

# STUDY GUIDE



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## THE EMPTY CLASSROOM (EL AULA VACÍA)

a Film by MULTIPLE DIRECTORS

ARGENTINA, BRAZIL, COLOMBIA, MEXICO, PERU, URUGUAY, EL SALVADOR / 2015 / 111 MIN

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## BACKGROUND INFORMATION

The creative director of **THE EMPTY CLASSROOM**, Gael García Bernal, has summarized the drop out crisis in Latin America:

“Nearly half of all young people in Latin America do not finish high school. Some don’t go to school because they live in rural areas. Others because they have a disability, and still others don’t go simply because they were born into a poor family. There are also many other young people who just aren’t interested in school. They don’t believe that their high school education will lead to a better future. The dropout crisis affects all sectors of society.”<sup>1</sup>

Once we analyze the drop out crisis within Latin America, can we connect this crisis to other major, systematic problems in the region? Is lacking a large, skilled labor force one of the problems that contribute to Latin America’s continued subordination in the global economy?

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<sup>1</sup> García Bernal, Gael. “Infórmate” [Learn More]. El Aula Vacía. <http://www.elaulavacia.org/en/>

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## INTRODUCING THE FILM

A film **synopsis** is a piece of text designed to summarize the film’s narrative, genre, style and key participants in a way that appeals to a wide audience. The synopsis is part of the film marketing process and tends to follow a traditional format. Read this official synopsis for **THE EMPTY CLASSROOM**:

Nearly half of all young people in Latin America never finish high school. To explore this dropout crisis, creative director Gael García Bernal gathered 11 award-winning filmmakers who have created a captivating anthology of short films, both narrative and documentary. There is no easy solution to this complex issue, and each short delves into the underlying reasons, from poverty to societal traditions, that students aren’t graduating.

- How do the trailer, poster, and image stills encourage you to watch the film in the cinema?
- Can you make any assumptions regarding what the film is about just from the marketing (i.e. trailer, poster, and image stills)?



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## GENERAL QUESTIONS

- Judging from the first few minutes of the film, what do you think this movie is about? What assumptions can you make?
- Does the language difference present a barrier to your viewing experience? What about the subtitles?
- Did you notice a difference in the way Spanish is spoken among the stories? Can you pinpoint some of the differences you noticed?
- What surprised you about the causes of the high school drop out crisis?
- Does the place you live in has an impact on the education you receive?
- Does the opportunity of receiving a quality education change according to your socio-economical status?



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## SHORT FILM: *Piñalito*

Director: Pablo Fendrik, Argentina (2:00-12:49)

Fendrik directed *Piñalito*, a short filmed in Misiones, Argentina, about the obstacles to accessing education in rural areas. The protagonist, Pedro, dreams of escaping the backbreaking work on his family's tobacco farm. He would like to study, but his family wants him to work. Will he end up going to school?

- ❑ In this story, children are expected to stay and help with work at home. Although this is a necessity to survive, it means children are denied an education. Are you surprised that this is still a reality for many children around the world? Do you think this is an issue?
- ❑ What did you feel after watching the short film? Explain how and what cinematic techniques you believe manipulated your emotions (long close-up shots of distraught faces, minimal dialogue, fading edit i between scenes, the placement of the character in the nature shots, etc.).
- ❑ What clues can you uncover regarding Pedro's desire to learn and escape the work at home? Think about the scenes where he runs off and goes into the forest (4:21-9:29) and ask yourself questions like what is he doing, what is he trying to find, and what is he interested in.



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## SHORT FILM: *Alondra*

Director: Daniel y Diego Vega, Peru (13:10-22:42)

Adolescence is full of important decisions that can shape your future. In the short *Alondra*, the Vega brothers follow a teenager from Lima who wonders how she will graduate from high school. Are high schools prepared to engage twenty-first century students?

- ❑ In this story, the audience follows Alondra through her difficult decision. Describe Alondra's actions, body language, and dialogue lines that give the audience the impression she wants to continue learning and finish her degree.
- ❑ In Alondra's story, family and relationships are a huge part of whether or not children or teenagers decide to stay focused in school. Select scenes that depict this issue.
- ❑ What were your thoughts about the adults in Alondra's life in terms of helping her and guiding her to make a decision? Keep in mind her mother, her older male relative, and her principal when writing your answer.



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## SHORT FILM: *Mathematics*

(23:05-33:36)

Director: Flavia Castro, Brazil

In her short film *Mathematics*, Castro explores the lack of interest in school that is preventing students from graduating. While it is true that socioeconomic barriers still keep some students from completing high school in Latin America, this does not tell the full story. In most countries, the decision whether or not to stay in school has become the greatest challenge when educating future generations.

- ❑ In what way does the director portray the students' lack of interest in school without using dialogue? Use specific examples from the story and think about body language, facial expression, and what is happening overall in the narrative.
- ❑ The main character seems to have an interest in learning, but not through school. Explain why you believe this is the case.
- ❑ How would you describe the relationship between adults and students in the story? Is it hostile or trusting? Caring or harsh? Explain using specific scenes.



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## SHORT FILM: *Written Off*

Director: Nicolás Pereda, Mexico (33:58-40:01)

For students who drop out of school, the future can be as uncertain and confusing as snow on television. The immediate costs and challenges might prevent them from seeing the long-term benefits of a quality education. But if the education system is failing, why even bother going to school? In his short film *Written Off*, Pereda asks if the cost to staying in school is worth it.

- In what ways did the film's mise-en-scène (lighting, set design, costume, acting, composition, space, film stock, etc.) implicate that this is a story in which poverty is an important theme?
- From watching the film, what can you assume about the additional burdens of trying to get an education as a disabled person? Think about the short film "Hugo" (the last film, 1:33:59-1:45:04) as well when writing your response.
- Notice how the narrative follows both Carlos, and the older woman. Why do you believe the director chose to show both sides of this story?



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## SHORT FILM: *Leagues*

Director: Lucrecia Martel, Argentina, (40:24-50:28)

It is said that education is the great equalizer able to close gaps and open opportunities. But what happens when schools themselves reflect the divisions and discrimination within a community in conflict? In Martel's short *Leagues*, the Argentine filmmaker explores the issue of school exclusion in indigenous communities.

- What other socio-political problems does *Leagues* uncover about indigenous communities in Argentina?
- Were you surprised that the "teaching" scene (42:18-45:11) wasn't actually homeschooling, but an exercise to uncover whether a private owner is stilling land from their community?
- How did the first shot introduce and summarize the first of many problems that indigenous youth must face regarding access to education? Think about what you see, and what you think is missing (i.e. infrastructure). How is this lack of infrastructure and transportation elaborated throughout the rest of the film?



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## SHORT FILM: *More Or Less*

Director: Pablo Stoll, Uruguay (50:52-1:00:44)

In his short film *More or Less*, Stoll asks what kind of future awaits young people who drop out of high school, and what happens when they want to go back to school. In his short, two teenagers are highly motivated to pursue their dreams, but unmotivated to stay in school. They soon discover that education is not an obstacle in the way, but rather the key to success in life. But will it be too late to go back?

- How are both of the characters introduced in the film? Keep in mind dialogue, clothing, and any behaviors.
- Although the two characters have similarities, their stories and circumstances seem to be different in several ways. Explain the differences you found.
- How do these two stories differ from the other short films? Keep in mind the race and socio-economic class of the characters.



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## SHORT FILM: *Good Intentions*

Director: Carlos Gaviria, Colombia (1:01:07-1:12:22)

In *Good Intentions*, Gaviria explores the links between the dropout crisis and violence. His short film tells the story of two young people on the road to recovery after becoming the victims of violence. *Good Intentions* shows the impact violence can have on future generations.

- In what way does the film demonstrate how the dropout crisis is just one of several larger problems that the Colombian youth is facing? Keep in mind the dialogue, behavior, and actions in the scenes where the characters are at school.
- Were you aware of the ongoing political conflict in Colombia depicted in the story? Elaborate on how this political conflict has affected the lives of the characters using specific examples.
- Explain how the film depicts how school is simultaneously an important part of these Colombians' lives, but also an insignificant factor in the grand scheme of things.



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## SHORT FILM: *See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil* Director: Tatiana Huezo, El Salvador (1:12:43-1:22:50)

In her short film *See No Evil, Hear No Evil, Speak No Evil*, the Mexican-Salvadoran filmmaker investigates how violence affects the school dropout crisis. This film explores the fear that forces many young people living in high-risk areas of the city of San Salvador to abandon their studies. Education can be a powerful tool to prevent violence. The tragic irony is that in some places, even the schools are not safe.

- Think about the theme of anonymity (e.g. hiding many of the students' faces) and connect it to the title of the story 'See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil.'
- Why do you think the director made the choice to not show the protagonist's face? Do you believe it to be a practical, or an artistic choice, or both?
- Were you surprised that many of the students felt most unsafe while they were at school? Were you surprised that fear has led the protagonist to take a year off from school? Explain why.



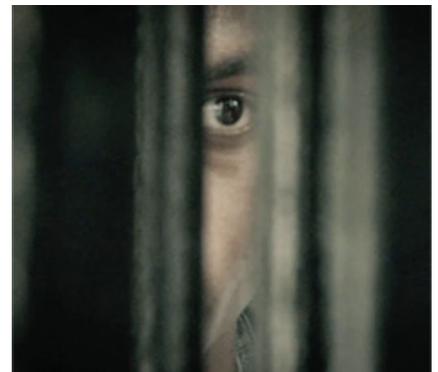
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## SHORT FILM: *Igor*

Director: Eryk Rocha, Brazil, (1:23:15-1:33:38)

In *The Empty Classroom*, Rocha takes a look at how to identify students at risk of dropping out of school in Latin America. His film *Igor* is based on the real life story of a teenager with lots of energy and potential who lacks the motivation to stay in school. This true story reflects the current situation of many students who are at risk of dropping out of school.

- Igor has no dialogue, signifying the audience should pay attention to the type of clothing being worn, and the parts of the house being shown. What can the audience assume about the socio-economic status of the household?
- The audience is shown several close-up shots of Igor's face throughout the entirety film, but we are never able to uncover what he is thinking. Explain the significance of this, keeping in mind the voice over of the woman discussing Brazil's education system (1:30:20-1:30:48).
- The audience follows Igor's daily life (1:23:15-1:33:38), yet we never hear him express himself. What do you believe this means?



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**SHORT FILM: *Hugo*****Director:** Mariana Chenillo, Mexico (1:33:59-1:45:04)

Students with disabilities face physical, social, and cultural barriers to accessing education. It is estimated that only 20% to 30% of children and youth with disabilities in Latin America attend school. In her short ***Hugo***, Chenillo's protagonist is just like any other high school student; he goes to class and studies so that he can graduate. The only difference: he is a deaf student in a hearing world. Hugo is a typical teenager. He just faces not-so-typical challenges to finishing high school.

- What are your feelings regarding the accommodations that Hugo has forged for himself at school? Do you think this is sustainable?
- After watching the film, do you feel there needs to be some steps taken to help students like Hugo? Were you aware of the struggles of a deaf student before watching this film?

