

Learning Vicariously: Students' Reflections of the Leadership Lessons Portrayed in *The Office*

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Abstract

Leadership educators are encouraged to identify and apply new ways to teach leadership. This paper provides the qualitative results of post-secondary students' reflections of learning leadership concepts after watching several episodes of the television show, *The Office*. Students used reflective journaling to record their reactions and evaluation of the episodes. Analysis of the journals indicated that students were able to connect the leadership scenarios shown in the episodes to those they may experience in their real life.

Introduction

Teaching leadership theories and concepts is challenging in a traditional classroom (Halpern, 2000). Leadership educators have the difficult job of “explaining abstract concepts and ideas to students” (Williams & McClure, 2010, p. 86). Williams (2006) said leadership educators want to find and utilize new and creative ways to teach leadership theory.

One teaching technique employed to illustrate leadership concepts is the use of popular culture items, such as television shows and movies. The use of popular culture items in the classroom is an accepted pedagogical tool for leadership educators. Utilizing such teaching resources has been done in “an effort to assist students in learning complex concepts such as leadership theory” (Williams & McClure, 2010, p. 86).

Integrating technology such as videos in the classroom can “enrich and enhance teaching and learning activities” (Duhaney, 2000, p. 69). Incorporating popular culture items in the classroom has been recognized as a valid teaching strategy because the popular culture provides settings in which to learn (Callahan, Whitener, & Sandlin, 2007). “Whether we like it or not, cinema assumes a pedagogical role in the lives of many people. It may not be the intent of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learned” (Hooks, 1996, p. 2).

Because movies and television shows are being used in the classroom, it is important leadership educators better understand what students are actually learning from watching popular culture items. Brungardt and Crawford (1996) advocated additional efforts should be made to assess and evaluate leadership curriculum to further the discipline. This research paper provides the qualitative results of students’ reflections of learning leadership concepts after watching several episodes of the television show, *The Office*.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Today’s students are different from previous generations of students (such as Baby Boomers or Generation-X) because Millennials have grown up with media and technology (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005) and are naturally technology savvy. In a learning environment, members of this generation appreciate teamwork, experiential activities, structure, entertainment, and technology (Raines, 2002). They believe that “education is supposed to be entertaining, easy, and fun” (Taylor, 2006, p. 50).

When educating the Millennial Generation, McGlynn (2005) said more research is necessary to develop new teaching strategies, to adjust current practices, and to investigate how to effectively use technology to improve learning. Educators must find ways to teach their students while also keeping them engaged in the curriculum (Graham, Ackermann, & Maxwell, 2004). “Educators must take responsibility for facilitating the learning process to critically engage the work as it relates to leadership” (Callahan & Rosser, 2007, p. 276).

Leadership can be taught (Bennis, 1994), but educators must integrate innovative teaching methods that allow for experiential learning (Brunk, 1997). One method that has become very popular is the use of popular culture artifacts such as television and movies (Callahan & Rosser, 2007). These tools can serve as mock scenarios in which the students can learn leadership skills (Williams, Townsend, & Linder, 2005).

Movies have been used as an educational tool to help people learn how to lead (Graham, Sincoff, Baker, & Ackermann, 2003). Leadership researchers have written about the use of movies to teach a multitude of leadership concepts (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Graham et al., 2003; Graham et al., 2004; Williams, 2006; Williams & McClure, 2010). Utilizing movies and television in the leadership classroom allows “students to witness and discuss leadership theory [which] aids in the students’ ability to build the mental synapses that lead to deeper learning” (Williams, 2006, p. 61). Graham et al. (2003) used movie clips to illustrate the five practices essential for effective leadership outlined in Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) book, *The Leadership Challenge*. Although they did not report how students benefited from viewing the clips, they did offer suggestions for leadership educators to follow when using movies and movie clips to teach leadership concepts. Williams (2006) wrote how a specific movie (*Pirates of the Caribbean*) can be used to illustrate power bases, but she did not provide how the practice affected student learning.

While showing movies can be effective for learning leadership concepts, it does take up a great deal of time and may not be realistic to meet course learning objectives. Roskos-Ewoldsen and Roskos-Ewoldsen (2001) found that using shorter video clips in an undergraduate psychology class helped students understand the concepts, made the concepts taught more realistic, and overall, made the course more enjoyable.

Williams and McClure (2010) compared the knowledge retention rate of students who were taught a leadership concept using one of three different pedagogical methods: lecture, experiential learning, or public pedagogy. Public pedagogy relies on popular culture to serve as the educational tool (Giroux, 2000). The leadership concept of interest was Kouzes and Posner’s (2007) *Challenge the*

Process. Students who were taught with public pedagogy watched media clips and commercials. The other two groups of students were taught in the traditional lecture format or with experiential learning activities. Williams and McClure (2010) developed an instrument to measure students' knowledge of *Challenge the Process*. The instrument was administered to each group a total of three times – immediately after instruction, two weeks after, and four weeks after. The researchers found the students who were taught using public pedagogy had the highest knowledge retention rate of all the groups. Those students who were taught with only lecture had the lowest knowledge gain and retention rate for the leadership concept of interest.

The theoretical framework for this study was Bandura's (1977) social cognitive theory which states learning can occur enactively or vicariously. Enactive learning relates to learning by doing and learning from prior experiences. Vicarious learning is different in that the learner does not actually perform the behavior, but watches others perform the behavior through a variety of sources. These sources include: observing or listening to individuals, printed materials, symbolic representation, and electronic sources (e.g., television, videotape, media clips). Schunk (2004) advocated the use of vicarious sources of information as a technique to make learning more possible than if someone had to actually perform all the behaviors individually. Using this recommendation, the integration of television episodes into leadership curriculum provides a source for vicarious learning.

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore students' ability to identify and evaluate leadership concepts after viewing television episodes of *The Office* (Silverman, Daniels, Gervais, & Merchant, 2005). The following research question was used to guide the research – What were students' evaluations of the leadership concepts portrayed in *The Office* episodes?

The population for this study included 39 students enrolled in two courses at a southwestern university. One course (AGSC 3301 Agricultural Leadership Principles) had 32 students enrolled while the other course (AGED 3315 Personal Leadership Development in Agriculture and Natural Resources) had 17 students enrolled. Ten students were in both classes.

Students watched episodes of the television program *The Office* while they were in their respective class. *The Office* is a television program that has been on NBC since 2005. It is a documentary-style 30-minute comedy series set in a Scranton, Pennsylvania, paper supply company called Dunder Mifflin. It revolves around the workers who spend their day in the office ("About The Office," n. d.).

The Office episodes selected for use in the classes were chosen based on the concepts taught in the two courses. Students in AGSC 3301 watched five *The Office* episodes during five separate class periods. The five episodes shown in AGSC 3301 were: Office Olympics, Halloween, Sabre, Conflict Resolution, and Business Ethics. Students in AGED 3315 watched six episodes of *The Office* during six separate class periods. The six episodes were: Health Care, New Boss, Dundies, The Negotiation, The Promotion, and Diversity Day.

The researchers obtained the university's Institutional Review Board approval before collecting data for the study. All research occurred within the normal class time and did not require any additional time outside of the class period. First, students completed a survey instrument to collect demographic data and to give permission to participate in the study. Second, students completed a reflective journaling exercise before, during, and after each of the episodes. Students were asked to provide permission to analyze their journals for the purpose of this study. Two students elected not to have their journals analyzed, which resulted in a total of 37 journals available.

To answer the stated research question, qualitative methodology was used through the analysis of the reflective journals. The journals allowed students to think about and respond to the episode in a "non-intimidating environment" (Meyers, Irlbeck, & Fletcher, 2011, p. 9). Reflective journaling may also encourage students to think more deeply about an issue after the class period ends (Beall, 1998; Boden, Cook, Lasker-Scott, Moore, & Shelton, 2007). The use of reflective journaling in the classroom can be a valuable educational tool, but teachers must do an effective job of giving directions for its use. Students must see the value in the activity and its application to their "personal growth and professional development" (Meyers et al., p. 9).

When using reflective journaling, Hubbs and Brand (2010) advised the instructor provide students with expectations as to journal length, how the content could relate to personal experiences, and a short introduction to the topic being illustrated. In this study, students were asked to consider questions before, during, and after each episode was shown to promote reflection. The same question was asked before viewing every episode – What are possible themes that may emerge from this episode related to leadership? Students were allowed time to write their response to this question and to start thinking how the title of the episode and the leadership concept being discussed that class period may be connected. Students were then asked a specific question to guide their viewing of the episode. They recorded their responses to the question in their journal as they watched the episode. Questions asked for each episode are listed in Table 1.

Table 1
Reflection Questions Asked to Students During Each Episode of *The Office*

Episode Title	Questions Asked
Business Ethics	What was the ethical issue? Which principles of ethical leadership were illustrated or broken?
Conflict Resolution	Write down examples of conflict and conflict management. How does the leader handle the conflict (methods, directions, etc.)?
Diversity Day	How does the leader encourage diversity? What concepts related to diversity were exhibited? (prejudice, stereotypes, ethnocentrism, etc.)
Dundies	What are the reward and/or punishment behaviors being illustrated? What is the reaction of the followers?
Halloween	Write down the bases of power that leaders exhibit. What influence tactics were illustrated in the episode? (Include who was involved in the influence process.)
Health Care	Write down who is exhibiting leadership behaviors and which behavior it is.
New Boss	Write down the types of directive leadership behaviors, skills, and traits that are exhibited. Also, write down supportive behaviors.
Office Olympics	Write down the leaders in the episode. What leadership traits do they possess/exhibit? Who exhibits ineffective leadership traits? What are they?
Sabre	What is the change and how is it implemented? How are the characters responding to the change?
The Negotiation	What negotiation skills/techniques are used in the episode? Are they effective? (Write down positive and negative examples.)
The Promotion	What are examples of fairness/unfairness? How does the leader(s) exhibit fair and ethical behavior? What are examples of social exchange behaviors?

After viewing each episode, students were allowed another five minutes to reflect on the episode and how it illustrated specific leadership concepts. Students were asked to write in their journals in order to evaluate the effectiveness, or

ineffectiveness, of the leader(s) in the episode. The following questions were asked after each episode:

- Have you seen this episode before?
- What is your reaction to the episode?
- How did the characters illustrate the leadership concept?
- How did the episode help you better understand the leadership concept?
- What would you have done differently if you were the leader in the situation?

Two graduate assistants transcribed the students' reflective journals in their entirety and saved each in a separate Word document. Students were assigned unique pseudonyms to protect their identities when analyzing and reporting the results. Data were analyzed using open and axial coding in *Nvivo*. *Nvivo* was used as an aid, but "the researcher remains the decision maker and interpreter" (Glesne, 2010, p. 205). Through this process, the data were coded and themes were developed.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are four components to establishing trustworthiness in a qualitative study – (a) credibility, (b) transferability, (c) dependability, and (d) confirmability. Triangulation of the data established credibility and confirmability. Transferability was accomplished through the use of thick descriptions and purposive sampling. An audit trail was also used to assure dependability of the study.

Findings

All 39 students completed the demographics section for the study. Two students opted out of having their journals used in the qualitative portion. Respondents were almost even in gender with 20 females and 19 males. Most students were seniors ($n = 17$), followed by juniors ($n = 11$), sophomores ($n = 10$), and one freshman. Most students were agricultural leadership majors ($n = 13$), followed by agricultural economics/business ($n = 10$), then agricultural communications ($n = 9$) and all other majors ($n = 7$).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore students' ability to identify and evaluate leadership concepts after viewing television episodes of *The Office*. The research question of interest was – What were students' evaluations of the leadership concepts portrayed in *The Office* episodes?

Overall, students were able to connect the leadership scenarios shown in the episodes to those they may experience in their real life. Student reactions included:

- It helped me to better understand leadership concepts because I got to connect them to real life situations.
- This episode helped me understand the leadership concept better by showing me that leadership can take place anywhere and anytime.
- The episode helped me by showing real examples in action.
- It put it in a real life perspective.
- It showed how people would use these tactics in day-to-day life.

Students were able to recognize several leadership lessons from the viewing the episodes. From the evaluation of their reflective journals four themes were identified as leadership lessons – (a) leaders should be professional, (b) leadership effectiveness can vary, (c) decision making is crucial, and (d) leadership is contradictory.

Theme: Leaders Should Be Professional

Students recognized the need to act more professional when in a leadership situation. Many students identified the need for Michael Scott to behave in a more professional manner because he is the manager of the office. Their comments included:

- I would have taken a better approach as the leader and acted like I had more control and would have been more professional.
- [If] I was Michael I would have put more focus into work and acted more professionally.
- I would have handled the issue in a more appropriate manner and a more business leadership way rather than a personal way.

One episode revolved around the need for Michael to fire an employee. Many students remarked how unprofessionally the situation was handled:

- I would never tell the employees that they were going to possibly be fired or ask their help in picking who to fire.
- If I would've been in Michael's shoes I first wouldn't have waited so long. Second, would have not asked other employees who they

thought should be fired, and thirdly, would have tried to handle it in a more professional way.

Students identified the need for Michael to allow his employees to do their jobs and not try to complete their responsibilities and tasks for them. They suggested:

- [I would] keep Toby doing what he was doing. It's worked so far...and he is trained.
- I would've allowed Mr. Brown to do his presentation and refrained from making inappropriate Chris Rock comments.

Students also acknowledged the need for leaders to communicate in a more professional manner. They stated:

- I wouldn't be offensive and rude. I would have left it to the professional.
- I would have been more discrete when complaining about the new changes.
- Had I been in the situation, I would have tried to put up with the changes to see how it would work out before contesting them.

Students recognized the need for a leader to handle sensitive subjects privately. Several episodes had scenes in which an issue was discussed out in the open and made a public issue. Responses included:

- In that situation, those things that people feel are personal and private material. It is not allowed nor is it ever a good idea to openly put everyone's personal opinions out there. Some things people say about others may be in private and may be something they are just venting on.

Several students added to their initial comments by describing what they would have done differently if they were the leader in the situation:

- I would have never discussed private complaints publicly. I would also encourage the individuals to resolve these conflicts without my input.
- If it were me, I'd probably not make it so public when trying to resolve complaints that coworkers had with each other.
- I would have done everything in private and not told everyone who was/wasn't getting raises because that is my business, not everyone's.

- I would have privately [gone] to each person who had a complaint and come up with a better way to solve the issues.
- Not openly discuss issues; pull each person aside to hear their stories.

Theme: Leadership Effectiveness Can Vary

Students were able to recognize the differences between effective and ineffective leaders:

- It helped me to realize what is effective as a leader and what is not.
- Just because someone is in a leadership position, does not mean they are fit for the role.
- The episode helped me better understand leadership by showing how leaders can have good traits even though they aren't the boss.
- The characters possessed different leadership traits, some effective and others ineffective. It shows that everyone handles a situation differently and some leaders' natural traits will come out.

Several students identified Jim as the effective leader in *The Office*. They stated:

- The episode showed how a charismatic leader, Jim, presents the office with a fun day to boost morale.
- Jim motivated the other employees and even the boss.

Students also commented that the leader in *The Office*, manager Michael Scott, is more an example of an ineffective leader:

- It showed that in the traditional management setup, those at the top aren't always effective leaders.
- Michael did not use good leadership skills when trying to fix the problems.
- Michael is a bad manager. He's an even worse leader. He can't ever back up what he says or stand up for himself. His only saving grace is that he cares for his employees.

Theme: Decision Making is Crucial

Students recognized that, as leaders, they will be required to make difficult decisions. They acknowledged it is necessary for the leaders to make the decision so the rest of the group or team can spend their time working on their own responsibilities. Students shared the following comments when they reflected on an episode in which the boss was asked to select a new health care plan for his employees:

- If I was the leader in this situation, I would [have] made the decision by myself and stuck to my decision.
- I would not have gone to all of the others for opinions. I would have made my decision and stuck with it.
- I would have picked the plan myself while asking for input from my employees/followers.

The students commented on the need for the manager, Michael, to gather more information to make informed decisions. The method he used was not the method most students commented was appropriate. Several said what they would have done differently:

- Ask employees what they would like to see in [a] health care plan and try my best to give them what they want. Man up to being a manager.
- I would have actually read the different plans and picked the best suited one for my office.
- I, myself, would have looked over the health care plans and choose the best one for the company and my workers. The workers would have listened more to the boss than one of their very own peers. Dwight had a good approach but the workers would have been more honest with Michael being the boss than any peer.

After viewing an episode dealing with change, students remarked about the need to gather more information in order to make a more informed decision:

- I would have tried to have been more open and given the changes a chance before I complained.
- I would have seen what was working in the branch and change what was not, because he came into a new place without any background

information. Figured out what they wanted as a branch.

- I would have tried hard to understand why these changes were being put into place.

Another episode focused on the firing of an employee. Students agreed that Michael Scott did not handle the situation well. They indicated:

- Discharge of an employee is not something to be taken lightly. Rather than consulting with each individual employee, I would have analyzed the situation and made the call authoritatively.
- If I had been the leader in the situation, I would have done some things the same way, but I think that I would have done more to choose the right person to fire based on employee performance, etc., as well as making my decision before the deadline.

Another episode featured an employee asking for a raise. The students said the way it was handled was not the most appropriate way and offered their own suggestions:

- I would have took more time before making a decision and letting them know what it would have been, and given everyone a raise.

Many students recognized that it is not appropriate to wait until the last minute to make an important decision:

- I would not have made it a last-minute decision, and I would not have let my first pick to tell me “no.” I would have stuck with my decision.
- Showed that it is better to know what you are doing than to quickly prepare.

Students commented that they would have done things differently if they were in similar situations:

- This episode showed how you can over micro-manage and that you shouldn't run from a decision based on the idea of not wanting to upset people.
- It helped me understand that it is difficult making tough decisions based on how it can affect others who are your friends.

Theme: Leadership is Contradictory

Students recognized that while anyone can lead, it is hard to be the leader:

- It showed that anyone can rise as a leader and because everyone has different traits, anyone can be a leader.
- It helped me understand that it doesn't have to be something major to be a leader, it takes [a leader] in anything you do.
- This episode helps illustrate that anyone can be a leader.
- It shows that there is not just one set way to lead. It also shows that people in any ranking position can lead in some way or another.
- It helped me understand the leadership concept better because it showed me, that in any situation, you can be a leader.

Students identified that it is difficult to be the leader and it requires a high level of maturity:

- [The episode] helped me understand that just because someone is in a leadership position does not mean that they are always prepared to lead and make important decisions.
- If you are the person in charge, you can't please every person 100% of the time.
- This episode sealed the fact for me that if you want to lead, you must be able to stand your ground.
- I thought it was a good way of showing how it is not easy to let someone go in an office setting where everyone knows everyone and that it is a struggle to not be swayed by outside influences.
- It helped me understand that it is always hard to separate when to be a boss and a friend. I understood that also being the boss is a challenge.
- [The episode] helped me to know that if you don't show support, charisma, or participate in a big decision/change, your followers may not be happy with the outcome.

Although leadership can be difficult, the students remarked on the need to have

fun while in leadership positions. Many students wrote about the working environment of the office and how it is okay to have fun every once in a while:

- Leadership does not always have to be geared to a goal; it can be for fun.
- If the leader is not happy, chances are the followers will not feel happy with their situations either.
- Leadership isn't just about telling people what to do but also getting to know them.
- It showed me that being a leader can have its fun sides. Being a leader is about motivating people, and Jim did.

Conclusions

Prior research has found that using popular culture in the classroom is an effective way to teach a variety of subjects (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Meyers et al., 2011). Within leadership education, Williams and McClure (2010) said viewing movies or television shows helps demonstrate abstract leadership concepts. The results of this study support that students do learn from watching television episodes of *The Office*. Some lessons were examples of what not to do, but others were valuable examples of leadership in a work environment. Students were able to critically evaluate the leaders portrayed in *The Office* and wrote comments about leadership styles, conflict resolution techniques, and leader effectiveness.

The use of *The Office* episodes also helped students understand concepts discussed in the courses by applying what was being taught in the classroom to the real-life scenarios (enhanced for comedic effect) portrayed in the episodes. Utilizing the episodes in these leadership education courses allowed students to learn from the characters involved in the leadership scenarios instead of being asked to perform those tasks themselves (Brunk, 1997; Williams et al., 2005). The students' ability to reflect on what they would do in these situations demonstrated vicarious learning (Bandura, 1977). Although students have not yet had the opportunity to be the leader who must fire someone, share bad news, make difficult decisions, or resolve conflict, viewing the episodes in the courses did allow them to think critically about how they should behave in these types of situations.

The use of the journals encouraged students to reflect on the leadership scenarios presented in the episodes. "Allowing students to witness and discuss leadership theory aids in the students' ability to build the mental synapses that lead to deeper learning" (Williams, 2006, p. 61).

In terms of the professionalism theme, students recognized that there is a need to be very professional when in a leadership position. They wrote how the manager in *The Office* was not the best example of a professional leader and what they would have done differently to be more professional.

When discussing the effectiveness theme, students identified a variety of effectiveness levels. Students were able to conclude that the leader in this work environment, manager Michael Scott, did not exhibit the most appropriate leadership characteristics. They also recognized that other people were effective leaders and what characteristics or behaviors made them so.

Students also acknowledged the important responsibility leaders have to make difficult decisions. The decisions illustrated in the episodes were not always handled in the correct manner, but students were able to see the challenges leaders might encounter. They also commented on how they would go about making similar decisions if they were in that position.

Finally, students recognized that leadership is contradictory because anyone can emerge as the leader, but being the leader is a hard job. Being a leader requires extra effort and energy, but good leaders enjoy their leadership roles.

Recommendations and Implications

Students were able to connect leadership scenarios portrayed in the episodes to potential real-life scenarios. Instructors should work to encourage students to make these connections and evaluate how they would have handled a particular situation. Leadership educators should also make sure to point out the positive and negative aspects of leadership portrayed in examples of popular culture. The use of television episodes to illustrate leadership concepts should be further examined and researched. “Due to the lack of historical precedence regarding the best method for teaching leadership, further exploration of new teaching methods is required” (Williams & McClure, 2010, p. 87).

One recommendation for future research is to look at other television programs that are more serious (e.g., dramas) in their portrayal of leadership situations. Another recommendation would be to repeat the study using a control group to determine the effects of the treatment (i.e. television episodes). Students could also be assessed longitudinally similar to the data collection methods of Williams and McClure (2010).

Leadership educators should put into practice teaching methods geared to integrating video into the classroom. The use of public pedagogy (i.e., television

shows) can have a positive effect on student learning. In a semester long course, it is hard to replicate leadership situations, but through the use of popular culture examples, students are able to learn valuable leadership lessons.

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