a full-length film on the same philosophical concepts. For example, critical reasoning skills could be reinforced with films such as *Twelve Angry Men*, and epistemological issues can be further explored through films such as *The Matrix*.

This paper suggests that music videos, when appropriately chosen and well-incorporated into the curriculum, could be an innovative and effective means to promote philosophical thinking in students. The author has used music videos to teach philosophy to groups of teachers and students and informal interviews with them show that they found music videos helpful in concretising the philosophical concepts learnt. This preliminary study can be the start of more empirical research on the potential, benefits and challenges of using music videos as a teaching tool.



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