Chapter 36

# Hollywood in the Classroom:
## A Resource for Teaching Business Ethics to Undergraduates

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter describes how Hollywood movies can be used in the classroom to bring finance and business ethics alive in ways that that are difficult to achieve in traditional lectures, assignments and written case studies. The use of seven popular full length motion pictures, four fictional and three based upon actual events, are discussed along with an approach that uses selected excerpts (film clips) in the classroom.*

## INTRODUCTION

While academics continue to debate the merits of different pedagogical strategies - which tools are valuable and when they are most effective – one thing remains clear, students cannot learn unless they are sufficiently stimulated. Student stimulation in the classroom manifests in two important ways: students are *fascinated* by and can *relate* to the material presented. Faculty must engage them in a way to make them care about the material presented in the classroom. At the same time, students must be able to relate to the material; it must speak to their own life experiences, even if it challenges their prevailing worldview. Stimulating students, especially undergraduates,

in the information age is difficult given the many multi-media options and expediency of digital messaging. Yet, even with students' high level of sophistication with respect to 21st century "toys" (i.e. smart phones such as the *iPhone*, social media such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*), undergraduates as a whole are in many ways ignorant to the complexities of organizational life. The chasm between their web-connected life and their vision of their future roles and responsibilities in organizations represents a significant barrier to stimulating undergraduates. An instructor needs to identify the level of sophistication that is appropriate to coax them across this chasm -- simultaneously *fascinating* the students and enabling them to see what is depicted as *relevant* to *their* future. Teaching business disciplines poses the continuous challenge of linking the wide variety of theories to the "real world" and providing students with an organizational frame of reference that helps them understand and appreciate the relevance and context within which the subject matter applies. Complicating this further, it is also challenging to include the human dimensions of our disciplines. It is ultimately men and women who practice business, people who are motivated by egos, desire for career success, lust, money, job security, excitement, competition, greed, and power.

There is a growing body of literature that describes how business faculty can effectively use movies to teach a variety of difficult topics in the classroom (Champoux, 2001, 2006; Hatfield and Buchko, 2008; Philpot & Ogelsby, 2005). Movies are able to bring situations and people to life in ways that lectures, cases, and textbooks simply cannot. That addresses an imperative because as noted, students, especially undergraduates, do not have the business experience and organizational context within which to place much of what is learned in the classroom. This is especially the case when studying the managerial motivations

(e.g., personalities, egos, and greed) surrounding strategic decisions such as corporate takeovers and proxy fights or malfeasance such as insider trading, and fraud. Serey (1992), has demonstrated uses of the movie *Dead Poets Society* to teach management and organizational behavior and Harrington and Griffin (1989), employ the popular science fiction movie *Aliens* to teach leadership and power.

Building upon this foundation, this paper makes the following two contributions to the literature on management education and integrity. First, it provides insights on what types of media are appropriate for instruction in the classroom. The paper highlights full-length feature films, documentary films, and movie clips from full-length feature films. The insights offered are intended to enable instructors to maximize students' classroom experience by matching specific media with pertinent business concepts. Second, it describes how instructors can use these media in the classroom to facilitate learning on subjects as varied as stakeholder management, leveraged buyouts, perverse employee incentive systems, fraudulent accounting practices, and rogue financial trading.

The first section of the chapter summarizes seven popular Hollywood motion pictures[1] and explains how they can be integrated into business courses to reinforce, illustrate, and help bring subjects to life: *Barbarians at the Gate, Boiler Room*, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *Glengarry Glen Ross, Other People's Money*, *Rogue Trader* and *Wall Street*.[2] The second section elaborates on the benefits of using movies in the classroom, to both substitute as well as complement traditional learning tools. The third section discusses the use of selected excerpts (film clips) from movies or television productions as an alternative to showing full length movies in the classroom. Finally, the chapter ends with our concluding comments.

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