

Superhero as Metaphor: Using Creative Pedagogies to Engage

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Abstract

Video case studies of realistic scenarios have long been used to illustrate course concepts and provide variety in the classroom. The growing popularity of superheroes in film suggests an openness to experience beyond the traditional fare. This qualitative study uses content analysis to explore how students' understanding of ethics concepts changed over time after viewing a superhero film and writing with metaphor. A pre-test post-test design was used, where students in an undergraduate management course completed a writing assignment before and after experiencing the film. Results suggest that after students were exposed to the treatment, they had a deeper understanding of the role of personal ethics and were better able to articulate their new knowledge in writing. Implications for future research are discussed.

Keywords: writing, metaphor, pedagogy, experiential learning, film, ethics

Introduction

Since the mid-1990's, there has been a growing trend in higher education toward more student engagement and active learning. This shift has been fueled by educational leaders who recognized the link between engagement and key student outcomes as well as by students themselves, whose voices have echoed loudly across campuses. The National Survey of Student Engagement, initiated in 1998 to study the practices that improved student learning, has marked its first decade. Similar initiatives, such as the Documenting Educational Effectiveness Project (DEEP) (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005) and the Education Commission of the States (1995) conclude that the potential for deeper learning occurs in institutions where a combination of academic rigor and creative, meaningful experiences are pursued versus the didactic method of information transfer.

Changing student demographics have also impacted the learning equation. Today's college students are beset with multiple priorities, including jobs and families, which serve to edge out college as the central figure in their lives. Coupled with this press for attention is a growing consumer orientation. Among convenience and accessibility, students desire high quality, satisfying experiences that will capture their attention during and prepare them for life after college (Chickering & Kytle, 1999; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt & Associates, 2005).

Concomitant with student engagement is a heightened focus on student outcomes. The Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006) recently surveyed American institutions to determine how well they were preparing graduates for life after college. They concluded that students were under prepared for full engagement in a knowledge economy

that required considerably different skills than just a few generations ago. Skills like creativity, problem solving and communication are just a few necessary for 21st century workers. Among the Commission's recommendations was a focus at the university level on competency-based learning and greater emphasis on creativity and innovation.

One of the competencies cited as lacking most often in college graduates is written communication. In fact, the Nation's Report Card (NCES, 2003) reported that the "basic level" writing of students entering universities decreased between 1998 and 2002 and the latest assessment of high school seniors shows no improvement at the "proficient level" between 2002 and 2007 (NCES, 2007). Employers have also expressed dissatisfaction with the training and preparation of students, citing a gap between what students had been taught and what they needed to perform their job (NCES, 1995). A Faculty Leadership Task Force of the AACSB similarly concluded that the gap between practice and academic teaching had widened (Karathanos, 1999). In addition to employers' costs for training, basic skill deficiency also has "demonstrable social, economic, cultural, and civic implications" especially considering the employability of individuals and the sustainability of businesses globally (Smerd, 2007).

Internationally, institutions of higher learning are grappling with the same issues. Academe and policy makers in the United Kingdom, for example, believe that a "high skills society" is critical as they determine how to best pursue this vision from a European perspective. They agree that "skills and learning are seen as central to competing in a knowledge economy and are argued to be prerequisite of security, prosperity, employability and job satisfaction" (Lloyd & Payne, p.117, 2003). This leaves universities and the professorate with the crucial task of constructing and managing environments that are conducive to development of these 21st century skills.

The question for faculty then becomes, from an operational standpoint, how to offer experiences that are both academically challenging and creatively engaging. One simple, yet effective method helpful to this endeavor is suggested by the authors of *Student Success in College: Creating Conditions That Matter* (Kuh et al., 2005). They propose that faculty experiment with engaging pedagogies, limited only by their imagination. Faculty have but to approach their own curricula with an eye toward continual improvement to start the process. In discussing new perspectives on andragogy, Knowles, Swanson and Holton (2005) posit that when faculty eagerly search for ways to combine self-direction and academic excellence, it cultivates curiosity in and releases the energy of adult learners.

Literature Review of Superheroes in the Classroom

One pedagogical practice that has received more attention of late is the use of comic books. "Contemporary and engaging, comic books are a mature form of literature" that is international and growing (Gerde & Foster, 2008). In countries outside of the United States they are associated less with juveniles and are called by various names such as *historias em quadrinhos* (Brazil), *manhua and lianhuanhua* (China), *bandes dessinees* or BDs (France, Belgium), *fumetti* (Italy), *manga* (Japan), *manhhwa* (Korea) and *historietas* (Mexico). They reveal the culture of their society, reflecting problems and desires in the current world. The September 11, 2001 attack, for example, is addressed in *Amazing Spider Man #36* (cited in Gerde & Foster, p.245, 2008), as was the struggle of Jews during World War II in *Maus* (Speigelman, 1986). They have been used with success in graduate, undergraduate and

high school settings because of their appeal and accessibility to students from varied socio-economic backgrounds.

Many of the world's comic book producers explore a much wider range of genres than does the United States. While American comics predominantly focus on action adventure superheroes, this is only a small fraction of the topics in other countries (Mayfield, Mayfield & Genestre, 2001). An international comparison within the comic book industry revealed that each nation's distinct approach to this medium has produced its own distinct content and distribution footprint of graphic novels.

The French government, for example subsidizes its comic book industry and has created a commission for BDs on the level of the U.S. National Endowment for the Arts. French BDs are highly artistic and explore psychological drama, erotica and historical adventure, with readers tending to be more educated and better off economically. Readership by poorer audiences in France is rather more limited. Japan's *mangas* on the other hand are cited as one of the oldest and most successful in the global industry, read by as much as 95% of the population. Popular genres here include mafia/crime stories, sports, science fiction and "how-to" comics on career topics aimed at young professionals. Action adventure comics featuring superheroes are widely exported by the United States. The import of comics and film into other countries has subsequently made many popular U.S. characters easily recognizable abroad. The benefit of this is that familiar superheroes can be used in American classrooms to provide a common frame of reference for international students who possess varying cultural identities.

Comic books depicting superheroes have been used in academia and popular culture to explore social, legal, and moral dilemmas. University teachers have used superheroes to teach consumerism (Belk, 1987), sociology (Hall & Lucal, 1999), cultural studies (Park, 2002), and physics (Feder, 2002). By tackling uncomfortable topics like workplace discrimination in the superheroes' world, students not only see the universality of such issues but are also more open to discussing them since they are essentially removed from the problem (Gerde & Foster, 2008). Another benefit is that students find this genre to be more interesting. Westrup (2002) notes that physics students would much rather calculate the lift required for Superman to fly instead of a similar problem from a mundane textbook.

Film depicting live action superheroes enjoys the same benefits of comic books and because it is a moving, auditory medium, addresses the needs of students with different learning styles and can easily be used in seated or online course formats (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004). Although the literature shows evidence of growing interest in the topic of superheroes as a pedagogy, the articles are theoretical or descriptive. Champoux (2006) and van Es (2003) describe how to use selected film scenes to examine different ethics theories, while Shaw (2004) discusses how he used various Hollywood films to explore moral reasoning with students in his legal studies course. Feder (2002) and Gerde and Foster (2008) provide ideas on how to incorporate comics into various disciplines, but none of these articles are empirical.

The pedagogical use of feature films has been widely cited in the literature going back at least as far as two decades. The 1985 film version of *Death of a Salesman*, first produced on Broadway in 1949, has been used to explore generational struggles, corporate life and death. Other feature films highlighting powerful issues include *The Insider* (Touchstone Pictures, 1999), *Wall Street* (20th Century Fox, 1987), *Philadelphia* (TriStar Pictures, 1993), and *Norma Rae* (20th Century Fox, 1979) (cited in Shaw, 2004). Animated films have more

recently been used as a teaching resource to explore issues such as leadership theories, gender, motivation and power. Some examples include *Antz* (DreamWorks, 1998), *Mulan* (Disney, 1998), *Toy Story* (Disney, 1995), and *The Lion King* (Disney, 1994) (as cited in Champoux, 2001, 1999a). At the time of this writing, the author did not find any empirical studies using live action superhero films, although an extensive literature search was conducted using electronic databases, such as FirstSearch, EBSCO, ERIC, ABI/Inform, JSTOR, Academic Search Premier, ProQuest and ISI Web of Knowledge, as well as the references listed in the articles cited in this study.

From experiences gained through teaching an undergraduate course on management, the author of the current study observed that students enjoyed the video case study given as an end of semester assignment. Assessment of learning indicated that students were able to communicate many of the concepts however, the author contemplated ways to improve the

assignment in order to foster deeper learning skills, such as synthesis and evaluation. Consequently, the movie based on real-world scenarios was replaced by the X-Men film depicting a band of misunderstood superheroes fighting for good in their universe.

The current study experiments with using engaging pedagogy and investigates the efficacy of using superhero film in the classroom. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore how students' understanding of course concepts changed when they watched the X-Men movie and then imagined themselves as good superheroes in an unethical environment.

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle provides the theoretical framework for this study. Central to his theory is that adults transform experience into learning, whereby current experiences are made sense of by connecting them to past knowledge and future possibilities. Learning begins with a **concrete experience or event**, followed by **reflective observation**, which occurs when the new experience is viewed from a variety of perspectives. Watching the X-Men film was the event that marked the first stage of learning for students participating in the study. The second stage occurred when students identified the concepts of ethics and leadership in the parallel universe. At the third stage of **abstract conceptualization**, ideas are analyzed and integrated into new meanings and implications for the future are identified. In the study, students perceived that ethical considerations and leadership qualities were enduring concepts that permeated every type of environment, both real and imaginary. In Kolb's fourth and final stage, **active experimentation**, learners apply these new concepts to self by determining how the new knowledge will inform future action. By creating their own superhero identity, students used metaphor as a new lens through which to see themselves, transforming ethical leadership principles into personal traits and future behaviors to combat unethical organizations in their own universe.

The word metaphor derives from the Greek *metapherein*—*meta* meaning "to change" and *pherein* meaning "to bear," suggesting that it acts as a change agent to help transform what is known into new understandings (Levine, 2005). Metaphors also have the power to heighten awareness of existing ways of thinking and acting and to prompt us to think and act differently because it gives us a change in perspective (Cook-Sather, 2003). Using metaphors gives us permission to explore and analyze in ways that we never conceived of before. Imagination is also important to the process because it frees our thinking and helps us to unpack the literal representations of a metaphor and reconnect them to make new meanings (Yob, 2003).

Methods and Design

Data Collection

Students in an undergraduate course on management were invited to participate in a study labeled, "Film in the Classroom." This is a survey course required for all students enrolled in the Bachelor of Applied Science degree program where students learn how to apply a variety of principles for effective supervision of others. Approval from the University's Institutional Review Board was received and fifteen students out of twenty-five completed consent forms and participated in the research project. Three of the students in the study were male and twelve were female. There were 16 female students and 6 male students enrolled in the course. The average age of students taking this course is 34 and most are working either full- or part-time jobs.

A pre-test post-test design was used in the following manner. For the pre-test, students were asked to write a 2-3 page paper in which they identified five key characteristics of good leaders and how these would be used in an environment characterized by unethical practices. Students were instructed to consider all of the concepts covered during the

semester. Prior to the study, students completed reading assignments from the textbook on topics such as motivation, leadership, conflict management, ethics, legal issues and decision making. Each chapter of the textbook covered one topic, which was subsequently reviewed in class through large group discussion.

The treatment consisted of watching the first installment of the X-Men movie series. This particular movie was chosen because it is a model of diversity. Varying competencies, gender, age and race are well represented in the film, making the film accessible to all students.

The post-test involved writing a second paper, where students were to imagine themselves as an incognito superhero working in a corrupt environment, like the characters in the X-Men movie. Students were instructed to use "superhero" as a metaphor for their professional selves and were to describe their supernatural traits and how they would use them for good in their organization. The goal of each paper was to reveal the extent to which students could identify key concepts necessary for ethical leadership and to describe how those concepts would be applied. The guiding research question was: **How will students' understanding of ethics and leadership change after watching a superhero film?**

The treatment and post-test were sequenced to achieve the following benefits: to ensure "readiness to learn" and to capitalize on teaching theory (ways in which a facilitator influences an organism to learn, distinct from learning theory which explains how organisms learn). Pratt (1988) suggests that adult learners vary in their readiness to learn because each requires a varying amount of direction and support. Adults who are competent in one area of life may be highly motivated to learn, but because of their lack of knowledge in another domain (e.g., the classroom in general or a particular subject, in particular) may need more direction from the instructor regarding the mechanics or logistics of a learning activity or because of low confidence, may need more emotional support.

By watching the X-Men movie, participants were re-introduced to the literary device of metaphor. The film itself uses metaphorical images to construct character identities. A dangerous, bad-tempered animal with razor sharp claws is depicted as "Wolverine," while a

powerful, unpredictable weather condition is used to develop the character "Storm." Seeing the visual images of metaphor onscreen ensured that participants were better prepared to develop their own metaphors in writing.

Watching the movie first also created a common frame of reference that writing alone could not have ensured. Because students come to the learning environment with unique and varied past experiences, their individual ideas of superheroes run the gamut. As far as character studies go, there is an essential difference between Superman of the 1970's and Daredevil of the 1990's, where one is congenial and altruistic and the other dark and calculating. Since no single metaphor is perfectly suited to all tastes or situations, the movie's multiple representations of a superhero illustrated the depth and dimensionality of the metaphor. The preparation that the movie gave for the next part of the assignment also addressed the concern presented earlier that college students' basic writing skills are deficient.

The sequence of watching the film and then writing the paper is supported by Hilgard and Bower's (1966) cognitive theory regarding how information should be organized. Optimally, knowledge should be sequenced from simple to complex so that the learner can build upon the recently acquired knowledge. Transitioning from a visual medium to more complex written expression facilitated students' meaning making. The film also acted as a catalyst for what Wlodowski (1985) labels motivation to learn, fulfilling the principle that adults want to their learning experiences to be pleasurable.

The assignment concluded with a focus group interview in the form of a chat room session. Students were divided into three groups of five for focus group interviews. Chat room sessions via WebCT Vista were held with each group. Two open-ended questions were posed to students: *What are your reactions to the assignment?* and *How did the assignment affect your thinking about ethics and leadership?* Posing simple questions like these is a good way to "promote participants' self-disclosure through the creation of a permissive environment" (Marshall & Rossman, p. 84, 1995). Interaction in the focus group enables participants to further develop and refine their views, enhances data quality and, in the case of computer-mediated forums (such as chat rooms), has the added benefit of reducing anxiety since participants and moderator are physically separated (Patton, 2002). Chat room logs also provide a good record of what was discussed, eliminating the need for a recorder.

Data Analysis

"The primary charge during qualitative research is to capture, understand, and represent participants' perceptions and meanings through and in their words" (Ruona, p. 234, 2005). Hence, this study uses content analysis to explore students' perceptions as recorded in their written papers. Analysis was performed on both sets of papers to determine how the pre-test and post-test content compared.

The first step in analysis was to read through all of the data in order to get an overall feel for its sense, that is, the general ideas and tone that participants were communicating (Tesch, 1990). During this process, I reflected on the participants' comments in order to understand their meaning, making separate notes regarding the direction the data seemed to be headed in order to begin to sort through the raw data. It was essential that I continually referred back to the guiding research question as I began to uncover the meaning of participants' comments. Miles and Huberman (1994) posit that conceptual frameworks and research questions are the best defense against overload. They state that researchers should "be explicitly mindful of the purposes of your study and of the

conceptual lenses you are training on it, allowing yourself to be open and reeducated by the things you didn't know or expect to find" (p.56).

The second step in analysis was to organize the data by finding common themes or categories among all of the students' responses. Boyatzis (1998) calls these data driven codes because they consist of the words and phrases the researcher finds compelling, rather than labels created a priori from theory or prior research. I read and re-read each of the comments along with their category heading several times to determine if students' comments were correctly placed and then analyzed each response separately to determine its interconnection to other themes. Glaser and Strauss (1967) call this the constant-comparison method. At this stage I looked for saturation of categories, that is, the degree to which new comments minimally altered the dimensions of the category, as well as the regularity at which similar meanings were expressed. Lincoln and Guba (1985) note that this process helps to ensure that the breadth and depth of participants' intended meanings are accurately represented.

For the physical manipulation of data (ie. searching for key words, merging data to analyze across themes, recoding as new themes emerged, sorting by multiple criteria, etc.) I used the method recommended by Ruona (2005). She advises using Microsoft Office Word where tables can be set up to hold codes, participants' responses and researcher notes.

Results

Pre-Test

Students were instructed to identify five personal traits required for leaders to operate ethically. Analysis of the pre-test responses sorted into three main groups. On the whole, students seemed to understand the assignment instructions because fourteen out of fifteen papers listed at least some personal traits necessary to uphold an ethical environment. Many of the other examples they gave however, were not personal traits. They consisted of either descriptors of desirable organizational characteristics (like team-oriented environment and secure workplace) or general management competencies, such as being flexible.

One-third of students wrote about at least one desirable organizational characteristic instead of a personal trait and half of the students wrote about at least one administrative skill. These comments depict the entire arena of what could be defined as a functional atmosphere, but were not acutely focused on the role of personal character in ethics. Positive organizational characteristics are a byproduct of ethical leadership, and while administrative competencies are integral to effective management, they are ambiguously connected to ethics. The author labels these three categories of pre-test responses as personal traits, organizational characteristics and administrative competencies. These categories are presented with the corresponding student comments that show the frequency of occurrence in parentheses across cases below in table 1.

Table 1. Pre-test Paper: Traits

Theme	Examples
Personal Traits	Motivator (5), example setter (4), leader (3), honest (3), fair (3), self discipline/control (2), respectful (2), credible (1), consistent (1), internal locus of control (1)
Organizational Characteristics	Ethical environment (2), teamwork (1), EEOC (1), security (1), drug free environment (1)
Administrative Competencies	Communication (9), complaint management (2), facilitating change (2), flexible (1), ethical training (1), discipline subordinates (1), sense of purpose (1), problem solver (1), conflict resolution (1), ambitious (1), alert (1), hardworking (1), confident (1), listening (1), decisive (1), competent (1)

The struggle to accurately identify personal traits is connected to another observation. Students' writing was heavily constrained by their textbook. There was an abundance of direct quotations and paraphrased textbook terms used to illustrate the role of ethical leaders, showing an obvious attempt to tie their writing back to course concepts, albeit sometimes clumsily. Using the word count function in Microsoft Word indicated that direct textbook concepts accounted for forty percent or more of the discussion written by eight students. Sexual harassment and discrimination were two concepts from the textbook that students referenced most frequently.

Another central topic that emerged during the analysis of the pre-test papers had to do with following the law. Nine students used either "legal," "illegal," "unlawful," or "illegality" when discussing how leaders make ethical judgments. This is accurate on its face since ethical behaviors involve legal considerations, but it only a starting point. Well-read students of ethics know that just because something is legal doesn't mean that it is ethical.

The following findings are reported because of their contribution to the overall interpretation of the students' responses rather than because of frequency across cases. Three students acknowledged the cost of being an ethical employee, two of which revealed challenges in their own workplaces. Their willingness to expose themselves in this way indicates that they have applied their knowledge about ethics to their own circumstances. Below are their poignant comments.

I work for a company that discriminates on the basis of race and sex. The company also takes hours from jobs that are over billed and bills them to various other clients. This scenario creates tension in my day to day endeavors and causes me to constantly question my reasoning for staying with the company. I disagree completely with the unethical behavior and discrimination, but on the other hand, I have to focus on keeping my job..... In an organization that is so characterized as being unethical, honesty can be a career liability. At the same time though, if the intention is to turn an unethical and discriminatory organization into a better place for all employees, being seen as an honest leader is critical (Case 1).

It is pretty easy to sit back as a manager and let things go but when you get into legality is when a lot of eyebrows are raised. The ramifications of a lawsuit could be tremendous to our company. I don't think it is worth overlooking the problem when one racial lawsuit could end all of our jobs entirely (Case 11).

In my job as a server, there would be days that we would try to be the first to arrive at work. This was to get all of the best silverware we could for ourselves. It always left someone with not enough silver to get through breakfast....It's wrong to pocket cash transactions. If you see this happening, tell the manager and don't follow in their wrong footsteps. Also, the ethical thing would be to not clock someone else in who is going to be late for work. This could cause you to lose your job (Case 6).

Finally, an interesting finding was that four students used literary devices in their first papers. One student used simile to describe the workplace as a human body with parts working together. The other three students wrote first-person accounts of how they would perform in organizations they created. One was an employee in the Worst of All Division of the Bad Behavior Company, one was the HR Manager in ABC Corporation and the third was a newly promoted supervisor in XYZ Company. All of these fictitious workplaces were corrupt. Given that the instructions for the first paper requested that students simply describe five personal traits for ethical leadership, the liberty they took in expanding upon it shows a higher level of abstraction and openness to more creative assignments.

Post-Test

Analysis of papers in time period two involved looking at students' super powers from several angles. Traits were first analyzed to see what they had in common and then how they differed from each other. What the author found was that students created powers that could be described along three dimensions: physical, spiritual and mental. For example, Case #8 could send electric shock from her body to restrain scoundrels, Case 13 used her Christian beliefs to spiritually transform the ambivalent and Case 5 could read others' minds to find out if they had a secret agenda. This array of the super powers was not only helpful to view the full spectrum of students' creativity, but it also showed their tacit understanding that there are multiple approaches to upholding ethical principles. Students' understanding on this point was not as evident in the pre-test papers.

The students' super powers were also analyzed according to the level of responsibility they targeted. All students included some example of combating individual bias or unethical practice by coworkers. In fact, unethical behavior at the individual level of responsibility is seen in every paper and accounts for the majority of examples across all of the papers in the post-test. The following examples illustrate this category.

I can use my power of invisibility when I see that an employee is tempted to say or do something that is against company policy. When an employee is tempted to do something wrong, I can give them a message not to do it or think about it before acting. It will be like their subconscious is speaking (Case 3).

My magnetic ears will beep louder as I get closer to those slacking off from their job and then I can confront them (Case 6).

My mind control powers would be used to produce only honest and fair thoughts. Employees would be respectful, considerate and encouraging of each other (Case 2).

Much like Wonder Woman with her truth lasso, I can look at someone and use my invisible truth rays to penetrate their brain so that they tell the truth (Case 10).

Seven of fifteen students also zeroed in on systemic ethical problems in the organization that oppressed insiders, while one student's paper targeted the corporation's social irresponsibility to society in general. The scenario that this student painted was of a waste management company guilty of years of polluting the environment. The organization was subsequently brought to task by "Coach," whose main power was the ability to infuse crooked managers with moral character. These findings suggest that students recognized that unethical behavior can occur at all levels of the organization.

The most fruitful analysis of the post-test data focused on the purpose of the super power. Using the guiding research question, I looked for meanings that addressed how students intended to use their leadership qualities. Three categories emerged: powers used to punish offenders, powers used to reinforce coworkers' good behavior, and powers designed to empower self. Table 2 displays these categories with the corresponding super powers, and are sorted by case.

Table 2. Post-test: Purpose of Super Powers

Case No. & Nickname	Super Powers
1 Crusader#	Telepathy to stop corruption~ Teleporting to rescue beleaguered^ Invisibility used to improve personal effectiveness & leadership*
2 Corporate Evolutionary	Precognition to identify and stop corrupt individuals~ Super hearing/vision to discern & increase awareness*
3 SuperSupervisor	Invisibility to reinforce good behavior^ Magic touch creates rewards for co-workers^
4 Unnamed	Invisibility to discover evil & report it~ Telekinesis to weed out "bad apples" before hiring~
5 JaLa	Mind reading and hypnotic eyes to discern true intentions and transform~
6 Hadora	Discernment to see troublemakers~ Magnetic ears to find trouble*
7 Coach#	Infuse others with super leadership abilities~ Lead by example to inspire others to do what's right*
8 The Discriminator	Electric shock to punish rule violators~
9 Radiant Riley	Mind control to change negative mindsets~ "Blast to the past" to help others recall and emulate

	when they were helped^ Emotional wand to spread understanding^
10 Truth Seeker	Invisible truth rays to expose deception and instill honesty~
11 Do Right Man#	Role reversal so that offenders can change places with oppressed and be transformed~ Magnetic force to make offenders pay attention & comply with rules~ Sends physical ailments to evildoers~
12 Multi-Girl	Multitasking to do the jobs of 10 over worked employees*
13 Yoke	Christian beliefs to eliminate negativity~
14 Crimson the Professional	Read/alter minds of discriminators~ Send electric shock and temporary sensory loss as discipline~ Turns invisible in the presence of evil*
15 Ethicist	Telekinesis, telepathy and invisibility to help others^

Note. Symbol for male students is #. Symbols representing purpose of superpower are ~ = transforming/punishing others, ^ = reinforcing good or helping in others, * = empowering self.

Subsequent to the examination of each super power, a wide angle lens enables the reader to see that the super powers can be translated into moral qualities. An inductive analysis of the super powers listed in table 2 shows that they exemplify a variety of personal traits such as: accountability (see cases 1 and 4), good judgment (see cases 6 and 10), conscientiousness (see cases 3 and 12), equity/social justice (see cases 9 and 11), empathy (see cases 1 and 3), honesty (see cases 2 and 4) and altruism (see cases 1, 3 and 9). In one example, "SuperSupervisor" turns invisible so that she can follow people without their knowing and whisper reaffirmations when they do good things. She also uses her magic to create just the right kind of incentives that will motivate them the most. Post-test papers revealed a wider range of personal traits than the pre-test papers.

Differences based on gender were also analyzed. When male students' super powers were compared to female students', the intent of their powers as well as the number of powers they created were comparable. On the whole, the full spectrum of purposes was represented in the male students' comments. Crusader used all three types of powers,

Coach used two and Do Right Man used one, where transforming or punishing wrongdoers was common to all. The male students' responses are comparable to the female students' in that 9 out of 12 also created transforming powers. The fact there were only three male participants in the study is consistent with the historical composition of the course and program. Female students typically constitute 60-70% of students enrolled in the course.

Focus Group Interviews

Students participated in focus group interviews as a way for the author to check the meaning gleaned from the written papers. Three chat room sessions were scheduled in WebCT during two weekday evenings, approximately two weeks after the post-test papers were submitted. Students had familiarity with WebCT since they had used it earlier in the semester to submit assignments, although the chat room function was not used as part of the course. Three students participated in the first session lasting 23 minutes, one student participated in the second session that lasted 7 minutes and four students joined the third focus group session that lasted 19 minutes, for a total of eight students overall.

As the facilitator, I arrived in the chat room a few minutes prior to the scheduled time and posted a greeting that everyone could read as preparation for our discussion. Two of the sessions (those with one and four participants, respectively) started slowly in the beginning as we waited for tardy participants to arrive. Both of these groups had difficulty finding a flow to conversation. In the remaining session, students generally arrived on time and discussion began quickly.

In the opening minutes, I gave participants instructions that I would present two questions to the group and each person should feel free to answer and provide follow up thoughts. I also stated that we would plan to spend at least between 20-30 minutes together. Participants were asked to describe their reaction to the assignment as well as discuss how their knowledge of ethics was affected by the film.

Students' discussion tended to gravitate more toward how they felt about the assignment rather than what they learned. Students also enjoyed revealing their super powers to the group and discussing how they could collaborate with each other. Because the number of interview participants was small, key responses that illustrated the central themes were combined and are presented below.

Instructor: What did you think about the assignment?

Case 13: I thought that it was interesting and also different. I loved the opportunity to create my own character.

Case 15: I loved it very much. I think allowing us to be creative using what we learned in the book was great. I hope I didn't go too far. I just felt all superheroes have background information on how they became superheroes.

Case 1: I thought it was an interesting assignment, I have seen the X-men movies several times so I liked that, the only difficult part I had on both assignments was wrapping my mind around why I would try and change the organization rather than getting out of the situation.

Instructor: How did watching the X-Men movie effect how you thought about leadership and ethics?

Case 14: X-Men gave me guidance on how to not allow those to discourage me who do not understand why some powers (personal attributes) were necessary. For example Xavier, their leader, was encouraging them to use their powers for good.

Case 15: Ironic for me, I'm a supervisor, so this entire assignment became very personal. I often find myself opposing some ethics I'm asked to demonstrate in my leadership role. I actually told my HR Director and COO about our assignment and my superhero. They were impressed.

Case 13: Well, I saw and have also experienced by working in corporate America that you are constantly battling good and evil. In the movie you could see how bad leadership produces bad people and vice versa. People tend to follow the leader even if it goes against who they are.

Instructor to case 13: What do you mean by people?

Case 13: The people consist of anyone who has a leader. It could be from the secretary to the SVP reporting to the CEO. I think (not conclusive) that people tend to act against what they know is right because they want to be accepted within the group, have fear of being ostracized, have fear of losing their job, etc.

Instructor: Does anyone want to add anything to this?

Case 7: Yes, I think that peers can be effected/influenced by poor leadership or unethical practices as well. I think that it depends on the circumstances. Let's say, your peer is disgruntled that he/she has not been compensated fairly by the manager. This has caused him/her to become very negative and maybe start calling in, have poor production, etc. Even though it's not the peer's intention to become negative, if a similar situation happens to him/her, they will remember what happened to the friend and may take on some of the mannerisms of the friend.

Case 5: (To instructor) How creative were the superheroes? It would be nice if everyone was in the room to share their experience doing this assignment.

Case 1: My superhero was an amalgamation, really. I used powers of teleportation, invisibility and telepathy to become like the shadow from the old radio dramas.

Case 15: I had invisibility and telepathy as two of my powers. Case 1, we could have been great partners (ha, ha).

Case 5: Role playing my character was really easy.

Case 15: Yeah, it made you use your imagination and be creative.

Discussion and Conclusions

Although students were given relatively open parameters for writing the first paper, many seemed stuck in "book report" mode. Students were given the assignment to write about personal traits needed to combat an unethical environment but many wrote about administrative competencies (skills honed through training) or desirable organizational characteristics instead. While these are related elements of ethical work environments, these factors do not clearly show students' intention to impact the organization in an ethical manner. For example, in the pre-test papers, communication was cited by nine students as

a trait needed by ethical leaders. In fact, being a good communicator does not necessarily indicate that a leader is ethical since that same skill can be used for deceptive purposes.

Another possible explanation for this result may be attributable to students' past classroom conditioning where reciting the text is a safer response than freer thinking and writing. It is also possible that the assignment instructions may have needed more clarification. Given that several students correctly completed the assignment in the pre-test by writing about personal traits like fairness, honesty, and respect for others, the more likely conclusion is that the majority of students were not fully able to explain how one's personal values contribute to an ethical environment. This is an important distinction for students learning about ethics because the key to living ethically is realizing that more is required than just understanding the concept. Most people caught in ethical dilemmas did not foresee or intend to be in a compromising position and those who navigate successfully through the pitfalls were clear and intentional about their values beforehand.

During the semester, students were introduced to the basics of ethics—its definition, guidelines for determining ethical behavior and the organization's role in maintaining an ethical environment. It is encouraging that students' pre-test papers revealed a foundational knowledge. Before the treatment, students showed that they understood the cost of being an ethical leader. Although they had difficulty articulating the many traits that are necessary, the realization that ethical leadership may come at a personal cost is a good start to grasping the full implications of the concept. For example, students acknowledged that being truthful in difficult circumstances or refusing to clock in a co-worker may be detrimental to one's career advancement or peer acceptance.

After watching the X-Men movie, students' papers more consistently reflected ethical principles. Before the treatment, students wrote about workplace characteristics even though they were instructed to focus on personal traits. Every student identified ethical leadership traits in the post-test. Many of the superhero nicknames they created, like "Crusader", "SuperSupervisor," "Truth Seeker" and "Ethicist," clearly promoted moral values. The name-creating segment of this assignment is informative because it shows how one's name is inextricably linked to self identity and tells others who we are. The fact that students chose names reflecting ethical standards shows that they identified with the role of ethical leader and took their knowledge of ethics to the next level of personal application.

The process of creating and then role-playing how to use their superpowers also reveals that students see themselves as ethical actors, that they believe that their actions can make a difference and that they intend to act in an ethically responsible manner. Although the mental exercise occurred in a virtual environment, the implications for practice are promising. When learners provisionally try a new behavior and discuss it in their writing, there is an increased likelihood that the new learning will endure (Knowles, et al., 2005). This is particularly important since the goal of every instructor is that learning will stick beyond the classroom.

The fact that many students are employed may have benefited them in this exercise because they were able to use real life examples. Plausible work situations were commonly used to explain the actions of their superheroes. Work experience and age would not seem to impede the applicability of this pedagogy with younger or less experienced students however, since the medium is youth-oriented and personal ethics are necessary in all realms of life.

Kolb's experiential learning theory describes the connection between experience and action as a cycle. Once a learner experiences a salient event, she or he reflects on what the experience means and how it fits into what is already known. The learner then considers

what the implications are for the future and adjusts behavior to incorporate the newly acquired knowledge. In this case, students would transfer what was practiced virtually into work life. Ideally the learner will convert this new knowledge into action however, the circumstances and timing of when that occurs is determined by the learner. The facilitator's most important job is to encourage and provide the context for the process to unfold.

The power of metaphors themselves to shape behavior is examined in a recent article by Cross, Ambrose and Cross (2007). The authors contend that metaphors are strong devices that influence both thought and action. They cite examples where voter behavior changed in response to metaphoric speeches when politicians used phrases like "children are our future" and "children are our most valuable asset." Other illustrations of the shaping influence of metaphors can be seen in societal responses to metaphorical worldviews, where reality is depicted as either a machine or an organism. Organizations with mechanistic worldviews value and pursue activities that predict, produce and control phenomena in search of linear causal explanations, whereas worldviews that see life as an organism engage in activities that support holistic, systemic integration.

Using the superhero metaphor required students to be imaginative, as shown by their creative descriptions. Imagination's role in fueling action cannot be underestimated. Alvarez and Merchan (1992) note that imagination connects ends and means, presenting both in a continuum so that past and future events are presented in such a way that they are seen as recollection and anticipation of one main event. By imagining the fantastical, students were "given permission" to venture beyond the textbook and write more freely. A good example can be seen in a comparison of how the trait honesty is written about before and after students watched the movie. In the pre-test, honesty is most often described as simply a trait that a leader should possess. After the treatment, students perceived that a leader's job is also to ensure that others are honest and that an atmosphere of truthfulness pervades the organization. Truth Seeker, for instance, used his invisible truth rays to expose deception and turn deceivers into honest employees. The nuances of ethical behavior were more apparent in the second papers because students showed that ethics are not simply the things you do, they reflect the kind of person you are and what you stand for.

The author concludes that the findings have substantive significance. Patton (2002) states that qualitative findings are determined to have substantive significance when coherency and consistency are evidenced in support of findings. In addition to the multiple examples and the recurring themes across cases, the chat room discussions confirm that students found that their creativity was stimulated and the application of principles was enabled by the assignment. Further, findings are said to have substantive significance when the findings deepen the understanding of the phenomenon and when they are consistent with other knowledge.

The phenomenon in the study was the experience of watching the X-Men movie and applying superhero metaphor. Through this experience, a window is opened allowing outsiders to see how students became intentional about defining the character values most important to them and how they had fun vividly describing the manner in which they plan to use those values in the workplace. The literature on role playing states that when "context

is provided it gives cues about the level at which a response is expected" and puts the actor in the role of expert (Patton, p. 367, 2002). In the post-test, students "rose to the occasion" by letting go of inhibitions and fashioning an empowered new self that they had complete license to create and convey.

Finally, substantive significance is found when the findings are useful for some intended purpose. The stated purpose of this qualitative study, as presented in the introduction, was

to evaluate the efficacy of using superhero films as a pedagogical method by exploring how students' understanding of course concepts changed when they watched the X-Men movie and then imagined themselves as good superheroes in an unethical environment. Students demonstrated in their writings that though they were not given any additional treatment save the movie, which was fantasy-based and not directly tied to course concepts, their understanding of ethics concepts improved.

Implications for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning

One of John Dewey's most enduring educational principles is that learning happens when students are interested and active in the process. He "emphasizes that the continuities between school and non-school life is a way of adding emotional intensity and relevance to formal instruction, promoting methods of discovery..." (Fisherman & McCarthy, p.22, 1998). Experimenting with new pedagogical methods and applying established ones in novel ways, like using superhero films and writing with metaphors, exemplifies Dewey's philosophy and helps faculty to effectively respond to the oft competing aims of education policy-makers, workforce employers and students. Dewey's philosophy is not new but it has increasing significance for today's institutions of higher learning because it integrates student and curriculum, while valuing academic rigor.

Faculty are limited only by their imagination when it comes to innovating their curriculum. The author explored the use of superhero film precisely because it was unusual as a method in the sometimes staid management discipline, and because it is culturally popular. Films depicting superheroes have flourished in recent years (X-Men series, Batman series, Spiderman Series, Fantastic Four, etc.) and their appeal is ubiquitous, making this appropriate for use in courses with international students who easily recognize the characters. Daring to employ the odd gives students opportunities to practice thinking creatively. Faculty that exemplify creativity in their own behavior promote environments that encourage and reward creativity in students (Knowles, et al., 2005).

As a well-established practice, writing with metaphors enables the free flow of ideas irrespective of discipline. When faculty outside of the English department use different kinds of writing assignments in courses that typically use writing mainly as a reporting tool, students are the better for it because of the continuity across subject areas. Students are also eager to apply knowledge from one course to another. This is exemplified in the pre-test writings where students were unaware of the post-test assignment and used literary license in their first assignment. Including metaphors in learning activities proves useful because of the new meanings it produces and the insights it provides to the writer (Yob, 2003).

Experiential learning such as described here produces dividends long after the initial experience. A classroom environment that allows students to practice using and expressing

new knowledge in novel ways is self-reinforcing, and particularly so for non-traditional students who can draw on knowledge acquired from previous work experiences. Their ability to build upon prior knowledge validates that learning can occur in every context and that learning is "cyclical in nature because whatever we learn in one experience is then applied to new experiences" (Merriman & Caffarella, p. 246, 1999). By venturing to use superhero films and metaphors in the classroom, instructors deepen students' learning experience, revitalize their curriculum and find enjoyment in the process.

Given the focus of this study, it is fitting to explore the ethics of using this exercise in the classroom. Clearly, students' superheroes displayed the salient qualities each admired and reflected their attempt to positively impact their environment. It would be an

oversimplification however, to conclude that every superhero's actions were purely beneficent. A multitasking superhero that eliminates the drudgery of her oppressed coworkers is one thing but one who forcibly controls another's mind gives pause. Using telepathy to change behavior against another's will may result in achieving the common good but it falls short of respecting the individuality and dignity of the one. The ability to balance competing values is the crux of ethics. Ethical dilemmas exist precisely because of the complexity in deciding what constitutes right and wrong in a particular situation.

The X-Men movie was chosen, in part, because it illustrates this struggle. All of the mutants in the film possessed supernatural powers but they did not all agree about the best way to use their powers for mankind. The set of characters that tried to preserve the life of their attackers were depicted as good and those who sought equality through extreme means were depicted as evil. Who's to say that caring for others outweighs justice or vice versa and how are the two reconciled when they seem mutually exclusive? And what about the character who bumbles along and reluctantly or by happenstance acts in a way that puts him on the "good" side? Is this person really acting ethically? While the film addressed these issues off-handedly and brought closure to the big questions, it would serve the course well in the future to purposely include this discussion at the end of the exercise.

This discussion also would not be complete without addressing the cultural relativity of ethics. Hofstede's (2001) study describing the five dimensions of national culture (time orientation, collectivism vs. individualism, power distance, masculine vs. feminine, and uncertainty avoidance) provides insight for global awareness and appreciation. Since ethics reflect the social norms and values of society, discussion and understanding of ethical principles require knowledge of this framework. Accordingly, superhero characters used to illustrate one nation's ethical values may be incongruent in another. It is important that instructors take this into consideration when trying to adopt this pedagogy.

Although participation in the focus group sessions was smaller than expected, it is clear from the interviews that students enjoyed the exercise. Since the purpose of the chat session was to check my understanding of their papers, I was careful not to lead participants or introduce thoughts that might sway their opinions. Getting students to verbally crystallize how their learning occurred was harder than anticipated. In retrospect, it is not surprising that students had difficulty articulating their responses since answering this question requires deep introspection at a level at which students may not have been able to operate at that time, possibly due to the constraints of having completed a long workday, discomfort with the focus group environment or too much time having passed after watching the movie. Subsequent focus group sessions might be improved by a pilot test, both to refine the clarity of the questions and to give the facilitator more practice with this

art form. After some reflection, it also seems that value can be added to the exercise by exploring the questionable uses of power and revisiting the role of competing values in light of the film. Students readily discussed their superhero, which would provide a natural segue to exploring the ethical implications of using certain powers.

Future studies on this topic might also be improved by expanding the number and composition of participants. Although the findings are not generalizable, readers are able to gain a deeper insight into the learning experiences of these 15 students richly retold in their own words. Sampling students from courses in a different discipline, possibly including multiple sections to achieve a larger sample, with a more balanced gender representation and age distribution would be a worthwhile next step in this line of research.

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