

## Using Video in the History Classroom

The potential offered by video as a teaching and learning aid in the history classroom extends way beyond asking students to answer structured questions based around a 30 minute programme. Primary footage, feature films and historical documentaries offer varied and stimulating ways into key topics. More excitingly still, developments in ICT now mean that students can now deconstruct existing film sources and construct their own with astonishing ease and with impressive results. In this first article, I will focus on the resources available "off the shelf" for use with classes. In subsequent pieces, I will demonstrate how simple it is for teachers and students to use digital video to enrich content coverage and develop historical skills in an engaging way.

### Newsreels

Primary footage enlivens history, allowing students to reach their own judgements by watching events unfold before their eyes. An investigation into whether Emily Davison intended to commit suicide at the 1913 Derby can start with primary sources about her character and prior career, but most revealing is the footage from the race, which enables students to decide for themselves whether Davison was intent on becoming a martyr or was merely trying to disrupt the race. Footage exists from two completely different angles, providing the opportunity for comparison. The first clip can be found on the British Pathé site ([www.britishpathe.com](http://www.britishpathe.com)), which contains 3500 hours worth of freely downloadable footage from 1896 to 1970. The second clip can be found at the British Film Institute's site ([www.screenonline.org.uk](http://www.screenonline.org.uk)), where many hard-to-find films and television programmes from the 1890s to the present are represented by thousands of video extracts and specially-written analyses by expert writers.

### Propaganda

Another great advantage of contemporary footage is that it illustrates how primary sources, far from being the most reliable, are often so wrapped up in the events described that they are completely biased. Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* opens with a merciless spoof of Hitler's rallies and speech-making techniques: students should suggest when they think that the film was made, based on the fact that he is clearly being depicted as something of a joke. Once they are made aware that the film was made when Hitler was at the height of his power, they should offer reasons why Chaplin has nevertheless chosen to depict him as a figure of ridicule. This can then be compared to Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* to deduce how far the first piece is an accurate representation of the truth. This in turn raises the issue of what the truth actually is; and even if unreliable, are such sources still useful?

The clip which I enjoy using most in this context is an extract from an episode of "The Day Today", the satirical newsroom spoof hosted by Chris Morris. In it, he declares that "today is the anniversary of 1940", a time when "a five gear, four litre Ford Capri was the stuff of a madman's dreams" and then narrates a "reminisci-package" in which a number of old people recall eating each other's houses during the rationing crisis and wiring the house up to a baby as a source of electricity. With genuine footage running in the background, the "documentary" is so plausible that students are invariably hoodwinked, and when the teacher points out how outrageous its assertions were they are really forced to explain the techniques used by the film-makers to give their work such authority. As Josef Goebbels said: 'We are convinced that films constitute one of the most modern and scientific means of influencing the mass. Therefore a government must not neglect them'.

### Movies and TV shows

Feature films provide invaluable source material for classroom use and can easily be purchased at [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk). The 1979 version of *All Quiet on the Western Front* provides an opportunity to look at the war from a German perspective and to consider whether this is something we should do more often. The final twenty minutes sees the main character comes home on leave and then returning to battle, providing an excellent way of illustrating both the detachment soldiers developed from normal life and the intense loyalty which they developed for each other. The original book was banned by both Poland (for being too pro-German) and by Germany (for being too anti-German) so it is well worth asking the students which point of view they think has the most validity.

Movies also raise interesting questions about the 'Hollywoodisation of History'. *Elizabeth* (1998) opens with a three-minute clip showing the burning of Latimer and Ridley which can be compared to primary sources in order to highlight essential differences. This

then leads into a discussion about what the director has left out and added, why he probably did so and whether his distortion of the truth is of any consequence.

Another idea is to compare clips from two movies dealing with the same topic. Comparing the trial and execution scenes from *Cromwell* (1970) on the one hand and *To Kill a King* (2003) on the other allows students to decide which one is the most educational, which is the most entertaining, and which quality is more important in a feature film.

A connected activity is to encourage students to produce their own billboard posters for their own historical epic. The life of Martin Luther provides an interesting example: students pick out five key events from his life, then use these as 'stills' from the movie which they depict in their poster. Adding their own cast list, quotes from critics and thinking of a suitably catchy title for the film can help them get inside the minds of film makers even more effectively.

### **The potential offered by ICT**

The web is packed full of video clips and audio files that can be downloaded onto a computer and then played through projectors / speakers.

#### **1. Search Engines**

##### **a. Films - Singing Fish ([www.singingfish.com](http://www.singingfish.com))**

This is a search engine dedicated to finding sound and film files. Type in anything from "Neville Chamberlain" and you will immediately be presented with an array of audio recordings and documentary film clips ready to be downloaded onto your PC! Other search engines (such as [www.excite.co.uk](http://www.excite.co.uk) and [www.av.com](http://www.av.com)) offer a similar, if less impressive service.

##### **b. Flash Files - Google ([www.google.co.uk](http://www.google.co.uk))**

Adding 'swf' to a search query in the mighty [www.google.co.uk](http://www.google.co.uk) also allows users to target Macromedia Flash movie files, which have the added benefit of being very compact. These can be downloaded onto a local intranet and used in class 'off the peg'. Because all of the files you view on the web are temporarily stored on your hard drive, it is possible to copy them to a safe location before they are scrubbed. If you use Internet Explorer, such files can be located by going into Tools > Internet Options > Settings > View Files (these can be listed in date order, or file type for ease of reference). A browser such as Firefox allows you to save such files directly from the page they appear in, so that those excellent animations at [www.bbc.co.uk/history](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history) need never take forever to load again!

#### **2. Using Archives**

##### **[www.britishpathe.com](http://www.britishpathe.com)**

This contains 3500 hours worth of freely downloadable footage from 1896 to 1970 from the Pathé archives. For teachers of Modern World History, the site is indispensable. The database is fully searchable, and students could be given the task of downloading newsreel clips on a particular topic, then writing their own biased narration to run over the top of it. The clips could then be watched with the volume down and the students reading their reports. Particularly interesting is comparing how students use the same footage to present different perspectives on the same event.

##### **[www.screenonline.org.uk/](http://www.screenonline.org.uk/)**

This provides a similar service to British Pathé, with two key differences. Firstly, the footage is largely taken from the entertainment and TV industry rather than being focused on newsreels. Secondly (and more frustratingly) the clips are of the "streaming" variety. What this means is that they cannot be saved for offline viewing, but have to be watched "live" over an internet connection, which can make them rather slow and unreliable.

#### **3. Software purchases**

##### **a. History Live (£350 at [www.nelsonthornes.com/secondary/history/historylive](http://www.nelsonthornes.com/secondary/history/historylive))**

*History Live* is an ambitious, innovative software package written by Ben Walsh and built around a vast array of video clips from the ITN news archives to help teachers deliver key topics in Modern World history. The coverage of the package is impressively comprehensive - the First World War, the Interwar Years, the Second World War, the Nuclear Age, the Cold War, the Vietnam War and The Troubles in Ireland each have their own dedicated library of video clips, commentary and questions. The quality of the film clips themselves is first rate,

and students are encouraged to consider the utility of each clip with a series of structured questions and discussion points.

**b. Channel 4 Clipbanks** (£47 each at <http://www.4learningshop.co.uk>)

Each TV-Rom in the **Channel 4 Clipbank** series contains 30-40 minutes of video clips which can be copied and pasted into student presentations and reports; the accompanying website (<http://www.channel4.com/learning/microsites/C/clipbank-lessonplans/history>) contains suggested lesson plans.

#### 4. Converting your VHS & DVDs to Digital Format

At the time of writing, the ability to record TV programmes directly onto the hard disk of your computer is becoming increasingly feasible. However, before throwing away your DVD and VHS collection altogether, read on...

(a) DVD:

**Xilisoft DVD Ripper** (\$35 US from [www.xilisoft.com](http://www.xilisoft.com))

Whilst many more recent computers have DVD players installed as standard, they do not have the facility to extract clips from the films for offline viewing. To do this, I use the Xilisoft application, which lists the "chapters" on your DVD then allows you copy them onto your hard drive.

**Fair Use Wizard** (free, from [www.mrbelshaw.co.uk/teacher/video/index.htm](http://www.mrbelshaw.co.uk/teacher/video/index.htm))

A similar piece of software is the Fair Use Wizard, which can be downloaded from Doug Belshaw's excellent site. It requires some basic ICT skills to set up, but the results are well worth it.

(b) VHS: Pinnacle Studio / Belkin DVD Creator

More flexible, however, is the ability to digitize your own video clips from VHS. There are two rival pieces of software which offer a similar service, and there is little to choose between them. *Pinnacle Studio* (£41.99 from [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk)) and the *Belkin DVD Creator* (£39.99, same source) allow you to digitize your departmental video collection and store it on CD ROM or on a local hard-drive. Instead of having to use a television in a corner of the classroom, videos can be projected onto a whiteboard. Instead of a large department having to share one video tape, all the resources could be hosted on the school network. Instead of wasting time finding the correct place on the tape, videos can play with the click of a mouse button. This is particularly useful when you want to use short clips which would otherwise be tedious to locate.

Perhaps most excitingly, an increasing amount of digital cameras now have the facility for recording movie clips complete with sound, making it simple to film students doing role plays and debates and transferring the completed film onto computer to be edited using Windows Movie Maker before being hosted on the intranet or school website. The International School of Toulouse (<http://www.intst.net/humanities>) has some excellent student examples of "Nazi Propaganda Films" produced by GCSE students that will form the focus of the next article in this series.

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**Also worth checking out...**

<http://www.learningcurve.gov.uk/onfilm/archive.htm> - Archive of historical clips, selected specifically for classroom use by the Public Records Office.

[www.archive.org](http://www.archive.org): A massive searchable database of online footage

[www.teacherstv.net](http://www.teacherstv.net): An increasing amount of freely downloadable documentaries are being made available here. Well worth keeping an eye on.

[www.easehistory.org](http://www.easehistory.org) – An excellent site with short clips organised by historical theme.

<http://www.reelclassics.com/> - Clips from great movies available here

[http://www.tes.co.uk/search/story/?story\\_id=374021](http://www.tes.co.uk/search/story/?story_id=374021): A detailed review of the Channel 4 ClipBank CD Roms by Andrew Field of [www.schoolhistory.co.uk](http://www.schoolhistory.co.uk)

<http://creativecommons.org/> - Video footage made freely available to the internet community. The BBC and Channel 4 have recently started putting some of their materials onto it.

<http://www.hpol.org/> - History and Politics Out Loud: audio files for download

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