Monsters Inc. as OB Teaching Aid

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ABSTRACT

Using feature films is a popular teaching aid across college curricula, including business courses. Finding a film that addresses organizational behavior and management elements can be a challenge as many classic films age in technology and pop cultural elements, which can distract students from learning. The story of "Monsters Inc." is presented here as a teaching resource that engages students in the artifacts of corporate life in general and encourages student to identify and explore concepts of organizational behavior including organizational leadership, corporate culture, training, employee recognition, coworker communication, cultural networks, superior-to-subordinate communication, organizational identification and satisfaction, management theories, effects of technology and change in the workplace, continuous quality improvement, corporate image and reputation. In the end, this unusual film selection produces critical analysis, discussion and retention of strategies and tactics.

INTRODUCTION

The use of popular culture media (movies, videos, television shows) in the college classroom is not new. From social work to medical education and sciences to communication, history and economics (Anderson, 1992; Barnett & Kafka, 2007; Harper & Rogers, 1999; Holbrook, 2009; Lieberman, 2002; Liles, 2007; Proctor, & Adler, 1991; Sexton, 2006; Tan & Ko, 2004; Ventura & Onsman, 2009; Weinstein, 2001), television shows and feature films provide a simulation of real life situations for discussion and analysis.

One drawback to using television shows and feature films as a teaching aid is that in these films technology and social norms are captured that represent a moment in time when the film was made or that represent the historical context of the film's plot. As years pass, these movies often lose their impact with students; students fixate attention on the lack of technology or the old-fashion technology, cars and clothing, thus losing the focus of the human situation being enacted.

The key to using popular culture media in the classroom is to find a film that will intrigue the students enough to keep them focused on the scenario at hand, while at the same time *not* providing historical cues that distract students from the assignment at hand. This is especially challenging for instructors in business disciplines, since most feature films that enact business relationships also include applications of technology and capture popular culture elements.

One film that provides insight into corporate life and organizational behavior *and* stands the test of time is *Monsters Inc.* (Docter, 2001). The film's designers created the monster world as a parody of the human world. According to production designer Harley Jessup (Disney-Pixar, 2001a), Monstropolis is "a parallel universe with the human world" replete with familiar features

like cities, governments, municipal utilities, restaurants, apartment buildings, grocery stores, even newspapers (Monstropolis Horn) in the distribution boxes on street corners. Jessup continues: "We really wanted it [the Monsters Inc. factory] to look like a working factory. We tried to communicate through the factory design itself that there were areas for the executives and areas for the union workers and for the people who clean up." There are production elements of the film that make the monster world as believable as the real world of work. When students view this film as a class assignment, they focus on the organizational behavior elements and not on the entertainment of a film in class.

Simply put, the movie *Monsters Inc.* is about life inside a large corporation. The corporation (a large power company) happens to be located in the fictitious Monstropolis (any large metropolitan community) and populated by monster personifications of typical business personalities.

Monsters Inc. provides opportunities for students to identify and explore a number of organizational constructs, including (but not limited to) organizational leadership, corporate culture, training, employee recognition/rewards programs, coworker communication, cultural networks, superior-to-subordinate communication, organizational identification and satisfaction, management theories, effects of technology and change in the workplace, continuous quality improvement, corporate image and reputation management.

This paper supports the use of *Monsters, Inc.* as an effective classroom aid for teaching principles of organizational behavior (OB) and management. This proposition is supported by a brief literature review regarding the use of popular media as a pedagogical device and a case-in-point discussion of the use of this film in OB courses.

FILM IN THE CLASSROOM

Use of the medium of film as a pedagogical device can be traced back to the 1950s (*The Educational Screen*, n.d.), i.e., films produced specifically for educational uses also known as educational propaganda. Champoux (1999) traces the use of feature films in the classroom to the 1970s. Popular culture elements like movies and television shows are used in the classroom to simulate real world situations and provide students with the opportunity to observe phenomena of human nature, such as interpersonal exchanges, decision-making process, and consequences of actions. Additionally, Proctor and Adler (1991) assert that movies are helpful in acclimating students to cultural cues and colloquial use of language. Specific to business disciplines, feature films are a popular teaching device for courses in economics (Leet & Houser, 2003), ethics (Berger & Pratt, 1998; Champoux, 2006), labor relations (Taylor & Provitera, 2011), leadership (Callahan & Rosser, 2007), management (Billsberry & Gilbert, 2006), and organizational behavior (Smith, 2009).

Multimedia (including movies/feature films) is necessary in the 21st century classroom to motivate students who are living in a multimedia environment – digital natives (Berk, 2009; Champoux, 1999; Lambert & Cuper, 2008; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Citing multimedia-learning theory, Berk (2009) claims that using multimedia elements like feature films engages students in a holistic learning environment that stimulates visual, auditory and kinesthetic learners. Using feature films (movies) in the classroom has a number of advantages (Champoux, 1999); these include: showing theories and concepts in action versus discussion in a clinical sense; saving resources that might be spent on field trips; and exposing students to environments beyond their own.

There are many rationales for including feature films as a teaching aid in college courses (Bluestone, 2000; Kuzma & Haney, 2001): increase active learning and critical thinking, provide historical context when appropriate, provide snapshots of reality for analysis, stimulate the senses, make abstract concepts more concrete, and in general advance students' learning.

Among the potential outcomes for a course using multimedia elements include (but are not limited to): "focus students' attention … improve attitudes toward content and learning … increase memory of content … increase understanding … foster deeper learning … make learning fun … create memorable visual images" (Berk, 2009, p. 2). Lambert and Cuper (2008) assert that using multimedia elements as a teaching aid provides students with opportunities to visualize and analyze concepts with their peers in an authentic context as well as engage in personal reflection. Kennedy and colleagues (2011) found that "showing movies [as a teaching aid] actually helps the students to build critical perspectives on subjects with social content by arousing their interests on this topics" (p. 10). In the end, using multimedia elements as teaching aids increases "memory, comprehension, understanding the deeper learning" (Berk, 2009, p. 5).

For feature films to be most effective as a teaching aid and not a mere entertainment, instructors must first present essential theories and definitions in a class discussion prior to using the film as an assignment (Berk, 2009; Bluestone, 2000, Kennedy et al, 2011). Showing the film as a group activity also increases active learning and the potential for group problem solving discussions. Bluestone (2000) notes that having students respond in a structured reflection regarding the concepts evident in the film is a more valuable learning scenario than having students respond to multiple-choice items on an exam. Berk (2009) provides the following guidelines for selecting appropriate multimedia elements as teaching aids. First, the socio-demographic characteristics of the students in the course should be considered. Second, the offensiveness of the video should be considered with regard to the socio-demographic characteristics of the students. Finally, the structure of the video must be considered, i.e., the time element, context, visual cues, and characters.

A few common liabilities of using feature films in the classroom include: the amount of time films take away from other classroom activities such as lecture and discussion; the universality of the film and the possibility of offending or not connecting with students due to issues of diversity and personal interests; and students' perception of films as a pleasurable distraction (Berk, 2009; Bluestone, 2000, Champoux, 1999; Holbrook, 2009, Kennedy et al, 2011). Kennedy and colleagues concluded that some of the best films for depicting course content cannot be used in the classroom because the films are too violent – too offensive to the students – or too entertaining, thus becoming more of a distraction than an asset to the course delivery. Champoux lamented that copyright restrictions prevent educators from copying individual movie scenes. Foreign films with subtitles lack effectiveness, as students are turned off by the additional work of reading the subtitles and following the action in the scenes (Champoux, 1999).

If a feature film can meet course objectives and educational outcomes while overcoming the barriers of distraction and offending students, then it is a sound pedagogy to reach today's multimedia generation of college students. *Monsters, Inc.* indeed satisfies these criteria.

CASE IN POINT: OB APPLICATIONS OF *MONSTERS, INC.*

I have used this application of film in an Organizational Behavior (OB) course. Reflecting on the literature reviewed above, the rationales for using film in general and

Monsters, Inc., specifically in this courses are: to increase active learning and critical thinking, provide snapshots of reality for analysis, make abstract concepts more concrete, make learning fun, and in general advance student learning. The anticipated outcomes associated with the use of *Monsters, Inc.* in an OB course are: to increase comprehension and retention of key course concepts; to engage students in personal reflection regarding course concepts, to encourage student discussion of course concepts outside of the traditional textbook discussion. These outcomes are measured through the following assessments: essay and multiple-choice items on course exams and through small group discussions coupled with oral reports in the classroom.

According to the official website for the film (http://disneydvd.disney.go.com/monsters-inc.html), the plot is summarized as the following: "Lovable Sulley (John Goodman) and his wisecracking sidekick Mike Wazowski (Billy Crystal) are the top scare team at MONSTERS, INC., the scream-processing factory in Monstropolis. When a little girl named Boo wanders into their world, it's the monsters who are scared silly, and it's up to Sulley and Mike to keep her out of sight and get her back home."

Here is a plot summary from an OB perspective: The movie focuses on the relationships – both business and personal – of employees of a mega-power company located in a large metropolitan city. A team of employees is faced with a security breech, knowledge of a company scandal, and the necessity for a major change in the operation of the organization. The film features organizational relationships among coworkers and between management and subordinates.

From an OB perspective the film illustrates organizational leadership, corporate culture, employee training, employee recognition/rewards programs, coworker communication, cultural networks, superior-subordinate communication, organizational identification and satisfaction, evidence of management theories, effects of technology and change in the workplace, conflict resolution strategies, continuous quality improvement, corporate image and reputation management. Additionally, the collector's edition DVD of the movie includes a number of documentaries on the making of the film in which the directors, producer, and production designer discuss the vision for the film to include artifacts of a real world organization and a humorous look at a number of traditional organizational artifacts, i.e., a walking tour of the corporate building, employee orientation and training programs, safety and quality control elements, employee of the month programs and the employee handbook, to name a few (Disney-Pixar, 2001a).

Some of these documentary short films are worth showing in class due to the attention to detail the Disney-Pixar team expended. For example, "Behind the Screams" (Disney-Pixar, 2001b) is a multimedia short element that resembles a corporate intranet for new employees. Typical organizational orientation materials include Welcome to Monsters, Inc. (corporate welcome video), Your First Day (orientation video for new employees, complete with operation of equipment and job descriptions), Monster of the Month (employee of the month program), Scarer Cards (trading cards of corporate heroes and evidence of corporate heroes per Deal and Kennedy's theory of strong corporate cultures [1982]), and an Employee Handbook. A look inside the Employee Handbook includes the following tabs (that simulate materials found in most traditional employee handbooks): Your Fellow Employees (staff directory); Occupational Safety & Hazard Poster: Hazard ID Symbols (think OSHA guidelines and warnings); How to Avoid Repetitive Scare Injury (occupational safety guidelines); CDA (Child Detection Agency – this is equivalent to federal guidelines for risk industries); Safety Check (a safety checklist); MI Cafeteria (it's the cafeteria menu); Door Station Guide (job description details – operations

manual to major equipment in the factory); Sample Scare Report (how to complete official bureaucratic paperwork); and Advertising (samples of corporate promotional materials like television commercials and magazine tear sheets).

Addressing common liabilities of film in the classroom: The common objections or liabilities to using films in the classroom included the time element, universality, and balancing entertainment (distraction) against the learning paradigm. Using *Monsters, Inc*. meets each of these objections. First, *Monsters, Inc.* has a running time of approximately 93 minutes, which includes the introductory credits and end production credits. If the film is started just after the introductory credits and stopped just before the production credits, the film fits into a 75-minute class period. The film uses one class period of time for viewing, if a course is delivered in a two-day a week schedule. If an instructor is strapped with three 50-minute class sessions in a week, then the film may be divided into one and a half class sessions, with time during the second session for discussion. If the film is being shown in a night class or a day class that meets once a week, then the film may be shown followed by a short break and then a discussion session regarding the content (see below). Depending on the assessment method being used, an additional class session may be used for follow-up discussion of key concepts. This may be accomplished in a number of ways. My preferred method is to divide the class into small groups; each group is given a set of concepts to define using scenarios from the movie; part of the class session is used for small group discussion; before the end of the session, the class convenes as a large group and the smaller groups report their discussion highlights. In their oral reports, the students define concepts with scholarly literature and illustrate the concepts with the scenes from the film.

Second, *Monsters, Inc*. is a universally acceptable movie. Most of my students have already seen the movie as a child and have positive associations with the film, but they do not have total recall of the plot. This means that they are eager to watch it again, even if it is in the context of a business course. Additionally, there are no objectionable scenes or objectionable language issues; it is a G-rated Disney film.

The third liability is my greatest concern. To help students focus on the film as an educational tool and not a folly or distraction, before showing the film, remind students why they are taking class time to watch the film. I remind them that they should be taking notes and attending to plot lines that illustrate concepts from the last unit of study regarding organizational behavior. The film is part of the "text" for the course and will be used to construct additional class assignments and examination content. These practices help to situate the film and the students in the learning paradigm.

Whether it is through class discussions and oral presentations or written essay responses to exam items, students can readily identify evidence of the following organizational behavior and corporate culture elements. Here is a sampling of student responses:

- organizational leadership: "In the movie organizational leadership is shown in two ways. First, there is a distinction between the workers/scarers what might be called administrators like the CEO and the COO and the training manager. This shows that there is a hierarchy of managers and workers in the company. Second, leadership is shown on a more personal level when Mike and Sulley go out of their way to save the company and the child from destruction. They uncover a scandal in the organization that goes all the way up to the CEO."
- corporate culture: "We learned that strong corporate cultures have a number of characteristics including values, heroes, rites and rituals, and cultural networks. In the

movie *Monsters, Inc.* each of these components are there. The company values safety and quality work. This is shown through the display of safe days and high production of the scarers. Sulley is a hero of the organization because he has been the lead scarer for years. Other employees look up to him for advice. Rites and rituals are also there through the procedures that are used and reinforced by the employees. Cultural networks include the employee activities, the company history on the intranet, and the way that employees look up to Sulley and Mike and the CEO, who uses a walking-around type of management style."

"Corporate culture is shown in the movie in a number of different ways. Subcultures and countercultures are shown. Employees of different job types socialize together in the break room and in the hallways. A small group of employees is plotting to undermine the company and they represent a counterculture. The company seems like a pleasant place to work. Employees engaged in meaningful work and are made to feel important by veteran employees."

- employee training: "In the film *Monsters, Inc.* several monsters who are identified as the scarers go through training processes in order to learn how to produce high quality screams through effective scare tactics. There is personal self-training as seen in the beginning where Sulley is working out and being coached by his co-worker Mike. There are also training simulations that show examples to new recruits on how to properly scare to produce the most scream."

  "It is beneficial for employees of any profession to undergo proper training to effectively carry out the mission of an organization. In *Monsters, Inc.* various training methods were offered to ensure the employees return optimal results. Methods included a simulation exercise as well as demonstrations from the company's top performers."

- employee recognition/rewards programs: "Employee recognition and rewards is seen through the scare leader board that is shown and displayed on the factory floor where all employees can see who is being most productive at any time. Sulley has been the number one lead scarer for a long time and whenever another employee breaks the record or moves up the leader board, then they receive recognition for it. This type of recognition encourages friendly competition and increases productivity. Employees are also personally motivated to break their own scare records. There is also an employee of the month program to reward employees."

- coworker communication: "In the film *Monsters, Inc.*, peer-to-peer communication is present. The monsters work in teams. One is the scarer and the other is an administrative assistant who tracks the progress of the scarer, files paperwork, etc. In this partnership the employees use a number of types of communication to achieve their scare goals. Some work teams share personal as well as work related information. Other teams are less familiar and treat one another merely as means to an end."

- superior-to-subordinate communication: "Superior-to-subordinate communication is seen in *Monsters, Inc.* through several scenes. The CEO of the company is often seen talking with Sulley, the lead scarer. Sulley shows deference to the CEO. Later there is upward distortion communication when facts regarding the rogue human child are withheld from management."

- organizational identification and satisfaction: "Organizational identification is seen when Mike and Sulley are banished from the monster world. Mike throws a tantrum and yells at Sulley about how he does not know how to function without the company. He defines

himself as part of the power company, Monsters Inc. Mike sees himself and Sulley as famous in the community for the work they do at the plant. Mike and Sulley find great satisfaction working for the company."

- management theories: "The company in the movie is a large power company. They are portrayed like a classic bureaucracy. Just like any factory, employees bunch in to start work and bunch out at the end of the day. They have a locker room where employees change before going home. Employees and managers are separate in the hierarchy of the organization. In the end, you could describe the organization more like a learning organization because they learn from their work that screams are less effective than laughter and they change the way they conduct business."

- effects of technology and change in the workplace: "Effects of technology are present in the film through the importance of the factory as a main employer in the community. They produce the energy for the community. The factory is fully automated, which is more evidence of technology. Typical business technology is also present in the form of ID cards that employees swipe for many purposes. Change in technology is also present. At the beginning of the movie screams are what powers the company and the monster world. By the end of the movie, the company has learned that laughter is even more powerful than screams. They change over the entire paradigm of the plant to collect children's laughs to power their world, which in the end is more efficient, too."

- continuous quality improvement: "During the movie employees compete with one another to be the high score scare leader. Through their work and through the training program, the organization is trying to improve their efforts to create power for the city. Turning to laughs in the end, instead of screams, is really TQM."

- corporate image and reputation: "Corporate image and reputation is seen in *Monsters, Inc.* through the CEO's several different conversations about the high reputation of the company with the general public. The factory is what powers the city, so it has to have and present a good corporate image to the public. When the human child gets into the monster world and pollutes their world, the nightly news tells the story to the public and that reduces the good image of the company with the public. By the end of the film, the company is back in the black and a positive light when they change from screams to laughter as the best practice for powering their world."
"During the movie we see television commercials for the company with its slogan and tagline. We also see magazine covers and advertisements with corporate image messages."

These student responses are just a sampling of the responses I get from using *Monsters, Inc.* as a teaching aid in Organizational Behavior and Organizational Communication courses. There are more topics that the film addresses than those listed above that may be probed through class discussions or focused-writing assignments. Once you watch the film for its portrayal of corporate artifacts, you will find there are many additional applications for this film in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

Choosing to use feature films in the classroom should be a calculated selection of films that address the immediate subject matter of the course. In this case, *Monsters Inc.* is an

appropriate choice for illustrating organizational behavior, corporate culture, and management concepts for undergraduate students. It provides an example of corporate life in an accessible plot and design. The additional documentary elements on the collector's DVD also provide content for exploring traditional organizational design and behavior concepts without distracting students with extraordinary situations.

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