

MOVIES DO MATTER

AN IMPACT EVALUATION OF THE DOCUMENTARY *THE CROSSING* AMONG HIGH SCHOOL AND MBO-STUDENTS

Iris Huisman, MA Intercultural Communication

Can film change the attitude of young people?

Education does not solely focus on the improvement of knowledge. It is the challenging task of teachers to also adjust the attitude of students, to make sure they will go on to participate properly in society. But what is an appropriate way for teachers to make loaded or sensitive topics such as sexual diversity, radicalization or the refugee issue discussable in the classroom?

Teachers often express difficulties with the above, for example out of fear of extreme reactions or because of strong personal feelings. Film can provide a solution. Moving images are the ideal means to appeal to young people; through growing up in a medialized world, they are visually set and used to communication through visual language. Film has the ability to introduce them to people, environments or events they do not know yet and to change the way they look at things they (think they) do know. A main character as middleman creates a safer environment for discussing sensitive subjects (e.g. homosexuality). Research has shown that certain films have the ability to open the eyes of students, fight indifference, encourage empathy and sympathy and lead to dialogue and debate. These are the core objectives of Movies that Matter, a foundation committed to bring human rights violations to the attention of high school and mbo-students (amongst others).

A very urgent and pressing human rights issue is the issue of refugees. The impact this issue still has on society makes it both relevant and important to discuss it in schools as well. Again, however, many teachers encounter the difficult question of how to discuss such a loaded topic in class. From all over the country teachers have shown a huge demand for an appropriate movie that helps them to address the refugee issue in class.

Movies that Matter Education wants to respond to this growing need by programming a refugee film or documentary on the educational film viewings during the annual Movies that Matter Festival in 2017. For this reason a large-scale research on the documentary *The Crossing* was conducted to determine whether this film is capable of achieving Movies that Matter's goals for high school and mbo-students. Does the film change the way students look at refugees? Will it lead to less extreme and more nuanced opinions?

The Crossing

The Crossing (2015) follows a group of Syrian refugees in the preparation of their journey from Egypt to Europe and during their seven-day crossing by boat to Italy. The days on the boat are grippingly

visualized: the hunger, the thirst, the lack of space, the filth, the fear, the sheer boredom, but also the disappointment about the refugee centers in Europe is portrayed. For months, they find themselves in a hopeless situation in which they can't work, can't go to school, can't take part in a language course and in which they lose contact with each other and gradually become discouraged and depressed.

Particularly special about *The Crossing* is the fact that despite the unique take on all the hardships and difficulties refugees endure during and after their crossing, it contains 'air' and also humor. The film focusses on the human side, rather than just on the legal proceedings. But does the film, through this perspective, succeed in achieving that what Movies that Matter stands for?



Methodology

What followed was research into the attitude of students in the classroom. The attitude of 403 high school students and 44 mbo-students was measured through statements before and after the film, followed by a focus group interview in order to support or possibly explain the results.

Attitude was divided into feelings (affective component) and beliefs (cognitive component). The affective component covered feelings of compassion, responsibility and fear towards refugees and dealt with stereotypes and values regarding refugees. Examples of statements are *'the thought of all the refugees coming to Holland makes me panic'* and *'I feel responsible for the refugees coming to Holland'*. Regarding the cognitive component, beliefs about the arrival of refugees, the consequences of this arrival and about refugee camps were examined. Statements included *'I believe that in the future, refugees can make a valuable contribution to the Dutch economy'* and *'I think the government has taken in enough refugees and must close the borders'*. On a 5-point scale, students indicated the extent to which they agreed with the statements.

Additionally, students' engagement with the topic was examined, for example by asking them whether they find it important to follow the news on refugees or to discuss the topic in class. Do students feel more engaged with the topic after seeing the movie? And does the film mainly impact the views of students who are little or those who are very involved?

Lastly, the evaluation of the film was included in the research. Do students find the film interesting or boring? Does the film also have an effect on the attitude of students who did not like it and would have never gone to see it themselves?

Results

As figure 1 shows, the attitude of students, both in terms of feelings and beliefs, is more positive towards refugees after seeing the film. What the documentary shows very clearly are the pain points of the European refugee centers and the research shows that students find the refugee centers less well-regulated after watching the film. They also believe less in the stereotype of refugees as poor fortune seekers. Even issues that are not directly addressed in the film, such as the potential positive (economic) consequences of the arrival of refugees are more often recognized. Students feel less fear and more responsibility towards refugees and their views on for example refugee centers being placed in their neighborhood are less negative. In short: in many of the measured variables, a (significant) positive change is visible. It is striking that although many students indicated feeling sorry for refugees during the focus group interview, compassion did not increase significantly. Perhaps for some students, despite the images, it remains difficult to identify with the refugees.

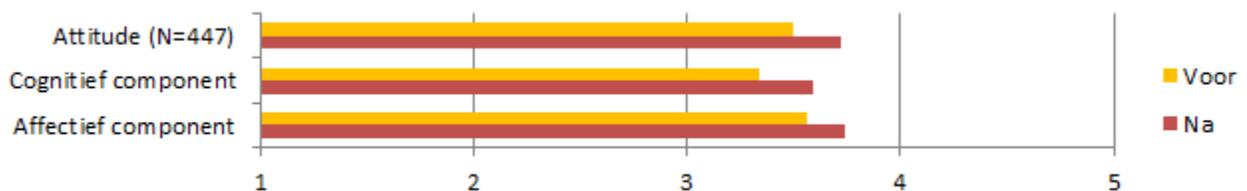


Figure 1: Attitude by component (1=negative, 5=positive)

As can be seen in figure 2, havo- and vwo-students are the most positive towards refugees prior to the research. The educational level of the students turned out not to be related to the degree of attitude change: the effect of the film is large for all tested groups.

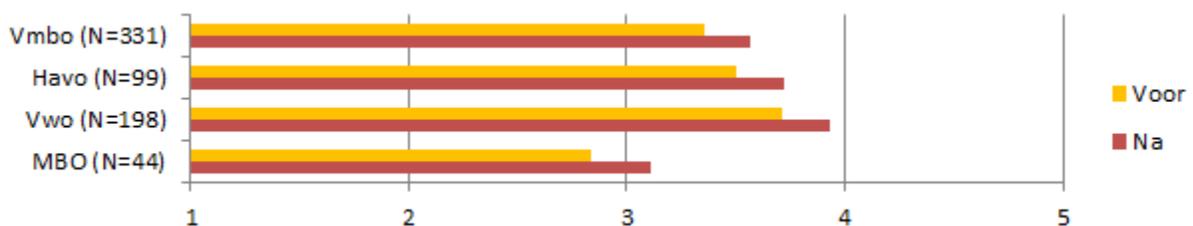
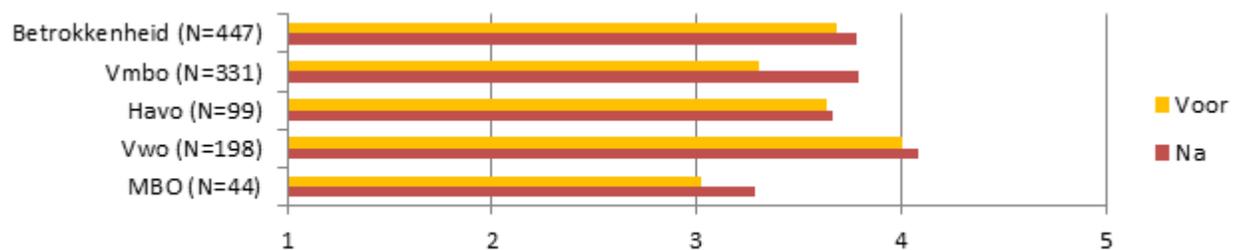


Figure 2: Attitude of target groups (1=negative, 5=positive)

Although the average attitude appears to be relatively moderate, opinions were heavily divided and a lot of votes were cast on the extreme ends of the 5-point scale, both on the positive and the negative side. A positive effect of the film is that the extremely negative responses in particular moved closer towards the midpoint of the scale: views became more nuanced and moderate. In the focus group interview students indicated a deeper reflection on what their attitude is based on and they additionally tried to substantiate their opinion.

Engagement & appreciation

Figure 3 shows the effect of *The Crossing* on the engagement of students. Especially the involvement of vmbo and mbo-students seems to have increased: after seeing the film students attach more importance to following the news on the refugee topic and to discussing the topic in class and in politics. The film thus seems to fight indifference of the less engaged pupils in particular; and it is precisely within those groups that Movies that Matter wants to make the most difference. The effect is less striking for havo- and vwo-students, probably because they were already more involved prior to the research.



Figuur 3: Engagement (1=not engaged, 5=very engaged)

The film received a rating of a 7,2. The highest average grade is given by the vwo-students (7,6), the lowest by the mbo-students (6,7). The film also has an effect on the attitudes of students who found the film boring or slow, and on both the less engaged and the more engaged groups.

What do these results mean? Although the results are significant and a change in attitude is perceived, it is not presumed that the screening of the film *The Crossing* will radically change the attitude of young people. However, it is interesting to see that by showing a movie, a sensitive and difficult topic, on which opinions may vary widely, can be addressed in the classroom in a positive way. One could thus definitely recommend teachers to introduce sensitive topics through movies, because movies do matter.