

# The Framework of an International MBA Blended Course for Learning About Business Through the Cinema

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**Abstract.** The primary goal of this study was to construct a business course that allows for the learning of business lessons by watching selected films. A self-administered questionnaire was utilized to obtain empirical verification on the reading and film watching habits of a sample of MBA students at an international university. The results indicated preference for audio-visual products over reading in order to obtain information on business. A course was then designed for the timeframe of a “blended” course where approximately half of the time invested by students consists of self-learning at home while the other half consists of traditional, face-to-face class sessions. A literature review revealed that the following business topics have been extensively addressed in the studying of cinema: cross-cultural management, ethics, entrepreneurship, managerial leadership and lifestyle choices within the business world. The framework of a course syllabus is presented based on these five subject areas.

**Keywords:** Blended course, cinema, cross-cultural management, ethics, entrepreneurship, managerial leadership, pedagogy, teaching with movies

## Introduction

The incorporation of media technology into the traditional classroom and into blended courses has allowed for the use of films to teach lessons regarding business. This is in addition to the reality that new generations entering higher education have increasingly come to obtain their knowledge by audio-visual means as much, if not more so, than through the printed word (Addams, Fan, & Morgan, 2013; Bates & Poole, 2003; Ballera, Lukandu, & Radwan, 2014; Butler, Zaromb, Lyle, & Rosediger, 2009; Callender & McDaniel, 2009; Champoux, 1999; Dunphy & Meyer, 2012; Huczynski & Buchanan, 2004; Jones, 2004; Parker, 2009).

This study is divided into three parts. The first is an empirical analysis of reading and film watching patterns of a sample of MBA students. The second part provides a literature review that explores the subject areas being studied by those who use or advocate movies to teach lessons about business. The third part presents the framework for a blended course since such a course structure is highly conducive to the watching and analysis of films.

## Literature Review

Exploring the possibility of using film for educational purposes has occurred almost since the creation of cinema itself (Hansen, 1933; Sumstine, 1918; Wood & Freeman, 1929). The body of literature addressing the use or analysis of films to study particular subjects is large and expanding. Subjects include communications (Kavan & Burne, 2009; criminology (Rafter & Brown, 2011), culture (Belton, 2013; Bodnar, 2003), economics (Bookman & Bookman, 2009; Macy & Terry, 2008; Valentine, Mujumdar, & Elkhail, 2012; Whaples, 2014), ethics/morality, (Downing & Saxton, 2010; Gillett, 2012; Good, 2008; Kowalski, 2012; Norden, 2007; Shaw, 2012), history (Carnes, Mico, & Miller-Monzon, 1996; Hughes-Warrington, 2007; Marcus, 2007; Marcus, Metzger, Paxton, & Stoddard, 2010; O.,Connor, 1987; Smyth, 2006; Toplin, 1996), human development (Harper & Rogers, 1999), international relations (Engert & Spencer, 2009), journalism (Ehrlich, 2004; Good, 2008); law (Bergman & Asimow, 1996; Greenfield, Osborn, & Robson, 2001; Huang, 2008), mathematics (Borko & Pittman, 2008; Polster & Ross, 2012), philosophy (Cox & Levine, 2012; Falzon, 2002; Gilmore, 2005; Livingston & Plantinga, 2009), psychology (Anderson, 1992; Bolt, 1976; Hyler & Moore, 1996; Nissim-Sabat, 1979; Young, 2012), religion (Marsh, 2007; Marsh & Ortiz, 1998; Watkins, 2008), social issues (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009; Russell, 2009), and strategy (Huczynski, 1994).

A more direct body of literature focuses specifically on the use of cinema to teach lessons regarding business. A review found five major subject areas in the literature:

1. **Cross-cultural managerial issues** (Briam, 2010; Cardon, 2010; Filby, 2010; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Pandey, 2012; Roell, 2010; Summerfield, 1993; Verluyten, 2008).
2. **Business ethics** (Arsenault, 1998; Belden, 1992; Berger & Pratt, 1998; Chan, Weber, & Johnson, 1995; Dunphy, 2011, 2013; Dyl, 1991; Higgins & Striegel, 2003; Kester, 2013; Kester, Cooper, Dean, Gianiodis & Goldsby, 2012; Teays, 2015).
3. **Entrepreneurship** (Eikhof, Summers, & Carter, 2013; Hang & van Weezel, 2015; Higgins & Striegel, 2003; Llander, 2010; van Gelderen & Verduyn, 2003; Zampetakis, Lerakis, Kafetsios, & Moutakis, 2015).
4. **Managerial leadership** (Ambrosini, Billsberry, & Collier, 2008; Bumpus, 2005; Carringer, 1985; Champoux, 2000; Clements & Wolff, 1999; Coupe & Sansolo, 2010; DiSibio, 2006; Dunphy, 2007; Dunphy, Meyer, & Linton, 2008; Serey, 1992).

**5. Lifestyle choices within the business world** (Coupe & Sansolo, 2010; Frymer, Kashani, Nocella, & Heertum, 2010; Levinson, 2012; Naremore, 2004; Shugan, 2006; Theberge, 1981; Thomas & LeShay, 1992; Younkins, 2014).

Based on this information, a determination was made to create a course that chose films that addressed the topics listed above. The construction of the course is presented after the section on the research design and findings.

## Research Design and Findings

A self-administered questionnaire (closed-ended questions with a Likert scale construct) was utilized to determine the frequency of book reading and film watching by MBA students as well as their preference for using audio-visual products (in this case, films) over reading in order to understand principles and practices of business. Cronbach's alpha reliability scores ranged from .80 to .91, thus indicating sufficient reliability (DeVellis, 1991; Tavakol & Dennick, 2011). As per Krejcie & Morgan's (1970) table for determining sample size, 212 students were chosen from a population of 470 students in an MBA program at an international university. 97 of the sample were male (46%) and 115 were female (54%). All the respondents were students in MBA classes taught in English and their English proficiency levels were sufficient to answer the questionnaire.

Table 1: Frequency of reading books\* (*What was the last time you finished reading a complete book?*)

Period of Time	Male (#)	Male (%)	Female (#)	Female (%)
A week ago	1	1	0	0
A month ago	4	4	3	2
3 months ago	12	12	9	8
Greater than 3 months	80	83	103	90
Total	97	100%	115	100%

\*"Books" are defined as non-comic or graphic novel and would include a textbook if the entire contents (i.e., all chapters) were read.

Table 2: Frequency of watching films\* (*What was the last time you finished watching a complete film?*)

Period of Time	Male (#)	Male (%)	Female (#)	Female (%)
A week ago	28	29	21	18
A month ago	68	70	90	79
3 months ago	1	1	4	3
Greater than 3 months	0	0	0	0
Total	97	100%	115	100%

\*"Films" are defined as a full-length film, excluding documentaries or television programs.

A comparison of Table 1 with Table 2 indicates dramatic differences in terms of frequencies in behavior. Though the implications of this comparison are valid for this study and for an argument in favor of using films to teach business lessons, the comparison is limited in terms of the time commitment between watching a film (which is usually between 1 ½ to 2 hours) and reading an average length book (which takes much longer with more concentration). Table 3 shows a majority preferring an audio-visual product over a book with about one-quarter expressing uncertainty due to lack of exposure to a blended course. All three tables indicate no significant differences based on gender. No generational gap existed within the respondents since the ages ranged from 22 to 31, with 25.5 as the calculated mean age.

Table 3: Preference of Films Over Books (*Would you prefer watching a film over reading a book in order to learn lessons about the business world?*)

Preference	Male (#)	Male (%)	Female (#)	Female (%)
Yes	63	65	66	57
No	12	12	19	17
Not sure	22	23	30	26
Total	97	100%	115	100%

## Construction of the Course

This study chose the timeframe of a blended (or hybrid) course. Blended courses, which are growing in popularity around the world, are designed wherein an equal portion of the face-to-face time spent in the traditional classroom between the teacher and the student is allocated with web-based, online resources, and other technologies for learning at home and preparing for face-to-face sessions (Arbaugh 2010; Bicen, Ozdamli, & Uzunboylu, 2012; Bleed, 2001; Carre, 2015; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008; Hew & Cheung, 2014; Keengwe & Agamba, 2014; McGee & Reis, 2012; Tseng & Walsh,

2016). The goal is to provide for more effective and efficient learning by providing for more adaptive and personalized instruction that is customized to suit the learning style, speed, and capabilities of the learner and to encourage greater interactive participation so that the learner encounters a more meaningful learning experience (Bonk & Graham, 2006; Cho & Cho, 2014; Lim & Morris, 2009; Tseng & Walsh, 2016; Woo & Reeves, 2007).

The construct of a blended course poses a significant pedagogical challenge since a blended format is neither exclusively distance learning nor traditional in its approach (Carre, 2015; Dziuban, Hartman, & Moskal, 2004). The ultimate goal is in creating a hybridization that improves student success and learning over a non-blended approach while addressing the challenges of time management through non-classroom study, the mistaken expectation that less class time means less work, and the possibility that students may disengage within the blended structure (Fairchild, 2015).

A blended course within the timeframe of five weeks (six hours on five different Saturday, face-to-face classes) was used for the development of this course. This is based on the blended course structure in the international university whose MBA population was surveyed in this study. (Note, however, that flexibility exists for a similar blended course that is not as concentrated in time, say, for example, eight weeks.) Two films would be assigned for each week: one to be viewed and analyzed at home (with a discussion in the morning session of the Saturday class) and a second to be viewed and analyzed in the afternoon session of the face-to-face Saturday class. A paper, answering specific questions germane for each specific film, would be required. Grading would consist of these papers (totaling ten) as well as class participation in the face-to-face discussions. This ensures that students will learn from the cinema world while also improving their writing and speaking communication skills. Each film is linked to specific scholarly articles that are to be read and referred to in the respective papers.

Selection of the films chosen was based on the following criteria:

- Only feature films were selected and not documentaries since both have distinct differences as to style and approach. Films convey ideas subtly through fictional story lines and characters that provide escape; documentaries are direct and formal.
- Three films would be available for each of the following five subject areas chosen as result of the literature review: cross-cultural managerial issues, business ethics, entrepreneurship, managerial leadership, and lifestyle choices within the business world.
- The instructor would choose the movie, in each subject area, that will be shown in the face-to-face portion of the weekly session; students would be allowed to choose from one of the two other movies to view and analyze at home.

- The films chosen are limited to about two hours each to make them more manageable as to viewing and analyzing at home and to allow for sufficient discussion time during the Saturday afternoon, face-to-face sessions.
- Films that minimize profanity and adult content were chosen to conform to school standards and to student sensitivities. Using this criterion, for example, the film *Wall Street* (1987) was chosen over *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013) – which re-defined the word *gratuitous*. Moral considerations over learning from organized crime personalities exempted the *Godfather* movie trilogy (1972, 1974 and 1990) and films such as *Scarface* (1983) and *American Gangster* (2007), to cite a few examples.
- Films were chosen from the rich span of cinematic history despite the perception by many contemporary students that black-and-white films belong in a museum.
- Films were chosen, as much as possible, with a storyline directly relating to the world of business. However, two exceptions exist in this list: *Twelve Angry Men* (1957) and *Thirteen Days* (2000) because of their exceptional examples of leadership that can be applied in the business world.

The researcher's viewing and examination of forty-five films resulted in the following movies being chosen for the course:

**Cross-cultural managerial issues:**

1. *Gung Ho* (1986)
2. *Lost in Translation* (2003)
3. *Outsourced* (2006)

*Gung Ho* (1986) involves the clash of two corporate cultures when a Japanese corporation purchases an auto manufacturing plant in Pennsylvania. *Lost in Translation* (2003) portrays an aging actor from the United States who goes to promote a whisky brand in Japan and becomes a stranger in a foreign land. *Outsourced* (2006) deals with an American novelty products salesman who goes to India to manage an office after his department is outsourced to that country.

**Business ethics:**

1. *Wall Street* (1987)
2. *The Insider* (1999)
3. *Margin Call* (2011)

In *Wall Street* (1987), an ambitious stockbroker falls under the influence of an unscrupulous corporate raider. *The Insider* (1999) portrays the struggles of a whistleblower against Big Tobacco and a CBS news producer's attempt to reveal the whistleblower's exposé on the *60 Minutes* news

show. *Margin Call* (2011) focuses on the desperate actions of a group of employees in a Wall Street investment bank as the bank faces economic collapse during the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2008.

### **Entrepreneurship:**

1. *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992)
2. *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (1988)
3. *The Founder* (2016)

*Glengarry Glen Ross* (1992) depicts the behavior of four real estate salesmen who are pressured by their corporate office to meet their sales quota at all costs. *Tucker: The Man and His Dream* (1988) portrays the struggles of entrepreneur Preston Tucker to create and market the 1948 *Tucker Sedan*. *The Founder* (2016) presents the story of how Ray Kroc, founder of McDonald's, built the company into a multinational, billion-dollar franchise empire through creativity, ambition, persistence, and a degree of ruthlessness.

### **Managerial leadership:**

1. *Executive Suite* (1954)
2. *Twelve Angry Men* (original 1957 version)
3. *Thirteen Days* (2000)

*Executive Suite* (1954) depicts the inner struggle for executive control of a furniture company after the president unexpectedly dies. *Twelve Angry Men* (1957) deals with twelve jurors deciding on a case. The film demonstrates skills of leadership, communication and consensus building. *Thirteen Days* (2000) recalls the leadership and decision-making challenges of the Kennedy brothers as they explored and analyzed different recommendations to deal with the Cuban Missile Crisis of 1962.

### **Lifestyle choices within the business world:**

1. *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956)
2. *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006)
3. *Up in the Air* (2009)

In *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956), a businessman in post-World War II America struggles to find a balance between his career and his family. *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) depicts a recent college graduate whose life is consumed in working for the demanding editor of a fashion magazine. *Up in the Air* (2009) focuses on a corporate downsizer who re-examines his philosophy of isolation and non-commitment.

## **Samples of Analytical Questions**

Each movie would have questions that are specific to the context of that particular film. Students would be required to answer the questions, in writing, while also referring to specific scholarly material related to the subject matter.

For example, questions and references for the film *The Insider* (1999) would include:

- *Executives at Brown & Williamson could have made an argument to themselves and others that nondisclosure of information was in the best interest of the company and its shareholders. Can an ethical argument be made that they were protecting company jobs and assets?*
- *Jeffrey Wigand did become a whistleblower, but he only became one after he was fired. In your opinion, does this make any difference? Is he a hero to you? Why or why not?*
- *You have a nice job with very good compensation and you have a future in your company. However, you are convinced that company activities are harming people in some significant way (e.g., exposing the environment to some toxicity). Would you whistle blow if no one in the company responded to your concerns? Why or why not?*
- *There are two other major characters in the movie beside Jeffrey Wigand: Lowell Bergman and Mike Wallace, both within CBS. What is your opinion about these two characters? Do you think that CBS acted in an ethical matter when they decided to edit out Wigand's interview from the original 60 Minutes' broadcast?*
- *Did this film affect you emotionally in any significant way? If yes, how so and why?*
- *What did you learn from this film? How could you apply the new knowledge from this film to your life and career?*

The references for the film are below:

1. Lennane, J. (2012). What happens to whistleblowers, and why? *Social Medicine* 6(4), 249- 258.
2. Near, J. P., & Miceli, M. (2016). After the wrongdoing: What managers should know about whistleblowing. *Business Horizons* 59(1), 105-114.
3. O'Sullivan, P., & Ola, N. (2014). Whistleblowing: A critical philosophical analysis of the component moral decisions of the act and some new perspectives on its moral significance. *Business Ethics – A European Review* 23(4), 401-415.
4. Van Es, R. (2003). Inside and outside "The Insider": A film workshop in practical ethics. *Journal of Business Ethics* 48(1), 89-97.
5. *Whistleblowing: The inside story. A study of the experiences of 1000 whistleblowers.* (2013). London: University of Greenwich & Public Concern at Work.



## Conclusions and Suggestions for Future Research

Films can serve as a pedagogical tool to bring subjects alive and to provide for a rich context of analysis by way of well-written scripts with good characters, and good acting. The use of film, along with other media, is particularly useful for blended courses which are structured for

significant commitment by the student as to self-study. While a student in another blended course may decide not to fulfill reading assignments, a student in the course developed for this study cannot forsake viewing and analyzing films at home or in class since this task affects the bulk of the course grade. Time management is structured and maintained by requiring a series of papers to be written (in this case, two per week). Discussion of films during the face-to-face sessions primarily would be in the form of elicitation of commentary rather than reliance on commentary that is made voluntarily. This provides for further incentive to carefully watch a film.

Hybridization through the blended course format, as a progenitor of transformation, is seen as a significant pedagogical innovation of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Bates & Sangra, 2011). However, it is also perceived as a “dangerous idea” (Moskal, Dziuban, & Hartman, 2013; Seife, 2000) in its potentially monumental challenge of the status quo and the consequential expectations of increased student performance and positive institutional transformation with its implementation.

Because of the stakes involved, future research should monitor the gradual implementation of blending courses in order to assess the perceptions and experience of students and the level of learning motivation as well as learning outcomes and achievement (Owston, York, & Murtha, 2013; Tseng & Walsh, 2016). In addition, purposive designs of blended courses should be based on a learning partnership built on an iterative process of reflective practice and post-intervention, leading to continuous improvement (Aycock, Garnham, & Kaleta, 2000; McDonald, Straker, Schlumpf, & Plack, 2014; Owston, York, & Murtha, 2013; Tseng & Walsh, 2016; Vaughn, Cleveland-Innes, & Garrison, 2013).

Following the implementation of the blended course proposed in this study, its impact should be empirically assessed as to factors such as student perception, experience, and overall academic outcomes. A meta-analysis of over one million students by Moskal, Dziuban and Hartman (2013) indicated that improved student satisfaction and learning success were vital for the continued adoption and implementation of blended courses. Empirical verification of enacted hybrid courses, by way of an iterative framework, can allow instructors to facilitate learning and improve their communication skills.

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