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## PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION & TRAINING | RESEARCH ARTICLE

# *The Profit*: Using reality TV to teach management theories and strategies

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**Abstract:** Instructors are constantly challenged to compete for student attention. The authors of this article discuss how they are stimulating their students using reality TV shows to teach management theories and strategies. Using reality TV shows has helped to captivate students and has resulted in higher levels of learning according to Bloom's Revised Taxonomy. In exercises, students watch episodes, analyze the business problem, and identify central issues and key players impacting the business. Students are asked to comment, evaluate parts of the business episode, apply course theory, and create solutions. Exercises help students learn business fundamentals and the intersectionality of people, processes, and products. This case study provides instructors with a specific lesson plan for incorporating reality TV into the classroom in a way that is enjoyable to students and enables them to apply business theories learned in class to actual experiences of the business owners in the assigned episodes.

**Subjects:** Tourism, Hospitality and Events; Economics, Finance, Business & Industry; Education

**Keywords:** real-world learning; reality television; learning resources; bloom's taxonomy; TV inspired; teaching method; teaching; learning; enjoyment learning; entertainment learning

### 1. Introduction

Instructors hope their students will be interested in the learning experiences they integrate into the curriculum. They are always searching for new teaching tools that are interactive, keep students engaged, and impart meaningful lessons. Scripted TV and movies have been used successfully as



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### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Bill Quain, Noel Criscione-Naylor, and Jane Bokunewicz are professors in the Hospitality Tourism and Management Studies Program at Stockton University in Galloway, NJ. Quain and Bokunewicz have focused a large part of their research on incorporating technology in the classroom and for business communication. Criscione-Naylor has published and presented at many conferences on the topic of educational theory, systems theory, and best practices.

### PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

Reality TV can be used effectively to make curriculum lessons more fun, spark engaging discussions, and help students to contextualize what they see on TV to concepts learned in class. This case study provides a specific lesson plan using Bloom's revised taxonomy and Reality TV episodes to help students evaluate business issues, apply course theory, and create solutions. It identifies specific methods for measuring student's recall and critical case understanding then facilitating student ideas for improving practice. Reality TV shows provide instructors with an extensive supply of fresh material that is professionally produced, entertaining, and adaptable into traditional learning models with outstanding results.

training tools for years. For example, the classic film, *Twelve Angry Men*, has been used to teach concepts like interpersonal dynamics, ethics, and argument and persuasion, to name a few. More recently, *The Office*, a scripted television sitcom, has been shown to effectively teach leadership and work environment skills (Wimmer, Meyers, Porter, & Shaw, 2002). Wimmer, Myers, and Shaw found students were entertained by the episode's comedic presentation and learned vicariously (Bandurra, 1977) by watching the characters.

Today, reality TV is especially engaging to students and workers because they are more involved in learning when it is enjoyable (Hall, 2009; Raines, 2002; Talyor, 2006). Hall (2009) found that people can relate to the characters in reality TV and their personal experiences; after all, the characters in a reality show are real people too. Many reality shows are business oriented; in addition, they are managerially relevant. The protagonists in the reality shows deal with money issues, customer service strategies, and above all, people issues. These shows bring realistic human interaction to life. There are crises, challenges, triumphs, and spectacular failures. Most importantly, the shows tell stories, real-life, human stories. They transcend mere text and graphs on paper as part of traditional classroom tools. As such, reality TV shows provide instructors with a nearly inexhaustible supply of fresh material that are professionally produced, inexpensive, and entertaining. Additionally, it can be adapted into traditional learning models with measurable results. This paper provides details on using the reality TV show, *The Profit*, to engage students in meaningful business topics, strategies, and challenges through the use of a flipped classroom, quizzes, and group formation as well as includes a detailed lesson plan to use *The Profit season 3, episode 10 "Bentley's Corner Barkery"*.

## 2. Foundation for understanding

Scripted TV and movies have been used successfully as training tools for years and have been proven as an excellent way to incorporate "problem-based" experiential learning into the classroom (Barrows, 1998). For example, *The Office*, a scripted television sitcom, has been shown to effectively teach leadership and work environment skills (Wimmer et al., 2002). Additionally, Kinnick and Parton (2005) demonstrated how the reality TV series *The Apprentice* depicted communication challenges and mistakes common in the workplace as well as films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* that emphasized concepts related to business communication in the workplace (Cardon, 2010). Although TV shows and films are exaggerations of reality, writers and produces indicate these experiences portray real-life experiences and are likely to manifest in a variety of organizations. When used in conjunction with teaching business concepts, scenes from TV series can lead to valuable discussions that help students formulate their own strategies for handling each unique situation (Bloch, 2011). Accordingly, students, as part of classroom exercises, can work in groups or individually to analyze the various situations and potential solutions to problems presented by focusing to extract the strengths and weaknesses of each potential solution.

Additionally, reality TV provides creative learning opportunities to achieve Bloom's Revised Taxonomy's levels of learning including remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Rosenbaum, 2015). Accordingly, as a result of using reality TV, students will be more equipped to:

- Recognize and analyze central issues that impact the business' performance
- Identify managerial behavior and the impact on business successes and failures
- Evaluate and apply management strategies and theories in response to business issues
- Reflect on their personal performance and contribution to the business in current job roles

As such, using reality TV makes curriculum lessons more fun, memorable, and efficient while also raising points that may not be given as much coverage in text books and provide opportunities for students to contextualize what they see on TV to concepts in their textbooks (Bloch, 2011; Sexton, 2006). Furthermore, integrating reality TV can be used to spark discussions pertaining to current

events happening in the business world, help students remember specific concepts and the application of concepts, and provide students with something to look forward to as part of classroom exercises (Sexton, 2006).

### 3. Procedures

There are many reality TV shows that are relevant to management training. These shows deal with financial challenges, customer service strategies, and organizational behavior issues. Most importantly, the shows tell stories, real-life stories that are easily relatable and engaging. Table 1 (Rosenbaum, 2015) below shows a list of reality TV shows that can be used for teaching management theory.

The authors of this paper have recently used four different reality TV shows in their classes.

- (1) *Hotel Impossible*, in a Hotel Operations class for teaching the concepts of revenue management, hotel operations, and branding.
- (2) *Undercover Boss*, where the CEO disguises his or her identity and acts in the capacity of a line employee has been used in a Business Policy and Strategy class to teach the concepts of expansion strategy, brand differentiation, and marketing.
- (3) *The Profit*, focuses specifically on management issues so it is an ideal tool for teaching management theory. It can be purchased on Amazon for \$2.99 per episode or \$9.99 per season.
- (4) *Bar Rescue* stars Jon Taffer, a long-time food and beverage industry consultant who offers his professional expertise plus renovations and equipment to desperately failing bars in order to save them from closing. Core areas of the show include break even, sales mix, and cost of goods sold concepts.

In each case, a class of approximately 35 Hospitality Tourism and Management Studies students were given the assignment to view the specific episode prior to attending class. The following is a specific example of how *The Profit* can be used in teaching management theory.

#### 3.1. Overview of *The Profit*

In *The Profit*, Marcus Lemonis visits businesses that are struggling and meets with the owners and operators. If he thinks he can assist, he offers a cash investment in exchange for equity in the business. Mr. Lemonis has strict rules business owners must contend with resulting in conflict and drama, which makes the show interesting. Our intention in the next sections is to share how an episode is used as part of an Introduction to Management course.

#### 3.2. A lesson plan using Bloom's revised taxonomy

The first step to ensure the successful use of reality TV is to explain to students how it will be used in the classroom, emphasizing the importance of copyright and trademark laws. Students should purchase or rent each episode and be provided with the links to Amazon or another source. To measure higher student learning, the following strategies should be used as part of the exercise (achievement of Bloom's is in bold). An at-a-glance view is also provided below in Table 2.

Applying a "flipped class" strategy is effective in using reality TV for learning because the episodes can be up to one hour in duration. Requiring students to watch the show before coming to class saves time and is an enjoyable homework assignment. Students should be encouraged to take notes on central themes of the episode. Students can be provided a list of questions to focus their attention on critical aspects that will be used as teachable events in the classroom. This helps students to **identify** and **remember** episode specifics and allows students to begin identifying the business problems in the show. The following is a list of sample focus questions that may be used with this episode.

**Table 1. Reality television guide for undergraduate retailing or services marketing courses**

<b>Reality program</b>	<b>Program's general concept</b>	<b>Recommended uses for course topics</b>
<i>Bar Rescue</i>	Jon Taffer, a nightclub expert, assumes managerial responsibilities at struggling bars	Failures typically stem from owners and employees not understanding their roles and permitting their bars' physical environment to become unwelcoming
<i>Caught Red Handed</i>	Follows undercover store detectives in service settings	Students learn how a team of undercover store detectives helps large stores discover and handle shoplifting suspects
<i>Hotel Hell</i>	Gordon Ramsey consults with struggling hotels and implements solutions	Gordon's direct and forward perspectives add real-life experiences to services marketing courses, especially those that cater to hospitality students
<i>Hotel Impossible</i>	Anthony Melchiorri, a hotel consultant, consults on struggling hotel properties	Owners are usually oblivious to negative comments from TripAdvisor.com. Opportunity to blend online commentary with real-life examples
<i>Restaurant Impossible</i>	Robert Irvine turns around faltering restaurants in two days with only \$10,000	Episodes show that owners often lack experience or are resistant to change. Many failures stem from service scope and product issues
<i>Kitchen Nightmares</i>	Award-winning chef, Gordon Ramsey, consults with struggling restaurants	Episodes show that owners and management often ignore problems in service delivery, until bankruptcy nears
<i>Mystery Diners</i>	Undercover operatives go into restaurants, bars, and food establishments with hidden cameras to perform surveillance	Each episode highlights happenings when the owner/manager is away. The show highlights the importance of service training and mystery shoppers
<i>Tabatha Salon Takeover</i> (seasons 1–3)	Tabatha Coffey assumes managerial responsibilities at struggling hair salons	Stresses the importance of the physical environment in a service-intensive industry
<i>Tabatha Takes Over</i> (season 4)	Tabatha Coffey assumes managerial responsibilities at small service organizations	Shows the challenges of operating small businesses. Failures typically stem from owners not understanding their business
<i>Undercover Boss</i>	A firm's chief executive officer goes undercover on the front line to discover strengths and weaknesses	The service-oriented episodes can be used to show that most frontline problems do not reach top management. Most problems stem from service intermediaries (i.e. franchise owners) not adhering to corporate policies
<i>The Profit</i>	Marcus Lemonis visits struggling businesses and for those that he believes he can assist, he offers the business owner a cash investment, in exchange equity	These episodes span across the business industry. Episodes focus on three main components necessary for business success: people, process, and products

Note: Adapted from Rosenbaum (2015).

**Table 2. Reality TV at-a-glance lesson plan**

Task step	Description	Resource/Materials	Timing
Introduction to Reality TV	Students will be introduced to how TV will be used in the course to allow them to gain exposure and see real-life examples of a variety of business cases. Review copyright and trademark laws and required costs as part of the class	This should be referenced as part of the course syllabus	5 min
Watching the episode	Students will watch a specific episode assigned as part of the course	Purchase of video episode Distribution or electronic availability of episode critical timings with questions to consider during the episode. These are guidelines for students to start CCU	45-75 min
In-Class Assessment	An activity to help students recall critical information that will be discussed during the class session	Printed quiz	5-10 min
In-Class Assessment Debrief	Debrief the quiz questions to measure student's understanding of the episode's business problem, central issues, key players, and relationships among these areas as a whole	Have the episode available in the classroom to use and reference for any questions students are unable to satisfactorily discuss during the debrief	5-15 min (dependent on student understanding)
In-Class Exercise Part 1: Independent	Students start critical case understanding (CCU) which includes analyzing the business problem, the central issues, the key players, and the relationship among all the parts of the issues. Students should also be encouraged to self-reflect on their practice	Rotate around the class and assist students that are struggling	5 min
In-Class Exercise Part 1: Small Group	Groups prepare to demonstrate and address the CCU's of the episode. Students can summarize the key points of their group's discussion using their personal computing devices	Allow students to form into groups. To enhance the exercise, assign groups that allow diversity Rotate to each group and solicit feedback and challenge student responses and broaden their understanding/application of management strategies and theory	10 min for group discussion 10 min for assembly of presentation 5 min presentation per group (35 min for a class size of 35 students)
Summary	Provide a general recap of the lesson. Solicit feedback from students as to how the episode may inform their practice	Reference student presentation materials and ideas	5 min

- (1) What was the leadership style of the owners?
- (2) What methods of communication were used between the owners and the unit managers?
- (3) *How was inventory accounted for and controlled?*
- (4) What criteria were included in the selection process for suppliers?

During the next class, students are given a quiz. It is important to emphasize the quiz is an activity to help **recall** critical information that will be discussed during the class. The quiz should use questions that help to measure the students **understanding** of the major facts from the episode. The teacher or trainer will use these facts to connect and elaborate on using previously discussed course content. Students should be allowed to use their notes to help reduce anxiety associated with any assessment tool.

The next step is debriefing the quiz. It is recommended to have the episode available in the classroom to use and reference if students are unable to satisfactorily discuss the key issues. After the debrief and review of specific video footage of the show, students are ready to start critical case understanding (CCU) which includes **analyzing** the business problem, the central issues, the key players, and the relationship among all the parts of the issues. First, students should be allowed to reflect on these areas independently. The instructor may rotate around the class and assist students that are struggling. Additionally, students who have previous work experience should be encouraged to use the episode to evaluate and self-reflect on their own practice in the workplace.

After five minutes, students should be formed into small groups to prepare to demonstrate and address the CCU's. Students should be encouraged to **evaluate** all parts of the business issue demonstrating the **application** of course theory to calculate and **create** solutions. Each group will present their findings and recommendations. A unique way to get students involved is to have them summarize the major points of their group's discussion on their personal devices (laptops, tablets, or smartphones) and email it to the instructor who can display it on a projector.

As part of the conclusion of the exercise, the findings of the episode should be emphasized, reinforcing student understanding of the CCU's. Lastly, solicit student contribution to discuss how the episode has informed or may change their practice. For additional clarification and suggested activities and exercises when using reality TV shows to achieve the levels of learning using Bloom's Revised Taxonomy, see Table 3 (Rosenbaum, 2015).

### **3.3. A sample experiential learning exercise**

#### **3.3.1. *The Profit* season 3, episode 10 "Bentley's Corner Barkery"**

The authors have selected an episode from this reality TV show that highlights teachable management challenges. The owners, Lisa and Giovanni Senafe started Bentley's after their pet died of a bad diet of not-so-natural dog food. They created a pet supply business with a mission to sell only natural products. Initially, the business was a success and their landmark location was selling \$1.3 million (US) in pet food and related products. In addition, they acquired six more stores in the Chicago area. Despite their expansion, they were losing money; yet, were still looking to acquire another chain of seven stores.

Marcus Lemonis focused all of his company-saving energy on the three components: people, process, and products. Below is a short overview of the challenges that students should focus on as they watch the episode.

**Table 3. Reality television programming assignment and bloom's revised taxonomy**

Level of learning	Learning-level goal	Reality assignment question
Remembering	Remember previously learned information. Use verbs such as define, list, or recall	List at least 10 problems that are causing service failures at Company X
Understanding	A student's ability to explain ideas or concepts. Use verbs such as classify, describe, discuss, explain, or identify	For each of the problems you listed in the previous question, classify the problem into the service mix
Applying	A student uses the information in a new way. Use verbs such as choose, demonstrate, solve, use, or write	Use theory x, framework x, or a particular aspect of a class discussion to explain why several of the problems in Company X are occurring
Analyzing	A student distinguishes between the different parts. Use verbs such as examine, compare, contrast, or differentiate	Examine each of the 10 problems you listed and analyze why the problem is occurring. Please make sure that you offer an in-depth analysis for each of the problems you listed in question #1
Evaluating	A student creates a variety of ways to solve a problem	Develop management strategies for solving each of the problems listed in question #1
Creating	A student creates a new product or a point of view. Use verbs such as construct, create, design, or develop	Imagine that you are a manager of a service-oriented firm, such as a retail, hospitality, transportation, financial, insurance, or food/beverage organization. Develop a set of procedures that you design and you will adhere to, which will help prevent you from encountering problems and issues that you just witnessed in this episode

Note: Adapted from Rosenbaum (2015).

3.3.1.1. *People*. Neither Giovanni nor Lisa had much interaction with the managers of the seven units in the Bentley's chain. The unit managers did not know how well (or how poorly) their stores were doing. No one held management meetings and neither owner visited the other stores on a regular basis.

3.3.1.2. *Processes*. The company had no central inventory or Point of Sales systems. Each store had excess inventory that was stored haphazardly. No one understood the sales mix. When a new store came online, no one set up branding or any identification of the brand name. Finally, there were no Standard Operating Procedures for the managers to follow.

3.3.1.3. *Product*. Lisa was in charge of product selection. Unfortunately, she had a rather militant attitude about who was an acceptable supplier. Their all-natural foods were too expensive for a major part of the target market. She would not allow any company's food to be sold in the store if the company sold anything other than natural food lines.

### 3.3.2. *Four teaching lessons*

Throughout the episode, four themes manifested. These themes are critical to allow students to achieve the objectives of the exercises including recognizing and analyzing the central issues that impact business performance, identifying impacts of managerial behavior, and reflecting on their personal performance.

3.3.2.1. *Leadership*. The owners did not provide strategic direction to the managers, nor did they provide operational leadership. A great example was the lack of an agenda at the first-ever managers meeting. This is a simple, yet powerful lesson to impart to the students. More importantly, the students can easily see how the meeting fell apart due to this omission.

3.3.2.2. *Product selection and pricing*. Lisa's inflexible and unchanging managerial style, often excluded manufacturers who had legitimate products that met Bentley's standards. Marcus does not simply tell Lisa (and us) about the way to overcome this problem. He flies the couple to a multi-million dollar, state-of-the-art pet food facility to show them how to adapt to new ideas. This segment of the show provides a great opportunity for students to evaluate and explore options on how to overcome these challenges.

3.3.2.3. *Systems development*. Marcus set up a centralized inventory system that reduced the amount of inventory in each store; yet, kept enough on hand to meet demand. This was aided by the introduction of a Point of Sale system that tracked sales and inventory usage at each store. This is a valuable learning experience because students do not read about this, nor do they suffer through a long explanation by Marcus. Instead, they are visually shown the piles of unused inventory, the way it is stored, and then they get to virtually walk through the new warehouse. This helps to expand students understanding and see real examples rather than reading descriptions of similar situations.

## 4. Student feedback from a real-life classroom experience

To measure impact of using reality TV in the classroom, we used a class from the School of Business, in the Hospitality and Tourism Management Program. The title of the class was Food and Beverage Operations. This class draws students from a wide variety of majors. It does not have a pre-requisite and is offered at the sophomore level. Most of the students have not had extensive experience in Accounting, so teaching fundamentals in subjects like cost of goods sold can be challenging. The reality TV we used was *Bar Rescue*, season 1, episode 4, titled Kilkenny's Irish Pub.

In this exercise, we taught three skills: break even analysis, sales mix analysis for influencing net profits, and cost of goods sold analysis, using inventory and purchases. One of the authors of this article taught these three skills using normal methods (lecture) only, and then showed the students the episode of *Bar Rescue*, stopping the video whenever it was necessary to point out how the skills



**Table 4. Student evaluations, average scores out of 10**

Skill	Lecture only	Lecture and reality TV
Breakeven	7.55	8.22
Sales mix	7.08	8.07
Costs of goods sold	6.26	8.03

were used in the video. After watching the video, and then taking a short quiz on all three skill areas, the students used a scale from 1 to 10 to rate their perceptions of learning effectiveness, on each skill, for “lecture alone”, and then “lecture plus reality TV”. A 1 represented the least amount of comfort with the skill, and 10 represented the best level of confidence with the skill. In addition, students were asked to rate (on a scale of 1–10) how effective they thought the teaching methods were. Students were also asked to offer comments on the use of reality television in the classroom. The results of the ratings are below and a few comments follow.

Twenty-eight students participated in both teaching methods (lecture only and video) and filled out the questionnaire. To get usable statistics, we added all scores for each part of the rating system and then took an average score for each category (Table 4).

For all three skills (breakeven, sales mix, and cost of goods sold) students identified they learned more from participating in both types of learning strategies. Students were least comfortable with their knowledge in the cost of goods sold area; however, results demonstrated significant gains in learning after watching reality TV. Students showed the lowest gain in the breakeven skill area, yet, reported overall comfort in the level of learning in this area. This directly corresponds to student comments. When asked in a questionnaire to comment on the use of reality TV shows for teaching, students responded:

- “This [reality TV] helped me to understand the concepts better because we watched it being discussed in a real-life situation”.
- “I think that it’s [reality TV] an interesting way to learn”.
- “I think it is better to use television because you learn a lot more and you can actually see what is happening for real”.
- “Learning the concepts and methods, then watching the videos helps with my understanding. Seeing the concepts in real life shows me the management in action”.

Although this is a small sample, the findings are more in-depth than traditionally associated with a single teaching technique, using our class evaluation instruments. For this reason, we find these data very informative. Student comments demonstrated greater comfort levels after watching the Reality TV episode and demonstrated the dry, technical skills into a real-world perspective.

## 5. Conclusion

From this limited study, the authors are more positive than ever that using reality TV shows are an acceptable way to enhance learning in certain subjects. The author who conducted this trial in the classroom is particularly satisfied with *Bar Rescue*, as it is very entertaining. Although it is certainly dramatized to enhance ratings, this only increases the entertainment value, and keeps the students very involved in the show. We encourage other instructors to explore the use of reality TV in their classrooms. If instructors do not want to take up class time showing episodes, we suggest they assign the episodes as homework, although this reduces the opportunity for instructors to help the students interpret the behavior on the show.

Overall, reality TV enables instructors to facilitate student learning by providing focus questions, measuring recall, and debriefing the case through assessing student's critical case understanding. Student learning is enhanced by enabling them to apply theories learned in class to real-life business problems and formulate creative solutions to the problems identified in the reality TV episode. The process is efficient because the flipped model may be used, where students view the episode at home and come prepared to discuss in class. Students have responded favorably to this approach. They have reported the exercises to be enjoyable, educational and instrumental in helping them to understand complex business problems.

In today's online digital world, video is king. Using reality TV in the classroom instructors can use the most profitable, most original, and most professional videos to help their courses come alive. Every good teacher knows that people love stories. These shows are story-rich. They are believable because the personalities and people are real and students can relate to them. In Hall's (2009) study on reality show viewers, she found that when viewers perceived reality show characters as more representative of their own lives, they were viewed as more relevant. In conclusion, students can see themselves in the show's characters, which helps students to self-reflect to improve their own practice in the workplace.

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