

The role of cinema in legal education: an exploratory study on pedagogical impact and empirical findings in labour law teaching

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Abstract

This study examines the use of cinema as a pedagogical tool in legal education, specifically in the teaching of labour law. This study reflects on cinema as a pedagogical practice in higher education and, in particular, its application to the teaching of labour law. It seeks to include empirical results and assess the value of film narratives in grasping content and developing critical thinking. A survey was carried out among law students, seeking to identify the strengths and limitations of this pedagogical practice. The results show that cinema has a strong potential to foster student commitment and knowledge retention. The study concludes with some recommendations to speed up the integration of cinema as a pedagogical practice in legal curricula.

Keywords: Cinema; legal education; labour law; pedagogical methodology; empirical study.

1. Introduction

Traditionally, legal teaching uses methodologies based on theoretical presentations, analysing court decisions and doctrinal studies (Cownie, 2010). However, current pedagogical approaches encourage more participatory and interdisciplinary teaching and learning methodologies in order to improve students' understanding and critical capacity. Film, as a visual product with a narrative, can be seen as a pedagogical tool that enables a teaching methodology that is contextualised and, at the same time, focused on understanding legal principles (Denvir, 1996).

This study aims to expand on the conclusions already presented in the article 'Cinema as a Pedagogical Practice in Higher Education: A Case Study Applied to Labour Law' (Pinto & Machado, 2024), in which a preliminary presentation of the discussion on the role of cinema in legal education was made.

This article, rather than reviewing the literature, seeks to incorporate empirical evidence as a result of a survey among students who took part in the activity proposed in the labour law subject. The aim of the study is to evaluate the use of cinema as a pedagogical practice and the consequent impact on the understanding of the content and the development of the students' critical spirit. This paper examines the use of cinema as a pedagogical tool in legal education, specifically in the teaching of labour law. It builds on the description of a pedagogical practice in higher education by incorporating the final empirical results of an audience of law students at the University of Santiago, Cape Verde.

2. Literature Review

Cinema has been recognised as a possible teaching tool in various areas, including law. Several studies have argued that some films can be used as a tool to explain legal concepts and expose ethical dilemmas that are very close to reality (Eddy & Bracken, 2008). In fact, legal education has already used cinema to encourage debate around legal ethics and access to justice (Greenfield, Osborn & Robson, 2001), as well as to present issues related to the social impact of court decisions (Russell, 2009). With specific regard to labour law, we can find a wide selection of films that portray labour struggles and the imbalance of power between workers and employers (Grubba, 2020). Some of the more classic films, such as *Modern Times* (1936) and *I, Daniel Blake* (2017), allow students to reflect on and discuss the evolution of work organisation, workers' struggles and their social impact (Lacerda, 2007). However, there are still some challenges in using cinema as a pedagogical practice, especially in terms of interpreting the narrative, which is always subjective, and also some prejudices that can bias discussions (Pinho & Demartini, 2013). Discussions should always be moderated by the teacher and further reading can be suggested to ensure that the film complements the legal content of the labour law subject.

3. Pedagogical Practice Background

3.1. Objectives

The use of this pedagogical practice has two general objectives: (1) To provide a reflection on the evolution of labour law; (2) To raise awareness of the reality of labour relations.

And there are two specific objectives: (1) To use cinema as a teaching tool; (2) To discuss film narrative and its different components.

3.2. Pedagogical contribution

It is essential to provide students with a critical view of the world of work, both for their training as citizens and for their legal training. Watching and analysing films is essential for training

more complete professionals who can contribute to the consolidation of the Cape Verdean legal system. It is a unique opportunity to develop their critical awareness.

Before screening the film, instructors provide students with relevant background information on labour law principles and historical context. This contextualization primes students to analyze the legal issues depicted in the film critically.

Following the screening, facilitated discussions are conducted to explore the legal implications of the narrative. Students are encouraged to identify legal concepts, analyze their application within the film, and engage in reflective dialogue.

The cinema can promote the exercise of freedom of thought, opinion and awareness of the role that everyone has to play in their social environment (Pinho & Demartini, 2013).

3.3. Target Audience

The pedagogical practice was applied to an audience with the following characteristics: (1) Law degree students; (2) University of Santiago, Cape Verde; (3) Distance learning system.

3.4. Themes

The themes related to labour law that we intend to address are as follows: Labour and the Industrial Revolution; Labour and Modernity; Labour and the labour movement; Labour and subjectivity; Labour and unemployment; Labour and globalization; Domestic labour; Oppression and gender; Harassment and psychological violence.

3.5. Movies

As law and justice are important themes in film (Denvir, 1996). In that context, the movies suggested to students are: *Germinal* (*Germinal*), Claude Berri, 1993; *I compagni* (*The organizer*), Mario Monicelli, 1963; *Daens* (*Daens*), Stijn Coninx, 1992; *Tempos Modernos* (*Modern Times*), Charles Chaplin, 1935; *La Classe Operaia va in Paradiso* (*The Working Class Goes to Heaven*), Elio Petri, 1972; *Eles não usam Black Tie* (*They Don't Wear Black Tie*), Leon Hirszman, 1981; *El método* (*The Method*), Marcelo Piñeyro, 2005; *Le Couperet* (*The Ax*), Costa-Gavras, 2004; *I, Daniel Blake*, Ken Loach, 2017; *Los Lunes al sol* (*Mondays in the sun*), Fernando Aranoa, 2002; *Domésticas - (Maids)*, Fernando Meirelles, Nando Olival, 2001; *Dogville*, Lars von Trier, 2003; *O Diabo Veste Prada* (*The Devil Wears Prada*), David Frankel, 2006; *Direktøren for det hele* (*The Boss of It All*), Lars von Trier, 2006.

3.6. Dynamics and assessment

Each student must watch one of the films listed below and then submit a text containing between 500 and 600 words.

The text to be written by the students should discuss the historical moment portrayed by the film and reflect on the connection between the film and labour law issues. In addition, students may submit an oral presentation of their reflection in class. This work is optional and only serves to enhance the grade.

In terms of assessment, students had to complete written essays in which critical analysis and the link between the film's narrative and the corresponding labour law themes were valued. There was also an oral presentation and discussion to gauge understanding of the themes described.

4. Methodology

In order to assess the impact of cinema on the teaching of labour law, a survey was carried out among 28 students of the labour law subject of the law degree. All the participants had attended the course in which the films were analysed. The survey sought to discuss the role of cinema in legal education, with a particular focus on its perception and use in the teaching of labour law.

The analysis of the data corresponding to the identified sample makes it possible to assess the different perspectives of the participants regarding cinema as a pedagogical tool and to discuss its effectiveness in the teaching and learning process.

The results obtained were categorised into the following areas: characterisation of the sample, perception of cinema, application to learning labour law. After answering the survey, the data was analysed using a mixed method combining statistical analysis and qualitative analysis.

5. Findings and Discussion

The results obtained confirm the consensus around cinema as a pedagogical tool, and the main conclusions are those set out below.

5.1. Characterisation of the sample

The sample comprises a diverse group of participants, the majority of whom (84.4%) express a liking for cinema (figure 1). The age distribution highlights that most respondents are aged 31 to 40 (40.6%), with other age groups also well-represented, as seen in figure 2. This diversity ensures a comprehensive understanding of the perceptions across different demographics.

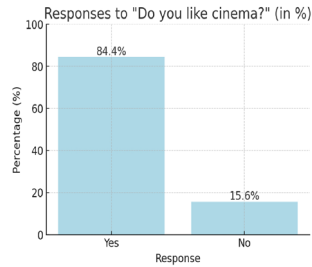


Figure 1. Response to "Do you like cinema?"

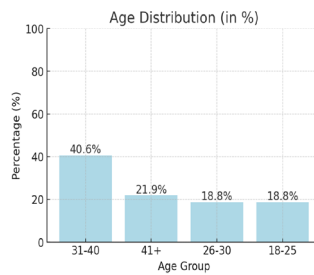


Figure 2. Age distribution

5.2. Perception of Cinema

Cinema is widely regarded as a valuable pedagogical tool. The majority of participants rated its use in teaching as “excellent” (62.5%) or “good” (28.1%), as demonstrated in figure 3. Additionally, all respondents believe that teaching becomes more contextualised with cinema (figure 4), and 93.8% agree it enhances decision-making and idea-sharing in the classroom (figure 5). While 87.5% reported that cinema stimulates critical thinking (figure 6), only 6.2% of teachers frequently use films for teaching, suggesting a disconnect between perception and practice.

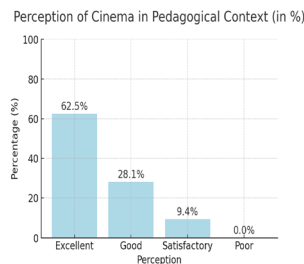


Figure 3. Perception of cinema in pedagogical context

The role of cinema in legal education

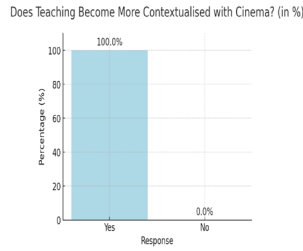


Figure 4. Response to “Does teaching become more contextualized with cinema?”

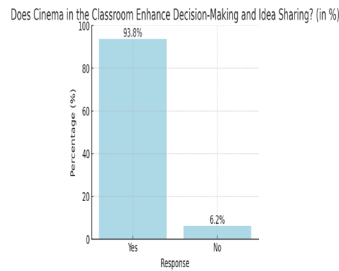


Figure 5. Response to “Does cinema in the classroom enhance decision-making and idea sharing?”

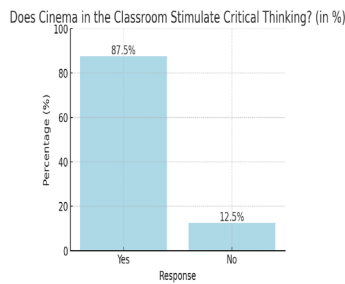


Figure 6. Response to “Does cinema in the classroom stimulate critical thinking?”

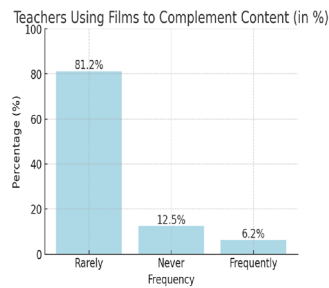


Figure 7. Teachers using films to complement content

5.3. Application to the learning of Labour Law

The integration of cinema into labour law education is perceived as highly beneficial (figure 8). Participants highlighted its ability to enhance critical thinking (28.6%), increase interest in the course (24.3%), improve knowledge acquisition (20.0%), and foster communication skills (15.7%). Films like *Modern Times* and *Germinal* were most frequently chosen for discussion (25% each), underlining their relevance to the subject (figure 9). These findings suggest that cinema can be an effective tool for contextualising complex concepts and making learning more engaging.

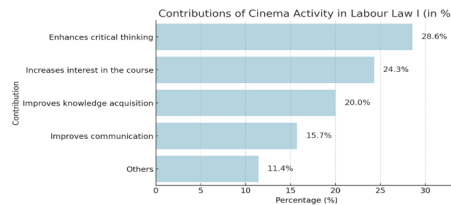


Figure 8. Contributions of cinema activity in labour law subject

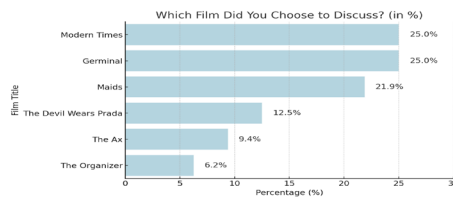


Figure 9. Response to “Which film did you choose to discuss?”

These findings support previous research advocating for structured discussions and supplementary readings to optimise the effectiveness of cinema-based learning (Berk & Rocha, 2019).

6. Recommendations

Considering the results of the survey, we recommend some strategies to enhance the involvement of cinema in the teaching of labour law:

Recommendation 1 - Selection of films: select films that allow for an approach and discussion on a wide range of labour law topics.

Recommendation 2 - Assessment: integrate the assessment carried out through the analysis and presentation of critical essays on the films in order to reinforce the learning outcomes.

Recommendation 3 - Guided discussions: orientate the debates in such a way as to keep the focus on legal issues and not divert attention to discussions of a socio-political nature.

Recommendation 4 - Complementary reading: suggest bibliography that helps to complement the narratives described in the films in order to provide more robust theoretical support.

7. Conclusions

This study confirms that cinema is a relevant pedagogical tool for legal teaching, and more specifically for teaching labour law. The results show that students see the use of cinema in the classroom as an effective tool for improving their understanding of legal issues, for promoting debate and critical reflection, and for learning concepts. However, there are still challenges surrounding the selection of films and how to guide debates.

In terms of future research, we propose a long-term exploratory analysis of the impact of using films in legal courses and the corresponding concrete application to different fields of law. The integrated use of other digital media as a pedagogical tool could also be explored in future researches.

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