Attracting the Education Audience

To encourage school visits to giant screen theaters, the education officer at two London venues conducted research focusing on what teachers need to justify their trips.

by Alex Patrick

The BFI London IMAX Cinema is a stand-alone commercial theater that opened in May 1999. It was funded by the British Film Institute and the Arts Council of England. The Science Museum IMAX is an institutional cinema within the Science Museum, and it opened in July 2000. I split my time as education officer between these two sites.

In January 1999, when my job started at the BFI London IMAX Cinema, awareness of giant screen films was very low in Britain. Teachers needed to be convinced of their potential as an educational tool before they would consider bringing a class along. Teachers in Britain have to justify school trips in terms of their relevance to the national curriculum, and they must have related educational activity in every visit. Schools can only ask children for a voluntary contribution to the price of a trip and must fund the rest themselves.

In March 2000, I took responsibility for giant screen education at the Science Museum, which has over 1.5 million annual visitors, 20 percent of which are education groups. It was vital to ensure this audience would want to include a giant screen film as part of their visit.

Links were established with relevant galleries within the Science Museum and local institutions, such as the London Aquarium, with which a joint teaching packet was produced. A hands-on workshop with an actor in the role of a Victorian time traveler was created. Links such as these encourage teachers to watch a film in conjunction with another activity, enabling them to spend a whole day working on a specific theme. Free education resources linked to giant screen films are a great selling point, but most are geared solely towards the North American curriculum. I have been working as part of ELF (European Large Format Film Forum) to provide advice on education guides in production, to make them more useful for European and global audiences.

WHAT DO TEACHERS WANT?
A series of teacher focus groups was conducted in December 1999 to establish what British education audiences wanted from a visit to a giant screen cinema. Although both venues where I work differ—one is a brand-new purpose-built commercial cinema, the other a cinema within a large well-known institution—both need to attract education business. The objectives of the research were to determine:

- How teachers find out about giant screen films and what they have heard.
- How best to promote these films to teachers.
Motivations for visiting giant screen cinemas.
Barriers to visiting giant screen cinemas.
Practical issues—problems, needs, wants, concerns for a visit.
How to help teachers make the most of a visit.
What sort of linking activities they would like to include in their visit.

We held two weekend discussion groups with a group of primary and secondary teachers* from a range of subject backgrounds, about half of whom had never seen a giant screen film before. They watched a film and had a discussion before and after the screening.

Our key findings were:

- Teachers were impressed by the realism and scale of the images. They felt the experience was ideal for students. Many thought the medium, because it is so visual, was especially suitable for children with special needs or those for whom English was a second language.

- "When you are studying space, it is so difficult to make it practical and to give the children a feeling of the universe and where we are in it. To come to this [Destiny in Space] would extend the teaching so much in a way you can't possibly do. Nothing can do what that huge screen can do." [Primary teacher]

- Teachers need information about the target age range of films, content and the dates of forthcoming films a term (10 weeks) in advance. They need to see a film before deciding whether it is appropriate for their students and they need resources to support their visits.

- "You need to find out what the content is and try to focus children prior to the visit." [Secondary teacher]

- Primary and secondary teachers need to be convinced that the film is relevant to the national curriculum. Some concern was expressed that the content might not be detailed enough for secondary groups.

- Both primary and secondary teachers need help building educational activities around their visit and focusing their pupils' attention. They need pre- and post-visit activities.

- "What do I get the children to focus on, because I don't want them to experience and forget. They need to be reminded to enhance that experience." [Primary teacher]

- Teachers need reassurance about the logistics of a visit—transport, health and safety, somewhere to brief and de-brief their pupils, lunch space, conveniently located toilets.

*The national curriculum is a statutory curriculum set by the British government, which all schools in the UK must follow. It is split into four key stages (KS1-4). Primary education covers key stage 1 (ages 5–7) and key stage 2 (ages 7–11). Secondary education covers key stage 3 (ages 11–14) and key stage 4 (ages 14–16). Further information can be found at www.ncf.gov.uk.
Children need allocated seats together to enable them to be supervised. Clearly signed meeting points should be provided where school parties can gather before and after the film.

Generally teachers expect to pay around £3.00 [approximately $4.50 USD] per child. Accompanying teachers should be given free admission.

School groups could not see a film before 10:30 a.m. due to the time it would take to register the children and travel into London. Free teacher previews of forthcoming films are useful. Teachers also respond to mailed information, provided it is personally addressed to them by name (“Ms. Smith” rather than “Head of Science”) and the literature clearly indicates national curriculum relevance.

“I would never take children somewhere I haven’t been. I wouldn’t have considered coming here as part of my teaching, but for the fact that I have been here this morning.”

WHAT NEXT?
In light of these findings, teachers are sent mail at the beginning of every term and attend special preview screenings of our films. Education groups are offered a discounted rate and accompanying teachers are free. Schools-only screenings are held in the morning with special introductions. Our local education authority provides funds for teachers to attend training days on how to incorporate a giant screen film into teaching. Resources and advice are free.

WHY GIANT SCREEN?
Watching a film encourages audiences to be “cineliterate” and gain information that would be difficult to convey in a text. As one primary teacher said, “The visual thing, the impact was really tremendous and it would excite kids because they would be seeing science from a completely different perspective that they would never see in books.”

Education audiences are familiar with and excited by the moving image. If an effort is made to include it as part of the classroom experience, the classroom environment and the home environment won’t be as separate in children’s lives. Bernie Bradley, from UCI, Manchester, agrees: “There is no denying the effect the moving image has on children. Rather than resisting that you’ve got to embrace it, you’ve got to work it to your advantage.”

Watching a giant screen film can have a lasting effect and permeate into different areas of children’s learning. A primary teacher whose school has a high percentage of children with English as their second language commented, “I took my class to see Destiny in Space. I sold it to the head teacher on science but when we came back we were doing stories and it kept cropping up. It really did ignite a spark in about a third of the class and it really did enrich their writing.”

The “educational” attraction for a film such as Mysteries of Egypt is content, which has a clear link to the UK statutory curriculum. Mysteries of Egypt is also an entertaining and popular film with nongovernment audiences. With a limited range of films on offer, it is important to maximize opportunities and use all films where possible with different audiences, not just those labeled as educational. Learning is more than the acquisition of concrete facts—it is the acquisition of skills, emotions and experiences. The immersive and engaging experience of watching a giant screen film is one that viewers remember and it is an “education” in a broad sense.

IS ENTERTAINMENT EDUCATIONAL?
I recently conducted some research with teachers and families in the form of questionnaires given out after screenings of Mysteries of Egypt, Into the Deep, Cyberworld, and Encounters in the Third Dimension. I asked whether these giant screen films were suitable for “education” or “entertainment.” Eighty-two percent said the films were both entertaining and educational, and 62 percent thought the films had national curriculum relevance that would justify a class trip.

Additional comments included:
“I don’t separate the two. My son asks more questions about films he enjoys, so ‘entertaining’ films are the most educational.” [Home educator]

“An amazing experience and, in a broad sense, anything that is entertainment is part of the children’s education.” [Primary teacher]

“The best entertainment is often educational. Education needs to capture the imagination for one to learn.” [Parent]

While providing teachers with information, resources and advice to accompany educational curriculum-relevant films, it is important to maximize the potential of every film for education audiences, both formal and informal. This means ensuring all films are exciting, engaging and entertaining, and giving as many audiences as possible the opportunity to extend the learning experience once they have left the cinema. As one secondary teacher put it, “A giant screen film is an unforgettable experience. If all lessons were as unforgettable, then we would have a nation of Oxbridge graduates!”

Alex Patrick has worked as an English and drama teacher and an education officer at the National Museum of Photography, Film and Television. She is currently education officer for the BFI London IMAX Cinema and the IMAX Cinema at the Science Museum, London, England. Her email address is a.patrick@nmsi.ac.uk