Thinking Outside the Box Office:
Using Movies to Build Shared Experiences and Student Engagement in Online or Hybrid Learning

William Kresse, M.S., J.D.
Assistant Professor
College of Business and Public Administration,
Governors State University
University Park, IL

Dr. Kathleen Hanold Watland
Associate Dean, Chair of the Management Department, and Associate Professor
Graham School of Management
Saint Xavier University
Chicago, IL

ABSTRACT

Movies and films are widely recognized as valuable pedagogical tools. Motion pictures provide concrete and illustrative examples of important concepts and can improve students' understanding of course material as well as increase their satisfaction with courses.

Online learning is becoming an increasing dominant facet of higher education. Online learning is preferred by many students for various reasons, many related to the flexibility and format of the course work; students can engage in learning when it is convenient for them.

While the flexibility of time and format is a major appeal of online learning, it also serves as a major impediment. Student retention is a significant challenge in the online learning environment. Research shows that students in online courses are more likely to feel a sense of "disconnectedness" and miss having a common shared experience with other students. As a result, students in online courses are more likely to withdraw from the course because they miss the opportunities for shared experiences.

This paper explores the use of movies in online and hybrid business courses for the purpose of providing a shared experience around which students can discuss course content. This paper describes the process for creating a shared student experience and creating the related discussions among students centering on particular concepts illustrated in the selected films. The students view the particular movies, and then, with either a lens of management and leadership strategies, or of business ethics concepts, discuss specific questions within their team, the whole class, and then again with their team. This paper discusses the value of that shared movie experience and discusses the need for additional pedagogical strategies to establish and promote online opportunities for student interactions.

MOVIES AND FILM IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Movies and film clips have been widely used as a teaching tool in college classes for decades (Champoux 1999) and are considered a valuable pedagogical tool. Viewing movies or film clips have been linked to increasing students' interest in the topic, integration of course material, and improving students' perceptions of the course experience (Badura 2002). A shared film or video clip can improve the substance of students' learning (Brinkley 1999). Généreux and Thompson (2008) found that utilizing movies in college classes increased opportunities for student reflection and involvement.

While movies are an effective tool for enhancing student learning, there are challenges and barriers in using the tool. Many faculty choose not to use this medium due to logistical issues of ensuring copies of the movie are available for the students; additionally there may be problems associated with obtaining copyright clearances (Clemens & Curt 2010). Further, selecting the appropriate movies or film clips, and deciding exactly how to use them, can be daunting. According to Clemens and Curt (2010), it is im-

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perative to identify movies that will capture the students' attention and resonate with them. At the same time, the movie must clearly support the specific learning objectives of the course. However, by using prompts, questions or a survey to focus the students on specific behaviors or outcomes, or by requiring the students to evaluate or reflect on the situation within the movie, the use of cinema is likely to have a positive impact on the learning objectives (McKeachie & Svinicki 2006).

Holbrook (2007) shared that there are many articles and books to assist faculty in identifying movies or film clips that may be suitable for their particular course content. While movies are widely available across the disciplines, it is especially true for leadership and management content (Holbrook 2009) and for business ethics content (Kester, Cooper, Dean, Peter & Goldsby 2009), where the contextual applications are so important. Bartunek (2013) cautioned faculty to be strategic in selecting any movies for use in courses. When identifying supplemental research or content for their students, Bartunek found that faculty are frequently drawn to information that disconfirms current beliefs and understandings. This may be because faculty are interested in information that may provoke debate. However, information that may be considered more of a positive example or illustration, or information that may provide clarity, elicit inspiration or be considered moving to the students, may be equally, if not more, valuable (Bartunek 2013). Bartunek (2013) further argued that students prefer concrete and illustrative examples to hypothetical situations to learn more about a concept. Students seek balanced information that both supports and provides positive examples of the concepts that they are learning (Bartunek 2013).

ONLINE LEARNING AND SHARED LEARNING EXPERIENCES

Online learning is experiencing significant growth, and the number of students selecting online or hybrid classes continues to increase. According to the Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System (IPEDS), more than 70% of all degree-granting institutions offer online or hybrid learning opportunities (Allen & Seaman 2014). Although there is a surge of interest in enrolling in online courses, student retention is a challenge in the online environment. Without special and specific considerations and experiences, students are much more likely to withdraw from online courses than from courses meeting in-person (Boston & Ice 2011). According to Zydney, de-Noyelles, and Seo (2012) much of the research suggests that students frequently withdraw from online learning because of feelings related to "disconnectedness" and a lack of shared experiences and interactions with the other

learners. Without shared experiences and purposeful interactions, students are less likely to experience cohesion within their groups (Boston & Ice 2011).

Knowles (1975) argued for the importance of strategically planning group activities into any course, but especially those for adult learners. In addition to the importance of learning in group activities, Stephens, Robinson, and Mc-Grath (2013) described the importance of using a shared learning experience as the foundation for increasing collaboration and student engagement in groups in the online environment. They recommended incorporating opportunities for students to review, respond to, and build on each other's work. Hansen and Erdley (2009) found that student learning can be enhanced in the online environment, but special consideration may be necessary to build group cohesion. Groups are more cohesive and active when all students are engaged (Heafner 2004).

McKeachie and Svinicki (2006) have recommended beginning all student discussions with a common or shared experience as this promotes student engagement. They suggested that movies or film clips are especially valuable for this purpose. Because all of the students have viewed the movie or film clip, every student now knows something about the topic through the movie. Each student is in an equal position to participate. Further, students feel much freer to point out issues and problems within the movie because they do not have a personal connection to the people or the organization depicted in the movie.

INCREASING ONLINE OFFERINGS AND ENSURING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Saint Xavier University is a nationally recognized mid-sized private institution serving more than 5,000 students. Saint Xavier University's mission is to educate men and women to search for truth, to think critically, to communicate effectively and to serve wisely and compassionately in support of human dignity and the common good. Effective communication and serving wisely and compassionately are at the core of successful teamwork. Like many institutions of higher learning, Saint Xavier University is offering an increasing number of courses online.

While Saint Xavier University is providing additional courses in the online and/or hybrid format, Saint Xavier faculty remain committed to ensuring that students have the opportunity to engage with the faculty, with the content, and especially with other learners. Consulting the literature on student engagement, faculty identified some pedagogical practices that would provide shared experiences to promote student engagement while also advancing the class content. Faculty first used the shared expe-

rience of viewing selected movies within the Masters of Business Administration program.

Most of the students in Saint Xavier University's Graham School of Management Masters of Business Administration (MBA) program are working professionals. Students generally complete the MBA program in two or three years, depending on a student's course load. Management Theory and Application is one of the first required courses that Saint Xavier graduate students take as part of the MBA program. Graduate students must also take the business ethics course Business, Ethics and Governance (or the predecessor course Government, Business and Society) as part of the MBA core curriculum.

MANAGEMENT THEORY AND APPLICATION

The purpose of the Management Theory and Application course is to explore the effective management practices and leadership skills. The students in the Management Theory and Application course have varying degrees of management experience. Some students are current managers, while others may be aspiring managers. Most of the students are hoping to improve their managerial and leadership skills. Within this course, one of the pedagogical strategies involves identifying and discussing key leadership and management practices in selected movies. In an online environment, it is especially important for students to have visual models of management and leadership behaviors (Boston & Ice 2011).

Within the first week of the course, students introduce themselves in a Discussion area of the online course environment and respond to a few short questions about their opinions on the challenges of leading others, as well as questions about their professional aspirations. Also within the first week, students self-select into learning groups. These groups or teams remain their permanent learning group for the entire term.

On the course syllabus, the students are immediately alerted that by the third and fourth week of the term, they will need to view the two selected movies. We refer to this assignment as "A Night at the Movies" and the information the students receive on the syllabus is below:

"Required videos:

Week Three

Hoosiers (1986) Directed by David Anspaugh and actors include Gene Hackman and Barbara Hershey. This video is widely available on cable. It can be rented from many sources including iTunes and Netflix. It is available for purchase from Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble.

Week Four

Apollo 13 (1995) Directed by Ron Howard and actors include Tom Hanks, Bill Paxton, and Kevin Bacon. This video is widely available on cable. It can be rented from many sources including Netflix. It is available for purchase from Amazon.com and Barnes and Noble.

In addition to your popcorn and Junior Mints, please have a copy of the "A Night at the Movies" questions in front of you when you view each of the videos."

While other popular movies could easily be used in place of *Hoosiers* and *Apollo 13*, these movies are selected for specific reasons. The students are likely to have already viewed these movies at some point prior to the class, so they have some familiarity with the story, but are not likely to have viewed it with the lens of analyzing and evaluating management practices. Building on information or experiences students already have, yet looking at them in an innovative way, can facilitate learning and engagement (McKeachie & Svinicki 2006).

Hoosiers and *Apollo 13* are widely available through many sources but do require some planning to view the movie by the due dates. Choosing movies widely available and usually available at no cost is less of financial burden on the students. Perhaps most importantly, these movies provide many examples that positively illustrate concepts studied in the class related to managing performance, culture, and leadership.

BUSINESS, ETHICS AND GOVERNANCE

The purpose of Business, Ethics and Governance is to have the students critically examine the major social, political, and economic forces that impact business organizations. The course places an emphasis on management's response to societal issues as the corporation attains its mission and goals. Further, the course is designed to increase the students' awareness of ethical problems and corporate management's responsibility to individuals and to society.

Similar to the Management Theory and Application course, some sections of the Business, Ethics and Governance course (or the predecessor Government, Business and Society course) are conducted using an online or hybrid format and have used motion pictures to reinforce key concepts. Additionally, this exercise allows the students to have the common experience of viewing a motion picture in which some of the course objectives are illustrated. Opportunities are then provided for the students to discuss each movie both within their study groups and in the full

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class. Also in line with the Management Theory and Application course, students are supplied with guidelines for watching the films.

The students are instructed to watch three movies:

The Fountainhead (1949). Directed by King Vidor and starring Gary Cooper and Patricia Neal, it is based on the novel of the same name by Ayn Rand.

Wall Street (1987). Directed by Oliver Stone and starring Charlie Sheen and Michael Douglas who won a Best Actor Oscar for his role as Gordon Gekko.

Other People's Money (1991). Directed by Norman Jewison and starring Danny DeVito and Gregory Peck, it is based on the play of the same name by Jerry Sterner.

Much like the movies assigned in the Management Theory and Application course, the films assigned in the Business, Ethics and Governance course are widely and inexpensively available through various sources and in various media formats.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR "A NIGHT AT THE MOVIES"

The purpose of the "A Night at the Movies" project is to have students' initial collaboration focus on a common and straightforward task. The students' first group assignment is to determine how they will access the movie. Assigning the task of accessing the film as a *student group* responsibility rather than a *faculty* responsibility has two immediate benefits. The first benefit is that very early in the term, each student group must quickly communicate within their group to share ideas on how they can access the movie. Because these early communications are focused on a very clear task, the students are quick to make suggestions to each other to ensure everyone has access to the film. While all of the students need to view the movie in the same week, they do not need to view it at the same location. Working together to share ideas, students quickly identify several options for accessing the film and share their ideas, even, at times, with students in different groups. The second benefit to the "A Night at the Movies Project" is that it removes the logistical and copyright challenges for the faculty member, a move that ultimately makes utilizing a movie a more attractive teaching tool. As stated earlier, faculty frequently experience many lo-

gistical challenges in utilizing videos as a teaching tool (Clemens & Curt 2010), making them less likely to incorporate films into their courses.

The actual assignment for each of the motion pictures is the same. Within their respective groups, students have the shared responsibility to ensure that each group member views the assigned movie and prepares preliminary responses to the questions that are posted in the online course environment. Using a separate small group Discussion area or "chat" feature in the online course environment, students share their preliminary responses only within their own groups. The "best" responses from each group are then entered into the whole-class Discussion area. The "best" responses that move into the whole-class Discussion area are frequently a composite of several group members' responses rather than from one individual student. This tactic works particularly well because the students feel an ownership with their respective portions of the responses and frequently engage in adding additional insights and information supporting why their responses are accurate and complete. Lastly, each group, working in the small group Discussion area or "chat" area, identifies which responses from a group *other than their own* best reflects and advances the topics being discussed that week. Additionally, students also provide a rationale to substantiate their choice of responses.

The particular questions for each movie may vary from term to term, but the question structure and intent remain constant. For example, students are asked to identify specific situations and behaviors in the movie that correspond with a theory or concept from the course reading materials. The questions focus not only on explicit behavior but also on motivational, environmental, or cultural factors that may be influencing the situation in a more subtle way. Students analyze the situation according to concepts and theories discussed in the course and then evaluate if the behavior in the movie was effective. If the behavior is viewed as effective, students share why they believe it to be effective and support their view from course materials and other experts. If there is a better management, leadership or business ethics alternative, students share their perspectives on what approach may have been more effective, and they provide supporting information on that view, as well. The instructor's vital responsibility in formulating the questions almost cannot be overemphasized. As Brookfield (1987) argued, developing purposeful and insightful questions that require students to analyze and evaluate options is possibly the most important step in preparing for student discussions.

STUDENT REACTIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Students' reactions and comments across each of the facets of the assignments have been extremely positive. It is particularly heartening to observe the online "chat" area as the students guide each other in accessing the videos, navigating the different cable providers, streaming options, rental and lending alternatives and other services. By having the students interacting and providing support for each other very early in the term, it is likely that the students feel more connected to each other (Badura 2002).

One behavior that was observed while monitoring the online chat sessions was that if a particular student was not participating in the discussion, the other students would intentionally ask the non-participating student for his or her thoughts. It became apparent that the groups wanted to gather as many views as possible with which to work for creating their group's response for the whole-class discussion. Because the first round of response sharing is only among members of the respective groups, each student's response mattered. Student non-participation, a frequent problem in the online learning environment, is minimized because in the small group structure, each student's response matters. Students demonstrated responsibility not only for their individual engagement in their group, but also for the collective engagement of their group. This sense of accountability to each other may lead to improved student retention (Zydney, deNoyelles, & Seo 2012).

It was also observed that students carefully edited and modified each group member's responses before sharing them in the whole-class discussion. Building on each other's work, the students collaborate to confirm and create knowledge while at the same time constructing a shared concept that they will explain to the class. This student-to-student collaboration can deepen students' understanding of the course content because the students must provide responses and be prepared to share their reasoning for those responses.

Questions prepared by the instructor played a significant role in the success of this assignment. Encouraging students to have meaningful discussions requires preparing good questions before the discussion. Socratic or probing questions can be mixed with open-ended questions in order to delve for more information and explore or challenge assumptions. Occasionally, thought-provoking or bold statements can encourage students to take a strong position and require them to share the rationale for their opinions. It is important for the instructor to choose questions that elicit differing views (Brookfield 1987).

The fact that none of the selected movies was of a recent vintage produced another interesting finding. Many of

the students observed that while they had viewed the movies previously, they had not "viewed it with the lens of management" or through the perspective of business ethics. Many students commented they "saw behaviors in a new light" and that the movies made some of the course concepts "more like real life than theories from a book." One student commented, "It was much more fun to watch the behaviors in a movie than just to read about them." Others shared that they were "surprised by all the differing views about the same movie" and that considering the diverse perspectives "may be helpful in understanding and managing others in the workplace." Some students have enthusiastically shared the titles of additional movies for faculty to consider for use in future classes.

GOING FORWARD

As universities continue to move additional classroom-based course offerings to the online or hybrid environment, we believe that utilizing movies as a shared experience will be an effective teaching tool in these other courses. From our experience, students enjoyed the experience of viewing the films through their newly discovered lens of the course content, discussing the movies with their classmates, and applying this experience to reinforce the course objectives. Further, by placing both the responsibility for determining the means for accessing the movies and the initial gathering of student responses at the group level, students seemed to be more engaged in the entire process. Regarding the use of the groups for eliciting the first level of response, one student observed, "If you don't post your response in a discussion for the whole class, the only person ... [who] notices is the faculty [member]. When you don't post your responses in the small group area, the group will get after you!" Perhaps most importantly, students were able to view and respond to course concepts and theories in context while contemporaneously having the opportunities to gain insight on diverse perspectives.

Further exploration and research is necessary to know if this type of shared experience is linked to student engagement in the online or hybrid course environment. For example, additional exploration will be needed to determine whether this model would be as successful if applied to undergraduate business courses and undergraduate students. Furthermore, as budget constraints and other reasons push universities to increase their online and hybrid course offerings, research should be conducted to test the success of this shared movie experience model in other business courses. Currently movies are utilized in a number of classroom-based business courses with courses as diverse as Business Law, Legal Environment of Business, Auditing, Forensic Accounting, Fraud Examination,

and Corporate Taxation. Using movies as a means to create a shared experience, coupled with the opportunity for small-group and whole-class discussion may prove to be an effective and enjoyable approach to engage a diverse set of students involved in online and hybrid courses across the business curricula. As discussed by Tyler, Anderson, and Tyler (2009) including movies, television, film clips or other popular media in classes fosters real-life connections to the course content and is likely to continue to be a successful approach as universities work with multiple generations of learners. As faculty, we must continue to ask what teaching practices will engage learners in the burgeoning online and hybrid course environment.

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