

**Elements of a curriculum for teaching the film Hero by Zhang Yimou**  
(As informed by the NEH Summer Institute for Teachers: Chinese Film and Society at the  
University of Illinois, Urbana)  
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Submitted by:

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## Background to this project

In September 2011 Helms Middle School administrators invited me to create a new academic elective specifically for students who had just been reclassified as Fully English Proficient, and for whom there was no room in the other elective classes at Helms. Thus, I developed a new class, “World Literature and Film,” whose primary goals are

### 1. To improve students’ “Literacy” using film as text, as they specifically

- Use and practice “reading comprehension skills” as they “read” [view] a film
  - inferencing
  - predicting
  - sequencing
  - questioning
  - summarizing
  - context clues
  - compare-and-contrast
  - cause and effect
  
- Gain and improve their knowledge + confidence in understanding/discussing narrative elements
  - plot
  - setting
  - characters (motivation, traits, etc.)
  - theme
  - conflicts
  - tone and mood
  - point of view
  
- Consistently use academic vocabulary to discuss narrative and literary elements

2. Build students’ background knowledge and vocabulary – the world outside Richmond/San Pablo/Michoacan – by showing films from (or set in) other parts of the world. Among the films I showed were

- *Bend It Like Beckham*: **England** (and Germany and Sikh culture)
- *The King of Masks*: **China** (Buddhism and cultural traditions)
- *Whale Rider*: **New Zealand** (Maori culture)
- *The Gods Must Be Crazy*: **Botswana** (Bushman culture, African landscape/wildlife)
- *Kirikou and the Sorceress*: **Senegal** (“universal” elements of folk tales)
- *Sierra Leone’s Refugee All-Stars*: **Sierra Leone/Guinea** (refugees, trauma, UNHCR, etc.)
- *Rabbit-Proof Fence*: **Australia** (Aboriginal culture)

(Please e-mail me for a complete list of the films I used)

### Using Yang Zhimou's *Hero* with [low test-scoring] 7<sup>th</sup> graders

*Hero* was one of the more challenging films for my students. These are the criteria that I used to select films for my students:

1. “kid-friendly” (movies w. kid characters and/or lots of action work best)
2. no *gratuitous* violence, sexuality, or bad language
3. strong narrative thread and clearly differentiated characters
4. a theme that is comprehensible, accessible, relevant to middle school students

Although *Hero* falls short in all of these, I'd still teach it again w. lots of changes and improvements.

#1 – no kid characters. I thought the gorgeous martial arts scenes would hook them, but I underestimated their familiarity w. this genre, so it was neither that much of a novelty nor the martial arts genre they were most familiar with (Jackie Chan, *Kung Fu Hustle*, etc.).

#2 – it's not gratuitous, but a few of them showed slight anxiety/embarrassment in the single, short love scene. Part of Culturally Responsive Teaching is working to show respect for the varieties of backgrounds that students bring, which may include a strong religious/moral upbringing. Typically, I do talk to the students about how some scenes may make them feel awkward and that they are free to not attend to those scenes.

#3 – the words *arrow* and *version*, among many others, were new vocabulary for most of my students, so the idea of a story having several different *versions* was a new concept that I needed to teach more explicitly – and possibly using a shorter and/or more accessible text. Clearly *Hero* offers rich possibilities for teaching point of view and perspective.

#4 – the rich themes (heroism, patriotism, loyalty, different kinds of love) are appropriate for 7<sup>th</sup> grade, but need lots of discussion.

**Test: Show what you learned, know, and understand about Zhang Yimou’s film *Hero***  
**OPEN NOTES!** (That means you may use your Green Chart of Scenes and your White Chart of Characters)

**Directions:** Read each question carefully. Write your answers clearly and neatly because if I can’t read your answer, I will not be able to grade it, so it won’t count in your score.

**Part A. Characters.** Choose THREE of the five main characters – Broken Sword, Flying Snow, Nameless, Moon, and the King of Qin – and for each one, give ONE piece of “background information” [something about their life before the events shown in the film]. Then explain their role in the film: Their relationships with the other characters, what they did, and why they’re important in the film.

**Example:**

<u>Name:</u> <i>Old Servant (Tianyong Zheng)</i>	<u>Background information:</u> <i>We don’t know his background except that he seems to be the <u>lead teacher</u> of the calligraphy school. So, he would have been the teacher of Broken Sword and Flying Snow when they were learning calligraphy and how calligraphy and swordsmanship are related.</i>
<u>Character’s role in the film:</u> <i>Besides being the lead teacher in the calligraphy school, he is important in the film because he is the person who has to heal Broken Sword’s injury from when Flying Snow stopped Broken Sword from meeting Nameless in a duel. And finally, he is sent by Flying Snow to bring back either a red flag or a yellow flag, depending on what happened when Nameless went to kill the King. His most important scene is when the Qin armies were attacking the calligraphy school and he said, “You must remember! Strong as the arrows of Qin may be, though they will shatter our cities and destroy Our Nation, they shall never extinguish Zhao’s written word. Today, I shall teach you the true spirit of Our Culture!”</i>	

<u>Name:</u>	<u>Background information:</u>
<u>Character’s role in the film</u>	

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**Part B: Setting, which is the time and the place where the events in the film take place.** Explain briefly the setting: Where the events take place and when.

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**Required Bonus Questions (RBO's).** **Required** means that you **have to try and answer these questions**. **Bonus** means that you never LOSE points – you only gain points, and points are usually based on the **effort** that you make to do a good job of answering the questions and following directions.

**RBQ #1:** What did you like most about this movie and why? Points will be based on how specific you are in explaining exactly what you liked about the movie.

**RBQ #2:** Would you recommend this film to other 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students? Be very specific about why you **WOULD** recommend this film or why you **WOULD NOT** recommend this film.

**RBQ#3:** Choose ONE MORE of the 5 main characters – a 4<sup>th</sup> one from the 3 that you wrote about for Part A and write the same information for that 4<sup>th</sup> main character.

<u>Name:</u>	<u>Background information:</u>
<u>Character's role in the film</u>	

## **Hero, a film by Zhang Yimou**

A quite detailed synopsis of the film may be found here:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hero\\_\(2002\\_film\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hero_(2002_film))

The director, Zhang Yimou, made his directorial debut w. the film *Red Sorghum*. Some of his other films include *Raise the Red Lantern*, *To Live*, *Not One Less*, *House of Flying Dragons*, *Shanghai Triad*, *The Road Home*, *Ju Dou*, *Riding Alone for Thousands of Miles*, *Curse of the Golden Flower*, and most recently, *The Flowers of War*.

Other summaries and commentaries on the film may be found at these websites (current as of July 2012):

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0299977/> -- the usual writeup from everyone's favorite Internet Movie DataBase

<http://www.chinesecinemas.org/hero.html>, as published in *Cinema Scope Magazine* vol: 5, Issue: 1, (issue 14; Spring 2003), p. 9

<http://filmsufi.blogspot.com/2009/10/hero-zhang-yimou-2002.html>, an extremely thoughtful critical analysis

<http://itpworld.wordpress.com/2008/09/15/hero-chinahong-kong-2002---narrative-analysis/>

Because some students will ask about the colors, here's an excerpt from that very comprehensive and useful review:

There are 5 sequences where a color either predominates or is made 'significant' in a scene:

- The King of Qin's palace is **grey/black**, enlivened only by splashes of red. This forms the beginning and the end of the story and the overall feel of this sequence extends into the first fight between Nameless and Sky;
- **Red** dominates the first version of the story by Nameless in which he describes the calligraphy school, the attack by the Qin army, the stabbing of Broken Sword and the subsequent fight between Flying Snow and Moon;
- **Blue** becomes the color for the second version of the story;
- **Green** is the color for the story that Nameless doesn't necessarily know since it covers the first meeting of Broken Sword and Flying Snow and also the failed assassination attempt;
- **White** is the final color, dominating the deaths of Flying Snow and Broken Sword and alternating with the black sequences back in the palace.

An interview w. Zhang Ziyi, who plays Moon, may be found here:

<http://www.wu-jing.org/News/M01/2002-01-Zhang-Ziyi-Hero.php>

## **Correlating the serious teaching of a film with English Language Arts Common Core Standards**

Teaching a film directly supports Common Core English Language Arts Standards in at least the 2 domains of *College and Career Readiness* and *Reading: Literature* by merely considering and then inserting the terms *view*, *film*, or *director* directly next to the terms *read*, *text*, and *author*, respectively, as shown below.

### **English Language Arts Standards » Anchor Standards » College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Reading**

#### **Key Ideas and Details**

1. Read [*VIEW a visual text*] closely to determine what the [*visual*] text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual [*visual*] evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
2. Determine central ideas or themes of a [*visual*] text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas.
3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a [*visual*] text.

#### **Craft and Structure**

4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a [*visual*] text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone.
5. Analyze the structure of [*visual*] texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole. *In teaching a film, one can teach and examine different kinds of camera angles, shots, tracking, or other details of cinematography to determine how those technical details “relate to each other and the whole.”*
6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a [*visual*] text.

#### **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

7. *Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse formats and media, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.*
9. Analyze how two or more [*visual*] texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.

#### **Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity**

10. Read and comprehend complex literary, [*visual*,] and informational texts independently and proficiently.

### **English Language Arts Standards » Reading: Literature » Grade 7**

#### **Key Ideas and Details**

- RL.7.1. Cite several pieces of textual evidence *from a film* to support analysis of what the text/*film* says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text/*film*.
- RL.7.2. Determine a theme or central idea of a text/*film* and analyze its development over the course of the text/*film*; provide an objective summary of the text/*film*.
- RL.7.3. Analyze how particular elements of a story or drama/*film* interact (e.g., how setting shapes the characters or plot).

## **Craft and Structure**

RL.7.4. Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text/*film*, including figurative and connotative meanings; analyze the impact of rhymes and other repetitions of sounds (e.g., alliteration) on a specific verse or stanza of a poem or section of a story or drama *or scene of a film*. *Certain cinematic devices can be very effective in demonstrating symbolism, tone, mood, and other literary devices.*

RL.7.5. Analyze how a drama's or poem's *or film's* form or structure (e.g., soliloquy, sonnet) contributes to its meaning. [*Documentary vs. fiction, shorts vs. full-length, etc.*]

RL.7.6. Analyze how an author/director develops and contrasts the points of view of different characters or narrators in a text/*film*.

## **Integration of Knowledge and Ideas**

RL.7.7. *Compare and contrast a written story, drama, or poem to its audio, filmed, staged, or multimedia version, analyzing the effects of techniques unique to each medium (e.g., lighting, sound, color, or camera focus and angles in a film).* [NOTE TO TEACHERS: Many excellent 7<sup>th</sup>-grade level texts have been made into films – *The Outsiders* or *Freak the Mighty* (film = *The Mighty*) – or have excellent films that can accompany them: *Chew on This* (*Food, Inc.*, or *Supersize Me*), *Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* (*Smoke Signals*), etc., etc.]

RL.7.9. Compare and contrast a fictional portrayal of a time, place, or character and a historical account of the same period as a means of understanding how authors of fiction [*or film directors*] use or alter history.

## **Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity**

RL.7.10. By the end of the year, read/view and comprehend literature/*films*, including stories, dramas, and poems, in the grades 6–8 text complexity band proficiently, with scaffolding as needed at the high end of the range.

### **Discussion questions generated by 7<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> grade students viewing the film *Hero* by Zhang Yimou**

Note: These are questions my students wrote and handed in. These are not ALL the questions they asked; these are questions I selected, about 60-70% of them, which were asked by several students, or which I felt were especially interesting or important to understand the film.

They are arranged acc. to the scenes that triggered them, and when I typed them up, I tried to put them in chronological order (as the events unfolded), and I grouped questions about a similar shot together.

**Some student questions about parts of the film *Hero*  
that we've watched so far (Scenes 3 + 4)**

- 1. Why were the soldiers shooting arrows at the Calligraphy School?**
- 2. How did the soldiers know where Broken Sword and Flying Snow were?**
- 3. Why did Nameless want to go to the Calligraphy School?**
- 4. Why did Flying Snow throw her tea at Moon?**
- 5. What did the leader of the Calligraphy School mean when he said that they can destroy our kingdom, but they can never destroy our art? (the art = their calligraphy)**
- 6. Why didn't the old man (the leader of the Calligraphy School) get hit w. the arrows?**
- 7. Why didn't Flying Snow want Nameless to help fight off the arrows?**
- 8. Why did Nameless and Flying Snow try to fight against all those arrows if they knew that there were too many and it might be impossible to beat them?**
- 9A. How is Flying Snow able to block the arrows with her sleeve?**
- 9B. How is it that Flying Snow is still alive?**
- 10. Why did Nameless ask Broken Sword and Flying Snow to meet him in the library?**
- 11. What does it mean that there are "19 different ways to write *sword*"?**

**More student questions fr. the film *Hero***

**Directions:** Choose **THREE** of the following questions and write your best guess for the answer. Please **do not copy the questions**; just write the number of the question, and then write your answer. You may not be sure of the answer, but write your best guess and explain the reasons for your guess.

Grades will be based on **effort**, especially the effort you make to write a good guess, even if you are not sure, and to explain the reason(s) for that guess!

1. Why did Nameless tell Broken Sword & Flying Snow that he killed Sky?
2. Why did Broken Sword and Flying Snow get upset after Nameless told them something? (Comment: Think about what Nameless told them. Then you will know why they became upset.)
3. Why does Nameless want to have a duel with Broken Sword?
  - 4A. Why did Broken Sword make love to Moon?
  - 4B. Why did Broken Sword want Flying Snow to see them together?
  - 4C. Why did Moon cry?
5. How did Broken Sword know that Flying Snow would see him with Moon? (Great question! But no name, so no points...)
- 6A. Why did Flying Snow kill Broken Sword?
- 6B. Why was she crying after he died? (2 more great questions [6A/6B]! But no name, so no points...)
7. Why did Broken Sword say, "We are both so foolish."

### **More student questions about Hero**

1. Why were Flying Snow and Moon fighting?

- 2. Why did all the leaves turn red when Moon died?**
- 3. Why was Flying Snow just walking away when Moon was trying to kill her?**
- 4. Why was Moon laughing at Flying Snow after she was stabbed?**
- 5. Did Moon die?**

**Why did King Qin think that Nameless was lying?**

**Why does Flying Snow want Broken Sword to live instead of her?**

**Why did Nameless want to advance 10 paces?**

**More student questions about *Hero*:**  
**Scenes 7 + 8, “Advance 10 Paces” and “Flying Snow”**

- 1. How can Broken Sword do all those movements and still catch the tea on his sword?**
- 2. Why did Nameless ask the warriors to let Nameless and Flying Snow fight?**
- 3. Why do they want to kill the King?**
- 4A. Why was Nameless lying?**
- 4B. Why did the King suspect that Nameless was lying?**
- 5A. Why does Flying Snow stab Broken Sword?**
- 5B. Why did Flying Snow say to Broken Sword, “Moon will come soon and take care of you.” Wasn’t Moon dead already?**
- 5C. Why did Flying Snow leave Broken Sword alone saying, “I must go.”?**
- 6. Did Flying Snow actually die?**
- 7. Why were Nameless and Broken Sword fighting?**
- 8. Why didn’t Nameless kill Broken Sword?**
- 9. Why did Broken Sword give Nameless his sword?**

**BONUS Question: Why does every scene – or almost every scene – have its own color? For example, when Moon died, everything became red. In the library, everything was blue.**

**More student questions from *Hero*  
Scenes 9 + 10, “Underestimated” and “Spare the King”**

**Note: We’ll watch Scene 10 again today to make sure that nobody misses some very important background information about Broken Sword and Flying Snow. Also, pay close attention to the sequence. There is a “flashback” in Scene 10, so be sure you understand what a “flashback” is.**

- 1A. Why were Moon and Nameless fighting?**
- 1B. Why did Nameless tell Moon to stop fighting?**
- 1C. Why did Nameless walk away after he pushed Moon into the books?**
  
- 2. Why did Flying Snow agree to help Nameless kill the King?**
  
- 3A. Why did Nameless stab Flying Snow?**
- 3B. How is it that Flying Snow is still alive after she was stabbed?**
  
- 4A. Why were the King and Broken Sword fighting?**
- 4B. Where was Flying Snow when Broken Sword was fighting the King?**
- 4C. Why did Broken Sword stab the King in the neck ... and not kill him?**
- 4D. Why doesn’t Broken Sword want to kill the King?**
  
  
- 5. Why are there so many stories?**

**More student questions from *Hero*  
Scenes 10 + 11, “Spare the King” and “Our Land”**

**1A. Why didn't Broken Sword kill the King?**

**1B. Why did Flying Snow and Broken Sword break up and not be a couple?**

**2A. Why does Broken Sword write “Our Land” in the sand?**

**2B. How is it that Broken Sword understood the King?**

**3. Why does Nameless want to kill the King with the King's sword?**

**4. Why didn't Nameless kill the King?**

**5. Why did all the warriors come to the doors of the palace?**

**Bonus Question: Why do all [most] of the scenes have a certain color?**

**Lesson Plans for *Hero* by Zhang Yimou**

Note to other teachers: For this lesson, students will already be familiar with the teacher's approach to films, including the following activities:

- Using graphic organizers to write notes about each scene (events, conflicts, setting, etc.) and about each major character
- Writing questions (on 3x5 cards) about aspects of the film that puzzle or interest them or that they want to know more about and submitting these cards/Q's to teacher for class discussion/clarification the next day
- Watching the film in respectful silence

- Watching the film one scene (chapter) at a time, with a pause after each scene (4-5-6-7 minutes of viewing, sometimes more, depending on the film)
- Having the choice of writing their notes either while the film is showing or in the several minutes of silent time after each scene
- **Read, think, then write (RTW)** by which a lengthy writing prompt (several paragraphs) is up on the Document Reader, is read aloud by the teacher, and then students write for about 10-15 minutes while instrumental jazz is playing (to muffle ambient noise and increase student focus)
- Being held accountable for understanding the film's content (sequence of events, conflicts, resolutions, characters' roles and development, setting, etc.) by on-demand writing (predict what will happen next, explain the conflict and which of the 4 kinds of conflict it is, etc.) and by "open notes" tests at the conclusion of each film. ("Open notes" tests give the students significant incentive for taking good notes, since they'll be able to use those notes to write answers to test questions.)
- Getting "bonus points" for questions they write and submit to the teacher on 3x5 cards.

### **Day One: Introducing the film**

**Content Objective:** Students will gain an overview of the new film

**Language Objective:** None today

**Warm-up/Opener:** **Read, think, then write About Heroes** (attached). Unusually, for a Read-think-then-write, the teacher leads the class in a discussion of heroes in order to elicit at least the 4 types. Students write silently for 10-15 minutes. Teacher collects student writing, which she grades based on effort. Full points (5/5) for effort, more points for extra effort, 4/5 for less effort.

### **Lesson Steps:**

- Teacher distributes [on colored paper] the 1<sup>st</sup> Chart of Scenes for the film.
- Students briefly discuss the headings – which ones are the “same as always” [events] and which ones might be different.
- Teacher distributes [on different color paper] the Chart of Characters.
- Discuss the characters names: Teacher pronounces, class repeats chorally, for each one. Discuss M/F, whether or not you can tell fr. the names.

IN FUTURE: Suggest filling in “EXAMPLE” boxes in each of the 2 grids to help remind students of the kind of content and level of detail expected in their notes.

- Students number the 2 handouts and enter the handouts' names in the Table of Contents for their Folders, which hold all the papers (handouts, writing, tests, etc.) for this class, numbered and in order.
- Play preview of film. Teacher distributes 3x5 cards for students to write their Q's about the Preview.
- Teacher answers any questions that “can't wait for tomorrow” about the Preview.
- TIME PERMITTING: Show 1<sup>st</sup> scene of film. If 1<sup>st</sup> scene is shown today, it will be repeated tomorrow, after some schemata from the RTW and the Preview have had a chance to sink in.

### **Closure:**

- Students pass Folders to back row for Folder Monitors to put away.
- Students pass 3x5 cards to front, or Teacher collects.
- Last-minute questions.
- Class dismissed.

### **Day Two:**

**Content Objective:** Students will be able to name and briefly describe several important characters.

**Language Objective:** “The character \_\_\_\_\_ [name] \_\_\_\_\_ is \_\_\_\_\_.”

One characteristic we could use to describe her/him is \_\_\_\_\_.”

NOTE: “Language objectives” are specific academic vocabulary that students use to display their knowledge and understanding of one or more content objectives.

**Warm-up/Opener:** Teacher has typed up the students’ questions from the preceding day and displays them on the Document Reader. Students take turns reading each one aloud and then volunteer to answer each one. Teacher will clarify any questions that students don’t answer.

### **Lesson Steps:**

- Students take out their 2 Graphic Organizers (Chart of characters and Chart of scenes).
- Teacher elicits any outstanding questions fr. previous day’s viewing.
- Teacher shows 1<sup>st</sup> scene, noting on the whiteboard any interesting or problematic vocabulary or cultural references for later discussion.
- Students watch; some take notes during, some take notes after.
- Teacher pauses at the end of that scene, allows students 4-7 minutes to write their notes (summary of events, notes on characters, etc.) on the Graphic Organizers and write their questions on their 3x5 cards.
- Teacher may choose to clarify vocab./cultural references at this point, or at the end of class, as a closing. (NOTE: If there are items for which students will be held accountable, e.g., “on the test,” clarify them directly after the scene and revisit them later.)
- Teacher shows next scene, continuing to note any interesting or problematic vocabulary/cultural references.
- Teacher pauses at the end of that scene, allows students 4-7 minutes to write their notes (summary of events, notes on characters, etc.) on the Graphic Organizers and write their questions on their 3x5 cards.

NOTE: USUALLY, only show 2 scenes – maybe more – not to exceed about 15-20 minutes of film viewing in order to allow time for note-taking, answering questions, etc.

### **Closure**

- Teacher clarifies vocab./cultural references on the board. Generally, students need to take notes. (In later versions of the Chart of Scenes, I left at least one row of boxes empty for students to write notes on vocab., etc. Previously, they wrote these notes in the margins.)
- Students pass Folders to back row for Folder Monitors to put away.
- Students pass 3x5 cards to front, or Teacher collects.
- Last-minute questions.
- Class dismissed.

The following days follow the same format and have similar Content and Language Objectives. This film would greatly benefit from additional schema-building, e.g., about Chinese calligraphy, swordplay, some of the emotions raised (jealousy, loyalty, truth-telling, different versions of the same story, etc.)

## Read, think, then write: Heroes

What's a hero? [We'll discuss briefly in class.]

So, there are at least these types of heroes:

- (1) Heroes in history (the past)
- (2) Heroes in world events today (the present)
- (3) Heroes in literature (books, stories) – we'll leave out heroes in movies for now ...
- (4) Our own personal heroes – people in our life who we think of as heroes, who act like heroes.

Choose TWO of these types of heroes, and write a paragraph about each type. Your paragraph should give several specific examples (at least two examples, and more than 2 is better) – names of real people who are this category of hero in your opinion. For each one, explain what they do, or have done, in their lives to make you consider them a hero.

Here's one way to start your paragraphs:

*One of my heroes from history is \_\_\_\_\_ . I think  
this person is a hero because s/he \_\_\_\_\_ and  
\_\_\_\_\_ .*