

“I am Different, Not Less”: *Temple Grandin* and Strengths-Based Leadership Education

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Abstract

The use of film as a teaching methodology in an undergraduate personal leadership development course helped students apply strengths-based leadership concepts. The film *Temple Grandin* was utilized to illustrate key concepts from Buckingham and Clifton's (2001) text, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*. After completing the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, students viewed the film *Temple Grandin* and identified Dr. Grandin's perceived top five strengths in relation to scenes from the film. Several lessons were devoted to the exploration and development of students' strengths. This practice paper describes the teaching methodologies employed and provides recommendations for leadership educators seeking to implement the use of film in their courses.

Introduction

Numerous definitions abound for the concept of authentic leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa, 2005; Northouse, 2010; Shamir & Eilam, 2005), a theory which is considered to be one of the newest areas of leadership research (Northouse, 2010). As the name suggests, the premise for becoming an authentic leader is to achieve authenticity, “through self-awareness, self-acceptance, and authentic actions and relationships” (Gardner et al., 2005, p. 345). Avolio, Luthans, and Walumbwa (2004) (as cited in Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, Luthans, & May, 2004) further posit that authentic leaders are individuals “who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspective, knowledge, and strengths” (p. 802-804).

As part of an undergraduate leadership degree program at a Midwestern university, students have the opportunity to enroll in a personal leadership development course (Pennington & Weeks, 2006; Scott & Weeks, 2016), which focuses on teaching authentic leadership development by “enhancing self-awareness through an exploration of personal values” (Pennington, 2006). One of the learning objectives for the course is for students to examine their strengths as they relate to leadership by utilizing the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment and related strengths-based literature. The format of the course is not lecture-based, but rather utilizes multiple learning approaches, such as classroom discussions, group work, and

experiential activities (Pennington, 2006). Several films are utilized throughout the semester to illustrate key concepts learned in the course. The film *Temple Grandin* is shown specifically to demonstrate strengths-based concepts.

Temple Grandin was chosen for this activity for a variety of reasons, the first being that in 2010, (the same year the film was released), Dr. Grandin visited the Midwestern university's campus for a seminar presentation on animal welfare and behavior, cattle handling, and autism awareness. The seminar was well-attended and afforded the opportunity to announce the creation of a new endowed professorship within the university's animal science department – the Temple Grandin Endowed Professorship in Animal Behavior and Well-Being (Gross, 2010). The film is well-suited for use with an agricultural leadership audience as it takes place in an agricultural context, thereby allowing students to effectively relate to the film's setting. Throughout the facilitation of this course over the period of several years, students have expressed a keen interest in and respect for Dr. Grandin and enjoy learning about her agricultural endeavors, as well as her promotion of autism awareness. Additionally, the film does an excellent job of emphasizing how Temple plays to her strengths and is able to manage her weaknesses, rather than focus on them, which is one of the founding tenets of Buckingham and Clifton's (2001) strengths-based philosophy.

Review of Related Scholarship

According to Rath and Conchie (2008), “people perform best when working in their strengths areas” (p. 1). Extensive research on the philosophy of strengths-based leadership has been conducted by the Gallup Organization (Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Rath & Conchie, 2008), who have found from the countless interviews conducted with managers across the world, that more benefit is garnered from focusing on our talents, rather than on becoming more “well-rounded” individuals (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). Within the context of education, it has been found that the identification of talents, coupled with strengths development, leads to “gains in GPA, state hope, and self-confidence, and declines in absenteeism and tardiness” (Clifton & Harder, 2003).

Leadership educators are continuously searching for new and innovative teaching methodologies in order to illustrate abstract concepts and theories (Porter & Wimmer, 2012; Wimmer, Meyers, Porter, & Shaw, 2012; Williams & McClure, 2010; Williams, 2006). In an analysis of signature pedagogies most frequently used by leadership educators in a college setting, Jenkins (2008) proposed that media clips, (in the form of films, television, YouTube videos, etc.) are a viable instructional strategy. Because leadership educators have found that principles of andragogy and experiential education lend themselves well to demonstrating leadership theories, movies have been found to be “a great way to infuse leadership theory with novel teaching methodology” (Williams, 2006, p. 60). When utilized in a classroom environment, movies can be “entertaining, informative, energizing, and educational, if used skillfully” (Graham, Sincoff, Baker, & Ackermann, 2003).

Learning Objective

The focus for this lesson was to have students view the film *Temple Grandin* as a way to reinforce knowledge learned in lecture about strengths theory as defined by Buckingham and Clifton (2001). The learning objective was: after viewing the film *Temple Grandin*, students will identify what they perceive to be Dr. Grandin's top five strengths, as per the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, and will describe each of her identified strengths in relation to scenes from the film.

Description of Practice

This activity was conducted in the personal leadership development course at a Midwestern University (Pennington & Weeks, 2006). A portion of the course focuses on strengths development by utilizing the text, *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Students were asked to complete the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment and utilized their identified top five strengths to complete several course assignments. Prior to viewing the film *Temple Grandin*, the instructor taught two lessons on “the anatomy of a strength” and “discover[ing] the source of your strengths” (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Several instructional strategies (Jenkins, 2012) were used to illustrate key course concepts: class discussion regarding chapter readings, a homework worksheet, a strengths debate, a review of each student's “signature themes” report, and a reflective essay on each student's top five strengths and the practical implications of the strengths approach.

Day 1 – The Anatomy of a Strength

- In-class activity: Strengths Debate. Divide class in half. Assign each group a position and allow 10 minutes to formulate talking points for their position. Two debate sessions will take place on the following topics: 1) Each person CAN/CANNOT learn to be competent in almost anything, and 2) Each person's greatest room for growth is in his/her area of greatest WEAKNESS/STRENGTH.
- Homework assignment: Students will complete the *Now, Discover Your Strengths* worksheet [instructor developed worksheet] and take the StrengthsFinder® assessment. Signature themes reports will be reviewed on Day 2.

Day 2 – Discover the Source of Your Strengths

- In-class activity: Review signature themes reports. Students will complete the following StrengthsQuest™ and StrengthsFinder® worksheets: “My signature themes and how I use the talents in them,” “Signature themes in common – similar and dissimilar experiences,” and “Understanding and respecting talent differences” (Anderson, 2004). As a class, discuss results from worksheets.

Days 3 and 4 – Temple Grandin

- Students will spend two class periods watching the film *Temple Grandin*. While watching the film, students will identify scenes and direct quotes that they believe reveal Dr. Grandin's top five strengths (per the 34 themes identified in the Gallup Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment). Students will take notes and complete a worksheet where they will provide two relevant examples for each strength and how the scene and/or quote from the film relates to the strength as defined by the course textbook.

Day 5 – Temple Grandin Film Discussion

- Students will be divided into groups and will discuss what strengths they identified for Dr. Grandin. From the group lists, students will debate and vote on a collective “top five” list of strengths. After identifying Dr. Grandin’s strengths collectively as a class, her “actual” strengths will be revealed.

Prior to the viewing of the film, the instructor’s teaching assistant e-mailed Dr. Grandin to inquire if she had ever completed the StrengthsFinder® assessment and if she would be willing to share her results for the benefit of class discussion. Dr. Grandin responded, stating that she had not had the opportunity to complete the assessment, but based upon a review of the 34 signature themes, provided a list of what she believed to be her top five strengths (T. Grandin, personal communication, February 10, 2017).

In addition to the activities completed in class, students also had the opportunity to complete an essay related to Dr. Grandin’s strengths as part of a unit exam, as well as an instructor-developed evaluation over the key concepts exhibited in the film regarding strengths theory.

Discussion of Outcomes/Results

Nineteen students were enrolled in the personal leadership development course for the fall semester of 2016. Seventeen students completed the assignment evaluation and agreed to allow their evaluations and exam essays to be used to exemplify how *Temple Grandin* effectively illustrated the concept of strengths theory.

Responses to evaluation survey. The instructor-developed evaluation survey consisted of nine questions that utilized a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Neutral, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree) to assess students’ level of agreement with statements regarding the use of the film *Temple Grandin* in class. Additional open-ended questions related to the use of the film, as well as demographic questions, were also utilized.

Students were almost even in gender with eight males and nine females. The class consisted of two freshman, six sophomores, six juniors, and three seniors. Several majors were represented, with the majority being either agricultural education ($n = 5$) or agricultural leadership ($n = 4$), followed by agricultural education/animal science double majors ($n = 3$), agricultural communications ($n = 2$), animal science ($n = 1$), family and consumer sciences education ($n = 1$), and an agricultural communications/pre-law double major ($n = 1$). Seven students had seen the film prior to watching it in class, while 10 students had never seen the film before.

The highest means reported were for the statements, “the movie was enjoyable,” and “the movie was a nice change of pace from lecture,” ($M = 4.65$, $SD = .493$). Students also agreed that “the movie made the concepts discussed in class seem more ‘real world,’” ($M = 4.53$, $SD = .717$), “was relevant to course content,” ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .795$), and that “seeing the leadership concepts portrayed in the movie reinforced the information more than if only learned in lecture,” ($M = 4.41$, $SD = .712$). In addition, students agreed that they were “clearly able to identify scenes

in the movie that best exemplified Temple's top five strengths," ($M = 4.18$, $SD = .728$). All students agreed that they would recommend the use of this film to help emphasize leadership concepts in this class in the future.

When asked to share their thoughts about using the film *Temple Grandin* in class, several students shared very positive opinions. One student also suggested that a recording of Dr. Grandin giving a lecture be shown in class to further help illustrate key concepts and bridge the divide between real-life and film.

- "I loved *Temple Grandin* – it relates to everyone in this class major-wise and was an interesting movie. I also liked the assignment for it; kept me focused and easy to fill out."
- "*Temple Grandin* was a good movie to use because she had clear strengths and maximized them instead of her weaknesses."
- "It caused some deeper thinking because you get to see how the concepts are used."
- "This was a great and relevant movie to use in class. Some movies are not worth it, but this one is."

Class activity: Identifying Dr. Grandin's top five strengths. After viewing the film *Temple Grandin*, an in-class discussion was held where students were divided into four groups and were asked to discuss what strengths they had identified for Dr. Grandin, as per the worksheet completed in class while watching the film. Each group had to collectively identify what they believed to be Dr. Grandin's top five strengths. The list for each group was written on the board and was compared for common strengths. Students then had to create an overall class list of Dr. Grandin's strengths and had to provide justification - specific examples from the film that exemplified her "naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior" (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 48) – for any tie-breakers.

Table 1 provides a list of the strengths identified by the class versus the list of strengths identified by Dr. Grandin herself. It should be noted that the class list was developed based on students' perceptions of Dr. Grandin in the film, whereas Dr. Grandin's list was developed after she reviewed the descriptions for each of the 34 themes identified in the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment (Dr. Grandin stated she has not actually completed the assessment before).

Table 1.

AGLE 2303 Class List of Dr. Grandin's Strengths vs. Dr. Grandin's Perceived Strengths

Class List	Dr. Grandin's List
Learner	Achiever
Analytical	Focus
Achiever	Input
Strategic	Intellection
Belief	Responsibility

Responses to unit exam. For the unit exam over the Buckingham and Clifton (2001) text, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, students had the opportunity to respond to one of two essay

prompts, the second of which was related to identifying Dr. Grandin's top five strengths (see below). It should be noted that students were asked to identify the five strengths identified collectively as a class, rather than Dr. Grandin's actual perceived strengths. Selected responses are reported in Table 2.

According to the authors, it is important to focus on our strengths rather than to focus on our weaknesses. Why (10 points)? In class, we viewed the story of Temple Grandin and discussed her strengths. Identify five of Dr. Grandin's strengths according to our discussion and identify five specific scenes from the film, one that demonstrates each of her five strengths (20 points). Finally, identify one of the ways to manage our weaknesses (described in Chapter 5) that Dr. Grandin used and give an example from the film (10 points).

Table 2.
AGLE 2303 Selected Exam Essay Responses

Strength	Student Responses
Learner	"An example of learner is when [the film] showed her photographic memory when she quoted the book after looking at the page. This shows she is a graphic learner."
Analytical	"An example of analytical is when she was figuring out how the cattle moved in the chutes, she analyzed the movements and every obstacle there was that could affect the cattle."
Achiever	"An example of achiever is when she watched the cattle go through the chute and it calmed them, so she designed one for herself."
Strategic	"Strategic was her fourth theme and displayed it as she could see the patterns the cattle took when moving and their behavior. With this information, she found a better way of handling cattle."
Belief	"An example of belief is when she stood up at the end of the movie with all the kids and parents who are in some way struggling with autism. She stood up with courage and spoke about how she dealt with [autism] and what ways she used it to make her better, and she believes everything has a purpose."

Reflections of the Practitioner

Over the course of the semester, several films are utilized to analyze leaders such as Dan West, Katie Davis, Alice Paul, and Temple Grandin. Movies can provide an effective visual representation of the concepts portrayed during lecture, especially when presented within a context that is relevant to students, thereby generating increased levels of interest and engagement. It is important to note, however, that the film is not used as a stand-alone learning activity. Rather, a foundation of lower-order learning (understanding and remembering) is created through the use of activities related to the strengths philosophy, followed by an analysis of each student's strengths (analyzing), which leads to levels of higher-order learning through evaluation and synthesis of the film (analyzing and evaluating) (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956).

By reviewing students' evaluation surveys and exam essay responses, it appears that students enjoyed the film *Temple Grandin* and believed that the film helped them to illustrate key course concepts. By identifying specific scenes from the film, students were able to effectively recognize Dr. Grandin's perceived top five strengths and describe how her strengths were best maximized.

Recommendations

According to the strengths philosophy, which purports that "people perform best when working in their strengths areas" (Rath & Conchie, 2008, p.1), Temple Grandin has been found to be an excellent example of someone who focuses on their strengths, as opposed to their weaknesses. This activity was well-suited for use within an agricultural leadership course as students have expressed a continued interest in and respect for Dr. Grandin. By contacting Dr. Grandin directly, the instructors were able to bridge leadership theory and practice and provide relevance by allowing students to compare their own strengths to those of Dr. Grandin's. Additional leaders within the agricultural industry should be identified and examined in order to bring continued relevance within the context of this academic area of study.

Media clips, particularly in the form of films, are considered a viable instructional strategy (Jenkins, 2008). While several films are shown throughout the semester, other movies should be explored for their applicability to key leadership concepts in order to provide variability and enthusiasm (Rosenshine & Furst, 1971). Additional movie recommendations made by students to illustrate strengths-based concepts are *Remember the Titans*, *The Blind Side*, *No More Baths*, *Forrest Gump*, *300*, and *Coach Carter*.

In a study conducted by Jenkins (2008) on signature pedagogies in undergraduate leadership education, discussion (in the forms of class discussion, interactive lecture and discussion, and small group discussion) were found to be the most frequently used instructional strategies. Discussion was a key component of the Temple Grandin strengths identification activity and throughout the duration of this course, students have numerous opportunities to discuss key concepts with their peers. This activity also provides several opportunities for continual application and assessment in the form of a written essay, a homework assignment, and

unit exam. Additional instructional strategies and experiential activities should continue to be explored for use within this course.

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