

## **Transforming Leadership: Film as a Vehicle for Social Change**

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### **Abstract**

Leadership scholar Margaret Wheatley (2006) observed that “Each of us seeks to discover a meaning to our life that is wholly and uniquely our own. We experience a deepening confidence that purpose has shaped our lives even as it moved invisibly in us. Whether we believe that we create this meaning for ourselves in a senseless world, or that it is offered to us by a purposeful universe, it is, after all, only meaning that we seek” (p. 134). At a small, private liberal arts institution in the southeast, educators attempt to traverse the complexities of chaos and meaning by integrating film into many facets of the curricular and co-curricular leadership learning process. This article highlights the background, pedagogy, and impacts of this integration and the bridge thus created between the in- and out-of-class experiences for students.

### **Introduction**

Since 2000, colleges and universities have been transformed by the influx of millennial college students. Likewise, popular culture has been transfixed by these students. Unlike their predecessors, millennials have been raised in and by an era of information, globalization, and chaos. While no two millennials are the same, each seeking to define the “self” within an uncertain world, life for them often imitates art. And art, in its many forms, is all at once voyeuristic, postmodern, digital, and surreal. This leads us to speculate what came first – the millennial or the cultural milieu within which the student thrives.

Indeed, college and university educators – many of whom are baby boomers, civics, and Gen-Xers – often struggle to deliver curricula that exact the kind of education necessary for 21<sup>st</sup> century realities. Seldom do we encounter students who aptly and excitedly distill lessons from the Great Books, translating Machiavellian and Aristotelian principles to current contexts. Not only do our students crave experiential pedagogies, they are likewise hungry for multi-media and pop culture stimulation.

When thoughtfully delivered, a pairing of film and leadership studies has the potential to satiate students' curricular and co-curricular learning. This idea briefing reviews, reveals, and reflects upon students' learning when film becomes a vehicle for social change.

### **Curricular applications**

At the heart of a curriculum that educates for global citizenship and responsible leadership, there are learning outcomes centered upon enhancing the self; understanding, appreciating, and advocating for the other; discovering individual and collective voice in creating change; practicing adaptation and flexibility in the face of chaos, complexity, and change; and, serving as stewards of our local and global communities. Learning about humanity's obligation to save the world is, for instance, an intra- and interdisciplinary journey.

This learning adventure can be enhanced by viewing and discussing films, among the most accessible media to our millennial students. Through a course entitled, *Go Organic: New Ways of Living and Leading*, film excerpts highlighted the importance of personal choice, exposing economic issues that impact the environmental degradation of our natural world. Concurrently, students engaged in a series of experiential exercises, such as in-class case studies, service-learning with Watershed Action Volunteers, and attending guest speakers such as Jan Cousteau. Film served as a thread to this course, bringing together complex ideas and synthesizing seemingly disparate academic topics. Through "visual" storytelling, participants began to make meaning of how they can make an impact, both individually and collectively. The use of films such as *The Corporation* (2003), an exposé of the psychopathic tendencies of American businesses, and *Super-Size Me* (2004), a documentary on the fast-food industry's perpetuation of obesity in the United States of America, allowed students to engage with topics that are complex and difficult, yet directly impact their lives and the condition of our earth.

Film was likewise vital to the success of an academic course entitled, *Women of Vision: Building Partnerships, Creating Change*. Applying leadership and change theories to the study of global women's issues, students challenged their assumptions about the roles of women in contemporary society. Critical to the learning experience were five film viewings around women and identity, body politics, women and violence, women and work, and women as change agents. A

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documentary, *Killing us Softly 3* (1991) brought to bear the propagandist, sexist imagery associated with popular media. Prompting activism, this film viewing and subsequent discussions inspired class participants to wage an anti-sexist advertising campaign aligned with Eve Ensler's V-day campaign. Other films such as *Moolaadé* (2004), depicting the ethical and culturally relative repercussions of female circumcision, and *Maria Full of Grace* (2004), showcasing interwoven crises of drug trafficking and poverty, brought to life contemporary women's issues in a way otherwise unattained through readings and discussions.

At any college or university film can complement courses across disciplines and departments, especially those tied to leadership education and development. Wheatley (2006) says, "We are all searching for this simpler way. In every academic discipline and institution, we live today with questions for which our expertise provides no answers" (p. 5). This is an uncertain world in which many feel lost in making a contribution that reflects need, interest, and passion. Film is the glue that binds our academic pursuits with texts, discussion, and experiential learning, allowing students to discover ways to plug-in as active citizens moving toward positive change.

### **Co-curricular applications**

Begun in 2001 by Emory University undergraduates, Campus MovieFest (CMF) has become the nation's premiere student film festival. CMF grants its participants full ownership of the filmmaking process: writing, casting, filming, directing, editing, and producing five minute short films. Seeing this as an opportunity to promote leadership in action, our institution and CMF have co-produced three highly successful film festivals for three successive years – 2006, 2007, and 2008.

Most recently, 50 teams ranging from five to 15 per members per team filmed and edited short movies on broad topics such as environmental reform, economic elitism, social stratification, meditation and mindfulness, and natural disaster, among others. In an unprecedented display of student leadership, undergraduate chairpersons worked tirelessly to ensure that CMF served as an intentional learning opportunity and leadership experience. Notably, 12 of the films produced were by-products of academic courses across various disciplines. Furthermore, on the day of equipment pick-up a two-hour workshop was held for film teams that allowed them to learn about the ins and outs of making a film that sends a social message. Constant support was provided to the student filmmaking teams, both with the technicalities of shooting and editing a film and the artistic sense needed to make it meaningful.

After exhaustive pre-screening and judging, an undergraduate core of leadership educators and the CMF crew prepared for the red carpet event – the CMF Premiere Night – which attracted no less than half of the student, faculty, and staff

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populous. CMF was a means of promoting global awareness, enhancing student life on campus, and utilizing the medium of film to explore advocacy and foster sustainable leadership. Through CMF students acquired skills requisite for story creation and production, created campus unity, and sustained a campus-wide interest in film.

The lasting component of CMF has been, perhaps, the most compelling. In follow-up to the Premiere, students have brought prominent filmmakers, screenwriters, producers, and directors to campus throughout the year to explore social advocacy through different forms of communication. Through a monthly series aptly titled, *Activism through Film*, actors, directors, and producers from the film industry have shared their work and invite critical discussion of world issues. Participants have reflected on ways to become involved and judicious citizens of our country and our world, often posting their own films – however amateur – on YouTube.

### **The Bridge Across: Connecting the Curriculum and Co-curriculum**

Indeed, film has also served as a great connector. Campus MovieFest brings together faculty, staff, and students as co-participants in the film-making and film-viewing processes. *Activism through Film* is a forum through which members of the campus and surrounding community engage in commentary around provocative issues such as immigration, homelessness, poverty, and men's violence against women. More recently, another portal has emerged, linking local millennials to their global peers: the *Global Peace Film Festival* [GPF]. In its second year, GPF's non-profit, eponymous parent has partnered with Rollins College to screen contentious, inspiring, and insightful films produced internationally. In 2007, over 30 faculty members included GPF in their course syllabi; further, a range of undergraduate clubs and organizations supported the GPF cause. For example, a student organization promoting multiculturalism and social advocacy offered a prequel to the festival by producing a human peace symbol on the campus lawn.

Across the board, initiatives connecting film and leadership, faculty to staff and students, curriculum and co-curriculum have been met with great enthusiasm. In addition to impacting our campus community, there are ripple effects in the broader community. Partnerships with local theaters, film festivals, and film schools have flourished, propelling a reflective liberal arts curriculum into a reflexive liberal arts learning laboratory. There are many vehicles through which students view, clarify, explore, and commit to the theories and academe surrounding leadership. Film, driven by students, faculty, and staff, has been a powerful unifying force for many connective and transformational leadership and justice efforts.

## **References**

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## Biography

Cara Meixner, Director of the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership, has contributed to leadership education as a researcher, staff member, and instructor. In 2004, she was awarded the American College Personnel Association's *Annuity Coeptis* award for exemplary contributions to leadership studies. She has published several articles and book reviews pertaining to socially responsible leadership, gender dynamics, and social change. In addition to serving on the faculty of the *LeaderShape Institute*, Cara has delivered numerous presentations, workshops, and keynotes on topics related to leadership education. In her current role at Rollins, she is responsible for the creation of a comprehensive leadership program. Cara is pursuing her Ph.D. in Leadership and Change. Cara develops and facilitates one or two courses each semester.

Becca Hickam, Course Director for Business Ethics and Social Responsibility at Full Sail University in Winter Park, Florida, has contributed to leadership education as a faculty member, presenter, facilitator, staff member, and instructor. In 2005, she served as a program reviewer for National Association for Student Personnel Administrators regional conference. In addition to serving as an onsite coordinator for the *LeaderShape Institute*, Becca has also prepared professional presentations and served in the facilitator role for conferences relating to leadership and education. Further, Becca has developed and taught courses here and at Miami University of Ohio that address leadership, service to the community, and social justice. At Rollins College from 2005-2008, she served as the Assistant Director of the Office of Student Involvement and Leadership, where she was an RCC instructor with President Lewis Duncan in Technology and the Future of Human Society in Fall 2006, and facilitated an RCC in Fall 2007 entitled, *Go Organic: New Ways of Living and Leading*.