Discussing How We Use Popular Culture to Engage Students and Help Learning of Theories

Abstract:

Teachers look for engaging examples to help student interest and learning. In this roundtable session we will discuss how popular culture examples can help student engagement and learning. The presenters will share examples of how they have used popular culture to teach management concepts and theories. We will then have attendees break into groups based on major topic areas in the field of management. Each group will then brainstorm to come up with examples from popular culture they are familiar with that could help teach concepts and theories in that area. Each group will then report out the examples they came up with. Post session attendees will be emailed a list of all the examples come up within the session.

Roundtable discussion

Introduction

As teachers, we often look for ways to make the theories we teach understandable and engaging. When ideas connect to what students already know and understand students can have a better grasp of what the theory means and how it applies. Popular culture offers one ready source of examples that students are familiar with and find engaging. In this roundtable we discuss how popular culture examples can be used to help students understand and apply theories. We find this to be an engaging way to help student understanding of important theories in our field at the undergraduate and graduate levels, and in any modality, whether face to face or online. We will discuss examples of how we have done this in our classes, articles, and books. We will then do an exercise where attendees are divided into groups by common topics in our classes, with each group brainstorming popular culture examples that connect to relevant theories. Groups will then report out what they came up with and other ideas they have. Attendees will leave with ideas for their own classrooms and will be emailed post session all the ideas attendees came up with.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

As educators look to find engaging examples for their classes, videoclips and movies have been found to be tools that help student learning and engagement (Berk, 2009; Billsbury, 2013; Fee & Budde-Sung, 2014). Popular culture is a major source for such engaging examples. Management scholars have shown how popular culture, primarily movies and TV shows, can be used to illustrate important concepts in our field. This has included topics such as leadership (Stratton, et al., in press; Urick & Sprinkle, 2019), ethics (van Esch et al, in press), and evidence-based management (Cannon & Doyle, 2020). Popular culture examples thus can be successful tools in teaching management related concepts.

The perspective we have to the use of popular culture is that students learn academic theories with popular culture examples used to illustrate the theories and be used like case studies that can be analyzed. Since popular culture is already known to students and is engaging content, it helps the theories make sense and increase understanding of where the theories would apply. This better understanding then lets students apply the theories in actual practice. Thus, popular culture examples help students to understand the theory, its implications, and then be able to apply it in their workplace. This view builds off the model of Urick (2021), expanding it beyond just the area of leadership concepts. Popular culture examples can illustrate a wide range of topics in management, leadership, Industrial-Organizational Psychology and related fields. This session will help attendees to see how they might use popular culture examples in their own classes to illustrate relevant theories.

This session has the goal of sharing examples of how the organizers have used popular culture examples in their own teaching and then having all attendees work to come up with other relevant popular culture examples. Attendees will leave the session with ideas for using popular culture examples in their own classes and will have in their email box all the potential examples generated.

Session Description

5 minutes: Introduction: The organizers (and time permitting, the attendees) will share one popular culture movie, TV show, book, or game they like and one topic in a class they teach it could connect to.

15 minutes: Discuss general nature of using popular culture examples in the classroom: We will discuss how popular culture can be used to illustrate class concepts. We focus on the idea that students learn a theory first, then popular culture examples help to illustrate the concepts and how they may apply, and finally connect the theory to their practice in the real world. We will discuss a few different ways organizers have done this approach in their classes, articles, and books. This will include discussion of different types of assignments that could be used and how the popular culture elements are best used to be beneficial, avoiding students just watching them for entertainment value (Sprinkle & Urick, 2016). This should give attendees a good idea of our perspective and how it could apply in their own classroom.

5 minutes: Explain group exercise: We will then segue into explaining the discussion and brainstorming exercise that will be the bulk of the session. The idea is for attendees grouped by topic area to come up with pop culture examples for theories in that topic area. The goal here is to generate general ideas and examples that could be used, not fully formed assignments or the like. Thus, we are brainstorming ideas that can be elaborated on later to fit a particular class setup, modality, or need.

20 minutes: Generating popular culture examples exercise: Attendees will be divided into five topics groups: leadership, motivation, human resources, strategy, and communication. Each group will be tasked with members coming up with examples from popular culture that fit with a theory in that area. For example, a person could say the movie Captain America: Civil War illustrates conflict management types (Schmidt & Islam, in press). This will be more of idea generation and brainstorming than idea refinement. Each group will have one person recording the ideas generated, with the list handed in to the organizers at the end of the session to be disseminated to all attendees. Organizers will go around from group to group answering any question or helping as needed. They will also give groups a warning when five minutes remain in the exercise.

10 minutes: Groups report out to other session attendees: Each group will then share with other attendees some examples of ideas they came up with and any other aspects of the discussion that seemed relevant. Organizers will help facilitate this discussion and offer their own insight when helpful.

5 minutes: Time for other questions: At the end of the presentation attendees will have time to ask any questions they might have or share their own relevant insights. Attendees will also be asked to give their email addresses. The organizers will collate and organize examples groups came up with and send a list of the examples generated to all attendees. Thus, attendees will gain not only their own generated examples but those of the session as a whole and others the

organizers have already identified. This should mean attendees leave with valuable ideas for their own classrooms in using popular culture to teach management theories.

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