
DISTRICT 9

THERE'S A LOT OF TEACHING IN HERE

DISTRICT 9: A teaching resource

"They are not welcome" . . .
"They are not accepted" . . .
"They are not human" . . .

Released in New Zealand and Australian cinemas on August 14th 2009, the restricted rating on the Neill Blomkamp directed, Peter Jackson produced sci-fi movie DISTRICT 9 will not stop your students from discussing it, nor many of them from viewing it. Central to DISTRICT 9 are the themes of refugees, discrimination, prejudice, oppression, greed, biological technology and warfare, the power of multinational companies, relationships, trust, and that ever present question, 'what is it to be human?'. As discussed throughout this article, DISTRICT 9 is rich with teachable moments and an opportunity for excellent cross-curricular learning links between History, Biology, Chemistry, Physics, Mathematics, Psychology, Health, English, Media and Film Studies, Theory of Knowledge, Economics, Commerce, Marketing and IT.

Aliens arriving on Earth may be to sci-fi movies what the man-on-the-run plot is to an action thriller, yet while DISTRICT 9 uses both these clichés, its opening documentary film style does not have a typical sci-fi feel. As a character in the movie is heard to state, "There are a lot of secrets in DISTRICT 9". If you haven't yet seen the movie and you plan to, you may like to stop reading at this point, and skip to page 4 so that the plot is not revealed to you.

Set in 2010 Johannesburg, we learn that twenty-eight years ago, an immense alien spacecraft came to rest in the skies above the city. Anticipating contact, if not hostility, the South African authorities are bewildered as three months pass. They then decide to enter the craft and find hundreds of thousands of malnourished and helpless alien labourers, seemingly with no



leaders and no way to "phone" let alone return, home. Far from being an invading force, these beings are refugees.

Facing this refugee crisis, the South African authorities employ the assistance of the military arm of Multi-National United (a not so subtle twist of the United Nations) and the aliens are deployed to DISTRICT 9.

"Committed to bringing Human-kind the benefits of tomorrow's technology today" Multi-National United (MNU) is not only a security force, but

"the global leader in technological innovation". ⁽¹⁾

It is no surprise then, that MNU want to learn from the aliens advanced travel and weapons technology. Rather than working alongside the aliens to repair their craft and return them to their home, MNU prevent their leaving, curtail their activities and, as we later learn, kidnap, harvest and experiment on the aliens in order to reveal their technology. However, the integration of their technology, with their alien biology renders the spacecraft and the alien

weapons useless in “humans hands”. In addition, a small section of the spaceship was captured on film falling to Earth. However, extensive searches over the years have failed to find any debris.



Now, more than two decades after the alien’s arrival, DISTRICT 9 has become a shanty town realistically reminiscent of refugee and squatter camps all over the world. Enacting MNU regulation 2.6.2 ⁽²⁾ which permits the MNU to “designate any non-human area as residential, industrial, government or MNU at any time”, an enforced relocation of the now 1.8 million alien inhabitants of DISTRICT 9 to District 10, a tented refugee camp some 240 kilometres outside of Johannesburg, begins.

The naïve, boyish and somewhat bumbly Wikus van de Merwe, (played by novice actor Sharlto Copley) a MNU field operative, is given leadership of the relocation operation, by his father-in-law, who is a director of the company.

As the operation begins and the documentary cameras follow Wikus, he stumbles upon a laboratory in one of the huts in which the alien Christopher Johnson (all aliens are given human names by MNU), his small son and adult colleague have been synthesising a black liquid. While searching the make-shift laboratory, Wikus discovers the canister containing the alien fuel and while showing the camera crew its alien markings, he accidentally sprays himself with a shower of black fluid.



True to our suspicions as an audience, Wikus becomes ill over the following hours, running a fever and oozing black phlegm from his nose. Despite his progressive illness, Wikus nevertheless “soldiers on” getting into an altercation with aliens where he injures and bandages his hand. At nightfall, exhausted, Wikus arrives home to a surprise ‘heroes’ party, where he collapses and is hospitalised. A doctor cuts away the bandages to treat Wikus’ injured hand, to reveal that it has morphed into an alien claw. Seizing the opportunity, and Wikus, members of the MNU, including his own father-in-law, torture Wikus into wrapping his claw around the triggers of numerous alien weapons. Indeed, his claw can operate the weapons and instantly Wikus becomes the most important “technology” on Earth.

Poised, as he is, in a balance between human and alien metamorphosis, MNU scientists decide to harvest Wikus’ organs in order to have the greatest chance of replicating his ability to use alien technology in other humans. Finding the strength to escape (with the aid of a few alien weapons!), Wikus flees. The man-hunt ensues, our “innocent” protagonist is framed, chaos



explodes across the screen and over the camera lens, and the movie slips into sustained (‘Y’-chromosome orientated) action-thriller sequences as Wikus teams up with Christopher Johnson to retrieve the canister from MNU headquarters. Scenes alluding to the Transformers, Ironman and Terminator One ensue as between them Wikus, Christopher Johnson and his precocious small son, re-unite the command module (which had fallen to the Earth many years before) with the alien master

ship enabling it to leave the Earth's atmosphere.

We return to the documentary clips where one character declares "Everyone wants to know what will happen next" . . .

The plot has been left open for a "District 10" sequel. Will Christopher Johnson keep his word and return to reverse the metamorphosis of the now completely "Prawn-like" Wikus, and to rescue the more than two million aliens now even more inadequately housed in new District 10?

Possible Discussion Questions and Cross-Curricular Links are detailed below: The ideas shared are designed to be a springboard from which teachers may develop thorough lesson/unit plans appropriate to teaching, learning and the development of critical thinking within their academic discipline.

(Note that short clips of the trailers to District 9 are available on YouTube)

History and Current Events:

While the parallels to the Apartheid era in South Africa are obvious, Blomkamp's aliens are a more encompassing form of "other" and the movie alludes to racial intolerance and marginalisation on a global, not just a local level. This futuristic setting provides a capture for the exploration of refugees throughout history and in current time, both within Africa and beyond.

Refugees: "They don't belong here"

"They are spending so much money to keep them here when they could be spending it on other things. At least they are keeping them separate from us."

"A lot of bad things have started to happen"

"They must just go. I don't know where they must go, but they must go."

Poignantly, these scene-setting comments made in the documentary-like opening are predominantly spoken by black South Africans. As filming began on DISTRICT 9, South Africa was experiencing an influx of refugees from Zimbabwe. Thus, the issue of xenophobia is raised.

"Hundreds of thousands and now millions of Zimbabwean immigrants from the collapse of Zimbabwe have been crossing the border into South Africa and have been living in the impoverished areas of South Africa with the impoverished black citizens of South Africa," says Blomkamp. "So they've come in looking for a better life because their country is collapsing. And what's happened now is that the poverty-stricken black residents in South Africa have lashed out against these poverty-stricken black citizens of Zimbabwe.

"It was like a powder keg situation that was on everyone's mind," continues Blomkamp, discussing the roots of his allegorical film. "It was seriously violent stuff that happened, and it happened as we were shooting. When the film was conceived, I wanted to incorporate the idea of impoverished South Africans who wanted another impoverished group out. Because that's a very big part of South Africa's fabric right now."⁽³⁾

- A subplot within the film concerns the Nigerian warlord, Mumbo, and his band who exploit the inhabitants of DISTRICT 9, scamming them out of their technology (specifically weaponry) and money via a trade in cat food and inter-species sex. It is worth exploring/discussing how the Nigerians are depicted within the movie as exploitative, cruel and primitive in their superstitions. Is this just?

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- What other modern-day examples of exploitation of the poor and/or vulnerable exist? (In the New Zealand context consider the recent issues on illegal overstayers. Who has authority/right to grant citizenship?)
 - Research District Six from modern South African history. Compare and contrast the forced relocation of some sixty thousand black residents of Cape Town's District Six to a barren outlying area known as the Cape Flats, during the apartheid era, with the forced relocation of the aliens.
 - Compare and contrast the development of the United Nations forces and the development of the military arm of MNU. How are parallels made between the two during the movie?
 - Holocaust allusions exist throughout the movie including the "resettlement" of the Jews. The rules and regulations for Non-humans may be viewed on the Multi-National United website (multinationalunited.com). Here one learns that Non-humans must be issued an identity tag within one day of hatching. This identity tag must be visible at all times. Non-humans are not permitted to own property; Multi-National United may search and seize Non-Human property at any time; NMU may monitor and record any non-human activity it sees fit, including surveillance of all medical records; Non-Humans must only sit, drink from, travel on, move within designated areas; and so on. This website provides an excellent opportunity to compare and contrast the treatment of those deemed "others" in society, both throughout history and within the current time.
 - Research the use of concentration camps, for example, during the Boer War; during World War II.

Philosophical Discussion:

- What are our responsibilities toward refugees from other countries? (Australia has dealt with 'illegal' refugee boats in very recent history and no-doubt will do so again in the future. Both NZ and Australia have accepted 'legal' refugees from a variety of countries in recent time.)
- What are the ethical and moral issues involved in the governance of diverse cultures that co-exist?
- What degree of authority/control/influence/sway should governments have over a population?
- What degree of authority/control/influence/sway should multinational companies have over a population?

Economics: Commerce: Politics:

- Who are the world's largest Multinational companies?
- What businesses are they in?
- What countries are they in?
- How does their business turnover compare with the Gross Domestic Product of these and other countries globally?

- Investigate Public-Private partnerships in your country (and globally). What influence do private companies have in the economy?; politics?; is this changing?



"The responsibility for co-existing starts at home. Staying inside your designated residential region will help keep order intact. Territorial integrity helps individuals feel safe, secure and empowered." ⁽⁴⁾

Psychology:

The protagonist we are introduced to at the beginning of the movie is a bumbling, well meaning, sensitive-new-age guy who likes to give his wife hand-made gifts. Exploited for his jovial naivety, and seen as a "pawn" in the larger game that is unfolding by his father-in-law (a senior in the military arm of MNU), Wikus is charged with leading the relocation of the aliens. As his DNA begins to mutate and he develops the ability to fire the alien weaponry, MNU seek to exploit Wikus for different reasons. Initially useful for his personality traits, Wikus becomes useful for his physical traits.

- Is there something in the human condition that predisposes us to exploiting "others" for our own gain?
- How might we personally be involved in the **exploitation** of "others" (you could define "other people" or "other sentient beings, including animals", as you choose. This could link back to exploitation of child workers in the production of designer goods, and the living conditions under which the poverty stricken survive; the exploitation of animals through genetic engineering and animal testing; the exploitation of women through pornography (physical traits) etc.)
- Why do we appear to be predisposed to disliking those who are not like us, but who are **"other"**?
- How do we make people "other"?
- We never learn the cultural name of the aliens in DISTRICT 9, but rather they are referred to a by the derogatory term "Prawns". Compare this to the use of terms such as "Cockroaches" during the Hutu-Tutsi genocide of a decade ago. What effects does the use of such derogatory terms have? What other terms have been used in

historical events?

- What derogatory terms are used in the school environment/our community to make people “other”?
- What is the significance of Wikus beginning to call Christopher by his ‘given’ name?
- How can you prevent undue manipulation of power/control/ pressure/ by peers; those in authority; advertisers etc?
- Research teacher Jane Elliot’s now infamous **1968 “A class divided” discrimination lessons**. Prompted by the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jane divided her class into blue eyed and brown eyed students in order to demonstrate what discrimination is, how it feels and how it can affect people’s behaviour. A good place to start is at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/divided/> This site has a Frontline documentary on the lesson with accompanying teacher’s guide; an interview with Jane Elliot and more.
- If students are finding it difficult to understand how “good” people might do “bad” things, or believe that they are not capable of active discrimination, then a discussion of **Stanley Milgram’s experiment** might prove interesting. This famous experiment (and its variants) measured the willingness of subjects to obey an authority figure, even when it came to undertaking acts that conflicted with their conscience.
- The closing line of the New York Times review of DISTRICT 9 is *“.the film . . . suggests that sometimes the only way to become fully human is to be completely alienated.”* ⁽⁶⁾ Discuss.
- Wikus undergoes a physical transformation. In what ways does he undergo a moral transformation?
- What natural feeling would we experience should an alien ship arrive and hover over our capital city? How would these initial feelings change after three months of no contact? How would they change if the Government or powerful multinational company confined them to one specific area and did not allow natural interaction to occur?



Art:

- Those with physical and mental disabilities are often perceived as “other” in our society. Explore the controversy around the artist Alison Lapper and the stand she makes against discrimination.

Religious Studies:

- Does the Biblical command to love one another extend to non-humans?

- The name “Christopher” is of Greek origin and means “bearing Christ inside”. Saint Christopher is the patron saint of travellers. Is this just coincidence? Are there other significant names in the movie?

Theory of Knowledge:

- The aliens have superior space-craft, fuel and weapons technology. Are there responsibilities that necessarily come with knowing something or knowing how to do something? To whom might these responsibilities be owed?
- Explore how important, and in what ways, students consider the study of literature and of history to be, in an individual’s ethical development.

Film and Literature Studies:

- Explore different genre – sci-fi, horror, docu-drama used within the movie. Compare and contrast the subtleties of each (including camera use, angle of filming and so on).
- Compare and contrast different Sci-fi links to DISTRICT 9 including the original 1958 Kurt Neumann “The Fly” and its 1986 Cronenberg remake, and Frank Kafka’s 1915 novella *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis) ⁽⁵⁾.
- Is the story resolved? Is it a satisfying ending with “Everyone wants to know what will happen next” left open? Has it been set up for a sequel?
- Does this science-fiction story provide any insights and revelations about the world in which we live?
- What is the importance of story telling (in all its forms) to the development of cultural and personal values?

English:

The posters and visuals within the movie provide an excellent capture for an advertising or propaganda unit.



There are some good examples available on the DISTRICT 9 YouTube clips, which I am unable to reproduce here for copyright reasons. Similarly, a Google images search of District 9 will result in many useable examples. However, do check copyright, and if necessary paint or sketch your own.

Marketing:

- Explore the marketing of the film, including the placement of “Humans Only” signs over cities in which the movie was to open, the development of the website etc. Film critic Scott Mendelson suggests that the marketing for DISTRICT 9 was a silent promotion via a big budget whisper campaign that makes everyone think they have discovered the film for themselves. Thus, the word of mouth factor is “higher and more fervent”.⁽⁷⁾ How many of us saw the alien symbols (that now make sense) on pillars and posters around our cities in the weeks before the film’s release?
- In what ways is the development of **websites** including **district9movie.com**, **multinationalunited.com** and **district9facts.com** in tandem with the film, a marketing tool?
- “Hopefully, DISTRICT 9 is compelling and it draws you in and is a Hollywood ride. But there are themes and ideas in the background that are present too, but don’t knock you over the head.” Neill Blomkamp.⁽⁸⁾ In what ways does interaction with the **movie websites** engage us further/draw us into the story? (For example, in what ways does engaging with the film’s website makes the film seem more “real”? Aid the suspension of our disbelief? Makes us feel part of the story? Add plausibility to the plot? Aid our ability to relate to the real themes explored within the movie?)

Internet and Multimedia Technologies:

The web sites (including district9movie.com) and related links set up to support DISTRICT 9 are a rich teaching resource, in and of themselves, as indicated in separate sections discussed within this article.

- Compare and critique the construction of the various websites associated with the movie.
 - How are they designed to attract?
 - Designed for ease of use?
 - Designed to give credibility?
 - Which are ‘legitimate’ and which are part of the fantasy?
 - Should we take everything presented in the media and on the internet as factual and truthful?
 - How can we discern between reliable (legitimate/truthful/sound) sources of information, and unreliable ones?
- The immediacy of modern technology is evident in the movie plot with Wikus’ face being broadcast everywhere. Wikus is framed and modern technology aids in the success of this.

Discuss

Internet ethics;

Identity theft;

Internet bullying

The responsibility of the media to portray information accurately

Mathematics:

- There is an aptitude algebra test available on the district9movie.com website. The questions get progressively harder, but they might provide a useful extension for brighter students (depending on the level you teach) and/or an entertaining homework activity. (Some discussion of the fictitious nature of the site would link back to questions posed in the Marketing and Internet sections above.)

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- As the practical side of mathematics, some calculations are necessary in the suggested Physics activities below.

Physics:

Just how the alien ship is able to 'hover' above Johannesburg, seemingly without any power is a great question for a Physics class.

- What forces must be overcome?
- What is required for the space-ship to be able to overcome these forces? Where might this energy come from if the space-ship is seemingly without power?

Proclaiming that he is able to reverse Wikus' metamorphosis, the alien, Christopher Johnson declares that he will return in three Earth years.

- Where in the universe might this place the alien civilisation if the space-ship travelled at light speed? Is this feasible? Why/Why not?

Biology:

"Like District 9, the reality of biotechnology is dramatic and intense, and the discoveries revolutionary: curing debilitating diseases, improving agricultural yields, and finding better ways to fuel our worlds. District9Facts.com is a project of bio.org to bring you the real-life science behind the on-screen fiction of District 9 – in a light hearted way."

district9facts.com

This quote can be found on the home page of district9facts.com

When I checked out the bio.org site on August 24th, it was featuring blog posts from the 7th Transgenic Animal Research Conference that had just concluded in California. Topics discussed included the possible benefits to society of genetically engineering animals, for example, cattle genetically engineered to produce a human antibody for cancer treatment; goats genetically engineered to produce spider silk proteins for use in sutures and body armour; genetically engineered pigs being used as models of human diseases including Alzheimer's, breast cancer, diabetes, psoriasis and atherosclerosis; and animal stewardship, including details of a conference on this subject to be held in 2010. I mention this site and these topics only as a starting point. There is a rich opportunity for exploration via many other resources, not just websites. Topics raised in DISTRICT 9 are directly relevant to the senior Biology and Biotechnology curricula in New Zealand.

- For example, the theme of **Xenotransplantation** – the transplantation of living tissue between members of different species – is but one of the scientific topics ripe for capture and exploration within DISTRICT 9.
- The alien's weaponry may only be operated by a being with the right DNA.
 - Explore the **bio-information** pages of our passports.
 - In what other ways is bio-information being used in security at the moment? What developments in this area are on the horizon?
- After being exposed to the synthesised "fuel" Wikus becomes ill and his cells begin to mutate. This offers an opportunity to explore **germ warfare** – past use, present developments and future implications. In turn this opens up discussion on **Just War Theory**.

Chemistry:

- The aliens take "bio-fuel" to a new level, synthesising a small canister of highly efficient fuel that is able to power the enormous ship. However, the process took many years.

This gives a great lead in to the study of current bio-fuels, not to mention the production of non-renewable resources such as oil (which the black fuel resembles).

Health

- The incidence of sexually transmitted diseases is a significant youth health issue in both Australia and New Zealand. The media report that Wikus is mutating because of a virus he contracted during inter-species sex. Sexual transmission of viruses and other pathogens is relevant to the Health curriculum and the use of a short clip from the movie would be a light-hearted discussion opener. It could then lead into a discussion of sexual deviance and what this might be considered to be, if appropriate to the syllabus and year level.
- The warlord Mumbo and his gang believe that if they eat alien flesh they will absorb their DNA and their physical and technological strength. This scene provides an opportunity to explore the interface between science and beliefs. For example, while alternatives to 'Western medicine' assist multitudes of people, numerous unfounded beliefs with respect to enhancement, disease and cures also exist within different cultures today (for example the belief that having sex with a virgin will cure someone of Aids). Possible areas for exploration include: alternative medicines; the role of belief, including the placebo effect (link back to Psychology). Where is the line between "witch-doctor", homeopathic healer, natural medicine and technology filled "western medicine"?; is scientific understanding the only important understanding when it comes to health and medicine?
- As he evicts the aliens from DISTRICT 9, Wikus discovers a hut in which alien eggs are incubating. He "aborts" several of them for the cameras (using this terminology). In a scene that follows shortly thereafter, Wikus prevents a MNU soldier from shooting a child alien who has annoyed them, saying something along the lines of, *"No you can't shoot him now, he is too big. It is against the law. That's why you have to abort them"* How does Wikus' action relate to the **abortion debate**? What are the alternative views within this debate? How does the perceived value of early life relate to the ethics of embryo experimentation?
- A number of relationship themes relevant to the Health curriculum may be explored through this movie. These include:
 - **family relationships** (what is the relationship between Wikus and his father-in-law? Wikus and his wife? His wife and her father? Wikus and his parents? Christopher Johnson and his small son?)
 - Peer group relationships – especially with respect to **loyalty**. Also, compare and contrast the behaviour of Wikus and Christopher Johnson. How would you describe their personal value systems? Are they similar to each other?
 - How is the theme of **trust** developed in the movie? How do we learn to trust people? Who should we be able to trust? Why do we sometimes trust people we shouldn't?
 - Compare and contrast the comments of the friends and colleagues who worked with Wikus. Who maintains trust? Who is suspicious?

References:

1. <http://www.multinationalunited.com>
2. <http://www.tinymixtapes.com/District-9>
3. Quote from "District 9: Alien (third world nation)" review retrieved from <http://www.fangoria.com/features/21-fearful-features/3565-district-9-alien-third-world-nation.html>, on August 26th 2009
4. <http://www.multinationalunited.com>

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5. Regarded by many as a seminal work of 20th century short fiction, the plot of Frank Kafka's 1915 novella *Die Verwandlung* (The Metamorphosis) opens with Gregor Samsa, a travelling salesman awakening in his family apartment to find himself curiously and intriguingly transformed into an insect.
 6. <http://movies.nytimes.com/2009/08/14/movies/14district.html> Accessed 25 August 2009
 7. http://www.huffingtonpost.com/scott-mendelson/gi-joe-and-julie-julia-to_b_255124.html
 8. Quote from "District 9: Alien (third world nation)" review retrieved from <http://www.fangoria.com/features/21-fearful-features/3565-district-9-alien-third-world-nation.html>, on August 26th 2009

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Images 1 (heading) and 7 (pedestrian lights) are the author's own, with grateful thanks to Adam Stevens for his assistance.