



Feature Films in Management Education: Beyond Illustration and Entertainment

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Abstract. Feature films are now widely used by organizational behaviour instructors, as a means of illustrating topics and concepts, and as a source of pedagogical material that is more entertaining and motivating than conventional teaching methods. The aim of this paper is to establish that, while the aims of illustration and motivation are valuable, film has further pedagogical potential, explored through the concept of film as theory-laden narrative. Various, different applications of films in classroom instruction are suggested.

Keywords: film, teaching, organizational behaviour, instructional techniques.

1. Introduction

The use of feature films in the teaching of organizational behaviour within management programmes is not new (Daniels, 1982), and has numerous advocates (Gioia and Brass, 1985; Kinnunen and Ramamurti, 1987; Michaelson and Schultheiss, 1988; Flores, 1989; Harrington and Griffin, 1990; Serey, 1992; Banthin and Stelzer, 1993; Gallos, 1993; Huczynski, 1994; Ross, 1996; Foreman and Thatchenkery, 1996; Rappaport and Cawelti, 1998; Comer and Cooper, 1998; Livingstone and Livingstone, 1998; Graham et al, 1999; Champoux, 1999; Comer, 2000; Roth, 2001). Marx et al. (1991) catalogue management teaching resources in which films play a prominent role. Champoux (2001a; 2001b) summarizes 160 scenes from classic and contemporary movies that illustrate organizational theories, concepts and issues. Huczynski and Buchanan (2001) have the first mainstream organizational behaviour text to include 'home viewing', identifying movies with themes relevant to chapter material. Observing that film was the 'defining medium' of the twentieth century, Monaco (2000) notes how, with developments in the use of video, DVD, and the internet, both the availability and consumption of film has changed dramatically since the 1970s. Thirty years ago, few people owned movies. Today, few people do not. Technological developments have thus potentially enhanced the educational

scope of film, making a range of material more readily available to a wider audience.

The popularity of film as a teaching vehicle relies on its unique educational properties. Champoux (1999, p.206) argues that, 'film enhances the learning process in ways unavailable in other media', by illustrating organizational behaviour themes, in a graphic and memorable manner, and by providing entertainment which can motivate students and stimulate interest. Hobbs (1998, p.263) argues that film can be used to gain attention, to illustrate subject matter, and also to encourage the analytical and critical viewing of film as 'text'. Hobbs' reference to text is particularly significant as fictional narratives are typically accounts of events that unfold sequentially, and chronologically, thus suggesting causality (Putnam, Phillips and Chapman, 1996, p.386; Czarniawska, 1998 and 1999). To the extent that narrative-based films contain embedded explanations for events, they are potentially theory-rich, suggesting premises for arguments, and offering frames of reference for the interpretation of organizational actions. While scientific understanding seeks to understand events in terms of covariation, in the form of general laws, narrative understanding is concerned with making sense of flows of social and organizational action in context.

Film, as narrative, can therefore be 'read' as advancing an argument, or arguments, or thesis, which is often 'the good guys always win', or 'the course of true love is never smooth'. However, as we shall seek to demonstrate, many films have more interesting and complex theses of relevance to management and organization studies. The aim of this paper, therefore, is to establish the wider pedagogical value of film beyond the illustration of themes and the entertainment of students, based on the narrative potential of film as thesis.

2. Film as Illustration

Instructors who use film report a range of objectives, relating to process, to the experience of viewing a film, to content, and to the substance of the plot. The process of watching a movie has characteristics not shared by conventional instructional methods. As a teaching medium, movies belong in the same category as lectures and case studies, providing learning material to consider, discuss, and analyse. However, viewing film allows students temporarily to suspend everyday concerns, to let imagination roam, to experience vicariously the richness of organizational life (Golden-Biddle, 1993). Hunter (1990) notes the ability of films to offer a 'transcendent' experience, creating 'a sense of engagement' with events on the screen. For Harrington and Griffin (1989), a movie's imagery produces a higher level of student involvement. Serey (1992) argues that movies produced a 'powerful, compelling, intense experience'. Film can thus trigger greater participant involvement, which can in turn enrich the learning experience (Michaelson and Schultheiss, 1988).

Champoux (2001a; 2001b) has done much valuable work in identifying relevant film content, and encouraging its use in organizational behaviour instruction. In particular, he identifies the eight ‘ways of using’ film, summarized in Table 1 (Champoux, 1999), using stimulating content to illustrate and highlight topics difficult to convey through lecture and print.

Table 1: Ways of using film in teaching (Champoux, 1999)

case	presenting narrative for analysis
experiential exercise	going ‘inside’ a setting, for problem solving and decision making
metaphor	portraying complex, abstract ideas in vivid and memorable ways
satire	using humour, ridicule, exaggeration, understatement
symbolism	communicating with visual imagery, language, music
meaning	giving substance to abstract theories and concepts
experience	bringing vicarious experience, such as life in other cultures
time	illustrating historical events, temporal dimensions of behaviour

Echoing Champoux’ recommendations, most instructors appear to use movies for illustrative purposes, for presenting, portraying, communicating, substantiating, and emphasizing concepts and topics more difficult to convey with more conventional methods. From an inspection of the literature, there appear to be seven main approaches under this heading:

1. demonstrating relevance
2. motivating the boring
3. concretizing the abstract
4. changing the mode
5. reframing the perspective
6. comprehending complexity
7. revealing the hidden

Having examined these applications, we will then consider how the narrative perspective of film as thesis leads to three further powerful pedagogical uses of film.