AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD FOR TEACHING THE CONCEPT OF THEORY IN RESEARCH METHODOLOGY COURSES: LESSONS FROM HOUSE M.D.

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Abstract

Management students need to learn the concept of theory in order to both understand managerial latent dynamics of organizations and to carry out research. However, teaching this concept using traditional teaching methods is difficult as the concept of theory is sophisticated in nature and the learning styles of today's students necessitate alternative teaching methods. Thus, in this study it is argued that one television series, entitled House M.D., can be used as an alternative tool to teach the concept of theory, and the ways in which it can be used in the research methodology classroom are explained.

Keywords: TV series in management education, the concept of theory, Generation Y, House M.D.

ARAŞTIRMA YÖNTEMLERİ DERSİNDE KURAM KAVRAMININ ÖĞRETİLMESİNE ALTERNATİF BİR YAKLAŞIM: HOUSE M.D. DİZİSİNDEN DERSLER

Özet

İşletme/Yönetim öğrencileri hem modern örgütlerin yönetsel dinamiklerini anlamak hem de araştırma yapabilmek için kuram geliştirme ve test etme süreçlerine hakim olmalıdırlar. Ancak bu kavramın oldukça kapsamlı ve karmaşık bir yapıya sahip olması ve günümüzde öğrencilerin öğrenme biçimlerinin geçmişe göre farklılıklar arz etmesi alternatif öğretim yaklaşımlarının kullanılmasını gerektirmektedir. Bu bağlamda bu çalışmada House M.D. isimli televizyon dizisinin kuram kavramının öğretilmesinde alternatif bir uygulama olabileceği savunulmakta ve bu alternatif uygulamanın ders ortamında nasıl gerçekleştirilebileceği açıklanmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler:İşletme eğitiminde televizyon dizileri, kuram kavramı, Y jenerasyonu, House M.D.

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1. Introduction

University education aims to achieve two significant goals. First, it aims to teach students the main principles of scientific thinking. It could be said that this aim is common to all universities. The second goal of university education is to teach students the detailed knowledge of one (or sometimes two or more) scientific disciplines. In terms of these arguments, it could be said that the main goals of management education are to equip students with the ability to uncover and investigate managerial theories and to give them the knowledge they need while working in the world of modern organizations. Indeed, management school curriculums are usually designed in accordance with these aims. However, I argue that one specific course, generally entitled research methodology, would serve perfectly to realize one of these aims. In particular, the concept of theory has a specific importance in the research methodology course because if a student grasps the main principles of this concept he or she can use this logic by applying scientific methods to solve managerial and other kinds of problems. In the light of these assumptions and arguments, in this study the intricate structure of the concept of theory and its importance to the management discipline is discussed, the reasons for alternative teaching methods required to teach this concept are explained and one example using one of these methods is presented.

2. The Concept of Theory and Its Importance for Management Discipline

In the seminal work of Bacharach[1] the concept of theory is defined as a statement of relationships between units approximated or observed in the empirical world. Approximated units cannot be measured directly, which is why scientists use observed units, or variables, in order to understand the latent nature of phenomena. Thus, it could be said that scientists use theories in order to find answers to the questions of how, why and when. However, as Bacharach is aware of the inadequacy of this simple definition, in the same study he adds another detailed explanation:

"In more detailed terms, a theory may be viewed as a system of constructs and variables in which the constructs are related to each other by propositions and the variables are related to each other by hypotheses."

However, knowing what a theory is is not sufficient to develop or test it. It is well known that editors of eminent management journals periodically complain about the lack of theoretical contribution to the research, and for that reason they regularly produce editorials instructing researchers on how to conduct research with a strong theoretical core. For example, in their essay explaining what a theory is not, Sutton and Staw[2] state that references, data, lists of diagrams, variables or constructs, hypotheses or predictions alone do not constitute a theory. They also

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[1] S. B. Bacharach, "Organizational theories: Some criteria for evaluation", **The Academy of Management Review**, 1989, Vol. 14, No.4. p.498.
[2] R. I. Sutton & B. M. Staw, "What theory is not?", **Administrative Science Quarterly**, 1995, 40, pp.372-377.

indicate that to give a simple definition for the concept of theory is almost impossible. According to Sutton and Staw[3] a strong theory consists of an explanation that tells us why acts, events, structure and thoughts occur. In addition, Bacharach[4] states that a theory must be falsifiable and utilitarian. Moreover, a theory should be generalizable. It can be seen from these statements that to develop or to test a theory is not a simple task. It is also well known that social phenomena have a more latent and dynamic structure than that of other sciences. These differences make the job of the social scientist rather difficult. For instance, in the world of organizations, one might wonder that why it is that some organizations adopt structures, schemes, norms etc., even if adopting them harms the efficiency of the organization. Normally, the person who seeks an explanation for this phenomenon requires theories in order to shed light on it. Thus, as Weick[5] states the process of developing and testing a theory means solving a problem. A person who faces a problem firstly uses existing theories in order to solve it and if those theories are not sufficient to explain the observed situation he or she needs to develop an alternative theory. At this point, a researcher follows these steps: he or she identifies the problem by observing its concepts and measurable variables, suggests an explanation for this observation, demonstrates the superiority of this explanation in the face of alternative rationales, develops hypotheses in terms of this explanation and finally tests them using appropriate methods. Each of these steps includes different and intricate sub-steps and requires specific knowledge. Fundamentally, research methodology courses are designed to fulfill these needs. However, as mentioned above, in the field of social sciences developing or testing a theory is a challenging task and most management educators and students are in need of an effective way to teach and/or understand this concept.

As a scientific discipline, management deals with managerial and organizational issues and decision-making is an inseparable part of this. In which case, a middle or top-level manager has to develop alternative theories and test them using scientific methods in order to make a suitable decision. In short, the concept of theory should be understood and taken seriously by both management researchers and students, the potential future managers. However, because of the difficulties mentioned above, it is hard to ensure that students fully comprehend the issues using traditional teaching methods. Furthermore, the personalities and learning styles of students who are members of Generation Y require some additional and alternative teaching methods.

[3] R. I. Sutton & B. M. Staw, **(a.g.m.)**
[4] S. B. Bacharach, **(a.g.m.)**
[5] K. E. Weick, "Theory construction as disciplined imagination" **Academy of Management Review**, 1989, Vol. 14, No. 4,p.520.

3. Why We Need Alternative Teaching Methods in Management Education and What They Are

Before explaining various alternative or contributive teaching methods, it would be useful to discuss why we need these methods. Modern education, especially at undergraduate and graduate level, directs individuals to seek truths by doubting and querying. However, the institutionalized form of traditional education, which is based on lectures, makes it difficult to realize this aim. In the traditional form of education, professors narrate and students listen as if receiving unquestionable truths. Unfortunately, this institutionalized classic system is still used by some scholars, especially in the periphery. The followers of this traditional system sometimes attempt to create a so-called 'active' classroom atmosphere by using presentations; but, this method invariably fails to stir students' creativity.

When we analyze the value chain of management education in an historical context we see a change from faculty-based education to student-based education. As well as knowledge revolution, internet proliferation is one of the key events of this change[6]. Therefore, management educators should adapt to this change by using or creating alternative teaching methods. Change is mainly about the style of teaching, teaching materials etc., and professors use these in order to enhance the efficiency of the education they are delivering. One advantage of this kind of change is that it does not require that all the contents of a course be altered. For instance, in a management theories course one professor might incorporate literary works into his or her lessons in order to make the life and working conditions of the classic management era more accessible and comprehensible to students. Thus, it could be argued that the application of alternative teaching methods does not require a radical change in the content of a course, and that these methods make it easier for students to understand the lessons and grasp the theories behind them particularly a challenging area such as the nature of scientific theories.

Most of today's college students were born in a global and online world and communication tools are inseparable part of their lives. This generation is often known as Gen Y and, as Sojka and Fish[7] state, the members of this generation constitute the largest population of business education students in American history. It could be argued that this situation is roughly the same for other countries because Gen Y consists of the people who were born between 1977 and 1994. Moreover, members of a new generation named Gen Z are about to start their college education and this latest generation learnt to write using computers. Members of Gen Y are distinct from previous generations in that they have some specific characteristics and these characteristics influence their ability to learn. One of the most important characteristics of this generation is their limited attention span, and a tendency to personalize events in order to understand them. In brief, Gen Y does not respond to

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[6] P. N Friga et al., "Changes in graduate management education and new business schools strategies for the 21st century", **Academy of Management Learning and Education**, 2003, Vol. 2, No. 3, p.234.

[7] Z, J. Sojka & M. S. B. Fish, "Brief in-class role plays: An experiential teaching tool targeted to Generation Y students", **Marketing Education Review**, 2008, Vol. 18, No. 1, p.25.

traditional lectures or training methods and for that reason educators need alternative methods[8]. As Auster and Wylie[9] indicate, students prefer to take part in more active lessons and when professors use pedagogical methods preferred by their students, they find the students' classroom performance improves[10].

The literature shows there are various alternative teaching methods and professors use them in order to create a more dynamic and active classroom atmosphere. For example, Sojka and Fish[11] suggest scholars use Brief In-Class Role Plays (BIRPs) because this method is based on real situations, the role-plays are brief and do not overload students with a great many details. According to these scholars, these features of BIRPs are well matched to the characteristics of Gen Y. In another study Flaim and Chiodo[12] argue that using novels in social studies would contribute to the students' conception as novels help us imagine the things we theoretically know. In addition, students would be able to find real-life examples of the theories in novels. Using novels in management education is a common alternative teaching method and there are several studies on this topic. For instance, a study by Bumpus[13] gives us an example of the use of this method – using a novel, Brothers and Sisters – in a human resources course. It is clear that all of these methods aim to increase students' ease of understanding of the theoretical knowledge by creating a visual image in their minds. Another method of creating this 'picture in the mind' during management education is to use Simulation-Based Trainings (SBT). The basic aim of this method is to create a realistic environment in which management students grapple with real-life managerial issues[14]. Using computer games in management education is another alternative teaching method, and in their study, Verzat and his colleague[15] point out that students give positive feedback when this approach is used. By taking advantage of a range of 'modern' methods academic lecturers address the common questions and complaints of students: 'Why are we learning these theories?' and 'Are these theories useful?' This is because these kinds of methods show students that theories are actually applicable to real life. The list of alternative teaching methods contains other interesting practices such as Improvisational Theatre Technique (ITT). This technique differs from traditional theatre in terms of its fiction because in ITT the dialogues are

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[8] Z, J. Sojka & M. S. B. Fish, **(a.g.m.)**

[9] R. E. Auster, & K. K. Wylie, "Creating active learning in the classroom: A systematic approach", **Journal of Management Education**, 2006, 30, p.334.

[10] S. D. Beets & P. G. Lobinger, "Pedagogical techniques: Student performance and preferences", **Journal of Education for Business**, 2001, 76, 4, p.235.

[11] Z, J. Sojka & M. S. B. Fish, **(a.g.m.)**

[12] M. L. Flaim & J. J. Chiodo, "A novel approach to geographic education: Using literature", **The Social Studies**, 1994, 85, p.225.

[13] M. Bumpus, "Brothers and Sisters: A novel way to teach human resources management", **Journal of Management Education**, 2000, 24, p.366.

[14] Salas et al., "Using Simulation-based training to enhance management education", **Academy of Management Learning and Education**, 2009, Vol. 8, No. 4, p.560.

[15] Verzat et al., "Tangling with spaghetti: Pedagogical lessons from games", **Academy of Management Learning and Education**, 2009, Vol. 8, No. 3, p.362.

created by the actors during the play. According to Moshavi[16] ITT helps to reinforce theories by providing students with the opportunity to use them in a memorable and interesting context. Finally, Buskirk and London[17] suggest using poetry in management education in order to improve students' comprehension of the topics.

When these methods are evaluated in terms of their main idea it can be seen that they all aim to create a bridge between theoretical knowledge and the applications of management science. In order to realize this aim, they make use of visualization in a variety of ways. However, it could be argued that the most effective way to encourage visualization is to make use of visual media. Some management scholars are already aware of the usefulness of these sources and so they have been used in the classrooms for some time.

4. Using Visual Media as an Alternative Teaching Method in Management Education

The common difficulty for professors of applied courses such as management is to find concrete examples of the theoretical concepts discussed in the classroom. Textbook cases provide such examples and their primary advantage is that they are created for the sole purpose of instruction and as such, contain no distracting contents. However, cases appropriate for management classes can also be found in visual media such as movies and TV series[18]. In his innovative book, Champoux[19] argues that movies are useful tools for demonstrating principles and practices and he gives a list of movies that would be suitable for use in organizational behavior courses.

The essential superiority of movies and TV series is their appropriateness to Gen Y. The members of this generation are often avid fans of movies and TV series and expect technology to be used in the classroom. Thus, it would be reasonable to think that professors would select examples from movies and TV series in order to support the theoretical background to their topics. However, the opportunities visual media present for use in the classroom are boundless - lecturers could take advantage of them as experiential exercise, as metaphor, as satire, as symbolism, as meaning, as experience and as time[20].

The idea of using movies as a contributive teaching tool in business education dates back to the 1950s and today is used by scholars from a wide range of disciplines such as political science, astronomy, psychology, management, marketing etc. The stated reason for using visual media in the learning environment

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[16] D. Moshavi, "Yes and . . .": Introducing improvisational theatre techniques to the management classroom", **Journal of Management Education**, 2001, *25*, p.434.

[17] V. W. Buskirk, & M. London "Inviting the muse into the classroom: Poetic license in management education", **Journal of Management Education**, 2008, 32, p.299.

[18] C. S. Hunt, "Must see TV: The timelessness of television as a teaching tool", **Journal of Management Education**, 2001, 25, p.632.

[19] J. E. Champoux, **Organizational behavior: Using film to visualize principles and practices**, Cincinnati, OH: South-Western College, 2001.

[20] J. E. Champoux, "Film as a teaching resource", **Journal of Management Inquiry**, 1999, 8, pp.209-212.

is that they have the ability to stimulate discussions and enhance students' understanding[21]. This assertion is also supported by some empirical evidence. For instance, Bumpus[22] states that students report an increase in awareness of how course concepts and theories can be situated in real-world events after watching relevant movies in their courses. In this study, Bumpus uses five different movies that are appropriate for corporate life. In another study, Graham and his colleagues[23] suggest management educators use Other's People Money as a contributive teaching tool in finance and organizational behavior courses. Finally, Comer[24] argues that The Lion King would be a suitable contributive movie in order to teach leadership.

Although management educators have recognized the benefits of using movies in the classroom, there has, as Hunt[25] states, been relatively little attention given to the learning opportunities that can be provided by television series. However, TV series have the same benefits as movies and whereas movies focus on a single story, multiple stories are depicted in one series, or even one episode of a TV series. Some management educators have recognized these advantages and begun to use TV series in their classrooms. For instance Hunt[26] argues that Seinfield is helpful in demonstrating the similarities and differences between Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Alderfer's ERG theory, and he provides an explanation as to how management educators can use this TV series in their organizational behavior courses. The Sopranos is another TV series that includes different scenes or anecdotes which are suitable for management education. In her book, Himsel[27] presents these scenes by relating them to different topics such as leadership styles, power, negotiation, conflict management etc.

While using visual media tools management educators must, of course, be aware that none of these TV series or movies are directly related to the lecture they give - the essential purpose of these tools is different. Generally, these television series or movies target average audiences with non-specialist knowledge and so when an educator wants to use these tools he or she needs to explain the relationships between the scenes and the management theories that are discussed in the classroom. However, there are some TV series or movies – The Office or Madmen, for example, which are set in actual work environments. According to

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[21] R.D. Parker, "Watch this clip: Using film as an augmentation to lecture and class discussion", **Academy of Educational Leadership Journal**, 2009, Vol. 13. No. 4. p.130.
[22] M. Bumpus, "Using motion pictures to teach management: Refocusing the camera lens through the infusion approach to diversity", **Journal of Management Education**, 2005, 29, p.807.
[23] L. Graham, et al. "Other People's Money: A visual technology for teaching corporate restructuring Cross-Functionally", 1999, **Journal of Management Education**, 23, p.53.
[24] R. D. Comer, "Not just a Mickey Mouse exercise: Using Disney's The Lion King to teach leadership", 2001, **Journal of Management Education**, 25, p.430.
[25] C. S. Hunt, **(a.g.m.)**
[26] C. S. Hunt, **(a.g.m.)**
[27] D. Himsel, **Leadership Sopranos style: How to become a more effective boss**. Chicago: Dearborn Trade Publishing, 2004.

DelCampo[28] The Office is an effective instruction tool for management educators as it contains various managerial issues that students are likely to observe in their own work environments[29]. Hence, it would be useful for instructors to find more appropriate visual tools to be used in their courses and take advantage of related articles or books that explain how these tools should be used.

As can be seen in the detailed analysis of the use of visual media tools in management education, they are mainly used as additional teaching material for specific courses such as organizational behavior, leadership, and human resources management. Although some professors use movies and TV series, for example in organization theory courses, this kind of usage is limited in management education. Hence, this study intends to contribute in some way to filling this gap by suggesting a TV series for a research methodology course. I argue that House M.D. could be used as a contributive teaching tool while teaching the concept of theory and its elements. In the next chapter I provide an explanation about House M.D. and its usage in a research methodology course.

5. Lessons from House M.D. about the Concept of Theory

House M.D. is a medical drama that has been broadcast by Fox Broadcasting Company since 2004. The central figure of the series is a genius medical doctor, Gregory House who leads the diagnostic team at Princeton-Plainsboro Teaching Hospital. Although House M.D. does contain 'side' storylines connected to the personal relationships between the main characters, each episode focuses on the process of solving a different medical case and these cases constitute the essence of the show. As each episode of House M.D. focuses on the way that solutions are sought and applied to different medical problems, an educator who decides to use it in his or her classroom could choose any episode randomly. Thus, it could be said that House M.D., with its six seasons of stand-alone episodes, offers us a rich collection without needing to have any information about the previous episodes.

Management educators could use any episode of House M.D. before or after explaining the theory development and testing processes. It also could be used alongside the lectures. However, I prefer to use it after explaining what a theory is, how we can develop and test a theory and which steps must be followed during the development and testing processes. In brief, I firstly give a series of lectures about the concept of theory and then I use episodes from the House M.D. series as extra teaching material, which helps my students to put their newly acquired knowledge of the concept of theory into a visual and concrete form.

A typical House M.D. episode begins with a medical incident and at the end of this incident a medical emergency occurs. In other episodes, people come to the hospital to seek a solution to their health problem. In either situation Dr. House

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[28] DelCampo, R. G., **That's what she said: A guide to using "The Office" to demonstrate management parables, organizational behavior and human resource management topics in the management classroom**, Albuquerque, 2007.

[29] T. Kernodle, "Effective media use: Using film and television to instruct an organizational behavior course", **American Journal of Business Education**, 2009, Vol. 2, No. 8, p.46.

stipulates only one condition in accepting the case; it must be unusual. His primary motivation is not to cure people but to solve puzzles. From this point of view he is a pure scientist and the method he follows whilst dealing with scientific problems provides a perfect visual example for students on research methodology courses. Personally, I prefer to use episodes that start with an incident because these episodes grab the attention of the students. After showing the incident, I stop the DVD player and ask my students to think about the reasons for this problem. As none of them have a medical background their guesses do not go beyond the amusing. I feel this is the most appropriate moment to teach them that without the possession of an adequate theoretical knowledge we cannot solve the scientific problems in our field. I also explain that the medical topics in the episodes are irrelevant to us and that I want them to concentrate on the following specific questions; how the problem is identified and how alternative theories are developed and tested to solve this problem.

When Dr. House is convinced of the uniqueness of the case and agrees to take it on he meets with his team and says his famous words "Differential theories", which means he wants to hear their theoretical explanations of the problem. At this point in the episode I give my students a managerial problem using a text case and ask them to use their managerial knowledge from other courses or their own experiences at work to consider the reasons for this problem. During the brainstorm meetings Dr. House and his team come up with a range of theoretical explanations and thrash out their ideas. Usually Dr. House selects one of these ideas and directs his team to test this theory. At this point I listen to my students' differential theories about the managerial problem that I previously gave. We choose one or two of their ideas to test and continue to watch the episode. In order to test their theories, Dr. House's team runs tests and on various occasions work as a team. Like House's team, we also try to find some appropriate scales - this is a suitable point to talk about scales, measurement styles and problems of social sciences. At the same time, I mention different measurement styles and their weaknesses and superiorities. The initial theory of Dr. House and his team almost always does not work and they develop other theories based on existing and new symptoms. Generally, at the end of the episode they find the right explanation for the problem that they observed and this explanation is pure theory. At this point Dr. House explains his theory to others step-by-step which includes all the variables that cause the problem. Sometimes this final theory might have originated from another member of the team. In both situations the final explanation is an excellent example of a strong theory because it explains how, why and when the medical incident occurred and which incident triggered the others symptoms. In this final theory we see the whole web of cause-effect relations. Finally, the team tests this theory and proves its accuracy. At this point I explain the valid theory about our managerial problem to my students – mostly it is a well known organizational or behavioral theory- and advice them to follow same steps as Dr. House and his team did in order to develop and test their theories in their future studies.

6. Conclusion

In this study it has been argued that episodes of the television series House M.D. provide suitable visual examples to explain theory development and testing processes on research methodology courses. By using these episodes management educators can enrich their lectures with visual and real-life examples of the theories students are studying. However, it should be said that there are some limits to this. Firstly, the principal character Dr. House is an unusual personality with a tendency to heavy sarcasm. For that reason, the episode that is chosen for classroom activity should be viewed in detail beforehand and if necessary some sections forwarded in the classroom. Another point to be considered is copyright, as copyright laws vary from one country to another. Finally, the outcome of using a television series such as House M.D. in a research methodology course should be measured by empirical analysis. For instance, future research could focus on comparing the performance of students on a research methodology course who watched House M.D. with students who did not, in terms of their paper quality or other quantitative or qualitative student performance indicators.

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