

## ***Game of Thrones* in the Management Classroom: Teaching Opportunities and Challenges**

### **Abstract**

We will lead a discussion about the use of the popular television series *Game of Thrones* (GoT) as a teaching tool for management. We suggest that numerous management concepts are illustrated in GoT such as power, political skill, leadership, ethics, decision making, and gender issues. Yet, we recognize challenges exist in using GoT in teaching (e.g., the violent and sexual content). We invite participants to share their experiences using GoT or other R-rated materials as teaching tools and engage participants in a discussion about the opportunities and challenges related to the use of GoT in the management classroom.

Keywords: *Game of Thrones*, organizational behavior, teaching tool

## INTRODUCTION

For this session, we propose to lead a roundtable discussion centered on the use of the popular television series *Game of Thrones* (GoT; Benioff & Weiss, 2011) as a teaching tool for management. Specifically, we suggest that numerous management concepts are illustrated in GoT such as power, political skill, leadership, ethics, decision making, and gender issues; thus, the show could be a treasure trove for management educators looking for popular culture video content to integrate into their classrooms. Yet, we recognize challenges exist in using GoT in teaching (e.g., the violent and sexual content). Thus, we invite participants to share their experiences using GoT or other R-rated materials as teaching tools and we plan to engage participants in a discussion about the opportunities and challenges related to the use of GoT in the management classroom.

GoT is a fictional fantasy drama television series on HBO that is based on the *A Song of Fire and Ice* novels written by George R. R. Martin (1996-present). Over a period of eight years (2011-2019), the GoT television series became an international cultural phenomenon. GoT is among the most popular television series' to date, touting the most Emmy awards for a fictional series (Swatman, 2017). The show was labeled by Guinness World Records as the most in-demand TV premiere of 2018 and 2019 (Gluck, 2019), and the show's finale was the most watched HBO show to-date (Gartenberg, 2019).

GoT chronicles a multi-year war among the noble houses of Westeros (the fictional continent where the story takes place) for the ultimate power of sitting their lord/lady as the king/queen on the iron throne. While the nobles battle for power, an even stronger, more powerful enemy rests to the north; this enemy has the largest army in the realm. This army is made up entirely of formerly-human ice creatures who pose a supernatural threat to all of

Westeros since they have the potential to wipe out the entire population of the continent. The nobles think these creatures are just a legend, rather than a reality. Thus, GoT is a story of two wars—one between the lords of Westeros and one between the living and the dead.

### **TEACHING IMPLICATIONS**

Using movies and television clips to teach abstract concepts is common in management education (e.g., Graham, Ackermann, & Maxwell, 2004; Pandey, 2012; Urick & Sprinkle, 2019), as these mediums illustrate management concepts in a relatable fashion and provide an engaging and exciting educational experience for students. We ground our usage of popular culture media such as GoT in the conception that when managerial concepts are presented in a manner that relates to students' interests, the quality of student learning and engagement increases. Previous research has shown that using popular fictional characters can influence students' understanding of business and management-related concepts (Urick, Gnecco, Jackson, Greiner, & Sylada, 2015). Thus, because of the immense popularity of GoT, we suggest that using GoT clips in the management classroom can be particularly effective in helping students grasp many organizational behavior concepts.

There is some precedent and discussion within the scholarship of learning and teaching literature for using GoT in the classroom. For example, Clapton and Shepherd (2017) discuss how GoT can be effectively used in an international relations course to teach global politics, international relations, power, and gender issues, and Urick and Racculia (2017) illustrate how nine different ethical decision making frameworks apply to various characters in GoT. Building upon this prior work, we suggest that GoT contains a significant amount of content that can be used in the management classroom to illustrate organizational behavior concepts such as power, political skill, leadership, ethics, decision making, and gender issues.

For example, the Jon Snow character can be used to demonstrate characteristics of servant leadership. Jon grew up in House Stark, one of the noble houses of the realm, but he was the bastard son of Lord Eddard Stark. Since he grew up as a bastard instead of a rightful heir, he was treated as a second-rate member of the Stark family; yet, growing up in the castle afforded him some benefits such as learning how to fight and use a sword. When he joined the Night's Watch (a military order that guards the wall to the north), he considered himself one of the best swordsmen and fighters, so he was quite humbled when he was selected as a steward instead of a ranger of the Watch. Jon later learns that he is not a bastard, but rather he is a rightful heir to the Iron Throne. Instead of fighting to take the throne, he bent the knee to a more powerful rival to the throne in order to save the Northerners, his family, and the wildlings (a people that most people in the kingdom either fear or hate). If our session is accepted, we will offer more examples of organizational behavior concepts that can be illustrated using GoT clips along with the related specific scenes from the series; additionally, we will ask session participants (if they are familiar with the show) to brainstorm management/organizational behavior concepts they could use GoT clips for their own classes.

### **Ways to Use GoT in the Classroom**

Since many of the series' specific scenes can be viewed via a YouTube search rather than showing entire hour-long episodes, management educators can select targeted scenes that correspond to the learning topic at hand. After viewing these clips, the professor can provide a worksheet with targeted questions designed to elicit students' critical thinking about the clips. This activity can then be supplemented with an in-depth discussion of the characters' behaviors and their relation to the specific management concept at hand.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages of Using GoT in the Classroom**

The use of GoT in the classroom can have many advantages such as the wide breadth of organizational behavior concepts that are illustrated throughout the show, increased student interest and engagement in the classroom due to the shows' immense popularity, and the wide availability of free clips on YouTube, making finding and using clips easy for management educators. However, GoT in the classroom can also have some disadvantages such as the heavy inclusion of graphic scenes depicting violence, sex, sexual violence, and explicit language. While it is entirely possible to select clips that do not include these scenes that are only appropriate for more mature audiences, the show's reputation for these elements could potentially turn off some students. Also, since the show is purely fantasy, there may be concerns that the situations presented in the clips may not accurately portray management concepts/issues.

### **SESSION DESCRIPTION**

The outline for the session is as follows:

- I. An overview of the GoT show and a video clip summary of the series (10 minutes)
- II. Discussion of opportunities to use GoT in the management classroom (with an open invitation for session participants to brainstorm management topics that the show illustrates) (20 minutes)
- III. Discussion of both the benefits and drawbacks to using GoT and other R-related material in the management classroom (30 minutes)

Sample discussion questions include:

What are the benefits of using GoT in the management classroom?

What are the drawbacks of using GoT in the management classroom?

Have you introduced GoT into your classroom? If yes, then how did you use GoT as a teaching resource?

To what extent were you successful using GoT in your teaching?

How did students receive your use of GoT in your class?

Have you used other R-rated videos or video clips in your classroom? Did you encounter any issues using R-rated materials?

Note: We understand that the required time length for roundtable discussions is one hour, and we planned the session accordingly. We can adjust this session to meet a 30-minute allotment, if that works better for the scheduling purposes.

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