TEACHING LEADERSHIP WITH 10,000 WORDS

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Abstract

An old adage states "Pictures are worth a thousand words." An appropriate deduction from this phase can be "Movies are then worth ten thousand words." With this basic premise, a unique component to an Engineering Leadership class involves the students viewing three films, namely, ***"Braveheart,"***[1] ***"The Patriot,"***[2] and ***"Gladiator."***[3] Each film contains a wealth of verbal and visual leadership examples which inspire men to willingly sacrifice their lives for a "vision" greater than themselves. Implicit in this observation is the fact that "vision" is a key leadership trait necessary for a leader. Since leadership is influence,[4] the student watches a dramatically unfolding portrayal of how a leader effectively influences others. Leadership skills, attitudes, and traits abound in the movies and students are required to identify and illustrate these skills, attitudes, and traits with specific examples.

Students select which movie they want to watch and work in teams of three to assess the film. The three major areas of assessment include *themes*, *context*, and *motifs* of the film. The *theme* requires students to search for the deeper meaning of the film in addition to questioning what it was all about. The *context* interpretation asks students to connect and compare the film to its historical setting and to present day situations. The *motifs* observation asks students to discuss how the various scenes were enacted to illustrate key points in the film. The student teams then prepare a paper on their selected movie. This paper details how the graphical portrayal of leadership in the film quickly engenders in the students a keen sense of skills, attitudes, and traits of an effective leader.

Introduction

"The one quality that can be developed by studious reflection and practice is leadership."
– General Dwight Eisenhower

Current thoughts on leadership depict it as a skill based subject which can be learned by those interested in developing it in their personal and professional lives.[4] The above quote from one of the world's great leaders reinforces this premise. Various venues such as books, tapes, seminars, and retreats are available to help one enhance leadership abilities. Each offers unique ways of conveying leaderships skills to the individual interested in this material.

The gamut of learning ranges from passive (reading) to active (experiencing and sharing). In his book "Silent Messages" Dr. Albert Mehrabian[5] concludes that effectively communicating with others requires individuals to thoroughly understand the elements of

the communications process. His research indicates that the actual message which one wishes to convey requires sensitivity to three distinct areas associated with actually conveying that message to a receiver. He concludes that 7% of any communication involves the actual "content" of the message. Next, he ascertains that 38% of message results from "how" i.e. vocalization and tone used when conveying the content of the message. Finally, his observations reveal that 55% of any effective communication process focuses on actual "body language" used while the message is being sent.

The above research played a critical part in determining how the subject of leadership could best be conveyed to students. Passive means of teaching leadership were ruled out since they only specifically address 7% of the desired message. Lecturing, while certainly an important part of any classroom learning experience, also falls short of adequately addressing Dr. Mehrabian's research requirements for effective communications.

Thus, the idea of using movies as a tool for helping students learn about leadership surfaces as an excellent way to incorporate all of Dr. Mehrabian's research. A movie obviously conveys the central message or "content". In delivering that message actors use a wide variety of vocalizations and tone to create the characters in the movie. Lastly, watching the "body language" of the actors added an extremely important element to thoroughly understanding how leaders used it in dramatic ways to excite, enthuse and motivate followers.

Using the movies *"Braveheart,"*[1] *"The Patriot,"*[2] and *"Gladiator"*[3] to help students see leaders in action through words and deeds has been very successful in the Engineering Leadership class. Incorporating movies as a learning tool complements the passive and less active ways of delivering a specific message especially as it relates to leadership.

Concept Development
The instructors for the engineering leadership class chose two national best selling books as texts. These are the *"The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People"* by Dr. Stephen R. Covey[6] and *"Developing the Leader Within You"* by Dr. John C. Maxwell.[7] To add to the uniqueness of this course it was decided to significantly alter the delivery of the material presented in each book.[8] A *seminar* approach similar what the students would encounter after graduation as they pursued their professional development was selected as the teaching model for the "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People".[8] Contrarily, *peer teaching* in which the students would actually prepare, rehearse and present selected material to their classmates was adopted for *"Developing the Leader Within You."*[8]

A unique challenge presented itself when it was decided a term paper highlighting the characteristics and traits of effective leaders would also be a course requirement. Following the traditional method of researching a specific subject and producing a term paper was deemed unacceptable. The desire to offer exposure to an authentic "leadership" role model was paramount, keeping with the spirit of developing a new,

interesting and unique course. A novel approach emphasizing more nontraditional sources for study became the motivation for searching for some new way for students to do "research" on leadership. It was also highly desirous for students to document their leadership findings based on their personal observations and perceptions.

The idea of using a movie came to one of the authors while viewing "Braveheart" for pleasure. Positive leadership characteristics and traits of the main character abound throughout the film. The key points of creating effective communications based on Dr. Mehrabian's research were all evident as one watched the video.

The "content" of the film along with the "tone" and "vocalization" by the characters emphasized the passion for the cause of freedom for Scotland. The multitude of "body language" examples by the actors added tremendous emphasis to effectively communicating the cause for the Scottish independence message. Based on this experience the decision to use specific movies as the source for writing a term paper on leadership was made.

Concept Implementation
Students were informed of writing a term paper at the beginning of the semester. A brief and general discussion on how and when it would be accomplished was presented, stating they would be required to watch a specific film personifying leadership. Many of the students were already familiar with the three selected films and were eager to try this novel approach.

About one month into the semester the students were given the opportunity to select their team mates for the video based term paper. The purpose of using student groups focused on enhancing the effectiveness of the experience.[9] They also chose which of the three movies they wanted to watch for this requirement. The students were also told it was mandatory they view their movie at least two times to ensure adequate reinforcement of their observations and perceptions.

In order for this exercise to have an assessment value, it became essential to find someone on the faculty who possessed an expertise in film analysis. Fortunately in the Humanities Division the second author had a reputation for offering a course entitled "Film as Literature." Also, numerous Engineering Technology students take this course because of the excellent instruction and appreciation they gain for understanding movies for more than their entertainment value. Team teaching this segment of the course was now completed with this faculty member agreeing to provide his input.

His expertise provided the critical scrutiny in the three major areas of assessment required of the students. As noted these include themes, context, and motifs of the film. Students searched for the deeper meaning of the film, identifying the theme underlying the movie. Comparing the film's historical setting and the present day situation addresses the context of the video while observations on motifs asks students to discuss how the various scenes are enacted to illustrate key points in the film.

When completed, the assessment significantly enhanced and reinforced the students' effort to identify and understand the specific leadership characteristics and traits of the central figure. They now understood why the main characters were so passionate, determined and inspirational to their followers. The assessment helped illustrate the spirit and zeal embodied in the film's leadership role.

Another significant service provided by this Humanities faculty member occurred with his agreeing to read and grade the students' term papers. Two preliminary drafts of the paper are required prior to final submission and both were read independently by the two authors with each offering suggestions on how to improve the paper. The final submission was again read by both authors who assigned separate grades for each term paper. The final grade became an average of the two scores assigned by the teachers. It should be noted there was little or no disagreement as to the final paper grades.

NOTE: A "Guided Leadership Analysis" form specifically designed to assist students in identifying the leadership characteristics and traits of the main characters in the film(s) will be available at the session. It can be used by faculty at other universities if they want to try this approach to teach leadership.

Conclusions
Overall this novel approach to writing a term paper on the subject of leadership characteristics and traits of the main character of a film was well received by the students. Since students generally enjoy watching movies, they embraced the concept of what was being attempted by the authors. They expressed approval of the approach of assessing the film and then applying the results to the leadership analysis of the main character.

Some recommendations for improvement include the Humanities faculty giving a class on specifically what students should be looking to make the assessment of theme, context, and motifs. Clarification in this area would eliminate some of the students concerns that they are approaching the viewings properly and with the correct mindset. A second area of improvement will involve the student team presenting their findings to the entire class when their drafts are due. This will permit a cross fertilization of ideas specifically on the leadership characteristics and traits of the main character. This will lead to a consensus on some of the common attributes of leaders, regardless of time, place and situation.

Finally, a formal and written evaluation of this approach will be conducted with input solicited from the students regarding the various questions to be asked of them. Since this is a leadership class, asking students for their thoughts on the construction of the evaluation is most appropriate. The novelty and uniqueness associated with this term paper blended well into the other new ideas for teaching this class on leadership. The multifaceted approach to having students "studiously reflect" on the subject of leadership was considered a success by both the students and faculty and will continue to be used in the future.

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