Reflections on the Use of Foreign Film in the Classroom to Enhance Cross-Cultural Understanding

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the experiences of the author in the use of foreign films to reinforce important aspects of a course in cross-cultural management. The paper provides the theoretical grounding for such a practice and offers suggestions to make the experience more meaningful. The paper argues strongly that the use of foreign film is a useful modality to the development of a deeper understanding of other cultures.

INTRODUCTION

As globalization continues its unending march and international transactions continue to rapidly rise, the need to better understand other cultures increases. The methods of teaching about other cultures and cultural understanding have increased as business school courses have incorporated cultural understanding into their curricula. Bird, et al (1999) proposed that textbook learning was insufficient to a true understanding of culture. They argued that true cultural understanding requires the immersion of students in a foreign culture for an extended period of time. While there is certainly merit to this argument, this approach isn't always practical in an educational setting. While short field experiences, or even more lengthy semester long study abroad programs may be part of one's educational experience, not every student who needs an understanding of cultural differences can engage in such activities. Orpen (2003) proposes using the process of interviewing managers from other cultures and having students explore subcultures within their own environment as learning methods. Another practical, yet potentially intensive approach is to build foreign films into a traditional classroom experience. Using full length films in the classroom can be a controversial issue and not a pedagogical approach supported by all. Some may feel that the classroom experience is too important to be spent watching "movies." Questions such as - "Do you also provide popcorn and drinks to the students?" may be asked of anyone who uses such an approach. The practice is often dismissed as simply a way of providing further entertainment to students. This paper argues that using full length foreign films in a course involving culture, specifically a course devoted entirely to cross-cultural understanding, is a valuable use of classroom time. This paper is based on the author's experience and reflections using foreign films to enhance cross-cultural learning.

As Mallinger and Rossy (2007) state "films tell stories about people, their hopes, dreams challenges, and fears, how they relate to others, and what behaviors are socially acceptable" (p.608). Huczynski and Buchanan (2004) propose that film can be used to "reveal embedded theory." Film can be an excellent supplement to be used to reinforce course content and to allow students to begin to think more deeply about course content. While this paper explores the use of film in a cross-cultural management course, the basic argument can be applied to a number of other courses as well.

THEORY BEHIND FILM USE

Experientially-based learning has been used in management classes for some time. Over the years a number of different methods have been developed to reinforce concepts discussed in the classroom. Many approaches have been used including role playing, survey feedback exercises, and even more creative methods such as the use of different types of food (Chavez and Poirier 2007) to teach about human differences. Since experiential learning of one sort or the other has been used in behaviorally-based management courses such as organizational behavior for some time, much has been written about its effectiveness (McCarthy and McCarthy 2006; Beard and Wilson 2002; Burgoyne and Reynolds 1997). The use of film for teaching cross-cultural management has been less well explored. While this paper addresses the use of film for a course in cross-cultural understanding, others have found its use effective in a number of different areas such as ethics (Giacalone and Jurkiewicz 2001; Shaw 2004), leadership (Rosser 2007), and economics (Sexton 2006). Other possible courses could be fertile ground for the use of film as well.

Carl Rogers (1969), who placed a special emphasis on experiential learning, felt that five conditions must be present for effective learning: 1) a positive climate for learning; 2) clarity of the purpose of the learning; 3) making available learning material; 4) balancing emotional and intellectual components of learning; 5) sharing feeling and thoughts with learners, but not dominating the learners. The use of film in the classroom is enhanced when students are predisposed to the idea of watching a film in class, and the reason for using film in the classroom is explained. The selection of an appropriate film for the content area is also important. Many films contain the ability to produce an emotional effect in addition to providing students with important aspects of culture. Equally important is the role played by the instructor. It is important that students feel free to express their viewpoints and not feel as if they should strive to record answers that are desired by the instructor. A general class discussion of the film is essential in which the instructor asks important questions but does not provide "correct" answers to those questions. As McKenzie and Swords (2000) have pointed out "discrimination, rather than absorption is an essential skill for a modern learner. The teacher adds more value in developing that capability, than he or she can by imparting knowledge" (p.276).

Experiential learning in management education has also been heavily influenced by Kolb and Fry (1975) through their learning cycle model. The model begins with a concrete experience of some variety, followed by observation and reflection on the experience, then the formulation of abstract concepts and the testing of the new learning in a new situation. While the model has been the basis for experiential learning in business schools for more than a quarter century, one area in which the model shows some weakness is the lack of emphasis placed on the need for reflection in the learning process (Boud, Keogh, and Walker 1985). While experience and emotion play an important part in understanding culture, it is necessary to allow time for reflection and assimilation of the acquired learning experience. The use of foreign film, coupled with the use of a reflective essay can make the learning cycle more meaningful in understanding culture. The WISE model of critical thinking proposed by Celly (2007) states that effective learning is achieved when students are encouraged to wonder about a particular idea (W), investigate the idea more fully (I), speculate on the dynamics of the concept (S), and evaluate theories, concepts, and their own experiences (E). The use of film, coupled with theory can follow this innovative approach to learning to enhance a student's interest and understanding of other cultures.

THE COURSE AND PROCESS

The class in which my experiences are based is an MBA class titled Cross-Cultural Management. The course meets one time a week for three hours. The course has been taught for a number of years using film. In the beginning years only one foreign film was used, and gradually additional films were introduced to the course. Since the films are shown during class time, there is a practical limitation to their number. I have found that three full length films provides the appropriate balance between experiential learning and other aspects of the course including lecture, case analysis, and student presentations. Most recently films from China, Brazil, and India have been used. The choice of these three countries represents their importance to international business as well as the richness and "foreignness" of their culture. The films are spread out throughout the course and inserted at particular moments when the subject matter being discussed in the course best matches the film content. The three films I currently use are *Beijing Bicycle* from China, *Monsoon Wedding* from India, and *City of God* from Brazil. Students are exposed early in the course to important cultural typologies including Hofstede (1980), Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), and Trompenaars (1994). They are asked to write an essay on each film with a different question proposed for each film. Generally *Beijing Bicycle* is used early in the course and covers the basics of the typologies just mentioned, *Monsoon Wedding* is used midway through the course addressing issues of communication and conflict, and *City of God* is used later in the course and addresses cross-cultural ethics.

A good film for a general discussion of cultural differences is *Beijing Bicycle*. In this film, a young man from the countryside travels to Beijing to find work as a bicycle courier. He lives with an older man from the country who acts as his mentor, pointing out differences between country and city folks. The bicycle is initially owned by the company but the young man finally earns enough money to pay for it, only to have it stolen. Another young man who steals family money ends up buying the bicycle to attract a young woman. The film shows family conflict and values, work relationships, and the importance of group membership. With this film I use the following essay question: *Using material learned thus far in the course concerning cultural models, cite examples from the film that manifest different aspects of Chinese culture. If you find inconsistencies between what you have studies and what you see in the film, also discuss these issues.* The film is a good introduction to many cultural differences and fits well with the typologies studied early in the course.

In the film *Monsoon Wedding*, a wealthy father is arranging the wedding plans for his daughter. The marriage is an arranged one, and conflict over traditional and modern values arises. As the wedding party begins to arrive, with some members from as far away as the United States, conflict and other difficulties increase. For this film I use the following essay question: *From your reading of Indian culture, comment on the cultural issues concerning family, communication, conflict, and traditional values. Also, if you find inconsistencies between the film and your understanding of Indian culture, comment on those inconsistencies.* The film is a rich in Indian family issues and values and shows the changing nature of Indian society, at least at a certain socioeconomic strata.

The last film shown is *City of God*. This is a very violent film and caution is recommended in its showing. Film depicts the life of slum dwellers near the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro. The story line involves a number of interesting characters who live in the favela or slum, and the changes that happen in their lives. The film is used to explore cross-cultural ethics in greater detail, and can be used to examine subcultures as well. In this course the moral development model of Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) is examined for its cross-cultural relevance and so the essay question which follows reflects that aspect of

the course. Students are also asked to examine any cross-cultural differences between Brazilian and North American culture. The essay question for this film is: *Select a character in the film and assess his/her level of moral development using the Kohlberg model. Also explain ethical differences you perceive between Brazilian and North American culture.* In a discussion of cultural differences in ethical orientation one can address the differences between a relativist and universal orientation. This film also can be useful to highlight these differences.

An issue that may cause concern in using film in the classroom is the possible objections some students may have concerning language, violence, or sexuality. My use of the film, *City of God* is the most troublesome of the three films in this regard. A warning is issued at the start of the course, and an alternative film is provided if a student has concerns regarding the content of the film. Up to this point no student has expressed a concern about film content, nor asked for a substitute film to be viewed individually. Over time, however, one will probably encounter such objections and will have to address these concerns with sensitivity. In a course that places an emphasis on understanding and differences, it would inconsistent with course values not to honor any moral reservations a student may have concerning film content.

Students are shown the film in class, and yes, popcorn is provided for their enjoyment. In some cases I have provided snacks from the featured country in the film. Before the film is shown a brief synopsis of the film is provided and an essay question is given based upon the film. While some have proposed the use of a more structured method (Mallinger and Rossy 2007), my preference is for a more open-ended exercise in order to encourage more general critical thinking on the part of the students. There are advantages and disadvantages to this approach, and the selection of methodology is dependent on course content, course level, and the goals of the exercise.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When using any nontraditional method of instruction problems may arise. The difficulties of introducing a new methodology must be weighed against the advantages of the new method. Some of the benefits of using film to teach culture include using a method that most students enjoy, showing the complexity and dynamics of culture, providing a more realistic view of abstract concepts, and forcing a degree of critical thinking on the part of the student. In order to realize these advantages certain practices should be followed. The first question is often - Which film should I select? Bumpus (2005) suggests that films be selected based on a number of issues including the ability of the film to engage students, the length of the film, the previous use of the film in courses, and the availability or accessibility of the film. The choice of film depends on the course and the objectives one seeks to accomplish.

The decision of whether the films are shown in-class or assigned as an out of class requirement should be determined by the instructor. It is my preference to show the films during class time. Courses which meet for a shorter time, such as fifty minutes for example, make this approach impractical. There are a number of advantages to showing the film during class time, if this is practical. By showing the film during class time the problem of students having access to the film and other logistical problems are avoided. Showing the film during class time also creates a more shared experience for the class. Collective emotional reaction to the film can be part of the learning experience. This should not discourage anyone from using film as a method of instruction if the film cannot be shown during class time. If the film viewing is assigned outside of class time, special attention may have to be directed towards availability and convenience in order to gain full participation

It is important to provide the rationale for requiring the viewing of films during the course. By expressing the objectives and motives, students are more inclined to take the exercise seriously and gain more benefit. It is helpful to tell students that film reflects the values, beliefs, and assumptions found in culture, and that a deeper understanding of the culture featured in the film can be gained by looking for subtle aspects in the film. An interesting film, and an instructor who shows excitement about the value of learning through film, can be very helpful in gaining full participation in the exercise.

Providing a short film synopsis, usually available on the cover of the video or created by the instructor is also helpful. In addition, a listing of important characters and their names is helpful since many of the names may be difficult or "foreign" to the students. It is also important to stress the fact that there are no right or wrong answers to the exercise. I want the experience to generate creativity and critical thinking in the students. The essays are graded not on the basis of a standard response, but rather by the level to which I feel the student was able to take the content studied in the course and see consistency, or inconsistency, in the film. The use of foreign films as a supplement to courses involving the study of culture can be very beneficial learning device if managed properly. It can make the course more interesting and provide for a deeper understanding of cultural differences.

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