Audio-Visual Inferencing

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Introduction:

You know the smell that hits you when you walk into a theater? Popcorn. The aroma can get your mouth watering in anticipation of the salty, buttery treat. In my youth, working in theaters, I was told to always pop a fresh batch before the evening influx of patrons appeared. The smell lingering in the air would drive people to the concession stand and increase the house's income for the night. Pop, pop, pop, even if that sound is coming from a microwave: for me it harkens back to nights at the theater hearing the bursting kernels banging off the lid of the popper. It has been a long time since I tried to upsell to the large popcorn on a Friday night, but the experience of popping corn has stayed with me even in kindergarten, where I have been teaching for years. Trust me when I say that popping corn and controlling a kindergarten class are really quite similar—or they would be if I removed the lid from the popper. A class of twenty kindergarten students can go in twenty directions at once. Pop, pop, pop! This applies to them physically as well as mentally. I have had some practice at wrangling students back to the carpet from time to time. I'm like the lid keeping the chaos of popping corn contained. But during any given lesson, my students' focus can be going in twenty different directions as well, and that is not so easily redirected. Yet when my students hear *Frozen*'s Elsa start to belt out "Let It Go," they are all synched up together singing along (even the boy or two who grumble about "girl songs" are still paying attention). Movies have the power to pull a group of viewers together. So perhaps, while I wrangle my popcorn from September to June, I can take some cues from cinema about how to focus my students' attention and raise their level of thinking in class too. I may not be running projectors and selling movie-time treats anymore, but my classroom is very much my theater.

My theater is found at Kathleen Wilbur Elementary School in Bear, Delaware. Wilbur is a K-5 public school of almost 1,200 students. The school draws from a fairly wide stretch of communities in the Colonial School District of New Castle County in northern Delaware. Our 1,200 come from a variety of social and economic backgrounds. We are a title I school and 100% of our students receive free breakfast and lunch. Wilbur houses 9 kindergarten classrooms. They typically include between 18 and 22 students. Last year my class consisted of 22 students: 9 females and 13 males. My class included students receiving English Language Learner (ELL) support and speech services. In previous years I have also taught students with Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and behavioral plans in place. I anticipate similar batches of popcorn in future years.

Rationale:

Movies bring an audience together. I remember sitting in the front row of *The Silence of the Lambs* on opening weekend. When the credits finally rolled, I distinctly recall hearing the entire crowd, myself included, exhale. Several hundred people with nothing in common all held their breath through an intense picture show. As a preteen I happened to catch *Jaws* on the television as my dad watched. I'm in my forties now, but I still can't wade into the water at Ocean City without hearing John Williams' theme music. I can't imagine that this phenomenon is peculiar to me alone. What is it about the movies that bridges different background knowledge and has an entire room enraptured? What is it about cinema that so deeply roots a song in my head that 35 years later it still floats to the surface around salt water? Whatever those things are, I want to use those elements in my classroom.

One of the biggest challenges I face as a teacher is the wide range of students sitting on the classroom carpet together. All of my students are five or six years old. They all come from my school's feeder pattern. They will all be challenged in kindergarten. That's about it for things that all of my kids have in common. Some come to me from preschool, others daycare, yet others are leaving mom's watchful eye for the first time. Some have developed calluses on their finger from extensive iPad time. Some have never been to a library. Some were babysat by a television. A few were basically unsupervised for much of their life. Some have awaited school so they can join their older siblings on the bus. Others are entering a frightening and strange new world. To me this sounds a lot like a room full of very different strangers feeling their heartbeats as special agent Clarice Starling matches wits with Hannibal Lecter in *The Silence of the Lambs*. Uri Hassan, a psychologist from Princeton University, has studied the impact of watching movies on the brain. He has found "that viewers' brains behaved alike in some respects and differently in others."[1] Movies synch portions of our brains, particularly the regions that deal with visual and auditory perceptions and emotions. Although I'm certainly not advocating giving my students nightmares about cannibal geniuses, there are ways to utilize how movies work with our minds to pull my class together and bridge our differing backgrounds.

Studies show that it may be even more than just our brains that are affected by what movies do. An article from the *Chicago Tribune* quotes Dr. Michael Miller, director of the University of Maryland's Center for Preventative Cardiology, who suggests that movies affect not only our brains but our bodies. For example, comedies can help our bodies relax. In an age of testing, testing, and more testing (alas, even in kindergarten), this would seem a useful strategy to take from comedic films and bring to the classroom.

It certainly appears that when we enjoy a movie, there is a whole lot of thinking going on. Seminar leader Leitch has stated that many movies are designed to discourage the audience from self-consciously thinking. We have the expectation that when we buy a ticket we will be pampered and not have to work too hard to follow what is happening on

the screen. So is there a lot of thinking going on? The answer is yes, but we don't really notice it. Much of the research on the brain is sharing what is going on unconsciously within us as we attend the cinema. All of the stuff engaging our minds is not things we really need to consider. Our brain is just processing this stuff on its own. This would seem a powerful tool to bring into the classroom. If I could engage the unconscious mind and follow up with high-level thinking and discussion, that could be a game changer in my classroom.

Do you want to watch a movie? This is a simple enough question and easily answered. But, if you delve into the question a bit, it hints at a major oversight in our thoughts on film. We primarily consider the cinema as a visual experience. It is easy to do so, as most people are focused on visual stimuli. However, the soundtrack of a film cannot be taken for granted. The soundtrack includes not just the music (which is confusing because we call the music of a film the soundtrack) but also the sound effects, and even the spoken words of the characters. These three elements, while often undervalued, are critical in telling the story of the film. So, do you want to listen to a movie too?

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) has considered the question of how filmmakers manipulate our emotions with music. The BBC found that "human beings are very good at interpreting sound. Right back to when our prehistoric selves will have heard a twig snap in a forest and thought 'that's it', I'm dead."[2] Sounds resonate with us. I really don't want my students fearing, "I'm dead," but I'd be happy if a song might help them think, "I'm too loud." Music is a powerful tool that can make or break a film. It can be equally useful in helping me manage a class, especially a class that is full of newly arrived students.

Kindergarten is full of new experiences. I will be teaching my students to write from week one. This is before many of them even recognize their letters. How does this work? I start by focusing on their drawing. I insist that they add details to their artwork from the moment they enter class. I believe that once they are in the habit of adding details to their art, it will be an easy transition for them to add details to their writing as they gain skills throughout the year. I can incorporate movies into class in this way as well. We can use clips and images from movies to aid us in making inferences, predicting, and justifying our answers. These are all essential skills that will serve my students well as they progress through their school career. These skills can be difficult to teach prior to the ability to read. I currently practice them through listening comprehension activities. I think that adding clips from films will increase students' engagement, as when an entire class sings along with Elsa.

A priority in my class is raising the level of student engagement. Highly engaged students present fewer discipline issues and are more apt to work harder. They are also considerably more focused on the tasks at hand. Students are drawn to film and television. The use of these media will indeed increase engagement.

Cinema has captured the minds of audiences for more than a century. Filmmakers have crafted their works to draw in large and diverse audiences. Films take audiences on a journey and return them to their own worlds with something to think about. I intend to adapt some of cinema's techniques to improve the journey my students and I will travel together. I hope through this emulation that they will leave the journey with something to think about.

Objectives:

This unit has three broad objectives. Within these three umbrellas fall skills that are useful for students in kindergarten and beyond. The first and primary goal is to increase engagement during my lessons. The second is to raise the level of critical thinking within my students. The third is to introduce and strengthen the listening comprehension skills of my students. Over time, as students gain reading proficiency, listening comprehension is transformed into reading comprehension.

An engaged student is not a discipline problem. A simple way to up the engagement factor is to allow students to choose their own topics to learn about. At the end of last year, I ran kindergarten genius hour with the help of some fifth graders. My students were given the opportunity to research and present their learning on a topic of their own choosing. I was not shocked to see many of them exploring cartoons and their characters. *Pokemon*, *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, *Frozen*, and an assortment of superheroes were all topics of interest. With this in mind, I will be using cartoons to increase engagement and drive my lessons. As a teacher of almost twenty years and a father of three, I know that cartoons can't miss when it comes to sparking excitement in a child. To paraphrase the great Yoda from *Star Wars*: Cartoons lead to excitement. Excitement leads to engagement. Engagement leads to … learning.

Wilbur Elementary considers the Rigor/Relevance framework when developing lessons. All lessons fall into four quadrants lettered A-D to indicate the level of rigor and relevance found in a lesson. Rigor describes how high on Bloom's Taxonomy chart an activity falls. A simple recall question—who was the first President?—falls very low; an activity in which a student must develop and defend an idea would rate considerably higher. Relevance measures how closely a topic is related to the student. Is the topic personally of interest or relevant? Quad D, the highest quadrant in the framework, marks lessons where the thinking is at a very high level and the material is very relevant to the students. Quad D lessons are where the best learning takes place. The use of cartoons will make lessons highly relevant for the kids. Asking questions that invite analysis and reflection and demanding an explanation for the answer will keep students rigorously working. Here are some questions we will explore: How is the character feeling in the following clip? Why do you think so? Do you believe that this character is a good guy or a bad guy? What makes you think so? These questions will require my students to make

inferences. Making inferences is an important skill I will introduce to the class, a skill that will grow with them and serve them well throughout their lives.

A final goal is to strengthen listening comprehension skills. In kindergarten we begin teaching English Language Arts (ELA). A cornerstone of ELA is reading comprehension. Reading comprehension demonstrates an understanding of the narrative elements of a story. Kindergarten is when we begin learning this critical skill. However, five-year-olds typically cannot read. We must begin with listening comprehension. Reading the book and asking questions require attention and thoughtfulness. Utilizing film can raise the level of engagement in the area of listening comprehension.

Content

Movies and the Audience

Movies, the Brain, and Us

It all starts with our brain, the control center of our bodies. Our brains are wired to take in information and do something with it. Our brains use information to make predictions, make inferences, and sort and categorize our world. They are always digesting new information and making decisions on how to deal with our ever-changing situation. Many of the tasks the brain undertakes require a certain level of specific skills that we focus on in the field of education. Students are expected to use critical thinking skills to demonstrate their understanding of the world around them. Movies, it turns out, give us many opportunities to practice these critical skills.

Two of the main ways we receive information are through our eyes and ears. Visual and auditory stimuli are the avenues through which much of our information is gleaned. Ever since the coming of synchronized sound in the late 1920s, most movies have presented a combination of pictures and sounds, and our brains respond to movies much as they do to the world around us, with some important differences I will address shortly. Uri Hassan states that "our brains are designed, as all animals' brains are designed, to turn our attention to whatever is new on our environment."[3] As we go through our lives, we focus our attention on the desirable things we encounter, such as food and companionship. Our attention is also drawn to things that are undesirable or dangerous. This focus then activates those portions of our brains which determine how best to acquire or avoid these stimuli.

Since a movie is "moving pictures, it constantly presents us with something new, and we pay attention to that new thing."[4] Therefore, our brain is constantly interacting with a movie as it is constantly presenting us with new images to view. Our brain processes these images through the visual systems we have learned and internalized. But a movie is not just a string of images. It also includes a soundtrack. The soundtrack, which contains

speech, sound effects, and music, adds an important dimension to the movie. The soundtrack engages the auditory systems of our brain. So a movie engages a greater portion of our brain than a series of pictures or a string of sounds alone.

Movies engage multiple portions of our brain as they present us with new information to process. At the same time, however, they also shut down a certain drive that is hard-wired into us. When we watch a movie about something that would move us to physical action if it happened in real life, our drive to act on what we are experiencing is diminished. For example, we still tense up at a frightening moment, but we do not typically flee the theater. Because we feel no need to react instinctually to what is occurring on the screen, four strange things happen to us. The first is that we cease to be aware of our own bodies. A second side effect of watching films is that we become less aware of our environment. Third, we happily suspend disbelief. Finally, we care about situations and things and people we really don't need to.[5]

We lose awareness of our bodies. We sit in the theater, the lights dim, and the show starts. As we are drawn into a film we forget about our own aches and pains. A headache could dull as our focus is shifted from our discomfort to the story that is unfolding.

Awareness of our surroundings also softens. This seems especially true in a darkened theater. As we become increasingly focused on the film, the auditorium seems to drop away. We become less aware of the other patrons of the theater. We lose track of the red glow of the exit sign. We no longer hear the air conditioning blowing or the machines running in the projection booth. During a good movie, the only time we are aware of these environmental elements is when a problem occurs. If a neighboring film is too loud, it can draw our focus away from our film and back to our setting, providing an irritating distraction from our moviegoing experience. This is probably why disruptive moviegoers and crying babies are reviled during show times.

We don't doubt. As we watch Thor call down thunderbolts atop alien invaders or Iron Man soar through the skies outracing a fighter jet, we don't stop to think of the improbability of those events. We don't question when the crowds in the New York City subway system smile happily as Crocodile Dundee walks across their heads and shoulders to reach his love. We don't question these and other events because we don't want to. We want to feel the power of the electricity crackling as the bad guys are struck down. We want the slip the bonds of gravity and soar through the skies as Tony Stark. We want to have crowds cheering us on as we finally have our happily-ever-after moment. We don't doubt because it satisfies us to have these things happening.

Movies make us care. Harrison Ford isn't going to be Han Solo anymore. Mr. Ford's work schedule does not influence my life in any way. I am no more likely meet Han Solo than to pet a unicorn. But when Han Solo is struck down in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens,* I and many others feel the gut punch of the moment. It is the same as the edge-

of-your-seat fraying of your nerves when music cues us that Jason and his hockey mask are about to make an appearance. We care for these cinematic characters and events as if they were real because they feel real when we are as deeply immersed in the story as we want to be.

Movies also force our brains to do things that don't occur naturally in our everyday experience, as they do every time a movie transitions from one scene to another. As we watch *Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back*, one moment we are set in a city in the clouds and following a group of characters as they fall into a trap laid by Darth Vader. Literally in the blink of an eye, we find ourselves in a swamp training with the last remaining Jedi. Does this sort of transition happen in the real world? Of course not. When we change our setting in the real world our eyes, ears, and brain go on the journey together. We do not simply cut to the next scene in reality. Despite these unnatural transitions during movies, our brain seamlessly strings the disparate pieces together, making a smooth story for us. Our brain fills in the blanks to keep things feeling seamless. Our brain can do this at the movies because it is already doing it all the time, albeit on a much smaller scale: "Our eyes are constantly darting around from place to place. We do this thousands of times a day, and every single time, during the fraction of a second that the eyes are in motion, our visual system essentially shuts off to spare us the nausea-inducing blur."[6] In fact, "research suggests our brains are constantly dividing up the torrent of information streaming in through our senses into more manageable chunks in order to help us make sense of what's happening around us and predict what's likely to happen next."[7] One aspect of the brain's ability to stream transitions or event boundaries together is that "people tend to struggle to remember objects they've seen just before an event boundary."[8] In my class I try not to end a lesson with a critical discovery, but rather leave a little time after the discovery to let it sink in before moving on to something different.

Movies, Our Emotions, and Our Bodies

Not only do movies affect our brain; they also can manipulate our emotions and even our bodies. Movies affect us in these ways without our even noticing. Often movies supply us with information not by targeting our intelligence but by engaging our emotions. Our emotional and physical states are often linked. When our emotions change, so too does some aspect of our bodies. As we laugh along with *Airplane* or the animated movie *Pets*, the laughter creates a buffer between us and our worldly concerns, because laughter leads to an increase in blood flow throughout our bodies. This increased blood flow can actually lower blood pressure, much as exercising does.[9]

Physical responses to things that occur onscreen are not limited to comedy. Horror movies can also evoke a physical change. The intensity during a horror film can increase heart rate and create an adrenaline spike. This spike can actually cause memories of traumatic events the viewer has experienced in real life.[10]

Another way movies can evoke an emotional response is through the use of well-chosen music or sound effects. Many horror films or thrillers utilize sounds that are reminiscent of the sounds we associate with animals in distress. Some of the jarring sounds in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* are similar to those of screaming animals. The sounds of nature in panic mode set us on edge,[11] just as Hitchcock's presumably intended. The twisting of childhood rhymes during the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series into singsong nightmares (one, two, Freddy's coming for you…) is an effective way to increase the tension or scare people. Some filmmakers now include infrasound in their soundtracks. Infrasounds are vibrations set at a frequency below the range that can be discerned by the human ear. These sounds take a shortcut past the logical parts of our brain and get straight at our emotional centers. Infrasound has been shown to produce extreme sorrow, shivering, and even heart palpitations. Infrasound was used in the 2007 film *Paranormal Activity*. Audience members reported high fear levels even when not much action was occurring onscreen. This reaction has been attributed to the film's use of low-frequency sounds.[12]

Movies can also trick our brain into feeling empathy for characters. There are two different types of empathy that we may feel while watching a movie. The first, mental empathy, requires viewers to step outside themselves and think about what another person is thinking or experiencing. The second, embodied empathy, is a more in-the-moment feeling like the gut-punch sensation of watching Han Solo killed. Filmmakers can foster empathy through their choice of shots in a given sequence. For example, moving from wide shots to a series of tighter and tighter shots can increase the sense of what the characters are feeling.[13] Empathy is one way we connect to the characters. Forging personal connections to stories, whether written or on the screen, is a goal in reading classes. Films can help us develop these connections within our students.

Audio-Visual Soundtracks

The soundtrack of a film encompasses all the music, sound effects, and spoken words of the film. The soundtrack adds to the movie experience in several ways. First, the soundtrack can deepen the mood of the piece. *The Lion King* includes the Zulu language in some songs. This detail fleshes out the setting of the movie. In *Tarzan*, Disney filmmakers do much the same thing by incorporating tribal drums into the music. Pair those drums with a drummer of Phil Collins' caliber and the tone of the film is enhanced.

The songs in a movie also move the plot along. In *Beauty and the Beast*, the characters sing many songs. These songs provide information about the characters and often drive the plot. "The Mob Song" sung by Gaston is used to whip the townsfolk to a frenzy and rile them to attacking the Beast. Animated movies have become proficient at utilizing music to further our understanding of character and to move the plot from one event to the next.

A benefit of the music of the soundtrack is that it can highly engage the audience. Kindergarteners will eagerly sing along with Belle, Ariel, Olaf, or any of the multitude of animated characters to whom they are drawn.

One of Us, One of Us… Synching the Audience

Hundreds of strangers sitting in a dark auditorium watching a film together even tend to blink at the same time. That may seem weird or disturbing, but it is also an example of the power of motion pictures. Uri Hassan has noted that audience members' brain activity can synchronize to a large degree over the course of a picture. During movie viewing, the active portions of the brain create similar profiles over multiple audience members. For example, the fusiform face area, which is in charge of recognizing faces, is engaged in filmgoers at similar times. A lack of brain synching during a show could be a bad sign for the movie. It could reflect wandering minds among audience members, not the best news for filmmakers.

Character Design

Character design begins with the way the character looks. But a well-designed character is more than skin-deep. To view Quasimodo from Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame,* one would likely see a monster. The same cannot be said for Gaston from Disney's *Beauty and Beast.* He is handsome and strong, and all the ladies of the town swoon when he walks by. Character design also takes into account stature, posture, gesture, movement, expression, and by extension the whole range of internal thoughts and emotions this behavior is expressing. Characters must be easily recognizable, able to be identified through their appearance, voice, abilities, and actions.[14] Characters frequently assume the roles of hero or villain. Determining which camp a character falls into requires that we look beyond their appearance. Quasimodo and Gaston require us to dig beneath the surface. To understand them we must look at their respective personalities, their actions, and their reactions to other characters. Once someone examines them deeply, it is simple to align the physically grotesque Quasimodo with the heroes and the morally grotesque Gaston with the villains.

Anthropomorphism is a technique that has been used with great success when developing characters. It is the overlaying of human qualities on non-human things. For example, Donald Duck is impetuous, impulsive, and quick to anger. These traits are not usually associated with a duck, but they make Donald a wonderful character. Human traits can be discerned in the bumpkin Mater in *Cars,* the power-hungry Scar in *The Lion King,* and the hug-loving snowman Olaf in *Frozen.*

Essential Questions:

There are three essential questions this unit will aid students in answering. The first: how can inferencing help us make predictions about characters? During the unit, students will be making predictions about the characters in animated movies based on their appearance, actions, and responses to other characters. The second: how do the music and sound effects in a film help us better understanding the narrative elements of the story? Students will focus on the soundtrack of film and make determinations about characters and plot event based on the tone of the scene. Through the exploration of these two questions, we will be working as well towards answering a third overarching question: how can movies help us become better at comprehending stories?

Strategies:

Kagan Structure: Hands Up, Stand Up, Pair Up

This is a strategy design to maximize student engagement. Each student is given a card with a word, picture, or question on it. They then stand up, spread out around the room and raise their hands. Each student high-fives a partner and then takes turns asking and sharing information about their card. After ideas are shared, the partners thank each other, raise their hands, and find a new partner to begin again. This of course is a very simplified explanation of Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up. For more details, I would investigate Kagan structures.

Picture Sort

I use picture sorts a lot with kindergarteners. I provide students with a range of pictures that match my lesson goal, then have them work together to sort the pictures into categories. These categories can be labeled or blind (in which the kids must figure out how the pictures fit together). Once the pictures are sorted, as a class we define our category labels based on what is common to all the pictures. It is empowering for students to develop their own definitions for terms. I believe it connects them more deeply to the new definition than if the definition is simply provided to them.

Exit Ticket

Exit tickets are a type of formative assessment. Basically, at the close of a lesson, students have to answer a question that demonstrates understanding of a concept taught that day. These assessments can be written, drawn, or verbal.

Classroom Activities:

Activity One: Visual Inferences

Since most of my students are primarily visual learners, I will begin the unit with an activity focused on this learning strategy. To prepare for this lesson I will print many images of characters from animated movies. I will also select clips featuring some of these characters. I will find my images and clips online by running a search of the internet. There are a multitude of animated films to choose from. I will choose some films containing well-known characters as well as some movies featuring more obscure characters with which my students may not be as familiar. I am opting to focus on characters because in kindergarten, character is the first narrative element that I introduce. Children understand characters, and they will have some background knowledge that includes various characters. The specific characters will differ from child to child, but the archetypes of hero (good guy) and villain (bad guy) will be known by most students.

To introduce our topic, I will be using the Kagan Structure of Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up. A picture of a well-known animated character will be given to each child. They will all participate in the Kagan structure with the goal to identify a character as a hero or a villain. After a few minutes and several opportunities to interact and trade pictures with other students, we will regroup on the carpet.

We will then move into picture sorting. I will call on students to show their picture to the class and as a group we will determine whether each character is a hero or villain. Once we have come to a consensus, I will hang the picture under the label identifying its archetype. At the completion of this activity we will have two assortments of heroic or villainous characters.

Next we will list common traits of heroes and villains in cartoons. I anticipate that with guidance, the class will be able to recognize some common traits the heroes share: they look friendly, they are pretty or cute, they are smiling, they are strong, they look nice/good (these adjectives are exceedingly vague, but they come up every time I do this sort of thing and usually with little clarification unless I define them myself). Then we will generate a similar list for our villains: they look mean, they are scary, they wear black, they have mad eyes, they are big. Someone will also tell me that they are bad, but I can usually lead them to swap out bad for mean. Given my schedule and the attention span of kindergarten students, this will probably be a good time to break for the day.

The following session will begin where we left off. I will lead a review of the characteristics of the hero and villain and then move into new territory. I will now present the class with pictures of lesser-known characters and ask the students to help me place them into one of our groups. Characters I will be considering for this activity might include Fievel in *An American Tail*, Gurgi and the Horned King in *The Black Cauldron*, and Littlefoot and Sharptooth in the *The Land Before Time* series. With each of these characters I will include a short clip that showcases them in action to give the students a bit more information with which to do our sorting.

I will extend this activity by comparing and contrasting Sharptooth to Rex in *Toy Story*, whom I will have included in our initial Stand Up, Hand Up, Pair Up activity and thus our sorting. I will point out the leading similarities between the two characters: they are both Tyrannosaurus Rexes. As such, they have the same physical characteristics, but they are presented in such radically different manners that it should make for an easily grasped discussion on the differences between heroes and villains in the movies.

As an exit ticket for this activity I will ask the students to explain how filmmakers portray characters to show them as heroes or villains. Of course, the phrasing of this question will need to be adjusted to the group of students with whom I am working in any given school year.

Activity Two: Auditory Inferences

Moviemakers frequently link a theme song to a character. This song can often clue the audience into the personality or intentions of that character. In *Star Wars: A New Hope*, for example, protagonist Luke Skywalker and antagonist Darth Vader have different theme music. Luke's theme seems to hint at a sense of struggle, while Vader's theme is ominous and powerful. The Horned King's theme is similar to Vader's in that it is menacing and sets the moviegoer on edge when the character is lurking about the screen. Animated characters often have their own music, and it's not always just instrumental. More often than not in animated features, characters break into songs whose lyrics and music establish characters' motives, desires, and personalities (Disney studios are masterful at this). Listening to *The Lion King*'s Scar sing "Be Prepared" lays bare everything you need to know about the villainous lion. Through singing, Scar explains his motives, his endgame, and his utterly despicable nature. As he explains all this to his hyena henchmen, he is also explaining it to the audience. Movies explain many things to the audience that are not always clear to the characters on the screen. This lets the viewers, or listeners in this case, feel like they are in the know and invests them more deeply in the story. When Ariel sings "Part of Your World" in *The Little Mermaid*, she too reveals her secret yearnings. Unlike those of Scar's song, these lyrics are designed to get the audience to take the mermaid's side and wish that Ariel could indeed be part of the world above the waves. The most interesting example of the character singing out her story (at least to me) is when Elsa belts out "Let it Go." The story from behind the scenes at Disney indicates that prior to this song, Elsa was intended to be the villain of *Frozen*, following Hans Christian Andersen's original tale *The Snow Queen*. However, once the song was written, Elsa became a much more sympathetic character, and the whole plot was reworked. As a hero, Elsa became one of Disney's most beloved princesses.

Listening comprehension is a critical skill to develop in kindergarten. Five- and six-year-olds are typically unable to read. Yet we must begin to teach them to understand story and plot. We have to get them to listen critically to the stories we read. Listening

comprehension is at the crux of my second activity. We will begin by listening to several songs performed in prominent animated features. I will prepare the students by asking them to tell me what the character wants according to the song. To best allow them to focus on the song itself, I will be playing the music without the accompanying video. I'll guide them to understand that Scar wants to be the king, Ariel wants to leave the ocean and explore the world of land, and Elsa wants to be free to be herself. We can then discuss whether these desires make the character someone to root for or against. I anticipate that many students will sing along with these tracks. Even though they will be deeply engaged, very few of them will have actually considered the meaning of the music. This activity can be completed in one day with a couple of songs or extended over several days with additional opportunities to practice listening comprehension in this way. Depending on my students, I will most likely opt for the latter.

After I have worked with the popular sing-along tunes, I will explore making inferences about instrumental themes. To do this I will pull a pair of pictures from our character sort, one villainous and the other heroic. I will play a theme (once more without benefit of the video). Afterward, I will ask the students which character that particular theme seems to fit. I doubt that anyone will believe that the Horned King's theme actually seems to go with the adorable Fievel the mouse. It could be tricky to draw out of the kids why they match a certain theme to a character, but I feel confident that they will match scary-sounding music to the scary-looking character. Likewise, goofy sidekicks typical have fun-loving or silly themes that match them well.

A good exit ticket for this activity could be explaining how music in a film helps us understand what is going on in the story.

When Inferences Trick Us (Book by Its Cover)

Moviemakers are very savvy at their craft. They know that audiences are always making inferences as they watch. We are always making guesses about characters and plots based on movies we have viewed previously. We can frequently identify the protagonists and antagonists as soon as we see them in the film's trailers. Most of this unit has been based on making these inferences. That is why it is so much fun when our expectations do not match what actually occurs. There are plenty of moments when the moviemakers play off our expectations to hit us with a surprise twist.

Storytellers know that when characters look monstrous, we will assume that they are monsters. Equally, they know that when a character strikes a dashing figure, we will consider them heroic. Of course we want our heroes to be strong and beautiful and our villains to be twisted. I will use these norms to illustrate that you can't judge a book by its cover.

We will begin the activity by revisiting our list of traits of the hero and the villain from activity one. I will introduce pictures of three new characters that have not been utilized to this point. The first of these pictures will feature Quasimodo from Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. Quasimodo is monstrous in appearance, and at times he behaves in a threatening manner (especially to Phoebus). A carefully selected image or clip will have Quasimodo looking exceedingly villainous. However, when we listen to him sing "Out There" we will realize that he is on a hero's quest to enter society and leave behind his lonely life. We can also evaluate characters by watching clips of them interacting with other characters. Doing so helps us understand that Quasimodo is a caring individual, unlike most animated villains.

Gaston is the antagonist of *Beauty and the Beast*. He certainly looks the hero. If we go by our checklist of heroic traits he will rate highly on looking the part. Most kids will be familiar with this character and will know that he is a bad guy, so I will focus on our traits list. It is easy to see that Gaston is a villain after watching almost any clip that he appears in. He cares only for himself. He is not a nice individual and even treats his friends poorly.

A final character I will use for this activity is Bellwether in *Zootopia*. Bellwether is the lead villain in the film. Yet she is a sheep. Cute little sheep are not typically manipulative villains, but she certainly is the villain in this movie. I expect that the kids will know she is the bad guy, but using her as an example will be the catalyst for a good discussion. I will ask why is it surprising when we learn that Bellwether is the villain. This discussion could be an excellent exit ticket for this third activity.

Appendix:

Common Core State Standards

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.2
Confirm understanding of a text read aloud or information presented orally or through other media by asking and answering questions about key details and requesting clarification if something is not understood.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.K.6
Speak audibly and express thoughts, feelings, and ideas clearly.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.9
With prompting and support, compare and contrast the adventures and experiences of characters in familiar stories.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.K.3
With prompting and support, identify characters, settings, and major events in a story.

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