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Teaching Ethics with the Help of Hollywood

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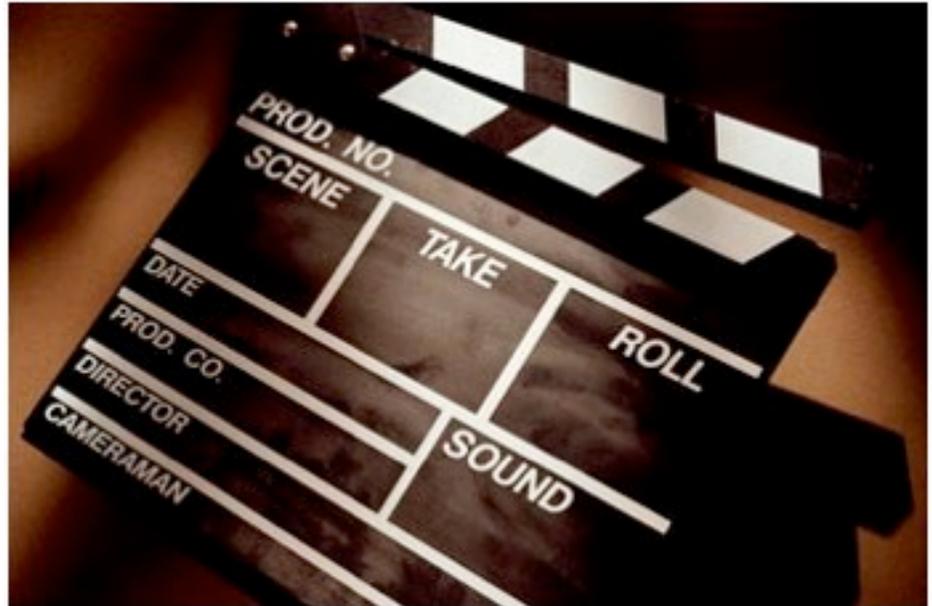
In the last issue of *Ethical News*, Don Wycliff addressed teaching the ambiguity of ethics in his guest commentary about teaching journalism ethics at Loyola University Chicago. Don passed along the following lesson: "The conversation's the thing." I could not agree more. At the beginning of the semester, I tell my students that the success of the course depends on their active participation and that I expect lively debate on the issues at hand.

However, I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel as if I am the only one in the room who is excited about the concepts and case studies. So how do we get the conversation going? What tools can we utilize to break down difficult ethical theories and philosophical approaches? How can we encourage our students to dissect an ethical dilemma and come up with multiple compelling arguments?

I try to engage my students with stories from movies, TV shows, novels and popular culture to help them evaluate and understand moral issues. We usually begin each class talking about ethics in the news. Some days we watch an ad on YouTube, go to a corporate website, or download a controversial photograph. Even though this might take a few minutes, I believe the visual element is critical to the students' understanding of the issue. The abstract is made real when the students see the images; thus the conversation begins.

I also use movies to get the conversation about ethics going because it enables the visual learners in the class to see the images, abstract the concepts and analyze the situation from their own perspectives. As teachers, we need to be aware of our students' needs and integrating a film into our classes might encourage the visually-oriented students to better grasp the material. Good and Dillon (2002) note that their book, *Media Ethics Goes to the Movies* grew out of course they taught: "We compared notes and found that abstract ethical theories became vivid for our students when played out in the dramatic narrative of film" (p. ix).

For years, scholars have written about the pedagogical importance of using movies



to teach ethics. Lee Wilkins (1987) wrote an essay that explains her use of certain films, outlines her criteria for selecting films, and lists films that could be successfully used in mass media ethics courses. Good and Dillon (2002) assert, "when used astutely in the classroom, movies can become a valuable teaching tool, a powerful lens through which to examine media professions" (p. ix). Berger and Pratt (1998) conclude that certain films can "make ethical inquiry less abstract than it should be and ethical self-questioning more relevant to business agendas than it is at present" (p. 1822).

In my experience, movies enable us to define crisis moments, distill moral issues and discuss at a meta-level the narrative being presented. I like to show *Toxic Sludge is Good for You* in Principles of Public Relations because it provides a raw and critical perspective from which we can discuss the role of public relations in a democracy, and *Ernon: The Smartest Guys in the Room* in Issues in Corporate Communication because it allows the students to arrive at the obvious moral conclusions on their own.

Another great resource is *The Moral of Story* by Nina Rosenstand. The sixth edition of this book includes coverage of and examples from recent research, events and films. After flipping through this book, I decided to begin my graduate ethics course

by showing *Return to Paradise* because it demonstrated nuances of morality and personal responsibility.

I encourage you to weigh the costs (giving up precious class time) and benefits (engaging students and getting the conversation started) of using films in not only your media ethics course but also any course in which you discuss ethics. It is our responsibility to elucidate complex moral dilemmas for our students and we need all the help we can get in doing so.

References

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