

Lights, Camera, Action! Engaging Students on Ethics and Values Through Film

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Abstract. There is a long tradition of the value of using film as a pedagogical tool. Such use spans a variety of business disciplines including organizational behavior (Smith 2009), accounting (Bay & Felton 2012), business ethics (Fisher, Grant & Palmer 2015) and cultural competency (Greene, Barden, Richardson & Hall 2014). Presented here is a recently developed course, Business in Film, which engages students in deep reflection on business issues with an emphasis on ethics and values. The course is structured around a weekly film (mix of dramas and documentaries), 15 weeks, 15 films covering approximately 40 years. For each film, students prepare a 2-3 page reflection paper. Student feedback has been consistently positive, with comments along the themes of a greater appreciation of the intersection between business and the human experience, bringing to life ethical considerations, and a greater appreciation of the historical context of business events.

Keywords: pedagogical tool, ethics, film, deep reflection.

1. Introduction

Introduced here is a new course recently designed, developed and offered three times titled Business in Film. This course has been well-received by students as it encourages deeper reflection and discernment on moral and ethical issues of relevance to business, society more broadly, and students' own professional journey. Additionally, the course provides a deeper understanding of important economic events over the past 40+ years including offshoring, recessions, and collapse of the housing market. In the following the course will be described in some detail including the film line-up, deliverables, class discussion, issues related to integrity and student comments. This course is not perfect (and has been adjusted over time) but presented here is a possible starting point for faculty who might be interested in delivering a similar course at their institution.

Background

There is a long tradition of the value of using film as a pedagogical tool. Such use spans disciplines including, but not limited to, organizational behavior (Smith

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2009), accounting (Bay & Felton 2012), business ethics (Fisher, Grant & Palmer 2015; Skorin-Kapov & Benson 2018; Youngkin 2014), cultural competency (Greene, Barden, Richardson & Hall 2014), attitude toward gender identities (Hartless 2021), urban geography (Sigler & Albandoz 2014) and law (Livings 2010). Typically, a film (or film clips) is used as part of a course to illustrate or emphasize a particular topic. Examples include 12 Angry Men in a Law of Evidence course (Livings 2010) and Barbarians at the Gate in Integration and Problem Solving (accounting) course (Bay & Felton 2012). Use of films can also serve as the primary pedagogy (e.g. Skorin-Kapov 2019; Skorin-Kapov & Benson 2018; Smith 2009).

There have been a range of documented benefits from the use of film as a way of enhancing the student's learning experience (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz 2001; Huczynski & Buchanan 2004). Such benefits include increasing retention of concepts (Giacalone & Jurkiewicz 2001), bringing key concepts to life (Champoux 1999), seeing theory in action (Berger & Pratt 1998) and encouraging critical thinking (O'Boyle & Sandona 2014; Skorin-Kapov & Benson 2018).

2. Genesis of the Course

This course is currently offered at a Jesuit university. Jesuit universities place a strong emphasis on character development and the importance of developing a strong ethical foundation to carry students forward through their professional and personal lives.

The importance of instilling an ethical foundation in students is certainly not the sole purview of business schools within faith-based institutions as business schools more broadly have become sensitive to preparing students to be more responsible leaders. To this point, AACSB emphasizes the importance of a greater sense of purpose for business schools:

“As the world's largest association for business education, AACSB is at the intersection of education, business, and society. We believe that business schools—and businesses—are a force for good in the world. With a vision to transform business education globally for positive societal impact,” (AACSB 2023)

All of this is against a backdrop of notable ethical lapses. Examples include VW cheating on emissions testing (Miller & Vladkov 2019), Enron's falsification of accounting statements (Schmitt & Weil 2002), the fraudulent Fyre Festival fiasco (Hong 2017), and a culture of misogyny and harassment at Uber (Prang 2019). Indeed, there is ongoing interest in exploring alternative ways to engage students in ethical reasoning activities and exercises (e.g. Chavan & Carter 2018; Hunt & Radford 2018; Nhung, Basuray & Smith 2017; Skorin-Kapov & Benson 2018). The above examples of business malpractice serve to reflect the timeless

importance of exposing our students to questions of values and ethics. The film line-up for this course, which will be detailed later, does include Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room. An earlier running of the course also included 2019's Fyre: The Greatest Party That Never Happened. The final film line-up will always reflect the judgment of the instructor. Relevant documentaries can serve as a great overview of actual events that students will likely have heard about.

3. Structure of the Course

The mechanics of the course are simple and straightforward. The course meets once a week for a two hour and forty-minute block. Each week students watch a film and have some initial discussion. The film line-up, which is presented in more detail in a following section, is organized more or less chronologically with respect to the setting of the film. For example, Glengarry Glen Ross came out in the early 1990's, but is based on a 1984 play, so this film is placed in the 1980s. There are certainly different organizing structures, such as grouping the films by themes, but the movement through time that a chronological structure provides gives students a sense of changing fashion, technology, and cultural references.

For each film, students prepare a 2-3 page (single-space) reflection paper. Students receive minimal direction with the papers, simply to be thoughtful, personal, and creative. There are 15 films, and the 3 lowest scores are dropped, including any zeros. This facilitates handling absences for any reason as well as gives students the option of a week off if their schedule is otherwise unusually busy. Zeros are not dropped for the last two films to prevent students from saving up their drops and checking out of the course before the semester ends. If students have an absence, they are allowed, alternatively, to watch the film on their own but this is monitored closely so as not to have a student who is essentially taking the class remotely.

4. The Filmography

In selecting the film line-up, the following issues were considered:

- first and foremost, it is an excellent film. How much a student will like a given film will naturally vary, but every film is outstanding (many of them award-winning).
- representative across various disciplines and issues. It is natural to drift a bit toward financially-based films, but it is important that the line-up that represents a variety of disciplines.

- mix of drama and documentary. Students will express a preference for one over the other. Some students report they like the documentaries better because they focus on real events, often times ones that the student has heard of but knew very little about. On the other hand, some students report that they find the dramas more engaging and that documentaries can be a bit dry. With the film line-up here, irrespective of which way a student leans, students typically find each film to be interesting and appropriate.
- representative across time. The earliest film by release date is *Wall Street* (1987) and the most recent is *WeWork: The Making and Breaking of a \$47 Billion Dollar Unicorn* (2021).
- engages in questions of values, ethics, consequences, societal impact, life choices. These films are not so much to teach about business (students get a lot of that in their regular curriculum) but highlight how business is interwoven with the broader human experience and provide students a platform for examining their own values, ethics, and life choices.

Selecting the final film line-up is an important part of teaching the course. It is important that the instructor is clear about the value of the film and how it adds to the total course experience. There is no perfect or ideal film line-up, different instructors, different films. Below is the current film line-up for this particular course and the business theme(s) the film most closely aligns with and also the main issues that emerge in the film:

Wall Street (1987)

First up is perhaps one of the most iconic business films, featuring one of the most iconic soliloquies with Gordon Gekko's "greed is good" speech to Teldar shareholders.

Business theme(s): finance (investing)

Key issues: ethics, values, mentorship, slippery slope of small decisions

Roger & Me (1989)

Michael Moore's first full-length documentary focuses on the impact of GM's Flint MI plant closing on the city.

Business theme(s): macroeconomics

Key issues: social responsibility, class division

Glengarry Glen Ross (1992)

This star-studded film (Jack Lemmon, Kevin Spacey, Alec Baldwin, Al Pacino) was adapted from a David Mamet play by the same name. The story focuses on