Popular Culture Media as a Teaching Tool in Agricultural and Extension Education

Jacklyn A. Bruce[1] and John C. Ewing[1]
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA 16802

Abstract

Leadership education has a rich history in university-based academic programs, and most departments of agricultural education have provided the bulk of this instruction for decades. As far back as the early 1900s, leadership educators have been formally prepared to advise FFA and 4-H members. The purpose of the study was to determine the current use of popular culture media by educators in teaching leadership concepts. Also, the curricular needs of the educators in terms of popular culture media were examined. Popular culture media, such as movies, music, and television, among others were examined. Half of the respondents used pop culture media in their teaching or programming. Thirty-percent of the respondents indicated that popular culture was not used in their classes. However, half of these respondents indicated that they would be interested in incorporating pop culture into their teaching. A large number of respondents (87%) indicated that they were teaching leadership development and leadership theory, but only 37% of those individuals used some form of popular culture media to illustrate those concepts. Respondents indicated a need for in-service training that would provide education about popular culture media and its potential use in agricultural science and extension education programming.

Introduction

A growing need for leadership development is evident in the shifting demographics of today's society, as well as in the changing nature of the social and economic issues people are asked to address. Demographic shifts and economic restructuring may alter the lives of people and their communities (Brown et al., 2003). Local governments and community organizations often impact the efforts in building communities. This responsibility equates to a need for all residents to assume positions of leadership, if they are to succeed in the global economic environment. Furthermore, many argue that leadership may be the catalyst through which positive changes occur. A new generation of leaders is needed to build local partnerships for managing change in today's diverse communities (Tabb and Montesi, 2000). Our task as leadership educators within the realm of agricultural education, as charged by our National Organization is to:

• Develop and disseminate effective leadership education programs.

• Support leadership opportunities for underrepresented populations.

• Ensure leader succession in sustaining agricultural enterprises, and enhance citizen engagement in rural and urban community development.

• Engage citizens in community action through leadership education and development.

There are many definitions of leadership. One would only have to go to the local bookstore to find the number of books and magazines, or surf the web to discover the number of websites that differently define this concept. In the book, Leadership Theory and Practice: Second Edition, a popular leadership theory text used in many agriculture leadership theory courses, Peter Northouse defined leadership as "…a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal" (2001, p.3). For purposes of this research, Northouse's definition will be the accepted definition of leadership.

Many educators, formal and non-formal alike, face the inevitable challenge of trying to find useful, believable, and tangible examples of the concepts that they are trying to teach (Hunt, 2001). In terms of leadership development, research indicates that learners can become easily confused and bored when faced with the multiple theories and complex concepts that are often delivered in the traditional format found in basic leadership courses and training (Harrington and Griffin, 2001). Leadership theory tends to be more abstract when compared to natural and biological sciences. As leadership educators, the foremost goal is to have students take theoretical knowledge we provide in training and apply it to their own "real world" experience. Popular culture mediums create a way for learners to associate theories with a greater sense of reality (Champoux, 1999).

Identifying elements of popular culture, or pop culture, is difficult because there are many competing definitions of the term, and the meanings "popular" and "culture" are contested concepts in themselves. Storey (2006) defines popular culture as what is popular, or favored, within the social context by many people.

Alvarez et al. (2004) acknowledged that using movies as a substitute for leadership case studies is an existing strategy, and even now includes animated films. Alvarez et al. (2004) and Comer (2001) theorize that this is because current learners are comfortable with visual media and regularly interact with it.

[1]Assistant Professor, Agricultural and Extension Education Department

These films include many complex concepts, issues, and theories that emerge under academic study of leadership (Comer, 2001).

Having the mandate from the National Council for Agricultural Education to develop the future leaders of rural communities and agriculture industries, and knowing what researchers say about the effectiveness of using popular culture to teach leadership concepts, it became imperative to find out what agriculture educators, both those in the classroom and those in extension, were doing to invest in this medium to improve their instructional design.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to describe the current use of popular culture media by agricultural science teachers, and extension educators in Pennsylvania, as well as determine the curricular needs of these two groups. Specifically, the objectives of this study were to:

1. Determine the agricultural science teachers' and extension educators' perceptions of what are considered popular culture media.
2. Determine the current use of popular culture media by the agricultural science teachers and extension educators in the state.
3. Determine the frequency of use of popular culture media by one state's agricultural science teachers and extension educators to illustrate leadership concepts.
4. Determine the needs of the state's agricultural science teachers and extension educators to enable incorporation of popular culture media in their curriculum.

Methods

Instrumentation

The instrument used in the study was developed by the researchers following a detailed inquiry into the literature related to current popular culture media used in education. The researcher-developed survey instrument was reviewed for face and content validity by a panel of experts with knowledge of leadership education, and the use of popular culture in educational settings. Several of the items were removed due to the apparent lack of connection with the current study, as determined by the panel. Reliability for the survey instrument was established by using 12 individuals that were similar to those that would participate in the study. Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine the reliability of the survey instrument. Following analysis of the pilot study instruments, reliability for the instrument was alpha = .84.

Data Collection and Analysis

This research study was descriptive in nature. Approval to conduct the study was secured from the university's Institutional Review Board. The study was conducted using SurveyMonkey. Dillman's (2000) procedures for conducting internet surveys were used when designing and implementing the study. A pre-announcement, an initial invitation to participate, and up to three follow-ups for non-respondents were sent using participants' email addresses.

The state's agricultural science teachers and the state's extension educators were the two populations of interest in the study. Due to the relatively small size of both populations, it was decided to conduct a census of both groups, rather than attempt to sample the two populations.

A total of 230 agricultural science teachers were on the list. A total of 83 extension educators were surveyed. While there may have been some frame error in both of the groups, it was minimized by using the most up-to-date directories available at the time of the study. Thirteen of the email addresses came back as invalid. Following attempts to determine correct email addresses for these individuals, five of the emails could not be determined. Thus, the total population for the study was 308.

Ninety-two agricultural science teachers and extension educators responded to the survey instrument. Thus, the overall response rate for the study was 30%. The statistical technique of comparing early to late respondents (Miller and Smith, 1983) was used to control for non-response error. Those individuals that responded prior to the third contact were considered to be early respondents. A comparison of responses of the “early” to “late” respondents revealed that there was no statistical difference between the early and late respondents in this study.

Results and Discussion

Objective Number One

Five items were reported by over 60% of the respondents to be considered popular culture media. Percentages are displayed in Table 1 for each of the items on the instrument that addressed objective number one. The popular culture media that received the highest percentage of responses was music with 90% of the respondents agreeing that it was a type of popular culture media. The next three highest percentages for other items that were deemed popular culture media were movies, television, and YouTube with percentages of 71%, 69%, and 67%, respectively. Board games (7.7%) and newspapers (7.7%) received the lowest percentage of agreements that it was a type of popular culture media. Knowing what items educators believe to be popular culture media is important to those individuals that prepare educators for their teaching position. Common designation of what is seen as popular culture media is needed to successfully prepare educators in the use of such media. While less popular forms of media are still viable options for use in teaching, educators may want to consider using media that students in the class are “comfortable” experiencing (Comer, 2001).

Objective Number Two

Fifty-percent of the respondents indicated that they currently use pop culture in their teaching or

programming. Approximately 30% of the respondents indicated that they do not use pop culture and 20% indicated that they were unsure if they used pop culture media in their teaching or programming. Of the 30% that responded that they do not currently use pop culture in their teaching or programming, almost half of these respondents indicated that they would be interested in incorporating pop culture into their teaching or programming. Another 38% were unsure if they would incorporate pop culture, and 13% responded that they would not be interested in using pop culture in their teaching or programming in the future. Educators are interested in using popular culture media in their classes. Teacher educators need to be prepared to train those individuals that are currently in the role of educator, or those that are planning to become educators, in the use of popular media culture in their classes. As technology advances, more educators are going to be looking for ways to engage their learners, and the use of popular culture media may be one strategy to accomplish the goal of engaging students.

Table 1. Agreement by Educators that Items are Popular Culture Media

Item	Percent
Music	90.1
Movies	71.4
Television	69.2
YouTube	67.0
Facebook	60.4
Video Games	56.0
Blogs	53.8
Podcasts	45.1
Websites	44.0
Magazines	40.7
Wikis	33.0
Game Shows	22.0
Literature	19.8
Sports	8.8
Newspapers	7.7
Board games	7.7

Objective Number Three

Participants responded to their frequency of use of popular culture media to illustrate leadership concepts. As can be seen in Table 2, over 94% of the respondents indicated that they used popular culture media 0 to 2 times in the past six months with approximately 2% and 4% of the respondents indicating that they used popular culture media 3 to 5 times and 6 to 8 times in the past six months to illustrate leadership concepts, respectively. None of the respondents indicated using popular culture media more than eight times in the past six months to illustrate leadership concepts. Educators are using popular culture in the classroom, but some may not see the direct tie to leadership education. Curricula development related to leadership education, and areas of agriculture, could be developed to enable educators at various levels to more readily implement the use of popular culture media in the classroom.

Table 2. Frequency of Use (past six months) of Popular Culture Media by Agricultural Science Teachers and Extension Educators to Illustrate Leadership Concepts

0-2	3-5	6-8	More than 8
94.2%	1.9%	3.8%	0%

Objective Number Four

Agricultural science teachers and extension educators reported that the greatest needs to enable incorporation of popular culture media in the curriculum were resources containing the pop culture examples, resources helping me find examples that I could use in-service workshops, and lesson plans/objectives. Percentages of responses are displayed in Table 3. All of the possible items were seen to be a "need;" however, blogs, websites, and peer sharing were reported with the least frequency. Through training, using resources that can be directly transferred to the educators' classes, popular culture media usage in class could enable some learners to better understand abstract concepts that may otherwise have been misunderstood by the student. Resources, such as curriculum materials and information sheets, may be the most likely way to reach educators with information pertinent to using popular culture media. Interestingly, the items that were listed least often as being "needed" to incorporate popular culture media into the curriculum, were items that may require more technology savvy. It could not be determined, from the current study, whether this is because the educators were comfortable, or uncomfort-

Table 3. Needs of Educators to Enable Incorporation of Popular Culture Media into the Curriculum

Item	Percent
Resources containing pop culture examples (DVDs, CDs, etc)	72.8
Resources helping me find examples that I could use	71.6
In-services/workshops	55.6
Lesson plans/objectives	55.6
Higher quality technology available to me	45.7
Greater quantity of technology available to me	43.2
Great quantity of technology available to my students	43.2
Higher quality of technology available to my students	39.5
Websites	35.8
Peer sharing	35.8
Blogs	12.3

able, with these particular resources. Future investigation should be conducted to determine the educators' familiarity with such technology resources.

Summary

The respondents in this study indicated that the pop culture media items were those items that are considered popular by those in society (Storey, 2006). Items such as music, movies, and television received the highest amount of support in identifying popular culture media, while items such as board games and newspapers received the lowest amount of support as being popular culture media. These items were the type of media that are interpreted by the participants as being "popular" in the current "culture." While the majority of respondents were similar in their thoughts related to popular culture media, examining what can be deemed popular culture, and how it can help educators, should be explored even further.

Educators were using popular culture media in their teaching and programming. However, there are areas for development, especially in the area of leadership concept and theory education. A large number of respondents (87%) indicated that they were teaching leadership development and leadership theory, but only 37% of those individuals used some form of popular culture media to illustrate those concepts. Moreover, in the past six months over 94% of the respondents indicated that they had only used popular culture media 0 to 2 times.

Agricultural science teachers and extension educators, like other educators (Bumpus, 2005), seem interested in using popular culture in their teaching or programming. Almost half of the respondents that were not using popular culture media in their teaching or programming indicated that they would be interested in employing popular culture media. By incorporating music, or YouTube videos, that relate directly to the topic at hand, educators can approach the content in a different way, while reaching the students through a medium that appeals to them. It seems that the teachers and educators are ready to include the use of popular culture media as a strategy in their teaching; however, there are some barriers that must be overcome before doing so. Respondents indicated a need for in-service training that would provide further education in the techniques of using popular culture media and in agricultural science and extension education programming. Also, the respondents indicated a need for resources, such as curriculum materials, that could help teach using popular culture in their programming. Russell et al. (2003) believed that the benefits of technology should be illustrated to educators. As today's society continues to embrace new media and pop culture iconography, it is essential to discover how this can positively affect how an educator teaches and students learn, and ultimately practice, leadership. Thus, popular culture media use, a specific form of technology, should be examined. If educators are not using this particular technology, then the benefits and possibilities for enhancing student learning should be clarified.

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