

Keeping It Animated: Utilizing Animated Films to Teach Geography

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In teaching geography, teachers often focus on having students memorize countries, states, capitals, and landforms, often through the labeling and coloring of maps.¹ Even with the emphasis on memorizing geographic facts, it seems a majority of students are still not able to adequately recall such facts.² Yet geography, and in fact all of social studies, should be an engaging time as students explore various issues and problems that require them to interact with greater quantities of factual information in order to reach reasoned conclusions.

There are numerous ways teachers can present lessons in order to teach geography in a captivating manner; however, in this article we will focus on a rationale and model for using animated films to teach geography. Teachers may want to review the specific disciplinary concepts and tools of geography in the *College, Career, and Civic Life Framework for Social Studies State Standards* (C3 Framework). The article will also provide concrete examples for using animated films to teach geography.

Understanding Geography and the C3 Framework

Geography is often thought of as the study of humans and their environment but “... it is not *what* is studied, but *how* the data are studied that defines the discipline.”³ That is, “Doing geography requires students to actively use three main aspects of inquiry—geographic perspectives, knowledge, and skills.”⁴ A perspective helps with the interpretation of meaning and the formulation of investigations. For geographers, there are

two primary perspectives: spatial and ecological. While there are additional perspectives (e.g., historical, economical, civic, cultural) that can support geographers, an established geographic perspective involves the complete unification of both space and place.

When it comes to geographic knowledge and skills, *Geography for Life* states that there are eighteen standards clustered into six essential elements: (a) The World in Spatial Terms; (b) Places and Regions; (c) Physical Systems; (d) Human Systems; (e) Environment and Society; and (f) The Uses of Geography.⁵ There are five geographic skills—asking questions; acquiring, organizing, and analyzing information; and answering questions—that establish a systematic approach to conducting and answering geographic investigations.

The C3 Framework’s Inquiry Arc, which is a set of interlocking and mutually supportive ideas that feature the four dimensions of informed inquiry in social studies: (1) developing questions and planning investigations; (2) applying dis-

ciplinary concepts and tools; (3) gathering, evaluating, and using evidence; and (4) working collaboratively and communicating conclusions.⁶

Rationale for Using Films

Films create an element of relevancy for students; this dynamic is especially true with elementary students and animated films. However, secondary students also find animated films appealing. Animated films have long been able to produce alternate worlds where animals or inanimate objects, such as cars, are given human qualities.

The use of film in the classroom has been promoted since its inception in the 1890s.⁷ Many pioneers of cinema even thought film might replace textbooks one day.⁸ Though film has not replaced textbooks, it has become an integral part of many classrooms; this is especially true for the social studies. In a 2007 study of social studies teachers, 100 percent reported using film at least once a month to help teach social studies content.⁹ A 2010 study found that 92 percent of social studies teachers used some or all of a film at least once a week.¹⁰

Though film is often used in the classroom, it is generally used for the teaching of history. However, traditional and animated films can be used with great success to teach authentic geography.



Frozen (Pictured) Olaf. ©2013 Disney. All Rights Reserved.

The key is to have a clear model and objective.

Model for Using Films

The four-stage *Russell Model for Using Film* provides a useful framework for teaching with film.¹¹

Stage 1: The Preparation Stage

The preparation stage is the most important stage of the *Russell Model for Using Film*. It is the stage that includes the creation and development of lesson plans, which should obviously incorporate film while still meeting instructional goals/objectives, state standards, national standards, and adhering to all legal requirements. Teachers may consider asking themselves: What is my goal/objective for using this film? Do I need to use it in whole or part? Is there a better way to have students meet this goal/objective? Is this film appropriate for my students? How will the use of this film follow the Inquiry Arc?

Remember to follow any district or school guidelines when using film including obtaining permission from the administration and parents prior to showing a film.

Stage 2: The Pre-viewing Stage

The pre-viewing stage takes place directly before students start viewing the film. This stage should include an introduction of the film and an explanation for why students are viewing the film. Teachers may ask the developing question with which students will plan their investigations. Eventually, students will be able to ask their own geographic questions. Additionally, teachers need to help students focus on the learning objectives. Teachers may also want to highlight key aspects or important scenes that are essential to students' meeting the lesson's instructional goals.

Stage 3: The Watching the Film Stage

The watching the film stage includes watching the film (in its entirety or in parts) and ensuring that students stay on task throughout the film. This is the stage when students are expected to apply disciplinary specific concepts and tools, which for geography deals largely with spatial views and patterns. Students will also be expected to start gathering and evaluating evidence. That is, when viewing the film students should be able to

utilize a geographic lens to notice clues that help them answer their geographic question(s). Depending on the film, teachers may need to stop it periodically to highlight the clues and ask probing questions that lead students toward their conclusion and to help them “think like a geographer.”

Stage 4: The Culminating Activity Stage

The culminating activity stage takes place after students have finished watching the film and includes assessing student learning. It is also important to provide closure to the previous stage. Although, the *Russell Model for Utilizing Film* suggests that teachers can choose to summarize the film or have a discussion of the film, with this particular model, teachers are advised to have some kind culminating activity that is aligned with the inquiry process (e.g., communicate a conclusion). The communicated conclusion can take shape in several ways including a written assignment (research paper, worksheet), role-playing activities, presentation (oral, visual) and/or student-led discussions pertaining to the inquiry.

EXAMPLE LESSONS

These examples may seem most appropriate for elementary students, but can be adapted for middle and secondary students.

Frozen

Stage 1: The Preparation Stage

National Standards:

- National Geography Essential Element: Places and Regions, Standard 4: Places have physical and human characteristics
- C3 Framework: Dimension 1 – Developing questions & Dimension 2 – Geographic Representations

Objectives: Students will be able to locate the region where the movie is set; describe the physical setting using maps, graphs, photographs, and/or other representations; and describe how weather, climate, and other environmental characteristics affect peoples' lives in the region.

Stage 2: The Pre-viewing Stage

Compelling Question: How do maps help us understand our world?

Supporting Questions: Assuming *Frozen* were real, how might we use maps to locate Olaf's relative location? How does our school's relative location differ from Olaf's?

Introductory Activity:

Prior to the introductory activity place a printout or small toy of Olaf (the snowman from the Disney movie *Frozen*) somewhere inconspicuous in your classroom. Then take a close up photo of him as well as several other pictures that would reveal his location based on the surroundings. Your final picture should try and include as much of your classroom as possible. Then start the lesson by showing students the close up picture of Olaf and asking them if they know, based on the photo, where he is in the classroom? After giving students a chance to think, show another photo that reveals a bit more and continue to show the photos until the students are able to correctly locate Olaf.

Be sure to ask students which photo provided the most evidence in locating Olaf. The answer should be the final picture, even if some or most are able to locate Olaf prior to you showing that picture. Students may conclude that the final picture provided the most clues and that allowed them to find Olaf's relative location based on his proximity to the other objects in the classroom. Next, ask the students if it was possible to locate Olaf based on the first few pictures. Of course, the answer is 'yes' but only if they were very familiar with the physical features of the classroom first. Finally, explain to the students that you want them to locate Olaf's relative location again, but this time the clues will come from watching clips from the movie *Frozen*. You may also hand out a graphic organizer (See Handout on p. 157) that could help them organize the objects they see from the background of the movie in order to locate Olaf.

Stage 3: The Watching the Film Stage

After handing out the graphic organizer, your first step should be to model how you expect students to complete it. (If you have used it several times before, then you may skip this step.) Ideally, the first clip should contain the scene of ice harvesters (minute marker 1:45–3:32). It may be best to perform a think-aloud where you point out all the evidence that helps you locate Olaf, namely ice and mountains. After placing that information onto the graphic organizer you might want to ask the students what else they notice about the scenery, people, or animals that might help you complete the graphic organizer. Students might notice that the people have sleds, there is a reindeer, and there are Northern Lights. It is important to note that if your students are not yet aware of reindeers or Northern Lights you might have to provide hints.

After you have demonstrated how you want students to complete the graphic organizer, show additional clips and have students complete it in teams, groups, or alone. Show the below clips, based on the minute markers:

- 1:45–3:32 (Shows a cold location and Northern Lights)
- 11:40–18:30 (Shows vegetation, fjord, architecture, cultural design, and animal life)
- 34:49–43:20 (Shows vegetation, animal life, Accent of Oaken, use of the word "fjord")
- 1:02:58–1:03:24 (Shows Northern Lights and Geo-thermal activity)
- 1:28:03–1:29:53 (Shows the fjord, architecture)

Stage 4: The Culminating Activity Stage

Once students have finished viewing the film clips and filling in the graphic organizer, lead them in a brainstorming activity about how they can use the information they gathered to narrow down Olaf's whereabouts. For example, students might suggest that because of the ice and snow the setting must be in a cold climate. Then, using a climate map, students should eliminate areas on Earth that do not experience conditions that produce ice and snow. With each piece of evidence students should begin to narrow down their search until they locate Olaf's relative location (i.e., Norway). Additionally, depending on the age and knowledge base of the students, this lesson can easily transition into teaching students how to read maps or learn about climates and animals. As a culminating activity, students could create a picture book that couples each movie scene with the real life geographic representations that helped them locate Olaf's relative location. Additionally, on the corresponding pages, students could describe the similarities and differences of their relevant location to that of Olaf's. The following are hints you want students to notice and the resources that will help them narrow their search.

- Ice and snow = Climate map
- Mountains and Ocean = Physical map
- Reindeer and Fjord Horse = Species Map
- Use of the word "fjord" = Dictionary & Political Map

Planes

Stage 1: The Preparation Stage

National Standards:

- National Geography Essential Element: The World in Spatial Terms, Standard 1: How to use maps and other geographic representations, geospatial technologies, and spatial thinking to understand and communicate information
- C3 Framework: Dimension 1– Developing questions & Dimension 2 – Geographic Representations

Objectives: Students will be able to identify on a map the regions Dusty visits and describe the physical and human characteristics of each region he visits.

Stage 2: The Pre-viewing Stage

Compelling Question: What is the relationship between physical and human geography?

Supporting Questions: Assuming Dusty's adventures were real, where in the world does he visit? What are the similarities and differences in the physical and human geography of each location?

Introductory Activity:

Start the lesson by asking students if they have ever heard of the "Wings Around the Globe" event (there will probably be few if any). Then prompt the students to infer what the event entails given its title. Direct the students to conclude that it is about planes flying around the world making strategic pit stops along the way. Next tell students that the event originates from the Disney film *Planes*, and that they will view the film in order to track where in the world

the lead character, Dusty, travels. Prior to starting the film students should also have access to both a labeled and a blank map, this is so they can properly identify the locations in which Dusty travels.

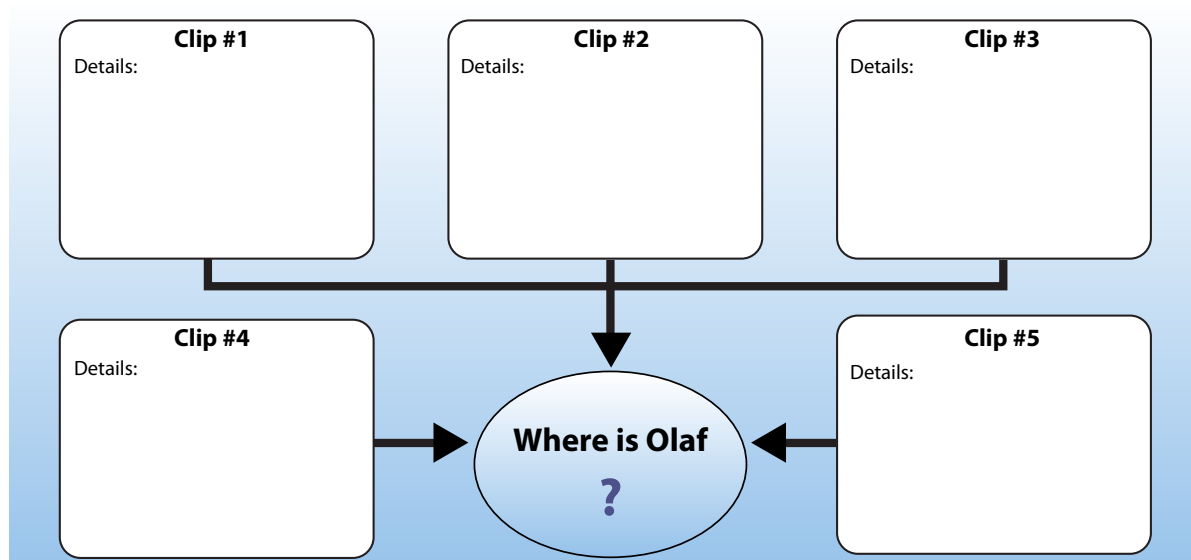
Stage 3: The Watching the Film Stage

Once the movie starts, be sure to demonstrate how to complete the map activity by first identifying Lincoln, Nebraska (including the longitude and latitude which is provided in the film), and coloring in the state and drawing a line to Dusty's next destination, New York City. Students will continue to identify each pit stop on their blank maps for the entirety of the film. Note that although the film provides the latitude and longitude coordinates for Lincoln, Nebraska, it does not do so for each pit stop. So in some instances students may need to go back and figure out the proper coordinates based on the surroundings in the film such as when Dusty lands in New York City's JFK airport, or when Dusty travels to the Taj Mahal.

Stage 4: The Culminating Activity Stage

Once the film is finished, divide the students into small groups (approximately 3–4 per group). Assign each group the task of identifying physical and human characteristics associated with a single pit stop that Dusty visited. For example, one group might focus on New York City while another China. If you have more groups than pit stops, feel free to have more than one group explore a pit stop. Be sure to set clear roles and expectations for each group and member. To close the lesson, have students share their group presentations either through a role-play activity or through a visual or oral presentation.

HANDOUT



On pages 156–157, we present some example lessons that highlight how animated films (e.g., *Frozen* and *Planes*) can be used to foster authentic geography for social studies students.

Conclusion

Animated films are a great way to teach geography while addressing national standards and the C3 Framework. Although, the example lessons may seem most appropriate for elementary students, they are also suited for middle and secondary students. By simply adding or subtracting scaffolding, students can be expected to make their own connections and locate their own resources that help them communicate their conclusions. ●

Notes

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10. J. Stoddard and A. Marcus, “More than “Showing what Happened”: Exploring the Potential of Teaching History with Film,” *High School Journal* 93, no. 2 (2010): 83–90.
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