

## **Beyond “Feeling Blessed”: Using International Documentary Film to Foster Global Awareness in an Online College Course**

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**ABSTRACT:** As US colleges and universities incorporate an international requirement for undergraduate students, this study assesses the value of an online international documentary course. The effect of documentary viewing was evaluated using students’ reflective essays, noting possible shifts in perspectives on international issues after film viewing. Findings show that students gained new knowledge, displayed empathy, felt “blessed” for their privileges, and were inspired to help others. Findings also reflected an ignorance about inequitable power relationships between the United States and other countries, producing an “othering” effect. Recommendations are provided for engaging students in more critical research and reflection about local-global connections.

**KEYWORDS:** Global awareness, documentary film, online learning, international education, higher education

**Review of Literature  
Methodology  
Findings & Discussion  
Conclusions & Recommendations  
References  
Appendix**

Documentaries have come to play a pivotal role in strategies to internationalize curricula and classrooms and to broaden students’ understanding of the world. Instructors use documentaries widely to accomplish the following objectives: to develop global perspectives among students; to improve their understanding of relationships between local and global contexts; to heighten students’ awareness of difference and diversity of environments and societies; and to cultivate their interest and ability to relate to different perspectives while developing empathy for others. In sum, in accomplishing these objectives, many universities hope that students will become more prepared to live in a global society (Berk, 2009; Ozder, 2014).

To this end, an online undergraduate international documentary course was created. Following Emily Style's (1988) essay, "Curriculum as a Window and a Mirror," the purpose of the course was to create a curriculum experience that was both "a window and a mirror" into global issues. As a window, international documentary films carry stories and images in life that are typically far removed from one's daily experience, expanding one's knowledge and understanding of values, beliefs, innovations, and struggles outside of the United States. As a mirror, these films tell universal stories across national boundaries and languages, creating connections across time, place, and cultures. Thus, depending on the curriculum and pedagogy, international documentaries can be powerful educational tools for integrating universal human values integral to global education.

The purpose of this research study was to explore the undergraduate student experiences of those who took the online documentary course, Cineculture, at a public, midwestern predominantly white university. To what extent, if any, did their viewing experience, coupled with the guided essay and discussion forum, result in their considering a new perspective about sociocultural and political issues in other countries and the United States?

This study was guided by the following research questions:

1. Using documentary film as text about international issues in an online course, what are students' learning experiences?
2. Using documentary film as text about international issues in an online course, what are effective pedagogical strategies to raise student awareness?

This one-unit online course is an "I"-designated course, which fulfills the international requirement for undergraduate students. Documentary film serves as a "window" into another country and culture and the assignments encourage students to consider the "mirror"—their positionality and ways that they can relate to distant people, places, and global issues. Our findings revealed that the documentaries were a catalyst for student empathy about people and issues in faraway places. Remiss were students' deeper understanding of the United States' involvement in sustaining or perpetuating the injustices they viewed in the documentaries, as well as an awareness of how their desire to help reified a white savior complex if they failed to address their own complicity.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Global Citizenship and Education**

Scholars debate complex definitions of global citizenship (Tarozzi & Inguaggiato, 2018; Goren, & Yemini, 2017). While acknowledging these "differing perspectives," UNESCO (2015) defines global citizenship as "a sense of belonging to a broader community and common humanity. It emphasizes political, economic, social, and cultural interdependency and interconnectedness between the local, the national, and the global" (p. 14). Hatley (2019) criticizes this definition for its vague terms and potential use by those in power to reinforce the status quo, yet advocates suggest using a social justice lens of anticolonialism and decolonization in conjunction with UNESCO's definition and policies to interrogate issues of power (Tarozzi & Inguaggiato, 2018).

To gain a sense of belonging across the boundaries of the local, national, and global society, UNESCO calls for three educational dimensions: cognitive, socio-emotional, and behavioral. First, learners acquire knowledge about local, national, and global issues, cultures, and policies; then they critically consider how these issues, cultures, and policies are connected (UNESCO, 2015; Bosio & Torres, 2019; Cantón, & Garcia, 2018). Second, learners develop a sense of solidarity and common humanity through empathy and a respect for cultural and personal differences (UNESCO, 2015; Bosio & Torres, 2019). Third, learners act in ways that sustain the environment, peace, and human rights (Bosio & Torres, 2019; Veugelers, 2011; UNESCO, 2015). Thus, global citizenship education advocates for the global commons through knowledge, solidarity, and action.

How does one teach global citizenship education in the United States in a way that fosters compassion, connection, and understanding that does not fall prey to feelings of pity or superiority? Pity “generalizes suffering beings to an abstract image,” while compassion occurs in a direct connection with the suffering, not a generalization, producing a co-suffering that causes students to experience a sense of solidarity despite the physical distance (Kitayama & Hashizaki, 2018, p. 272). Barton and Levstik (2004) call for an historical empathy as an act of care that involves emotions and a sense of civil and social justice. Empathy plays a critical role in decentralizing one’s perspective to consider “other people’s cultural affiliations, world views, beliefs, interests, emotions, wishes and needs” (Council of Europe, 2016, p. 47). However, Arendt (1963) cautions a compassion that identifies too personally with the suffering individual(s) as it could disconnect students from the broader context. Instead, Saito (2010) advocates for compassion towards individuals connected to a shared interest in bringing a sense of solidarity globally. Hence, “caring promotes a sense of justice, which is considered a more public conception” (Kitayama & Hashizaki, 2018, p. 274). Further, Okano (2012) argues that the ethics of care is a more inclusive approach to social justice, as it pays attention to contexts and consequences of suffering people, rather than moral judgement. To orient students in the direction of solidarity and an ethics of care, it is important to engage students in making connections between past and present (Nygren, 2016) in local and global contexts (Okano, 2012).

Another challenge involves confronting the “white savior industrial complex” or WSIC (Cole, 2012). Described as the “confluence of practices, processes, and institutions that reify historical inequities to ultimately validate white privilege,” the WSIC is a lingering remnant of Western colonialism (Anderson, 2013, p. 39). It involves the idea that white people must “save” or solve the problems of non-whites without acknowledging the ways in which white people might have contributed to existing problems. Hollywood films play a powerful role in promoting the WSIC, both in the United States and abroad, through such films as *Slumdog Millionaire*, *The Blind Side*, *The Help*, *Lion*, and *Freedom Writers*. In these films, the white savior usurps the narrative while people of color are decentralized as their lives are improved. This perpetuates the “othering” of people of color while reinforcing inequitable societal power structures and racial stereotypes (Rodesiler & Garland, 2018). Consequently, these films pose hurdles for educators striving to educate students to understand their own positionality and that of the United States, especially in relation to political, economic, and social problems abroad.

## **Teaching with Documentaries**

Research studies have shown that when documentary film is paired with pedagogical strategies like discussion, questioning, presentation, writing, and conceptualization, student learning is improved (Bloom et al., 2015; Cakmakci, 2017). Documentaries are both instructional and inspirational in the creation of real-world projects, increasing social, political, and economic awareness (Bergera, 2018). Biographical documentaries paired with writing and discussion increased student awareness and empathy regarding marginalized individuals (Gonzalez et al., 2016). However, film representations should be critically discussed (Daniels, 2012; Shdaimah, 2009; Sylvest & Munster, 2015). With attention to critical media literacy, other reputable information sources, such as peer-reviewed articles, can be incorporated to interrogate film content. Using this method with video worksheets, Daniels (2012) noted an increase in student engagement, stronger connections to the content, more attributions of critical thinking and recognition of other points of view.

Documentary films are a common teaching tool in many disciplines (Berk, 2009), but their use in higher education is little understood. Most research has focused on the use of documentaries in secondary-school teaching (e.g., Barbas et al., 2009; Dhingra, 2003; Fortner, 1985; Kelley et al., 1987) with limited research at the college level (e.g., Berk, 2009). Research on the effectiveness of videos in classroom instruction has shown that they help to draw and hold students' attention (Berk, 2009; Dhingra, 2003), help students to make emotional connections with content (Champoux, 1999), can improve acquisition and retention of knowledge (Fortner, 1985), and can increase students' sensitivity to environmental issues (Barbas et al., 2009; Fortner, 1985). Researchers interested in the use of documentaries in classrooms frequently focus on the result of viewing one or two specific documentaries to examine the pedagogical effectiveness of particular films (e.g., Barbas et al., 2009; Owens, 1987). Little research, if any, has centered on fully online college teaching with documentary film serving as the only text. This study hopes to show the effectiveness of such a course in raising social, political, and economic awareness of international issues and its efforts, or pedagogy, in fostering a global awareness.

## **Cineculture Curriculum**

Created in Fall 2017, the online one-unit undergraduate course, Cineculture, is eight-weeks in length, capped at sixty students, and uses documentary film about social justice issues around the world to raise sociopolitical and global awareness. The course fills quickly and typically has a waitlist, as it fits the "I," or international, requirement for the university; it is convenient and economical, as it is fully online and asynchronous with the only "texts" or "reading" being film viewing.

The online pedagogy and curriculum consist of viewing four documentaries, engaging in an online discussion forum, and submitting a guided essay about the film. The students are divided into ten groups of six students for the discussion forum. The instructor selects the streaming documentaries (accessible through the university library) to ensure a glimpse of different countries and issues. After viewing each film, the students post to their discussion group something that stood out for them in the film as well as

pose a question to the group. In addition, each person responds to at least one of the group member's posts.

The guided essay is meant to encourage a “deeper dive” into the material presented in the film. The guidelines are the same for all films (See Appendix), with students doing additional research on the history of the location of the film as well as investigating the connection of the film director to the documentary’s topic and location. Students identify power issues and are asked to investigate and produce more information about something that piqued their interest in the film. Moreover, they research policies and advocacy programs in place to address the target issue. Finally, the guided essay culminates with students being asked to discuss their own personal and professional growth as a result of viewing this film.

### Methodology

At the end of the Fall 2018 and Fall 2019 semesters, after grades were posted, students were emailed and solicited to participate in this research by signing a consent form indicating that their essays could be accessed and used as data for this study. Fourteen out of 58 students participated in Fall 2018 and 5 out of 58 students participated in Fall 2019. All essays from the combined 19 students were downloaded and de-identified. The faculty member who oversees this course reduced the number of films required for the course from 5 to 4 between Fall 2018 and Fall 2019. As a result, the researchers analyzed a total of nine essays from 19 students.

The chart below contains the film titles and their content from both semesters. The rationale for those selected was based on an attempt to represent a variety of countries and social justice issues, while limited by films with stream capability through the university library.

<i>Survivors (2018)</i>	Ebola outbreak (Sierra Leone)
<i>On Her Shoulders (2018)</i>	Yazidi genocide and ISIS sexual slavery (Iraq)
<i>Canada’s Lost Girls (2017)</i>	Missing and murdered Indigenous women (Canada)
<i>The River and The Wall (2019)</i>	Borderlands, wildlife, and immigration (Mexico)
<i>The War to Be Her (2016)</i>	Women and sports (Pakistan)
<i>Voices of the Sea (2018)</i>	Immigration, rural (Cuba)
<i>The Apology (2016)</i>	“Comfort women” WWII (Japan)
<i>Kingdom of the Shadows (2015)</i>	US-Mexico drug war (US and Mexico)
<i>Oscar Arias: Without a Shot Fired (2017)</i>	Achieving peace without military (Costa Rica)

The researchers used an interpretivist perspective and a constructionist epistemology, acknowledging that students make meaning in their viewing of the documentary, as well as in their discussion groups and in writing their guided essays. The researchers separately reviewed the essays, paying specific attention to what piqued students' interests and their thoughts about their professional and personal growth. The researchers then convened and used a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) to arrive at their codes, categories, and final themes. Using data reduction, their initial 14 themes were reduced to four: 1) new knowledge, 2) emotional response, 3) grateful/blessed/proud to be an American and/or to live in the United States, and 4) a desire to help others.

## **Findings & Discussion**

### **New Knowledge**

Students found that viewing the films was not only an experience of gaining new knowledge but also one that oftentimes challenged previous misperceptions and shifted their perspectives on the topic and the country featured. Limited news sources and ignorance figured prominently. Students' comments included: "This was all news to me and I'm glad we were assigned this film." "What I enjoyed most while viewing this film was the knowledge I gained from it. Before this film, I was completely oblivious to the fact that..." "I have learned many things from this film that I did not understand before." Other comments stated that the information in the film was "eye-opening," especially "knowing more of what actually happened" and "learning the depths of oppression." Many students learned about issues for the first time while watching the selected films.

When curriculum is superficial or silent on a topic, students can have distorted perceptions of a country, which they came to recognize. Their comments included: "Prior to watching this film I had a skewed view;" "This assignment helped me broaden my views internationally and helped me discover something new about the world that I didn't already know;" and "after watching this film I can see that that's a distorted view." Students realized that their knowledge on the country and topic was limited and perhaps incomplete, if not inaccurate. Thus, this film course helped expand learners' perspectives regarding social and international issues (Lee, 2019).

In fact, having the opportunity to gain this new knowledge sometimes included adopting a new perspective too. Students became "curious" and more "aware," many times reflecting critical thinking skills. Comments included: "It's so easy to point fingers and judge people but it is important to take a look at both sides of the situation;" "I have gained the ability to look at every side of an issue and evaluate it plain and simple;" and "The documentary was also able to give me a new perspective." Students documented becoming more "open" to other ideas and perspectives, as in, "I am definitely more aware of the issue in the country;" and avoiding being "ignorant to big issues, but to research all that I can before creating an opinion." The documentaries broadened students' perspectives and facilitated critical thinking. This finding is in line with existing research about documentaries in college classrooms stimulating multiple perspectives on different issues, thereby having students exercise critical thinking skills (Brown, 2011, Lee, 2019).

This new awareness, in fact, often led to a desire to become more informed and globally aware, noting the benefits of such knowledge. Students' remarks included: "it is

important to know that these problems exist so that we can work toward removing stigmas and stereotypes that feed into racism;" "Going forward I am more aware of others and desire knowledge of issues individuals face across the world, especially women;" and "It is easy to have misconceptions about other places when you have known nothing other than living in and being exposed to western society." Although most students were thirsty for more knowledge as a result of their film viewing, some students seemed content "as is;" "grateful to live in America." Nevertheless, the comparative perspective, by seeing how people struggle with issues outside of the United States, increased students' knowledge.

Many students did not stop with simply wanting to educate themselves more. Many felt led to educate others on these issues. "I want to help create awareness for these issues by challenging people's perspectives with the new knowledge that I have gained;" "There are massive issues worldwide that people need to be educated about in order to help;" "Events like this... should be taught in schools and not be hidden from the public;" "Having watched this film, I feel like I can be a better global citizen by bringing awareness and advocating for other survivors." Being a global citizen, for some, meant being educated and bringing awareness about issues in different parts of the world.

### **Emotional Engagement/Empathy**

Students were able to develop feelings of empathy, sympathy, and compassion for the people shown in the films. Some students noted how the films they watched made them feel "very emotional," a "rush of emotions," and "emotionally invested." Other students named their emotions more specifically as feelings of "sadness," upset, "anger," "fear," feeling "disturbed," "inspired," or "hopeful," and in several cases "heartbroken." These feelings in turn gave way to deeper expressions of caring for the people shown in the films as reflected in students' written comments.

Further, some students specifically attributed their feelings of sympathy, empathy, and compassion to the films that they viewed. In this vein, they wrote that, "With this film, I have learned how to be more sympathetic in relation to immigrants;" "This film made me more compassionate towards people in other countries;" "This film made me feel deep emotions of sympathy;" and "This entire film...made me feel empathetic." Other students noted how the films gave them new insight into the plight of others as reflected in these statements: "I came to the realization that I have turned a blind eye to suffering of people outside of America;" "Before watching this, I never really gave much thought into the difficulties these people face;" "This film really opened my eyes to the conditions people...are suffering in;" and "I needed more compassion for why the people are fleeing their country."

In other examples, students mentioned being able to emotionally connect with a film on a more personal level; some students felt a cultural or experiential connection. Comments included: "As an indigenous person, this documentary was able to connect on a very personal note to me;" the film "resonated very deeply with me. My mom was born in Monterrey;" "This stuck with me because I have thought about leaving my family;" and "The reason this resonates so well with me is because I lost my grandfather to prostate cancer." Films that focused on women, women's rights, and issues of sexual abuse were especially resonant. Along these lines students shared: This film "resonated with me

personally because being a woman I can relate;” or because I am “a female,” “I was empathetic to her situation and felt as hopeless for her as she did;” “There are strong emotions I personally felt. I have had several close friends that have dealt with sexual abuse;” “I found myself being very emotionally invested... I found myself connecting to her on a personal level;” “I have felt pain in my life giving me a strong sense of empathy towards her;” and “I understand this feeling on a personal level, and I empathize with the grandmothers.”

In only a few instances did students mention that they could not relate to a particular film or topic on a personal level. One student mentioned that the issues seemed “so far away” from their own life. Yet, overall, most students were able to bridge this distance by considering what they would do in the “unimaginable” situations in which the film subjects found themselves. Specifically, they reported: “I was just imagining how terrible I would feel;” “I kept putting myself into her shoes and I was heartbroken;” and “Imagining losing a loved one in this way can bring many people to the side of the indigenous families.” This imagining and trying to put themselves in the shoes of another are first steps in exercising empathy.

Overall, the students’ essays conveyed a strong degree of emotional engagement with the characters in the films. The emotional pull of documentary film has the capacity to encourage empathy among viewers (Buchanan, 2014). The documentaries stimulated learners’ imagination so that they could form strong bonds with characters and feel strong emotions about the images on the screen (Marcus, 2005). In other words, viewing documentaries can build empathy.

These findings suggest that international documentaries can engage students in content that may seem uninteresting to them otherwise and help them develop knowledge about and empathy for people in other countries. Helping students develop a sense of “care” and “empathy” for others is a goal promoted by organizations that are intimately involved in global citizenship education (Council of Europe, 2019; Oxfam, 2015; UNESCO, 2015). By helping students connect to the humanity of others, viewing and analyzing international documentary films may thus serve as a means for developing a more globally aware and concerned citizenry. Further, Patricia Hill Collins (2017) suggests that developing empathy for others is a component in shifting from a passive voyeuristic stance in which the lives of poor and disaffected people are “interesting for their entertainment value” (p. 270) to one that encourages “individual accountability” (p. 273) for addressing issues of oppression. In other words, empathy serves not only to connect people, but as a potential motivator for active engagement in social justice efforts.

Yet, other research challenges the underlying assumption that empathy is uniformly positive or that it leads to social action. For instance, Smajdor et al. (2011) note that empathy “can be used to gratify one's own pleasures or to further one's own interests” (p. 382). Expressing empathy can hide other motivations which might include making oneself feel better, making oneself appear to be a “good” person, and using empathy to gain favor with others, among other things. In addition, Jurecic (2011) argues that “empathy is dangerous,” because it “placates the privileged” and is bound up in emotional politics. She explains that... “social emotions, such as empathy, sympathy, compassion,

and pity... can be expressions of power, appropriations of others' experience, and falsely oversimplified understandings of social and cultural relationships" (p. 11).

To illustrate her point, Jurecic (2011) offers two scenarios. In the first, she notes that one could make charitable donations to address global poverty out of feelings of empathy; yet, the resulting sense of "satisfaction" in making such donations may mask the realization that one's own wealth is built upon the poverty of others. Likewise, one may read about social issues such as "systemic urban violence" and may feel that they comprehend the experience yet be unable to recognize their "own complicity with the social and political structures that engender this violence" (p. 11). These perspectives highlight the sentiment that some efforts to educate for empathy are "too focused on interpersonal relationships, tolerance, and respect, while de-emphasizing or avoiding overarching issues of power and privilege particularly within a global capitalist world order" (Dolby, 2012, p. 47).

Revisiting students' comments through this perspective, one could argue that their self-reports of empathy, sympathy, and compassion may support inequitable systems by masking their own privileges and the ways in which the United States may be implicated in global trauma. In declaring their empathy, students may also be performing in ways that are socially or culturally expected or, as Sutherland (1986) laments, that empathy has become such a buzzword in educational settings that "students will soon believe that no essay can pass without reference to it" (p. 142). Sutherland also asks if it is even possible to teach emotions such as empathy, what may qualify one to teach empathy, and how might one assess another's ability to express empathy (especially in instances when we cannot confer with the person receiving empathy). Her work suggests that empathy is a kind of social performance, and it calls into question the meanings we ascribe to such performances.

However, this does not mean that students were not sincere in their expressions of empathy after watching the films. Nor does it suggest that emotional engagement is not an important catalyst for developing human connections or spurring social action. In fact, Sutherland (1986) acknowledges the important role of "emotional involvement" in the development of empathy with the "cognitive awareness" gained through activities such as "dramatisation," "role-playing," and "discussion" (described elsewhere as "perspective-taking") as equally important even though, to some extent, "the intrusion of cognitive data may so easily reduce or destroy the emotional involvement in the situation" (p. 150). This implies a simultaneous sense of emotional closeness and intellectual distancing if one is to experience empathy and address deeper questions of privilege, equity, and culpability. It also suggests teaching holistically, which involves "integrating intellect and emotions and promoting students' physical, intellectual, emotional, aesthetic, moral and spiritual growth" (Wang, 2014, p.165).

### **Grateful/Blessed/Proud to Be an American**

Within their guided essays, students often noted feeling blessed, thankful, or grateful for living in the United States where the problems experienced in the films did not exist. This seemed to create a sort of dualism between the United States as a blessed space and other countries that are less fortunate and awash in "unimaginable" difficulties. Perhaps this is an unintended consequence of showing only the traumatic struggles

experienced by people in other countries, which creates a limited view or what may be termed a “single story” about the country (Adichie, 2009). While students were encouraged to learn more about the countries presented in each film, most focused on a facet of the problem highlighted in each film. In other words, students did not always make the connection to similar social issues that occurred in or were perpetuated by the United States.

Some examples of students’ written comments include: “I learned more about places of poverty...and how lucky we are in the US;” “I feel so blessed to live in country where I have the freedom to be me;” “I am fortunate enough to call myself an American citizen and am blessed with all of the privileges that it comes with, and it is easy to forget just how lucky we are in comparison to some parts of the world;” “As Americans we have great privileges, opportunities, and options that other countries do not;” “I am thankful to be an American and a civilian of a country where human rights are of the utmost importance;” “This film most certainly reshaped me in a way such as being grateful for good health care and all that I have;” “I will be more aware of the poverty in different places and never take anything I have been given for granted ever again;” “it just showed me how much I have to be thankful in this country;” and “...made me realize just what luck that we have here to live in a free country where we don’t have secondary problems such as these.”

Certainly, it is not a bad thing to be grateful or recognize one’s position of privilege; yet, these comments suggest that students are somewhat oblivious to similar conditions in their own country, such as poverty, racism, sexual violence, gender discrimination, etc. and that the United States often plays a role in creating inequitable circumstances in other countries. Likewise, students did not seem to recognize that other countries should not be defined solely by the problems highlighted in the films or to consider that the people shown in the documentaries might enjoy living in their homeland, despite the difficulties presented in the films.

The Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie refers to this narrow understanding as the “danger of the single story” (Adichie, 2009) that prevents people from seeing the full complexity of a country or its people. She asserts that the single story promotes stereotypes and the problem “is not that they are untrue, but they are incomplete” (Adichie, 2009). Relatedly, Kitayama and Hashizaki (2018) note that “human rights issues, are commonly portrayed as problems in other... typically developing countries” as if such issues are particular to the country and unrelated to broader, global human rights issues. They note that such a perspective “may generate stereotypes and exclusions” and leave the viewer with a “sense of superiority and pity” (p. 271). This seemed to be the case in the students’ responses. Instead of looking for information that might disrupt the idea that the United States is problem-free while other countries have a myriad of problems, students sought to confirm this dualism, leaving them feeling blessed. This perspective also provides support for Malewski and Phillion’s (2009) assertion that “...it is possible that cross-cultural learning encounters heighten sensitivity and awareness *and* national, racial, and ethnic feelings of superiority, although these two perceptions are often assumed to be mutually exclusive in the literature” (p. 53).

Considering that watching international documentary films is also a form of cross-cultural learning encounter, it seems plausible that students in the current study

experienced both heightened awareness of other cultures, as well as feelings of national/racial/ethnic superiority expressed as blessedness. In order to deconstruct notions of privilege, Malewski and Phillion (2009) suggest having students reflect on how their race, gender, and class inform their experience and understanding of the world. This also hints at the need to explore the ways in which global social relationships have been constructed and for whose benefit.

These findings provide an opportunity for education to help students critically examine the social issues presented in international documentary films without relying on them to offer a complete picture. Educators face the challenge of developing students' awareness of global injustices while being cognizant of the fact that the documentary films they show may contribute to a "single story" reading of the world—especially what has been dubbed the Third World. Helping students reflect on their privileges based on nationality, race, socioeconomic status, gender, etc. appears integral to both understanding and addressing social issues on a global level. Not only does such an endeavor help students recognize their privilege, but it also helps them understand the constructed nature of social realities.

### **A Desire to Help Others**

Viewing the social justice-themed documentaries, students not only expressed empathy and sympathy regarding the plight of those in struggle, they also communicated a desire to help, from a charitable contribution to advocacy and activism, with some specifying education as a means to improve the situation. A desire to help or to relieve the suffering of others is a natural part of our humanity and should be encouraged. After viewing the documentaries, some of the students' comments included: "I want to learn more about the atrocities in the world and learn how to help;" "I hope that having this information will allow me to better advocate for these people in my future job or as a global citizen... I hope to help any refugees I come across in my life;" "This film gave me the appearance that there are several things that I could do to help promote policy change and advocacy to help with the ecosystem in the United States;" and "...how fortunate and blessed I truly am as an American and how I want to help others more." These students' statements reflect a sincere interest in wanting to help people in other countries and on the US-Mexico border. However, one's "feel-good" activism must be interrogated. Is it serving to empower the oppressed/marginalized or simply reinforcing existing societal power structures?

US students have grown accustomed to the image of the United States, especially in the news and film, "coming to the rescue" when other countries, especially non-white countries, are in trouble. Westerners concerned with helping poor, suffering countries have often been accused of having a "white savior complex" – a term connected to European colonial history — and descending upon the African continent to "civilize" it. This imagery easily fuels one's understanding of US foreign policy, as politicians convince the public that wars in other countries are necessary to "save" the citizens of these countries from their oppression. The United States is celebrated as brave, heroic, and virtuous, without critically questioning the complexity and nuances of the "disasters" and "oppressions" that the United States tries to fix. In addition, some argue that foreign aid can be counter-productive, as it means countries will continue to rely on outside help and, therefore, understanding the help as deeply patronizing and offensive (Zane, 2016).

What are the patterns of power behind these long-running violent conflicts over a wide and varied terrain? What has been the role and relationship of the United States in and with other countries? They may include militarization of poorer countries, resource extraction, and the propping up of corrupt governments to name a few. Of course, this does not mean that students should not want to help. Rather, they need to do more research about the context and ask more questions.

While some students had a desire to help, others felt compelled to take a stand and to consider taking their right to vote seriously regarding how elected officials may affect US foreign policy. Their comments included: "Voting in this way is a small part of changing the world into a better place, especially for the downtrodden indigenous people of the world;" "This film helped me to make sure to stand up for those that are discriminated against, because in many cases, their voice does not really get heard;" "This film is important and informative when deciding how to vote for President or national representatives;" "As a global citizen, this made me recognize the importance in standing up for what you believe is right as well as making a difference." And some said that they would donate money where possible.

Certainly, voting in the presidential election is important, as the US Constitution gives much of the foreign policy decision-making to the presidency. But what does "standing up for what you believe in" look like? Teju Cole (2012), a Nigerian-American writer, critiques the desire to "make a difference" as contributing to the "white industrial savior complex (WISC)." The United States often benefits more than the target country and the way of relating often feeds a feel-good rescuer mentality. Cole (2012) asserts: "There is the principle of first do no harm. There is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them" (p. 10). He suggests beginning with humility and some respect for the agency of the people affected and evaluating foreign policy before imposing oneself to "save others." For example, the livelihood of corn farmers in Mexico has been destroyed by NAFTA. Haitian rice farmers have suffered appalling losses due to Haiti being flooded with subsidized American rice, while the white US elites prosper (Cole, 2012).

Cole urges activism to start with dismantling "the money-driven villainy at the heart of American foreign policy," thereby giving up the illusion that "making a difference" should trump all else (p. 19). He calls on those living in the United States to investigate who is benefitting most and at what cost. A greater awareness is key; "if we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement" (Cole, p. 20). Issues such as economic dependence, environmental degradation, cultural loss, and labor exploitation must be considered.

It is noteworthy and admirable that many students, after seeing the documentaries, wanted to share this information and educate others on these issues: "Since I have a history with drugs in my family, this video has made me want to share issues on drug trafficking and prevent any involvement in my family for the rest of my life;" "Knowing this, I think it prepares me to educate others about the challenges the Mexican people are facing and to be more understanding of those trying to immigrate to the United States any way they can;" "I want to help create awareness for these issues by challenging people's perspectives with the new knowledge that I have gained;" "Allowing individuals to openly share their experiences with the world to help educate others is a next step in a brighter

future for the world;" and "Maria frequently spoke about how people are born free and without fear and I feel like her powerful message is one I'd like to share with not only my (future) children, but also the future generations."

Their reflections may reveal the "seeds" of cultivating global awareness and action. While each student's response focuses on a particular issue, their desire is to communicate and share an alternate perspective to what perhaps is commonly understood. This type of education is a starting place for building contextual, comparative, causal, or consequential relationships among and between the histories of countries. These documentaries, together with well-strategized guided essays, can facilitate cognitively conceptualizing the global commons and the interconnectedness of those in the commons (Bosio, & Torres, 2019; Cantón, & Garcia, 2018; UNESCO, 2015).

Part of the problem, however, is that most undergraduate students have learned world history in a fragmented way. They may never have experienced a world history course that was taught with, or encouraged, a critical perspective and a focus on interconnectedness, other than an occasional comparison to emphasize political and cultural differences. Another challenge is that studies show that pre-collegiate students have learned that personal agency, that is, the intentions and desires of the historical actors, is the most compelling explanation for historical changes (Halldén, 1997). However, historical changes normally include large-scale structural factors, such as economics, politics, or ideology, although this was not acknowledged by the students in Halldén's study (1997). Most surprising was how little change in causal reasoning occurred between sixth and twelfth grades.

These findings are pertinent to our study as undergraduate students were "moved" to empathy, sympathy, and a desire to help and educate because of the personal stories in these documentaries. It is important, however, for the instructor, that the personal story not be the end of the students' processing and learning. If instructors do not intentionally engage students' tendency to see change as a byproduct of human agency alone, then students will be more likely to translate *all* structural trends into personal desires or to personify abstract categories. The problem, as Teju Cole warns, is "His good heart does not always allow him to think constellationally" (Cole, 2012, p. 9). A country's problems are both intricate, intensely local, as well as connected to larger global issues. Privilege, Cole (2012) claims, allows people to ignore or deny constellationally thinking when it does not directly affect them.

### **Conclusions & Recommendations**

Our hope with this research is to share insights regarding the use of international documentary films to stimulate international, intercultural, and global awareness in the college classroom. Although the online Cineculture course at the heart of this research was not designed to promote global citizenship per se, the international documentary films viewed, the critical issues presented in the films, the essay prompts, and students' responses to them, and the themes that emerged from this study all speak to the development of a kind of global awareness that coincides with many of the expressed goals/practices of global citizenship education, namely:

asking questions and critical thinking, exploring local-global connections, and our views, values and assumptions, exploring the complexity of global issues and

engaging with multiple perspectives, exploring issues of social justice locally and globally, applying learning to real-world issues and contexts, [and providing] opportunities for learners to take informed, reflective action and have their voices heard. (Oxfam GB, 2015, p. 7)

These practices work in concert to both broaden and deepen students' global perspectives. Further, international documentary films provide an excellent canvas for examining real-world social justice issues within a local-global framework, which may in turn spark informed and reflective action.

According to the students' written essay responses, the films they watched engaged their emotions and inspired empathy, helped them develop new knowledge, made them aware of and thankful for their privileges, and encouraged active engagement in the issues presented in the films. While these are debatably "positive" outcomes, what appeared to be lacking in most students' responses was an awareness that the problems faced in the documentary films viewed were not unique to the countries and people at the center of the films. For students, the problems viewed in the films remained "over there" and were unrelated to inequitable power relations created and perpetuated by the United States. Further, the students' expressions of both empathy and blessedness, while genuine, eased their feelings of discomfort while simultaneously maintaining the status quo.

Generally, the students' responses indicated culturally and socially acceptable responses (within the American context) to the problems that seemingly exist only in other countries. This represents a challenge as it may give the impression that the problems viewed in the target countries exist in isolation. How do we help students recognize and disrupt culturally reproduced narratives which may encourage a superficial understanding of other countries and perpetuate an othering narrative? Because this research focused on the essays students wrote in response to the films they watched in this course, we considered ways in which the essay prompts may be better constructed to help students make stronger, more critical, local-global connections. The purpose for each set of questions is also noted.

*1. Purpose: To understand students' readings of the films and what they regard as new knowledge.*

Write a brief summary of the documentary film you watched. What was the main issue explored in the film? What was your immediate response to the film? What information was most surprising to you?

*2. Purpose: To understand if and how students' beliefs shifted after watching the film.*

Before watching the film, what was your perspective about the country, the people, and/or the issue presented in the film you watched? In what ways did this film challenge, support, and/or shift your previously held beliefs?

*3. Purpose: To help focus students' attention on issues of power and to shift the perception that victimized people are powerless.*

Paraphrasing the philosopher Michel Foucault, “power *circulates* in all directions, to and from all social levels at all times” (Tyson, 2006, p. 284). How did power “circulate” in this film? How did the different groups/people use and/or experience power differently?

4. *Purpose: To help students consider how local and global issues are interconnected.*

After doing some online research, what connections can you make between the issues shown in the film and similar issues in your own country or community? How has your country/community worked to address, alleviate, and/or perpetuate the problem, either at home or abroad?

5. *Purpose: To help students make connections between their own identities and experiences to those shown in the films.*

How do your identities based on race, gender, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, political affiliation, physical ability, religion, etc. play a role in how you understand the issues presented in the film? What experiences have you (or someone connected to you) had that helps you understand the issues faced by the people in the documentary?

6. *Purpose: To help students practice perspective-taking and potentially develop empathy for another person/group.*

Taking on the perspective of a person or group shown in the film, what do you want others to understand about you? What challenges do you face? What strengths do you have? What help do you need from others?

7. *Purpose: To have students attend to the broader social implications of the issues presented in the films and consider ways to address those issues.*

What is the main message of the documentary? What can we learn about ourselves and our society from viewing this film? How could we address the issues presented in ways that honor the experiences and beliefs of the people shown in the films?

These are just a few ways in which the essay questions may be adapted to foster students’ global awareness. They may also act as starting points for other equally important questions that we may ask of our students and of ourselves.

Overall, this research found that watching and responding to international documentary film provided opportunities to stimulate students’ engagement with global issues. We also noted, however, that these opportunities are made even more profound when students are asked to critically connect local-global issues to their own lives and experiences, as well as to the political actions of their own countries and communities. Further, we suggest that the promotion of global awareness should not be reduced to an instrumental focus on disconnected skills that may be unreflectively employed without paying heed to specific contexts. We believe that these skills should be connected holistically within a pedagogical philosophy that engages students’ thoughts and emotions, challenges them critically and ethically, works for justice and equity, and promotes personal, social, and global well-being. Further, we are convinced that thought-provoking engagement with international documentary film can play a beneficial role in helping students understand world issues and in assuming their global responsibilities.

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## APPENDIX

### Analytical Essay Guidelines

(For each documentary film)

The following components should be addressed thoroughly in the analytical essay:

1. **History.** Using Internet sources, provide background information on the documentary and the location where it takes place. Cite relevant websites used to find this information.
  - a. What is the significance of the film's title? What is the history of the location(s) and the issue(s) highlighted in the film?
  - b. What information can you find on the film director's background? What is her/his connection to the subject matter of this film? What was his/her purpose in making the film?
2. **Diversity & Power Issues.** Describe the problems being experienced in this context and the cause(s). Explain and give evidence by providing examples from two scenes in the film.
3. **Research – Extending your knowledge.** What is something that you saw or heard in the film that interested you? Do further Internet research to provide more depth on this topic.
4. **Policy: Agency & Advocacy.**
  - a. What international policies are in place (globally and in this country) that address the problem featured in the film?
  - b. What possibilities (advocacy and agency) exist to work towards justice on these issues? Have people organized in this context to create change? If so, explain providing relevant examples. Cite website sources.

**5. Personal/Professional Growth.**

- a. Was there a part of the film that resonated with you personally? If so, describe this part and explain your connection to it.
- b. What new knowledge did you gain from viewing this film and how might it prepare or shape you as a global citizen, professionally and/or personally?

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