From Persona Non Grata to Mainstream: The Use of Film in Management Teaching as an Example of How the Discipline of Management Education Is Changing

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My first encounter with the use of film in management teaching came in 2000 at the Academy of Management meeting in Toronto. Joseph (Joe) E. Champoux ran a professional development workshop on the use of film in management education. About 40 people were dotted around a large, spacious room listening intently to what Joe had to say. He showed clips from four or five films and explained how he used them to illustrate theory in his teaching. It was an interesting and engaging session, as Joe’s sessions always are.

At an appropriate moment, probably when Joe was changing tapes over, I introduced myself to the chap sitting behind me. I asked him if he used films in his teaching. His response succinctly captured my own situation: “No. I’d love to, but I wouldn’t be taken seriously by my colleagues. I’m hoping no one saw me come in.” As I looked around the room, I sensed furtiveness in the rest of the audience as if the people were attending some form of illicit entertainment. Everyone seemed to sitting individually, quietly, desperately trying not to attract attention to themselves.

This attitude toward the use of film in management education was replicated in the articles of the time. In these, judging by the published output,

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authors (and their editors and reviewers) felt that it was important to explain why film was a suitable medium in management education. Articles whose primary purpose was to advocate the use of particular films for use with management students were prefaced by explanations of the value of moving images (e.g., Champoux, 2001; Comer, 2001; Hunt, 2001; Kuzma & Haney, 2001; Liedtka, 2001; Scherer & Baker, 1999). This was perfectly natural in a climate where the introduction of such teaching methods was controversial.

This literature changed in character as we travelled through the 2000s. The recommended films became more unusual or extreme as scholars looked to push the frontiers of what might be used in the management classroom. Comer and Holbrook (2005) saw benefit in using material designed for children and advocated the use of Dr. Seuss. Billsberry and Gilbert (2007) argued that there is value in using material based in fantasy and suggested *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* as a useful resource for teaching recruitment and selection. Smith (2009) went beyond advocating film as an element of a management course and suggested that it become the primary medium through which organizational behavior should be taught.

Nowadays, film is accepted as a perfectly normal medium for teaching management and related subjects. In topics where the focus is on individual behavior, film offers a particularly useful medium as the subtlety and complexity of human action can be studied in minute detail and within context. Most instructors accept that in the field of management and organizational behavior, the moving image is just one of the many valid options to enrich teaching. It has become mainstream in just the same way that we accept books, games, simulations, role plays, and the like are legitimate methods. In the current teaching environment, most instructors would feel free to use any manner of moving image (e.g., film clips, whole movies, TV programs, YouTube videos) as long as they help them achieve their learning objectives.

Given that the use of film is now mainstream (Billsberry, Leonard, & Charlesworth, 2012), manuscripts on the use of film in management education are likely to change as well. On one level we are likely to see more sophisticated studies. For example, scholars might look at the impact of the use of films compared to other media, or they might look at how moving images work as learning devices, or how they suit different personalities, different subjects, or different learning styles. Authors of such papers no longer need to justify film as a medium for management education, which is now taken for granted. Instead, they will look at how films work as teaching devices; when, where, and how they might be used; and at differences in how students respond to them. In short, these manuscripts are likely to be analytical pieces compared to the descriptive and advocatory pieces of a few years previous.
In addition to these empirical and theoretical pieces, instructors will still be interested in staying up to date on new releases, not only to keep their teaching fresh but also to reflect current trends in business and society. Instructors might wish to have their attention drawn to recent releases such as the portrayal of leadership in *Lincoln*, or of ethical employee behavior in *Flight*, or language and cultural differences in *English Vinglish*. But gone is the need for such pieces to justify their existence. Just as we don’t expect reviews of new books to justify the role of books in management education, the same is now true of films (and many other media as well). In short, the identification of useful sources for instructors now falls into review territory and as such these will be shorter pieces akin to book reviews.

Accordingly, we are looking to launch a review section of the journal. This is different to “full-blown” review articles that comprehensively discuss a topic. Instead, we are looking to run a section dedicated to the identification, description, and critical analysis of new items that may prove to be excellent teaching resources of instructors. Think of this as the classic “book review” section, but not limited to books; it could contain a review of any preexisting material (i.e., not source material developed by the instructor) for use in management education. Therefore, we intend to call the new section, *Resource Reviews*.

To make this work, I am looking to recruit one or two additional associate editors to work exclusively on this section. This role is different to the associate editor roles in other sections, as the incumbents have to be proactive in sourcing reviews. This is not a passive role where one can wait for reviews to tumble in; although we welcome unsolicited reviews as well. The job description includes spotting new material to review, finding reviewers, and working with prospective authors to hone their reviews. It is an exciting and challenging role and a great way to get involved with the journal. If you think you might be interested in doing it, please contact me (j.billsberry@deakin.edu.au).

**New Special Issue Announcement: Threshold Concepts**

I am delighted to announce that we have just approved our latest special issue. It will be guest edited by April Wright (University of Queensland) and Paul Hibbert (University of St. Andrews) and the focus is on threshold concepts. This topic is one that has the potential to transform the way we teach. Getting right down to basics, threshold concepts are those ideas, often strange, unusual, and counterintuitive, that students must understand to gain mastery of the subject; they change the way the students think about the subject forever and open up doors for future and advanced learning. The classic
example is opportunity cost in economics. Once students understand this concept, their ability to learn economics is transformed and they can move on to much more complex matters.

Threshold concepts present an intriguing challenge to management educators. Whereas other disciplines have found it relatively straightforward to identify their threshold concepts, it has not been so easy in management education, which begs the questions of whether management has any threshold concepts and what they might be, and if it does not, what are the implications for the discipline (Wright & Gilmore, 2012)? As such, the search for management’s threshold concepts returns us to the enduring question of whether management is an art, a science, or a practice, and what we should be teaching.

More details about this special issue including the full Call for Papers can be found on the journal’s website: http://jme.sagepub.com/

**This Issue**

Fifteen years ago in these pages, scholars were concerned about the growing trend that increasingly regarded students as customers. Franz (1998) outlines the issue thus,

> Around campus, I frequently hear how “students are our customers,” and that we should treat students like customers. On the surface, this seems a very reasonable and straightforward suggestion—especially because they’re paying to be here. We all know the associated catchphrases, “the customer is always right,” “the customer is king,” “get close to the customer,” “customer-focused service,” “customer-driven marketing,” “customer-based quality,” and so forth. But, given our educational mission, does treating our students like “customers” make sense? (p. 63)

He is concerned that

> Under the customer metaphor, we find students buying their education and shopping around for classes and majors; our goal as educators becomes attracting and retaining students for our courses. What the students desire out of their college experience starts driving programs. Resources follow students, and departments are rewarded in direct proportion to the number of students (customers) who choose to attend (buy) their classes. Classes become popularity contests. Pedagogy becomes entertainment with MTV and video games as the models. Flexibility and customization are the buzzwords; a flood of self-designed majors, conveniently rescheduled exams, and rule-bending exceptions the result. The ultimate outcome is unrelenting grade inflation—keep the student-cum-customer happy and give him or her what they want. We’re getting the “Nordstromization” of education,
where universities become a new breed of shopping mall and our role as educators is to delight our customers. (Franz, 1998, pp. 63-64)

Fifteen years later, readers will recognize many of these influences in their own institutions, but perhaps not the full-blown Nordstromization Franz feared. There is certainly a tension in most institutions with student-cum-customers shaping what is taught, how it is taught, and how instructors relate to them. Around the world, professors are now managed through research and teaching metrics and fears of students’ feedback plays a key role shaping behavior. It is interesting, therefore, that the four articles in this issue all explore management teaching where students are put in potentially uncomfortable situations. In this climate, this is high-risk teaching. But as the saying goes, with high risk comes the possibility of high reward.

Elise J. Dallimore, Julie H. Hertenstein, and Marjorie B. Platt write the first article in this issue. They look at the challenge of getting students to participate and suggest that cold-calling—asking students for answers when they have not raised their hands—can help tremendously. Their results show that in classes with a lot of cold-calling, voluntary participation increases noticeably. Interestingly, this coercive approach seems to increase students’ levels of comfort, perhaps because they overcome their fear of speaking in class.

In the second article, Kerri S. Kearney, Bernita Krumm, Robin L. Hughes, and James W. Satterfield explore the impact of confronting students with extremely distressing material—documentaries about the Holocaust. Such emotive material still has power today, perhaps even more so, as the passing of time has reduced students’ familiarity with these events. The authors found that exposure to this uncomfortable material greatly increased their students’ engagement and led to a powerful desire to apply the lessons to their own jobs.

In the first instructional article, João Neiva de Figueiredo and Alfredo J. Mauri describe how they put their students in the uncomfortable position of working in a team and having the team paired up with another team who are not yet fluent in English. As the authors say, this deliberate cross-cultural assignment is designed “to deepen self-awareness of their own attitudes toward different cultures and also to develop international managerial skills.” The authors report positive outcomes and discuss some of the difficulties they have experienced.

In the second instructional article, Kevin Farmer, Steven I. Meisel, Joe Seltzer, and Kathleen Kane describe a fascinating exercise intended to improve students’ critical thinking skills. It is adapted from the teaching of law. They have their students take part in a mock trial, playing the roles of
attorneys and witnesses. The thing on trial is a course theory. This appears to be an engaging way of bringing theory to life and having students study it in depth. As this exercise has winners and losers and puts students “in the dock,” this would appear to be a potentially uncomfortable experience. But the authors argue that it accords well with popular culture and our apparent obsession with courtroom dramas, and students can be made more comfortable and prepared for the experience by being shown relevant film clips, which nicely brings this editorial full circle.

References


