



Spirit and Home: New films for developing powerful geographical understanding

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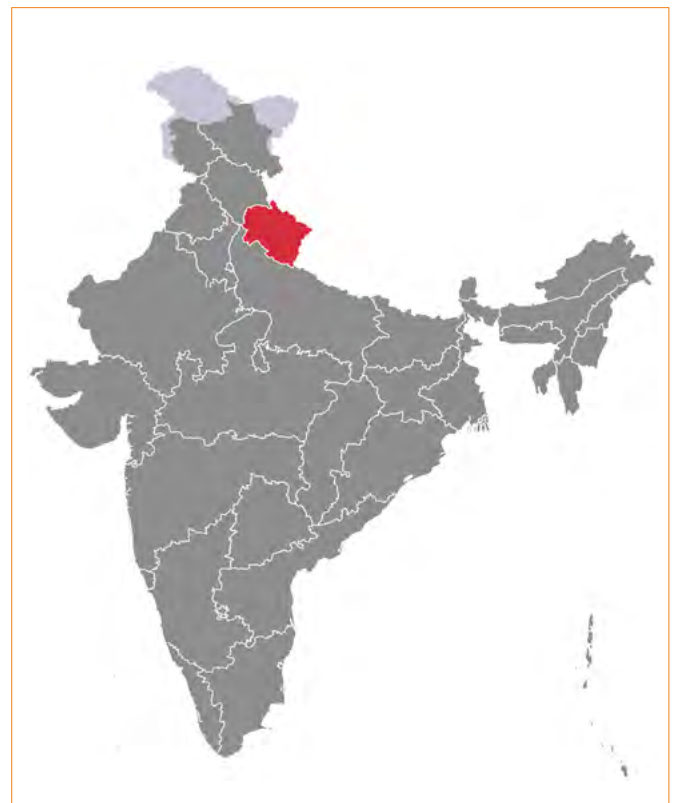
Films as a teaching resource

Films transport us to places in ways that words alone cannot, which is why they are an especially valuable resource for the geography classroom. Take the concept of economic development, for example; students can understand it by examining geographical information in written texts including development indicators in various countries. However, films can provide students with the opportunity to understand the perspectives of people living in very different cultural settings and to form visual and acoustic impressions of their lives. In doing so, film can stimulate discussions that develop a more nuanced understanding of how 'development' and change are experienced by different sets of people on the ground.

To use films effectively in the classroom, teachers can use various scaffolds to encourage students to actively process new perspectives. For example, the 5W1H strategy – described later – is valuable in this context. Teachers also need to ensure that, after viewing a film, sufficient time is provided for students to think about and respond to new perspectives portrayed (Durbin, 2002). Using dialogic teaching strategies can help students to think critically about geographic issues in film and to empathise with people in very different cultural settings.

It is not always easy to find films that both explore issues through a geographical lens and intersect with a high school curriculum. Here we introduce two films – produced by a geographer – with accompanying lesson plans that are aligned to the Victorian geography curriculum standards. **Spirit** and **Home** are documentary films made by Associate Professor Jane

Dyson, whose earlier film **Lifelines** has been successfully used as a teaching resource in secondary school classrooms in Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, as well as in higher education (Kriewaldt & Dyson, 2017, www.lifelinesfilm.com).



Map of India showing the location of Uttarakhand in red.

Top: View of the village nestled beneath the Himalayan peaks.
Credit: Ross Harrison

FILM STUDY: *SPIRIT & HOME*



A young woman dances during the *Pandav Lila*, a festival depicted in the film, *Spirit*. Credit: Ross Harrison

Two new films: *Spirit* and *Home*

Based on Dyson's long term ethnographic research in a high-altitude Himalayan village in Uttarakhand, India since 2003, the films document continuity and change through the eyes of the villagers. The once highly remote region has been transformed in the past two decades; the building of a new road, installation of electricity and telecommunications, and the rapid expansion of educational facilities have provided new possibilities in the village beyond subsistence agriculture. Nevertheless, young people are increasingly leaving the area to access even better educational and employment opportunities in the cities. But leaving one's home is a difficult decision and often taken reluctantly. Many young people eventually return to the village with renewed commitment to the village, and its development.

The two new films explore the tensions between the 'old' and 'new' from different angles. *Spirit* (19 minutes) examines ideas of belonging in this remote area as it undergoes rapid social and economic change. It depicts how, despite new opportunities for education and growing rates of outmigration, villagers still prioritise their connection to their community, to the land on which they live, and to the many thousands of Hindu gods who are also said to inhabit the mountains. The cultural and spiritual practices in the village celebrate these interconnections across the physical, social and cultural/spiritual realms, and, in this respect, villagers share similar perspectives to Australia's First Nations people and their connection to Country. Culminating in the exuberant *Pandav Lila* – a ten-day festival that celebrates the gods and draws people back to the village – *Spirit* explores the tensions people face in managing 'development' and change while maintaining their connection to each other and the land.

Home (8 minutes), on the other hand, is a short film that focuses on a young generation of women who, despite their educated status, continue to farm and contribute to domestic work considerably more than young men. The film follows the story of Munni as she contemplates her

inevitable arranged marriage, her ambivalent pursuit of an education outside the village, and her connections to her family, community and the region.

Both films – *Spirit* and *Home* provide students with a visual understanding of key geographical concepts such as place, interconnection, and social and economic change. Lesson plans have been designed to help teachers make use of the films to build students' geographical thinking and understanding. The resources aim to help students engage with the various characters and themes in the films, critically consider different perspectives and reflect on the implications of development for people's lives.



Two older women discuss changes in the village. Credit: Ross Harrison

Suggested Lesson Plans

The first lesson plan is based on the film *Spirit* and is designed for the **Year 7 unit** 'Place and Liveability,' which investigates people's connections to place and how these shape their identity, and sense and perceptions of place. After viewing the film students will assume the roles of different characters in the village and simulate a village gathering to discuss the future needs of the village. The role play activity encourages students to consider how different people perceive and are connected to place. This then enables students to reflect on their own assumptions and perceptions about place.

The remaining two lessons plans are based on the film *Home*. The first plan is designed for the **Year 8 unit** 'Changing nations' and encourages students to adopt the 5W1H (what, why, who, when, where and how) strategy to actively engage with the film. This strategy supports students to collect, record and subsequently analyse geographical information (DET, 2020). The lesson discussion encourages students to construct their own understanding of how education for girls influences population changes, and how education might act as a push/pull factor for urbanisation and internal migration in India.

FILM STUDY: *SPIRIT & HOME*

The 5W1H strategy for active viewing of the film *Home* is also recommended in the final lesson plan designed for the **Year 10 unit** 'Geographies of human wellbeing'. Students are encouraged to record any information from the film that helps them infer the level of wellbeing in the state of Uttarakhand. They will then conduct further research on wellbeing indicators for Uttarakhand and compare these with another Indian state. The lesson plan suggests for teachers to engage students in critical discussions on various ethical dimensions including if and how the indicators show gender differences.



Munni contemplates her homeland. Credit: Ross Harrison

Developing powerful geographical understanding

A focus on ethics and values is a vital component of many geographical issues. Roberts (2017) proposed that geography teachers play an important role in helping students consider diverse perspectives, interrogate knowledge claims and develop their own opinions with respect to ethics and values. This prepares them for civic participation and informed decision making on complex issues like uneven development, climate change, or a global pandemic. Documentary films like *Spirit* and *Home* are powerful resources that teachers can use to explore the ethical/values dimension and develop the geographical thinking and understanding that will empower students to shape their future.

The lesson plan for *Spirit* is appended with this article. You can access all the lesson plans as well as the films, *Spirit* and *Home*, at www.spiritdocumentary.com/resources

References

- Victorian Department of Education and Training (DET). (2020, Oct 14). *Making sense of moving images*. Literacy Teaching Toolkit. <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/Pages/making-sense-of-moving-images.aspx>
- Durbin, C. (2002). *Teaching Geography with televisual resources*. In M. Smith (Ed.), *Aspects of teaching secondary Geography: Perspectives on practice* (pp. 200–209). London: Routledge.
- Kriewaldt, J. & Dyson, J. (2017). 'Lifelines': A new resource for integrating film into the classroom. *Interaction*, 45(3), 17–21.
- Roberts, M. (2017). Geographical education is powerful if... *Teaching geography*, 42(1), 6–9.



Women gather to talk before working in the forest. Credit: Ross Harrison

Authors' biographies

Jane Dyson is an Associate Professor of Human Geography at the University of Melbourne. For two decades, she has conducted research on young people and regional change in the Indian Himalayas. Her work is published in academic books and journal articles and presented in award-winning films.

Shu Jun Lee is a lecturer at the Melbourne Graduate School for Education, University of Melbourne. An experienced Geography teacher and leader, she recently completed her PhD researching on the place and potential of inquiry in the secondary geography curriculum.

Spirit Lesson Plan for Year 7 Geography

Written by Jane Dyson & Shu Jun Lee

Subject: Geography	Year level: 7
Topic: Place and liveability	Time required: 90 minutes
Lesson summary Students will watch the film <i>Spirit</i> and participate in a role play that would encourage them to reflect on diverse perspectives on place/Land.	
Curriculum links The cultural connectedness of people to places and how this influences their identity, sense of place and perceptions of a place (AC9HG7K07)	
LEARNING OBJECTIVES Knowledge Students will be able to: <ul style="list-style-type: none">– describe the characteristics of a place– explain the cultural connectedness of people to places and how this influences their identity, sense of place and perceptions of a place– relate these concepts to the cultural connectedness of First Nations Australians to Country Skills Students will develop skills of <ul style="list-style-type: none">– communicating with peers– empathy– community awareness– knowing Asia and its diversity Values Students will be able to <ul style="list-style-type: none">– develop intercultural understanding	
Resources required <i>Spirit</i> video (including transcript for students who may benefit from access to the written text)	

Spirit Lesson Plan for Year 7 Geography

Lesson Outline

Teacher guidelines	Student activity	Timing
<p>Introduction</p> <p>Teachers may use a photograph of a place familiar to students as a trigger activity. Teacher asks students to brainstorm the characteristics specific to that place; these include natural and human features.</p> <p>Teacher introduces the film and provides some background information on the place where the film is set: the Garhwal Himalaya village in the Indian state of Uttarakhand.</p>	<p>Students lists the characteristics of a place.</p> <p>(optional) Students locate the Indian state of Uttarakhand using Google Maps or Google Earth, and describe their observations of the location.</p>	10 mins
<p>Development</p> <p>Teacher introduces the role play task and assigns and explains the roles. Teacher shows the film <i>Spirit</i> (approx. 20 minutes).</p> <p>Teacher gets students to discuss how their characters 'see' the village and the factors influencing their perception of the village. Teacher guides students to imagine how the characters may envision the future of the village.</p> <p>Teacher assumes the role of the village leader (pradhan) and facilitates the discussion at the village gathering. Teacher may use the hot-seat strategy or any other role-play strategies.</p>	<p>Students pay particular attention to their assigned characters in the film.</p> <p>Students work in groups to discuss the perceptions of their assigned characters.</p> <p>Students assume their roles; characters take turns to sit on the hot seat to be interviewed by the rest of the class.</p>	<p>20 mins</p> <p>15 mins</p> <p>30 mins</p>
<p>Conclusion and reflection</p> <p>Teacher debriefs the activity and guides students to reflect on the cultural connectedness of people to places and how this influences their identity, sense of place and perceptions of a place. Teacher can also extend the discussion to include how the First Nations people in Australia perceive Country.</p>		15 mins

Spirit Lesson Plan for Year 7 Geography

Role Play Activity

Background information

The village in which this film is set is located in the Indian state of Uttarakhand, in the Garhwal Himalayas. Over the past two decades the once highly remote village has seen many changes. The inflow of state funds has led to the development of infrastructure including a road, electricity and telecommunications, and schools. The Indian government's push for free and compulsory education since 2009 has enabled the younger generation to receive basic education, providing new possibilities in the village beyond subsistence agriculture. Nevertheless, young people are increasingly leaving the area to access even better educational and employment opportunities in the cities. But leaving one's home is a difficult decision and often taken reluctantly. Many young people eventually return to the village with renewed commitment to the village, and its development.

Despite new opportunities for education and growing rates of outmigration, villagers still prioritise their connection to their community, to the land on which they live, and to the many thousands of Hindu gods who are also said to inhabit the mountains. The cultural and spiritual practices in the village celebrate these interconnections across the physical, social and cultural/spiritual realms. The film culminates in the exuberant *Pandav Lila* - a ten-day festival that celebrates the gods and draws people back to the village. The festival illustrates how the wellbeing of the land and the spirits is perceived to be closely connected to the wellbeing of the villagers and their animals. In this respect, villagers share similar perspectives to Australia's First Nations people and their connection to Country. The villagers in the film acknowledge that this interconnectedness is something that those outside of the village may not experience or understand.

The roles

Each group of students will represent one of the following characters/groups of people:

Saraswati

Saraswati is the main character in the film *Spirit*. When she married her husband, she moved to the village as an unusually well-educated young woman. However Saraswati worked hard like the other women in the village. She also had children who have since left the village for education elsewhere. Although she now works at a school, Saraswati continues to share the work on the land with the other women. While she feels sad that she has not achieved as much as she would like in her life, she now feels at home and connected to the village and the land.

Saraswati's children

Saraswati's children were born in the village but they moved away when they were young to find a better education. They come home occasionally to visit and participate in festivals including the Pandav Lila.

The older ladies

All their lives, the older generation has worked hard, living off the land, and maintaining the connections between the physical, spiritual and cultural realms in the village. They are somewhat sceptical of younger generations with their 'newfangled' ideas and who they perceive to scorn hard work. They fear that young people will leave the village, and worry about the implications of outmigration for the economic, social and spiritual life of the village.

Dancers in the Pandav Lila

The Pandav Lila is conducted to ask the gods to protect the cows and other livestock in the village. During the festival, the dancers are spontaneously possessed by the gods and goddesses. The whole village gathers to help organise and participate in the festival. The exuberant performances last from dusk to dawn. At the end of the 10 days, even as the dancers go back to their normal lives, the spirit which they embodied and displayed remains high.

Spirit Lesson Plan for Year 7 Geography

State government officials

The state of Uttarakhand in north India was established in 2000. Prior to that, it was part of the state of Uttar Pradesh. Since 2000, Uttarakhand has become one of India's fastest developing states. Agriculture remains one of the state's key industries. Tourism, manufacturing and other industries are also growing. The state continues to look out for opportunities in the various districts for economic development.

Tourists from Australia

Uttarakhand offers many natural and cultural attractions with spiritual significance. Tourists visiting the Garhwal Himalaya can enjoy mesmerising views of the snow-capped Himalayas, visit key Hindu pilgrimage sites and learn from the multiple religious and cultural festivals.

The task

In your assigned groups, after viewing the film, think and discuss:

- How does your assigned character 'see' the village?
- Which factor is the most influential in influencing this character's perception of the village?
- What might your assigned character want for the future of the village?
- What might the other characters want for the future of the village? How will your character respond to these perspectives?

The role play scenario

- There is a village gathering today for everyone to discuss the future of the village.
- Each character is hot-seated for 5 minutes. The characters take turns to sit on the hot seat to be interviewed by the rest of the class.
- The entire discussion will be facilitated by the village leader (the teacher).

Additional information

- Official website on *Spirit* with further information <https://www.spiritdocumentary.com/>
- Using role play and drama in lessons, Literacy Teaching Toolkit by Victoria Department of Education and Training <https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/speakinglistening/Pages/exampleroleplay.aspx>
- Additional film from the same village – *Lifelines* (16 minute version and 10 minute version) – and associated lessons plans available at: www.lifelinesfilm.com/resources
- Further film: *Home* (8 minutes), and associated lesson plan available at: www.spiritdocumentary.com/otherfilms and www.spiritdocumentary.com/resources

