The Rise and Rise of Management Edutainment

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In this, my last editorial, I want to reflect on how my own teaching has changed during the 5 years I have been involved with the *Journal of Management Education* as either an associate editor or an editor-in-chief. And changed, it has. These changes, which I shall describe later, are partly due to being exposed to many new and exciting ideas in these pages, partly due to joining a university where experimentation, risk, and academic freedom are celebrated and encouraged, and partly due to the increasing managerialism in business schools (White, Carvalho, & Riordan, 2011; Winter, 2009). I have found myself propelled toward more effective and exciting teaching, but this is strongly tempered by the need to entertain students. Although I fully acknowledge that learning and entertainment are two sides of the same coin, I have begun to wonder if the emphasis is shifting too far toward entertainment. I have written this editorial in the hope of stimulating discussion on this topic that goes to the core of our pedagogic and andragogic philosophies.

**Edutainment**

When the portmanteau *edutainment* was coined, it was a word with positive connotations. The new word was used to describe entertainment that was also designed to educate. Education and entertainment have always sat side by side, as educational material that is boring is likely to be ineffective. Throughout the ages, entertainment material with a message has been a staple

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teaching method as witnessed in cautionary tales, fables, documentaries, and, more recently, infotainment. Lately though, the word *edutainment* has taken on an altogether darker twist with it being used to describe a particular distortion of education where the drive is to entertain students in educational settings rather than teach them. More than this, it captures a change in the relationship between instructor and student (Finney & Finney, 2010). In the edutainment paradigm, the student is a customer, someone who has bought a product and whom the instructor has to delight (Franz, 1998). The problem is that although most would agree that learning should be fun, often it is also painful, especially in managerial disciplines where students may need to confront and change deep-seated values, beliefs, opinions, and behavior. Hence, the need to delight often coexists with the need to challenge, and a lot of students (and instructors) have difficulty with this apparent contradiction.

Many factors are thought to contribute to the changing nature of the student–instructor relationship. Some scholars have pointed to societal changes and the emergence of the disengaged students as causal factors (e.g., Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Trout, 1997); others have accused parenting (e.g., Howe & Strauss, 2003), schooling (e.g., Ogbu, 2003), business schools (e.g., Westerman, Bergman, Bergman, & Daly, 2012); and yet others have described how the new digital age has changed the nature of students’ classroom expectations (e.g., Stratton & Julien, 2014). All of these factors might play a role in changing the student–instructor relationship, but ask almost any university instructor about the causal factors and he or she is much more likely to point to more proximal factors such as the rise of managerialism in universities and implications for the way that they are assessed (Lawrence & Sharma, 2002; White et al., 2011; Winter, 2009).

In many universities, faculty are conscious that students have the opportunity to assess the quality of their teaching and that this might have a serious impact on the way their manager rates them. Even if the university has no formal assessment of student satisfaction, the emergence of publicly viewable Rate My Professor type websites exposes faculty to public feedback from students. If you Google any academic job applicant who is currently employed as a teacher, it is likely that his or her RateMyProfessors.com profile will appear in the top 10 hits. (I tried this with 20 U.S.-based faculty and 17 [85%] of them obeyed this rule.) I have to admit that when undertaking due diligence on candidates to posts in my own department, I Google them and take note of comments on their Rate My Professor profiles. On one occasion two students posted very negative comments about an instructor, complaining that she made them work too hard and had high expectations of them. I saw this as refreshing and a positive sign.
Travels in Management Edutainment

Before relating other management educators’ confessions on this matter, I should first confess my own sin. In my residential organizational behavior course, I screen American Beauty and Up in the Air: two wonderful films that allow me to explore behavior, work/life issues, motivation, and commitment. I show the whole films as this helps me explore the complex and multifaceted nature of human behavior. I brief the students to watch the films closely and to concentrate on the behavioral themes. I integrate ideas, behavior, and events from American Beauty into my interactive sessions on personality, perceptions, behavior, and motivation. I use Up in the Air as the case study on which I base my examination questions. Despite the centrality of these films to my teaching and feeling that I have no need to excuse their inclusion, I also now make sure that my students get free popcorn and “choc tops” when watching them. Harmless enough, perhaps, and it adds to the sense of occasion, but my decision is also prompted by my concern about their feedback.

Over the past few years, I have been fortunate to have had the opportunity to visit other universities, travel to other countries, and meet many fellow management educators. This theme of edutainment is one that has recurred time and again. Here are some of the tales I was told. One person talked about the way that student satisfaction scores are built into his, and his colleagues’, annual performance objectives. His students’ satisfaction scores must achieve the level of “satisfied” (i.e., 4 on a 5-point scale) or else he will fall into the “development required” category with no pay rise, no prospect of promotion, and no conference funding. Moreover, it puts a permanent scar on his performance record that will be difficult to eradicate. He teaches a class of 40 and about half of these students complete the end-of-term satisfaction feedback. If we assume that he is a good teacher and gets an average of 4.5 in his feedback, he only needs three students in the class to award him a “1” for his target to be in jeopardy. He told me that he lives in fear of the disgruntled student and has stopped doing anything even mildly innovative or risky.

Another person told me of a similar performance management situation at her university, and she has convinced herself that her students understand the power that they hold with a simple tap of a mouse button at the end of the year. Sometimes when she teaches, she feels like a puppet whose strings are pulled this way and that by the whims of the student masters. She feels unable to stand up to them for fear of the negative click.

Perhaps more worrying is one person’s self-censorship and failure to confront poor behavior in the classroom. This chap described the passive-aggressive disengagement of some of his students. He told me that he had noticed that a small minority of his students do not seem to want to be there. They
expect to get their pass marks without putting any effort into their studies (they even expect a distinction) and refuse to do anything not directly linked to assessment. In days past, he says he would have “had a word” with students who decide to absent themselves during activities, but now he tends to let it pass:

I do not want to inflame the situation and create enemies of such disengaged students. My hope is that their general disengagement will mean that they will not be “bovvered” to complete the formal student assessment tool when it pops into their inbox at the end of term. If I anger them, not only will they look out for that e-mail, they will give me a “1.”

Faculty in several universities have told me that their performance objectives contain a measure of student satisfaction but no metric for student performance outcomes. Ironically, there will often be a mild disincentive in place to improve the quality of my students’ learning. If the marks of students on instructors’ units deviate from the overall pattern of student performance on the course, they are often held to account. They might be asked to explain why their students have higher (or lower) marks than on other units.

The old adage is “what gets measured, gets done.” For these instructors, student satisfaction is measured in terms of higher scores being better, but student learning is measured in terms of typical scores being best. Deep down, I suspect that they know that their masters want student learning to be as high as possible, albeit within the prevailing cost constraints. But the different measurement emphasis on student satisfaction and student performance might tilt the approach of these instructors.

One factor moderates my concerns. Student satisfaction and student learning are intertwined constructs. My students’ satisfaction levels will rise as their performance increases (Gibson, 2010). So I have an incentive to improve the marks of my students by increasing the impact and relevance of what I teach. Hopefully I shall be able to resist the temptation to inflate marks inappropriately and be strong enough to argue that the marks are truly deserved. However, that said, the relationship between satisfaction and performance may not be as clear-cut as first thought as the famous Dr. Fox lecture by Naftulin, Ware, and Donnelly (1973, p. 630) revealed. Here is their abstract that beautifully describes their study:

On the basis of publications supporting the hypothesis that student ratings of educators depend largely on personality variables and not educational content, the authors programmed an actor to teach charismatically and non substantively on a topic about which he knew nothing. The authors hypothesized that given
a sufficiently impressive lecture paradigm, even experienced educators participating in a new learning experience can be seduced into feeling satisfied that they have learned despite irrelevant, conflicting, and meaningless content conveyed by the lecturer. The hypothesis was supported when 55 subjects responded favorably at the significant level to an eight-item questionnaire concerning their attitudes toward the lecture. The study serves as an example to educators that their effectiveness must be evaluated beyond the satisfaction with which students view them and raises the possibility of training actors to give “legitimate” lectures as an innovative approach toward effective education. The authors conclude by emphasizing that student satisfaction with learning may represent little more than the illusion of having learned. (p. 630)

This study cautions us against edutainment. With managerial factors pushing us toward satisfaction rather than education, with lecture theatres full of multimedia devices, with massive open online courses (MOOCs) threatening to make us all media stars, and with celebrity-obsessed recipients, it would be all too easy for us to be seduced into a superficial world of sparkle and glamour.

**Future Research**

Thinking ahead, these issues suggest a number of research questions about the linkage of students’ satisfaction and learning and the alleged rise of edutainment. Have student satisfaction scores become more common in management educators’ performance assessments? If the answer is yes, as seems likely, a series of interesting research questions flow. Do student satisfaction scores have any effect on what is happening in the classroom? Do students understand the power they hold over their instructors? Do management educators recognize and respond to these dual pressures of satisfaction and achievement? If so, how are they responding? Are management educators becoming management edutainers?

Behind these overarching questions lurk a series of more specific process-based questions. For example, does the timing of student evaluation influence their assessment? It seems natural to hypothesize that conducting satisfaction evaluations prior to an examination, or the release of results, might have an influence on the feedback. The timing of evaluation might be reframed and analyzed according to short-, medium- and long-term assessments. Conversely, does the type of performance assessment (e.g., examinations vs. projects vs. continuous assessment vs. peer assessment) influence satisfaction scores?

Other studies might look at the relationship between entertainment, satisfaction, and performance and consider the causal effects say, between
satisfaction scores and learning and between satisfaction scores and student retention. On a more practical level, we might consider the policy implications of not including outlier scores in instructors’ performance appraisals. Imagine an instructor has a class of 50 students and 47 of these provide a satisfaction score in the range 3/5 to 5/5. Should the three outliers be considered on an exception basis, investigated independently, and excluded from the aggregate score rather than being lumped in with everyone else? This provokes an ethical issue of whether student satisfaction scores should be anonymous or not. It could easily be argued that as these scores influence the performance assessment of instructors and have implications for pay and promotion, instructors should have the right to face their accusers in order to be able to defend themselves.

Ultimately, these concerns are caused by a fundamental problem in management education. Although there are many explanations of the content of management (e.g., Fayol, Mintzberg, Stewart, etc.) and an ongoing debate about its nature (art vs. skill vs. craft vs. science vs. profession, etc.), most instructors assess their managerial students in nonbehavioral ways. It is unlike many other fields where we can see whether they can do the job with practical tests. We see if medical students can diagnose illness, or whether drama students can act, or whether engineering students can build things, but in management most of our examinations are at arm’s length from the practical skills needed to perform well as a manager. Once we have behavioral testing and can determine that our students have developed the necessary skills to be effective managers, then perhaps assessment of teaching will reassert itself over student satisfaction scores.

This Issue

One of the strangest phenomena being a journal editor is that you spend much of your time publishing material that was submitted and approved under the previous editor. That has been the case for me, and I am amused that this is the first issue where every manuscript was submitted during my tenure. And in choosing the selection of articles for this issue, I have been able to express my intended design for the journal. It includes two research papers, one of which is a domain review; an essay; two teaching innovations; and three resource reviews. This is the spread of papers I had in mind when I took over as editor, and I am delighted to have witnessed it emerge at the end of my tenure.

The first article is a domain review on the topic of student incivility. It was written by Lisa A. Burke, Katherine Karl, Joy Peluchette, and W. Randy
Evans. They offer a comprehensive study of this important topic and provide research questions that many will want to follow up.

Alyson Latham and N. Sharon Hill are the authors of the second article. Their focus is on the use of technology in the classroom—a theme running through this issue—and in particular on the use of student response systems, which are also known as clickers. In their study, they found that clickers were popular with students and that more introverted students were keener on the use of clickers than extroverted students. Given many students’ reticence to participate in class and the importance of participation for learning, the authors argue that this technology may have an important role to play in management education.

The essay written by Simon Kelly is a wonderful illustration of how one takes one’s own experience and crafts it into a scholarly piece of work. Many people try to do this and fail because it is so difficult to convince readers that your observations are something more than idiosyncratic meanderings. He attended a leadership development session based on horse whispering. To make sense of this and to throw light on leadership development, Simon used Lacanian psychoanalysis to explore the relationship between “self” and “other” that characterizes leader–member exchanges.

The price of digital technologies has plummeted in recent years at the same time that its usability has become easier and more intuitive. These dynamics mean that some management educators are introducing these technologies into their classrooms. But rather than watching movies, these innovators are asking their students to create their own films and videos. Patrick Schultz and Andrew S. Quinn describe an exercise in which students shoot their own “real action” videos. An alternative approach is to use animation software that allows students to create their own cartoons. Micheal T. Stratton and Mark Julien focus on the use of one of these pieces of software, Xtranormal, and found it led to greater engagement, understanding, and application of course ideas.

Unfortunately, Xtranormal has been discontinued and is currently unavailable. I do not know if it will reappear in a new or enhanced form, if at all. However, there are alternatives and in the Resource Review section we examine three alternative forms of animation. In the first review, Micheal Stratton, Mark Julien, and Bryan Schaffer look at GoAnimate, a very similar product to Xtranormal, which also allows students to create their own cartoons. In the second resource review, I consider how another text-to-voice software program called CrazyTalk might be used in management student assignments. Ted Thomas wrote the third resource review. He describes the high-quality animations produced by the RSA and their potential use in management education.
Thank You and Goodbye

As I depart this role, I should like to acknowledge the help I have received and express my thanks to a few key people. First, I must thank all the volunteers who have taken the time and trouble to write papers, review them, and guide them through the review process. My associate editors have been wonderful to work with, and I could not have asked for more stimulating, able, and collegial companions. They give of their time freely and do a magnificent job. Second, I want to thank my predecessor, Jane Schmidt-Wilk, who has been a constant source of help and encouragement. Third, I have enjoyed forging links with the Academy of Management Learning & Education. Their editor, Ken Brown, has been incredibly helpful and considerate, and it was a joy to work with him closely. Ken was part of the group, along with Amy Kenworthy, George Hrivnak and me, who set up the Research in Management Learning and Education Unconferences. These continue to be great fun to work on and attend, and I want to express my gratitude to Ken, Amy, and George for being such fantastic colleagues. I should also acknowledge the help and thank Ken and Amy for the advice they offered as I was preparing this final editorial.

Finally, I want to thank everyone who has responded so positively to these editorials. I have loved writing them and been genuinely surprised how much favorable comment they have attracted. Normally, my research papers have entered the world to deafening silence, but each one of these editorials has generated at least half a dozen responses. This feedback has convinced me that the essay format is particularly important for our domain of management education.

Looking ahead, I know that the journal is in good hands, and I wish the incoming editors and the journal itself well for the future. I know it will thrive.

References


