



**IOBTC 2016 at  
University of Winchester  
July 8<sup>th</sup> – 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016**

**Submission Template**

**SUBMISSION GUIDANCE**

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**Submission Template for the 2016 IOBTC  
International Teaching Conference for Management Educators**

**1) Title of Proposal:**

**Sex, Religion, Racism, Oh My! Appropriately Watching 'The Office' Inappropriate Humor in the Classroom**

**2) Abstract:**

Inappropriate topics like sex, race, and religion may create a hostile learning environment in the classroom by reinforcing stereotypes, and deteriorating the student-teacher (S-T) relationship. In this interactive session, participants view a full episode of "The Office", a sitcom that thrives on exploiting inappropriate humor, and participate in an experiential activity. I demonstrate the quality of the S-T relationship can increase if inappropriate humor is used strategically. In a study I recently conducted, students watched 9 full episodes of "The Office" during the semester. Using Leader-Member Exchange theory, the quality of the S-T relationship significantly increased, contradictory to research.

**3) Keywords:**

*Humor, Media, LMX, Leader-Member Exchange, Engagement*

**4) Format**

- Activity or exercise  
 General discussion session

**5) Time Requested:**

- 20 Minutes  
 30 Minutes  
 60 Minutes

## 6) Planning Details:

*Does your session have any special requirements for space or materials?*

Projector and internet

## 7) Learning Objectives or Goals for the Session:

*What are 2-4 specific learning outcomes that participants will get from your session?*

- Participants will be able to judiciously and strategically utilize inappropriate humor in the classroom to engage students
- Participants will learn the value of incorporating pop culture (The Office) as a main component of a class

## 8) Management or Teaching Topics:

*Describe what management and/or teaching topics are relevant to your session, and why. Please include theoretical, disciplinary, or theoretical foundations that will help reviewers understand how your ideas fit within the broader field of management.*

Taking into account “one does not attempt to be frivolous, foolish, fun-seeking, or flippant when it comes to the acquisition, promotion or advancement of knowledge” (Koller, 1989, p.1) incorporating humor into an OB classroom environment to engage students may not be the norm. However, research has revealed a positive link between humor and student learning outcomes (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999), student scores, perceptions of a teacher (Torok McMorris, & Lin, 2004), quality of the student-teacher relationship, retention (Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004; Ziv 1998) engagement, (Bryant, Crane, Comisky, & Zillman, 1990; Torok, McMorris, & Lin, 2004).

Most studies on humor in the classroom emphasize the juxtaposition of unacceptable and acceptable humor. Professedly, pedagogical use of “appropriate” humor in the classroom can have a positive psychological effect on students (Garner, 2006). Appropriate humor builds “a sense of community, promote creativity, and reduce conflict” in the classroom (Kehr, Molstad, & Donahue, 1999, p.5), whereas inappropriate humor purportedly can create a hostile learning environment (Kehr et al 1999) resulting in heightened awareness of social differentiation among students, suppression of thoughts and ideas, and reinforcement of stereotypes (Alderman & Popke, 2002).

Humor, while universal in nature, is very individual in nature. It’s a complex communication behavior reflective of one’s culture and social beliefs and values (Shabbir & Thwaites, 2007) which also suggests a moral perspective. Knowingly

pairing humor with inappropriate divisive topics such as sex, ethnicity, religion, and gender as an academic tool in the classroom can lead to negative consequences (Alderman & Popke, 2002; Kehr et al 1999), hence infusing humor into a classroom must be strategic and deliberate.

Very few studies, if any, have directly examined the intentional use of inappropriate humor in the classroom as a means for a constructive learning environment. Specifically, in my class, students viewed 9 full episodes of *The Office*, an Emmy Award winning sitcom that thrives on exploiting inappropriate humor at the expense of others. The crux of the show is the depiction of situations that violate commonly accepted norms in the workplace. In a 2010 NPR web article entitled “Should ‘The Office’ be Used in HR Training?”, Sheri Leonardo, senior vice president for human resources at Ogilvy Public Relations, stated in response to this question, "As an HR person, I sometimes cringe," she said. "Some of the stuff is so outlandish, politically incorrect, morally incorrect and everything else — but at the same time I say, 'God, I would love to take clips of this and use it for training, because it's so perfect.'" (Chappell & Beeler, 2010).

In this interactive session, participants will be immersed in the classroom setting I created with my students. Participants will watch a full episode of “The Office”, participate in an experiential activity and lastly, I will share the format and structure of the course and the results of my study.

Contradictory to research, use of inappropriate humor positively nurtured the student-teacher relationship, as stated by a student.

*“I think that watching the office helped to foster the relationship between [the] professor and us, it made her feel more like a normal person, not a robot professor. I feel like that's something that a lot of professors struggle with, is making their students feel like they can come talk to them if they're struggling.”*

I will present the results of my study that demonstrates the student-teacher relationship was not exacerbated but actually improved.

One of the challenges professors have with teaching theory-laden courses such as organizational behavior (OB) is engaging and sustaining student attention. Organizational behavior textbooks present theories and management concepts in a very abstract, serious, and sometime boring fashion (Billsberry, Charlesworth, & Leonard, 2012; Mintzberg & Lambel, 2001). I think after attending this session, professors may be more apt to infuse “inappropriate” humor in the classroom if it’s properly presented.

## **9) Session Description and Plan:**

*What will you actually do in this session? What activities will you facilitate, how long will they take, and how will participants be involved? Reviewers will be evaluating how well the time request matches the activities you'd like to do, and the extent you can reasonably accomplish the session's goals. Reviewers will also be looking for how you are engaging the participants in the session. Include a timeline for your session.*

- **5 – minutes: Overview**
  - Explain the purpose of the session and why it is important to management pedagogy
- **22 – minutes to view an episode of *The Office***
  - Participants will view Season 1 Episode 2 – *Diversity Day* (I have enough copies of the episode to make sure I do not violate copyrights)
- **5 – 8 minutes** to participate briefly in an experiential activity
- **12 - minutes to discuss the structure of the class after viewing the episode**
  - Discuss how to approach debriefing after an episode
  - Share complementary experiential activities (I will bring handouts)
  - Share examples of students' final presentations (students signed consent forms)
- **5 – minutes to share results of the study**
- **8 – minutes debrief**

## **10) For Activities and Exercises:**

*Attach any materials needed to run the activity and debriefing questions. Evidence for effectiveness may also be included.*

Debrief for this session will consist of brainstorming and gathering ideas from participants. For example, I will pose the following questions to the participants:

- What are additional ways to use inappropriate humor as an educational tool?
- What are factors, as professors, that we need to keep in mind when using inappropriate humor in the classroom?, i.e., students cultural differences and teacher's culture

## **11) Implications for Teaching or for Teachers:**

*What is the contribution of your session?*

The contribution of this session is to facilitate thought among management educators that taboo topics such as race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, etc. can be presented in a humorous framework that will not offend students. In essence, if inappropriate humor is used judiciously and strategically, it can enhance classroom discussions, increase the quality of student-teacher relationship, and trigger students and professors' critical thinking skills and creativity.

## **12) Application to Conference Theme:**

How does your session fit with the overall IOBTC theme of *Elevating Aspirations*?

This session demonstrates elevating aspirations in the classroom by encouraging students to embrace a different learning model in order to feel at ease discussing taboo issues that exist in today's work settings. Using humor as a tool to facilitate free flowing conversation allowed students to deepen their learning by feeling at ease asking questions that may not be posed in a more traditional class setting.

I conducted a focus group at the end of the semester and two of the students stated the following that exemplify how they embraced the unconventional learning model:

*"I think Michael Scott's awkward character kind of broke the ice in a sense, like after you see it in front of you in the beginning of the class, this guy just being totally ridiculous, people I believe feel more open to say what they actually think in a sense and are not as guarded; they laughed with everybody and then the class starts so now you're free to speak and not worry about looking stupid because Michael Scott has already taken the bullet. " (Student #1)*

*"I liked how it was so controversial that by the time you were done watching the show, you were like "ok, there are so many things I want to talk about because that was just insane." (Student #2)*

Ironically, "The Office" was created in the UK and only lasted 2 seasons. The sitcom was adapted for the US audience and debuted in March 2005. The show enjoyed 9 seasons and can be seen as re-runs regularly on cable.

## **13) Unique Contribution to 2005 IOBTC:**

*Have you presented the work in this proposal before? If so, how will it be different? Is this proposal under current review somewhere else? If so, please explain. How will your proposal be different for the IOBTC conference?*

No

## **14) References and/or Additional Materials:**

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