

Let's go to the movies!: Teaching management through film

Abstract

Instructors often use movies or short clips to bring a specific topic or theory to life. Perhaps a few students participate in the discussion that follows, but others passively watch the clip for entertainment. This session will highlight activities that can be used with any movie to help students critically engage with the content. While the session focuses on a three-week winter term course, Management through Films, attendees can easily adapt all or one of the activities into their courses. Attendees will receive a list of movies as well as ideas for how to facilitate critical analysis of the movies.

Keywords

Movies, discussion-based class, engaging assignments

Introduction

When my university decided to offer a winter-term for the first time, I quickly thought back to the fun, unique, and interesting classes my undergraduate alma mater offered during my time there. While the term at my university was only three weeks, I was determined to pack a big punch and give students time to dig deeper into topics that they briefly cover in their introductory management courses. I also wanted to make the course engaging while students were at home with their families during the pandemic. I therefore set out to design an elective course called Management through Films.

The course was offered as a business elective taught during a three-week winter term. Students were juniors and seniors and the introduction to management course was a prerequisite. While someone else might not be able to teach an entire course on management and films, it could be extremely easy (and beneficial) for faculty to incorporate some part of the course into their introduction to management, organizational behavior, or human resources courses. The course is also very low cost. The readings consisted of academic journal articles or popular press articles and it cost, on average, \$2 per movie to rent if students did not already pay for the streaming service the movie was on. We watched six movies in total, so the cost for the course was easily under \$20. Students were able to locate movies using www.justwatch.com.

The course was described as a way for students to critically analyze popular movies through a management lens. The movies were intended to highlight both successful and unsuccessful managers as well as best practices and inappropriate managerial behaviors. The movies were also expected to create discussion around how the organizational environment plays a role in influencing these behaviors and how interactions among characters lead to important organizational outcomes (e.g., commitment, motivation, performance, etc.). To create more buy-

in, students had the opportunity to vote on which movies we would watch. The course met twice a week for three weeks. When we were not meeting to discuss a movie, students were either watching the movie on their own time or completing assignments related to the course.

By the end of the course, students made connections between films, had open and honest student-led discussions on important topics like diversity, microaggressions, work-life balance, managing up, and the kind of manager they wanted to be, and gained confidence in leading meetings. Students not only learned about management, but they recognized their positive leadership traits and could communicate the importance of leadership and management topics to others.

Theoretical Foundation

As seen from my call for movies on the MOBTS Facebook page and the list of 70 movies that were generated, using movies to display management, OB, or HR topics is not novel. We also see articles published in MTR with activities related to specific movies and topics (e.g., Cannon & Doyle, 2020; Liu, 2021; Quijada, 2017; Rabinowitz & Fender, 2018; Stratton et al., 2020). Movies work well for traditional undergraduate (ages 18-22) learning because they showcase the complexity, interactions, reality, and hard decisions they will have to make before actually making them (Sprinkle & Urick, 2016). In short, movies succeed at bringing abstract concepts to life (Quijada, 2017). Movies also put students on the same, level playing field because instead of relying on personal examples, students can use examples from the movies to relate to textbook topics and theories (Hunt, 2001). Through critical analysis, all students have the opportunity to think about various viewpoints (i.e., different characters), scrutinize behaviors, and create ‘what-if’ scenarios for characters to better understand how they could have done things differently or more effectively (Edwards et al., 2015; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004).

When designing the course, I knew I wanted to avoid falling prey to the *movie sandwich* (Sprinkle & Urick, 2016). The movie sandwich has been defined as “sandwiching” movie clips between theoretical concepts such that the instructor provides background information, show the clip or movie, and then engage in a discussion about the clip. While effective, this could lead to students “passively” watching the movie rather than critically engaging with it (Sprinkle & Urick, 2016). Therefore, I aimed to design a more immersive movie experience that combined activities during their viewing of the movie, short-term and long-term after the movie, *and* applying concepts and examples from the movies to their own development. These activities ensured a more “analytical viewing” of the movie (Hobbs, 1998) and that students were prepared for in-depth discussions.

Below, I describe the five activities students engaged in throughout the three-week course. The *movie tickets* were used to ensure students were 1) watching the movie and 2) picking up on important theoretical concepts. The *movie promoters* and *popcorn gallery* incentivized students to critically engage with the content, watch the movies through a management lens, not just for entertainment, and helped them prepare for discussion. The *movie critiques* helped students dig deeper into leadership behaviors and key course themes by comparing, contrasting, and applying ideas and examples from at least two movies. Finally, the *write your own scene* assignment tied it all together by allowing students to learn about themselves, gather feedback, and connect that feedback to the course topics and movies.

Learning Objectives

Please note these are the learning objectives for the entire course. In the presentation, I will highlight which assignments connected to specific learning objectives.

1. Analyze and apply management and organizational behavior topics to explain decisions

and behavior in films

2. Compare and contrast leadership, management, and OB theories through films
3. Articulate how the organizational environment influences leaders, managers, and interactions between employees
4. Evaluate your own management and leadership abilities and compare and contrast them with what you see in films
5. Professionally communicate (both written and orally) through a variety of mediums
6. Combine creativity and management/OB theories to portray films in a new light
7. Gain skills in leading meetings, asking for feedback, and managing ambiguity

Exercise Overview

In the session, I will share the list of movies I curated from crowdsourcing feedback on the MOBTS Facebook page, peers, and friends and family. I will also give an overview of the various assignments and activities I used during the course and student feedback. Below, I describe each of those assignments/activities in more detail.

Movie Tickets. These were short low-stakes quizzes students needed to be complete in order to be able to participate in class discussions (e.g., movie promoters and the popcorn gallery). They are designed to encourage engagement. Half the questions asked about details in the movie to ensure the students had watched the movie. The other half of the questions were related to theories and concepts that we would discuss as a class. If students did not complete these, they could not participate in the discussion, so this acted as an extrinsic motivator to carefully watch the movie through a managerial/leadership lens rather than as just a viewer.

Movie Promoters. Students worked in groups to be the ‘movie promoters’ for one movie. As movie promoters, students were tasked with leading a 75-minute discussion about the movie,

writing a blog for a managerial audience about the movie, and recreating a movie poster that advertises the lessons that can be learned from the movie for managers. To help students become better discussion leaders, I led the first discussion, held a Q&A about leading discussions with students, and created handouts describing how to write good discussion questions and types of questions to avoid. Students were encouraged to incorporate some sort of activity into their discussion lead (e.g., polling, role-playing, Pictionary, etc.). I stepped into discussions as necessary to help keep the discussion on track and focused on management topics.

The Popcorn Gallery. Students who were not movie promoters were part of the popcorn gallery and **active** participants in the class discussion for that day. Students received a grade for each discussion. I tracked not only quantity of comments, but quality of comments during each discussion. Students had to speak at least twice during the discussion, but also had to make different types of comments. For example, students were challenged to make comments that either related to readings, other movies, their own experiences, or their opinions about specific scenes. Students were also encouraged to ask questions, support other students' viewpoints, and also play devil's advocate where possible. Students were graded on three categories: preparedness, attitude, and engagement.

Rotten Tomatoes: Movie Critiques. To further push students to think critically about the movies, they individually completed a movie critique comparing and contrasting two movies at a time. Students were tasked with making connections between the two movies, discussing the various leadership styles, qualities from the various leaders they would want in their own manager, and any other themes they noticed in the movies. These helped me evaluate their understanding of the readings as well as what they took away from the discussions.

You're the Main Act!: Write Your Own Scene. To tie course material to their understanding of themselves, students completed two assignments that culminated in them using their creativity to write themselves, as a manager, into a movie scene. The first two assignments involved students completing self-assessments and asking people close to them for feedback about when they are their best selves. Students then came up with themes about themselves that pointed to qualities that will make them a good manager. From this information, students wrote their own scene with them as the main character. They then explained the scene by integrating references and themes from their two previous assignments. These assignments seemed to be very engaging and important to students. It was clear these assignments boosted their confidence as many of them are very nervous about entering 'the real world' and wondering what they can contribute to organizations.

Session Description

Proposed Session Length: 60 minutes

Applicable Courses: While this was taught as its own course, the assignments and movies could be used in Principles of Management, Organizational Behavior, Human Resources

Format: both online (synchronous) and face-to-face

Time (min)	Topic	Format	Discussion Points and Activities
5	Welcome	Large group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduce presenter & purpose 2. Polling questions regarding use of movies or scenes in class
10	Experiential exercise: Watch a short scene!	Small group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I will show a short scene from a movie we watched during class (e.g., Devil Wears Prada) 2. Ask some questions after playing the scene and put attendees into breakout rooms to discuss 3. Challenge participants to apply management topics or theories to the scene 4. Groups share out what they found

25	Share description of various assignments	Large group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Movie Tickets 2. Movie Promoters & The Popcorn Gallery 3. Rotten Tomatoes: Movie Critiques 4. You're the Main Act: Write Your Own Episode!
15	Discussion and feedback from the group	Small/Large group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Share impressions of class 2. Share attendees' use of movies and assignments in their own classes 3. Suggest improvements and/or alternative uses
5	Collect email addresses	Large group	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Collect email addresses for those interested in any of the materials shared
60	Total		

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