

Harry Potter and the leadership educator: using film to teach team leadership

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Abstract

Purpose – This article focuses on how the film, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998), can be used to teach the concepts related to team leadership. In addition, the article offers a discussion of the student and professor perspectives on using film in the classroom and provides recommendations for implementation.

Design/methodology/approach – We applied Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) stages of small group development to frame a vicarious learning experience utilizing the movie, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*. This approach is grounded in experiential learning, guiding learners through a shared experience, reflection, conceptualization, and experimentation.

Findings – Popular culture artifacts (PCA) can be used to transport learners to a context within which they can vicariously experience leadership concepts that might otherwise be abstract.

Originality/value – Intentional preparation and facilitation can result in engaged, effective leadership learning through film.

Keywords Team leadership, Film, Harry Potter, Popular culture artifacts

Paper type Technical paper

Introduction

Educators are continually searching for innovative ways to engage learners. The most recent generations of students entering college classrooms have never lived in a world without the internet and instant entertainment at their fingertips (McBride, 2020). While this can present a challenge for educators striving for active learning, one strategy is incorporating popular culture artifacts (PCAs) to create a familiar and comfortable environment that gains learners' interest and helps them make connections between the PCAs, the course content and real life (Callahan, Whitener, & Sandlin, 2007). In this review, we apply the 2001 film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Columbus) to teach team leadership concepts, specifically the stages of group development. Although the movie is fictional, the formation, development, and processes the team of characters demonstrate provides ample opportunity to teach course concepts while keeping learners engaged.

First, we describe the characteristics of the current traditional-aged learners in post-secondary classrooms. We follow this with an overview of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, integrating connections to content in a course on communication and leadership in groups and teams. Finally, we provide insight into the potential effectiveness of this PCA from both the students and educators perspectives' and conclude with recommendations for implementation.

Background

Members of the college class of 2023 were born in 2001, according to the annual College Mindset List (McBride, 2020) and are members of Generation Z (Dimock, 2019). The Pew

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Research Center has indicated that Generation Z includes those born in 1997 and later (Dimock, 2019). This generation of learners has outlived iTunes, prefers Snapchat to other social media platforms and has grown up with Big Data and algorithms predicting their desires and preferences (McBride, 2020). To say their lives have always been inundated with technology is, perhaps, an understatement (Dimock, 2019). Where learners once found information in encyclopedias, this generation turns to YouTube videos (McBride, 2020). Although it can be difficult for educators to compete with such prolific “edutainment” at the fingertips of learners, an opportunity exists to harness PCAs for teachable moments in the classroom. One PCA from Generation Z’s formative years is Harry Potter. Harry Potter emerged from the writings of J.K. Rowling across seven novels published from 1997–2007. The stories were subsequently adapted into films that were released from 2001–2011 (Eldridge, 2022). Both the novels and films were international sensations that garnered a large and loyal following. Because of its popularity and familiarity among this generation of learners, the first film, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, provides a keen opportunity to teach team leadership concepts.

Utilizing popular culture artifacts (PCAs) in leadership pedagogy

Leadership theory and concepts can be abstract and therefore, difficult for learners to grasp. PCAs can provide a way to place these concepts in a specific context that helps learners better understand their meaning and application. PCAs come in various formats, including movies, social media, television and other non-traditional materials that support learning (Callahan & Rosser, 2007; Odom, Jarvis, Sandlin, & Peek, 2013; Wimmer, Meyers, Porter, & Shaw, 2012). Viewing movies may appeal to current students’ learning preferences, resulting in a deeper understanding of leadership education (Callahan & Rosser, 2007). Moreover, film is noted as the most impactful medium to convey important educational information (Wegner, 1977).

Beyond students’ comfort with PCAs, incorporating them into more traditional lessons has several benefits. First, PCAs can promote learning with or without the student’s awareness (Giroux, 1992; Williams & McClure, 2010). The advantage of the potential for subconscious learning is that it allows students time to process what they are learning and see an example where they can apply the new knowledge rather than assuming they understand the concepts and are ready to move on to the next one. A second benefit of using PCAs, especially film, in leadership education is that learners can see theories and processes in action without waiting for them unfold in real life. Importantly, films can show a complete process in a short time that may have taken weeks, months or even years to observe in real life (Cenkci, 2020; Cummers, 2007; English & Steffy, 1997). In addition, using different scenes from a film can provide learners an opportunity to see how concepts can be applied in separate circumstances (Champoux, 2005).

Coursework focused on leading groups and teams is common in post-secondary leadership education (Brungardt, Greenleaf, Brungardt, & Arensdorf, 2006; Cletzer *et al.*, 2022; Muscato, Sowcik, & Williams, 2021). Many of those courses incorporate a model of group development to help learners conceptualize how groups develop task-related processes and interpersonal relationships over time. One of the most common models comes from Tuckman and Jensen (1977), who proposed that small groups develop through stages of forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. The forming stage is characterized by reservedness among group members as they get to know one another. Storming is exhibited as they exit the forming stage comfortable enough to challenge one another and engage in conflict. A group emerges into norming as they resolve conflict and settle in to agreed-upon processes. Groups then enter the performing stage, where conflict is taken in stride and typically does not disrupt the group but rather informs and improves their work. Finally, groups adjourn as they complete their designated tasks. It is important to note that

not all groups successfully move through the stages and complete their task. Additionally, though often described as a linear process, it is not uncommon for groups to revert back to previous stages for various reasons (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977).

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Teaching the stages of group development through *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*

One of the biggest and most successful book/movie franchises worldwide, Harry Potter continues to be influential for Millennials and Generation Z. The series follows the young protagonist, Harry Potter and his friends on a journey throughout the wizarding world to stop the forces of evil. *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*, the first installment in the series of films, reveals a story ripe with connection to the stages of group development and other leadership concepts embedded in the model.

A brief description of the primary characters is provided in Table 1.

Forming. J.K. Rowling’s first story begins with the introduction of Harry Potter, a young boy living in a cupboard under the stairs at his aunt and uncle’s house (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998). A flashback reveals that Harry was brought to live with the Dursleys after Lord Voldemort killed his parents. The idea that Harry is “special” is confirmed when, during a trip to the zoo, he unintentionally uses magic to speak with and then release a snake by causing the glass of the snake’s enclosure to disappear. Shortly thereafter, Rubeus Hagrid comes to retrieve Harry and bring him to the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998).

On his journey to Hogwarts, Harry meets Ron Weasley and Hermione Granger, two young people similarly making their initial trip to enroll in the school. At this point, one could argue that the forming stage begins. However, a teachable moment lies just ahead in the film. Upon their arrival at Hogwarts, all first-year students are brought into the Great Hall to be sorted into one of four Houses, including Gryffindor, Slytherin, Hufflepuff or Ravenclaw (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998). The trio of Harry, Ron and Hermione are all sorted into Gryffindor. This presents an opportunity for learners to consider whether this trio would have continued developing as a small group, had they not been sorted into the same house. Learners can consider the ways in which groups come together, either organically or assigned as well as the implications. Moreover, discussion can illuminate ways in which groups might prematurely adjourn, including how proximity, time and the interpersonal behaviors of teammates impact group members’ ability to get to know one another—a keystone component of the forming stage (Tuckman, 1965). Other tenets of team design can be highlighted and analyzed here, including team size, team composition and purpose and goals (Levi, 2014). Interactions and behaviors that characterize the forming stage should be noted, including awkwardness, adhering to rules and looking to leaders for direction (Tuckman, 1965).

Character	Description
Harry Potter	The main hero of the story and leader of the golden trio. House – Gryffindor
Ronald (Ron) Weasley	Harry Potter’s best friend and member of the golden trio. House – Gryffindor
Hermione Granger	Third and brightest member of the golden trio. House – Gryffindor
Severus Snape	Potion’s Professor at Hogwarts and Head of Slytherin House
Rubeus Hagrid	Hogwarts Gamekeeper and friend of Harry Potter
Petunia, Vernon and Dudley Dursley	Harry’s aunt, uncle and cousin
Lord Voldemort	The main antagonist of the story. Also known as the Dark Lord and He Who Must Not be Named

Note(s) Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998

Table 1.
Harry Potter
characters

Storming. The story continues, documenting the trio's antics, missteps and adventures. The end of the forming stage is clearly illustrated as the three young wizards are no longer reserved in their interactions with each other and argue their way into and out of trouble. Out late one night after curfew, Harry, Ron and Hermione discover a giant three-headed dog who is clearly guarding something. Subsequently, Harry uses his invisibility cloak to explore the restricted area searching for information about what the dog may be guarding. While he is unsuccessful, Hermione finds a book about the Sorcerer's Stone. The group believes this must be what the dog is guarding and that Severus Snape, a Hogwarts Professor, is trying to secure the stone in order to resurrect Lord Voldemort (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998). The group struggles to understand one another and decipher what is happening at Hogwarts, which is indicative of the storming phase (Tuckman, 1965). Additionally, the intragroup conflict between the wizards portrays the difficulty of this stage (Tuckman, 1965). The three young wizards fluctuate between taking matters into their own hands as individuals and trying to work as a team as they decide what to do and how to be successful. Several scenes invite discussion about conflict management, problem-solving and decision-making in teams (Levi, 2014).

Norming. As Harry, Hermione and Ron continue to navigate obstacles together; we see them settle into the norming phase. As each becomes comfortable with their strengths, the others acknowledge those strengths and adjust their behavior and expectations accordingly. The characters work together more seamlessly, less independently and ideas are accepted with increased openness, a key indicator that team processes and norms have been established (Tuckman, 1965). For example, when they decide they must stop Snape from stealing the Sorcerer's Stone, Hermione casts a freezing spell on a housemate so they are not deterred from their mission (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998). Her action gives none of them pause, but instead seems to be anticipated and even expected.

Performing. In the climax scenes of the film, viewers get to enjoy the performing stage. The team of young wizards must conquer four challenges to get to the Sorcerer's Stone (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998). The first challenge requires the trio to get around the three-headed dog. Relying on their established norms, Harry, Ron and Hermione narrowly escape through a trap door as the dog rouses. The second challenge calls on Hermione's keen intellect to know they must relax to escape the Devil's Snare plant. Harry's prowess as a flyer on a broom helps the trio catch the flying key, their third challenge, to enter the next room. The final challenge depends on Ron's chess skills as he beats the life-sized challenge of Wizard's Chess, allowing Harry to get to Voldemort and the coveted Stone (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998).

The sequence of challenges highlights the synergistic nature of team performance, as each individual team member is called upon to perform according to their strengths, while simultaneously relying on all team members to achieve together what they could not achieve alone. Each wizard understands and executes their role in order to accomplish the team objective (Tuckman, 1965). This exciting progression of action lends itself to an analysis of team cohesion, psychological safety and team efficacy (Griffith & Dunham, 2015). Moreover, instructors can help learners consider how the diversity of knowledge and skills can benefit a team. Analysis of the mental models and transactive memory would also fit well as students consider how the team learns and adjusts while they work together (Levi, 2014).

Adjourning. After the ensuing battle over the Stone, Harry wakes up in a hospital room to the news that he (presumably) defeated Voldemort and the Stone was destroyed (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998). As the young wizards return home for the summer, we see signs of adjournment (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). The intense nature of the trio's adventures and the evidence of strong cohesion make adjournment, even if perceived as temporary, potentially difficult (Griffith & Dunham, 2015). The conclusion of the film presents an opportunity to analyze the effectiveness of the team's processes, the interpersonal

relationships they developed as well as their individual growth, all key markers of team success (Levi, 2014).

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Discussion and recommendations

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone presents an engaging illustration of a team progressing through Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) stages of group development. The film creates a bridge for learners between the abstract and the concrete. Specifically, utilizing Harry Potter may provide learners with a familiar context that allows them to connect the vicarious experience in the film to the leadership concepts they are learning. The film offers a unique and engaging way to watch a team form, storm, norm, perform and adjourn (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), which learners might otherwise not get to see in such a short period of time. While a lecture can explain Tuckman and Jensen's stages of group development, *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* provides a vicarious experience of these stages in action.

It can be challenging for instructors to identify appropriate PCAs that provide a relevant and engaging vicarious experience that is familiar to many of their learners and avoids profanity, inappropriate humor or uncomfortable scenes. Certainly, not all learners will identify as "Potterheads," but the film is likely to be palatable to general audiences as it is devoid of offensive language or actions. It illustrates a relatively straightforward presentation of group development, with scenes depicting the team of wizards at each of the defined stages (Columbus, 2001; Rowling, 1998). This makes it easy for the instructor to show a section of the film, pause for analysis and discussion and then, resume viewing.

Inductive or deductive approaches to teaching with this film can be implemented. An inductive approach might have learners viewing the film and characterizing how the group changes over time, then learning the stages of development and connecting their observations to Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) model. The inductive approach would provide learners with an intriguing starting point for the course or lesson. Conversely, an instructor could apply a deductive approach and teach the stages of development first, then show the film and ask learners to analyze the wizarding trio's development based on the model. Guided notes, including short descriptions of each stage and a brief list of key behaviors, may assist learners in identifying and recording specific scenes or interactions representing various stages, especially if the inductive approach is used, guided notes may help students recall specific information a few weeks or months after watching the film.

Assignments could be more creative. For example, learners could write a development guide for team development at Hogwarts. This guide could be structured as a handbook on team development for Hogwarts Heads of House. Learners could immerse themselves in the context of the film, vicariously becoming leaders tasked with providing guidance for developing wizarding teams. Alternatively, learners could compete in a "buzzer beater" activity, in which they buzz in to stop the film when they identify an example of a leadership concept or stage of development. There are myriad ways in which *Harry Potter and Sorcerer's Stone* can be used to help leadership learners better conceptualize team leadership concepts.

Conclusion

PCAs can be used to transport learners to a context within which they can vicariously experience leadership concepts that might otherwise be abstract. One such PCA is the film *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, the first in a series of wildly popular screen adaptations of equally popular novels. There are a great many concepts that can be identified and analyzed in the film, most predominantly the stages of group development and embedded concepts, including team design, conflict management, decision-making, diversity, cohesion,

psychological safety and team success. Intentional preparation and facilitation can result in engaged, effective leadership learning through film.

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