

## Finding OB in Disney's Finding Nemo

RAYSHAD A. HOLMES

George Washington University

One of the greatest challenges faced by new professors and those aspiring to become members of the academy is the consistent need to illustrate organizational behavior concepts to undergraduate students (Hunt, 2001). Most of today's undergraduate population find themselves encased in a world permeated with fashion, music and little understanding of business principles. For this reason, it is incumbent upon business faculty members to continually create new and inspiring teaching interventions that illustrate business principles and concepts in action. From 12 Angry Men to The Brady Bunch, management faculty have enhanced the learning process of under-graduates with cinema that highlights concepts that are crucial for success in business. The exercise introduced in this paper furthers this discussion by showing how an animated film, Disney's Finding Nemo, can also be used to illustrate organizational behavior and management concepts and as a tool to assess comprehension and retention of these concepts.

**Keywords:** Teaching exercises, Animation, Student assessments, Learning exercises, Organizational behavior.

One of the greatest challenges faced by new professors and those aspiring to become members of the academy is the consistent need to illustrate organizational behavior concepts to undergraduate students (Hunt, 2001). Most of today's undergraduate population find themselves encased in a world permeated with fashion, music and little understanding of business principles. The Enron scandal coupled with the fall of the Martha Stewart empire have prompted many students to question career choices as well as interest in business and management. When polled, students in my undergraduate organizational behavior class seemed confident that they wanted a career complete with a lucrative salary and rewarding opportunities. However, far more showed hesitancy to suggest that business or management was appealing. It appears that the headlines familiar to this "millennial" generation have tainted the discipline and practice that so many have worked to enhance. For this reason and many more, it is incumbent upon business faculty members to continually create new and inspiring teaching interventions that illustrate business principles and concepts in action. We must seek to develop future business leaders that are aware of organizational behavior, astute at comprehending the impact it has on business and adept at responding to its demand since it is clear that corporations of both today and tomorrow will require competent and capable managers and leaders.

In an effort to respond to this challenge many scholars have suggested the use of additional resources to supplement typical classroom and textbook-driven instruction (Shaw & Fisher, 1999). Some scholars have validated these efforts by suggesting that employees in the 21<sup>st</sup> century will need to exhibit skills and capabilities that are not gained through conventional education or training (Leslie, Aring & Brand, 1998). This "informal learning" transpires in and through events such as watching movies, family discussion and the like which typically occur outside of the classroom (ibid). Among the available options, animation poses immediate value to organizational behavior education. Animated films have the distinct ability to display organizational be-

havior and management concepts in vivid and descriptive ways (Champoux, 2001). Although most cartoons carry a “G” rating, the current collection of animated films bring a variety of organizational behavior concepts and principles to the screen while winning the acclaim of audiences of varying ages. Previously published articles confirm that with the aid of television and animation, students are likely to become engaged and will find it relatively easy to relate course material to various aspects of the presentation (Comer, 2001; Hunt, 2001). Instructors have concurred that cinema in all of its varied forms is a powerful teaching tool (Champoux, 1999). From *12 Angry Men* to *Seinfeld* and *The Brady Bunch*, faculty have attempted to enhance the learning process of undergraduates with cinema that highlights concepts that are crucial for success in business (Dent, 2001). The exercise introduced in this paper will further this discussion by showing how an animated film can also be used to illustrate organizational behavior and management concepts and as a tool to assess comprehension and retention of these concepts.

As the highest grossing animated film ever and the highest grossing animated DVD ever sold, Disney’s 2003 *Finding Nemo*, brings contemporary need theories put forth by Maslow (1943) and McClelland ((1961), motivation literature and group development processes to the forefront. As the story traces the adventure that a father undergoes to relocate his son, careful analysis also highlights concepts such as self-efficacy, self-fulfilling prophecy, social reinforcement theory and the study of group dynamics. Illustrations of Vroom’s expectancy theory (1964) and the issues that surface when individuals alter their effort and performance are vivid in this film. In addition, *Finding Nemo* illustrates the power and benefits of intrinsic and extrinsic forms of motivation. The colorful constellation of characters coupled with the heartwarming story of Nemo’s successful reunion with his father after a series of mishaps engages audiences of all ages and enlightens students of organizational behavior simultaneously.

### **The Story of Nemo: A Synopsis**

*Finding Nemo* recounts the challenges and adventures that a father, Marlin, must go through to relocate his son, Nemo. As all of the characters in this film are aquatic in nature, the film is set deep beneath the surface of the sea. In an effort to exhibit his own self-confidence, ability and prowess when in the face of his peers, Nemo swims off in defiance of his father’s instruction. This move brings with it harmful repercussions as Nemo is captured in a fishing net and forced to spend the foreseeable future held captive in a dentist’s aquarium. Meanwhile, Nemo’s father is forced to use all available resources to find his son. To do this, he finds comfort, friendship and alternate strategies by befriending another fish, Dory. Surprisingly, Dory can read and this human characteristic ultimately becomes the tool used to start the process of locating Nemo. Together, Dory and Nemo’s father start a journey towards Australia. Along the way, they meet a kaleidoscope of characters who shed additional insight on how to reach their target destination. Meanwhile, Nemo finds himself a new member of a group of fish that are held captive in a dentist’s office aquarium. After passing the induction process, Nemo and the group collectively brainstorm to create a way of escape. It is clear that none of the fish want to live their lives held captive in the fish tank and Nemo postures himself as the front runner to freedom. With renewed self-efficacy and a determination to reunite with his father, Nemo participates in several stunts to catapult himself and the other fish out of the tank and back into the harbor. As the 90-minute film progresses, Nemo’s father is successful in navigating his way to Australia and Nemo man-

ages to also get himself back to the harbor. Dory is instrumental in connecting father and son. As the story ends, the father and son embrace and apologize for the selfish behavior that resulted in the initial mishap. From its beginning to the joyful conclusion, *Finding Nemo* brings to life a series of organizational behavior concepts and management issues that can spark group discussion and also serve as an end-of-module assessment through essay prompts or multiple-choice questions.

### **The Exercise**

Because *Finding Nemo* illustrates a practical application of organizational behavior concepts, the exercise detailed below is suggested as an assessment tool through essay form which can be given as an in-class assignment or as a take-home test which will enable students to revisit the film. The objective of this exercise is to assess student's retention and understanding of key organizational behavior concepts and its applicability to contemporary business and organizations. The exercise as detailed below will require 2.5 hours of classroom time with the viewing of the film. Instructors will need copies of Table 1 and 2 for students, *Finding Nemo* on DVD or VHS tape and appropriate equipment for viewing. Some instructors may use chalkboards or whiteboards to highlight information but it is not required for this exercise. This exercise can be customized to fit the dimensions of any classroom and can also be introduced to large or small classroom populations.

### **Guidelines for Instructors**

*Preliminary work.* Introduce class to motivation theories including Maslow's need hierarchy and McClelland's learned needs. Students should be familiar with Vroom's expectancy/VIE theory (1964) as well as the concept of self-efficacy. Assigned readings, textbook chapters and classroom discussion should seek to highlight this information for student's retention and understanding. Students should also be familiar with group/team development and the issues that can strengthen or hinder the group's performance. Because the course syllabus for Organizational Behavior courses vary in design and material covered, this activity can be included in lesson plans during a module that concerns motivation or group or team development.

**Step 1:** Distribute the information in Table I to students before viewing *Finding Nemo*. This information will enable students to direct their attention to key scenes and concepts as each is illustrated in the film and prevent the need for numerous reviews of the film. In addition, once complete, the handout will serve as a milestone and note sheet that students will be able to use to complete the next phase of the assignment. Advise students to pay careful attention to the film and use this information to track notes, comments and reactions to the film. (10 minutes)

**Step 2:** View *Finding Nemo* during one or two class sessions. (90 minutes)

**Step 3:** During the next class session, students should be assigned informal discussion groups and encouraged to respond to the film. These conversations should highlight areas of the film that show parallels to the concepts and issues discussed over the course of the module or semester. (15 minutes)

**Table 1**  
**Character and Concept Analysis for *Finding Nemo***

---

**Directions:** On the following paper or attached sheets, make notes of any character traits and behaviors or scenes in the film that illustrate any of the organizational behavior concepts covered in this module of the course. You should show careful attention to detail as this information will help you complete the next phase of the assignment.

**Central Characters**

Nemo  
Marlin  
Nemo's Mother  
Dory  
Gill  
Bloat  
Peach  
Bruce  
Anchor  
Chum

**Organizational Behavior Concepts**

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs  
McClelland's Learned Needs  
Self-Efficacy  
Expectancy Theory  
Effort\*Performance\*Reward  
Instrumentality  
Valence  
Group Development Processes  
GroupThink  
Motivation  
Needs  
Leadership  
Self-fulfilling Prophecy

---

Sample questions might include:

- What concepts did you see illustrated in the film?
- Were there any behaviors that resembled what might take place in an organization?
- Were there any illustrations of dysfunctional behavior? If so, how might you as a manager solve the problems caused by it?

**Step 4:** Reassemble as a class and facilitate a full-group discussion seeking to answer any questions that the students may have concerning the film or its subject matter. This may be a good opportunity to address concerns held by international students or those whose native language is not English. For the instructor's benefit, a resource sheet has been included in the appendix which lists a scene analysis of organizational behavior concepts as well as practical applications (10 minutes)

**Step 5:** Distribute the questions in Table 2 for students to complete during the in-class or take-home examination. All details of test submission and deadlines should be discussed. (10 minutes)

## Table 2 Sample Essay Test Questions

(Answers to these questions can be obtained by contacting the author directly at rholmes@gwu.edu)

- 
1. During the first scene of *Finding Nemo*, Nemo's mom defies one of the central concepts in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Define and discuss the central premise and structure of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory and then explain how this concept was challenged in scene One of *Finding Nemo*. How does Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs influence managers today? Be sure to include detail that includes common issues with this theory as well as your opinion of its usefulness.
  2. When Nemo defies his father's instruction and swims towards the boat, he exhibits several organizational behavior concepts as well as the negative results that can occur when one of these factors influence our behavior. Define and discuss Nemo's behavior as well as the course concept illustrated. Your analysis should also include discussion that explains the role these concepts can occupy in the actions taken by managers in today's environment.
  3. The group of fish that Nemo meets in the tank have a distinct group chemistry that results in the successful escape of Nemo as well as the others. Analyze and discuss the team development process as exhibited by this group as well as the factors that influenced their performance. Be careful to discuss role definition and performance expectations. What lessons can be extracted from this course of action that would benefit human workforce teams in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
  4. David McClelland's Learned Needs theory is a paramount component of organizational behavior and our understanding of motivation. In several scenes in the film, the characters act in ways that support McClelland's key assertions. In addition to defining and explaining this theory of motivation, choose one character and discuss how she/he confirms McClelland's theory. Discuss how these needs might impact our role as managers and business leaders.
- 

**Step 6:** Once the tests are collected and graded, facilitate a second full-group discussion and debrief the exercise as well as the appropriate answers for each of the questions. (15 minutes)  
(Sample answers to the questions are available by contacting the author via email)

*Debrief:* Review in detail the scenes discussed as well as the organizational behavior concepts highlighted in each. Managerial implications for real businesses and organizations and answers to supplemental questions should also be given out at this time. The exercise serves as a practical illustration of multiple organizational behavior concepts.

In addition, the use of animation should be palatable to both undergraduate and graduate audiences. Because *Finding Nemo* deals with the universal bond between parent and child, the film is appropriate for diverse student groups, including international students. Further, the G rating ensures that the film is not mired in offensive language or sexual situations and enables students to focus intently on the movie and Nemo's rescue.

## Student Reactions & Responses

Student response to this activity as well as the inclusion of animated films on the course syllabus was noticeably positive. The undergraduates were particularly engaged because it enabled them to place organizational behavior concepts into context that was both manageable and understandable. During the debriefing, students were able to expound on each other's ideas and explanations, creating a lively and stimulating learning environment. The most rewarding facet of the student response was the sentiment of "I get it now" that students echoed at the conclusion of this exercise. For many of them, the film displayed concepts and themes in organizational behavior that textbooks struggle to bring to life. The students were clearly able to relate and retain the central ideas behind the theory and application of organizational behavior. The essay responses were thoughtfully crafted and over 75% of the class population scored a B or better on the exercise. Those that scored lower showed an overall lack of interest and commitment to the project, perhaps because of a dislike for animation or failure to take it seriously. In an effort to mitigate this challenge in future classes, I will use both animated films and other genres and then allow the students to choose one of the two for completion of this assignment.

Because *Finding Nemo* is rather innocent and contains dialogue that is not offensive or hard to comprehend, I did not experience any difficulty introducing this exercise to international students. In fact, the film also stays clear of deep cultural references that often hinder proper interpretation from international audiences. Of the 65 students that participated in this exercise, at least ten were international students and none of them expressed any issue completing this exercise or obtaining a respectable letter grade.

## Alternative Designs

In an effort to conserve or maximize instruction time, instructors may wish to have students view the film outside of the classroom. Most libraries have on hand or can easily retrieve a copy of the film for display in the audio-visual department and most video rental stores carry copies of *Finding Nemo*. As this exercise was designed to aid undergraduates, those that teach graduate students may wish to omit Table 1 which serves as a supplement to the film. These students generally have the capacity and requisite skills necessary to apply course concepts and may find the listing elementary and unnecessary. Further, graduate students may also only need the group discussion after the examination has been completed.

The exercise may also function as a supplemental writing assignment rather than an examination. In this instance, instructors may have students choose one or two of the questions to answer for homework or an optional semester assignment. While the film brings several organizational concepts to bear and has comprehensive value, some instructors may wish to use this exercise to highlight only one or two concepts at a given time in the semester or module.

An additional variation of this exercise may challenge students to choose a character from the film and in essay form, discuss and detail the organizational behavior concepts illustrated in his/her performance. Instructors may again omit Table 1 and allow students the opportunity to

brainstorm all of the concepts that apply to the film. Interestingly, students may uncover additional concepts that have some validity or exposure in this film.

Some instructors who use project teams in their course may also wish to have the discussion and analysis of the film done by the formal team and have the team submit a group paper. This method will further the team's development and the instructor may use team feedback instruments to assess whether this activity strengthened the performance of the group in any way.

## Summary

Champoux's work (2001) coupled with extant management education research validates the opportunity and benefit received by introducing films in the classroom (Comer, 2001; Dent, 2001; Hunt, 2001). Disney's *Finding Nemo* adds to the collection of films that are rich in illustrations of organizational behavior and management concepts. The exercise detailed above will enable new faculty members to engage undergraduate students in unearthing organizational behavior.

## REFERENCES

- Champoux, J.E. (2001). Animated Films as a Teaching Resource. *Journal of Management Education*, 25(1), 79-100.
- Champoux, J.E. (1999). Film as a Teaching Resource. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 8(2), 206-217.
- Comer, D.R. (2001). Not Just a Mickey Mouse Exercise: Using Disney's The Lion King to Teach Leadership. *Journal of Management Education*, 25(4), 430-436.
- Dent, E.B. (2001). Seinfeld, Professor of Organizational Behavior: The Psychological Contract and Systems Things. *Journal of Management Education*, 25(6), 648-659.
- Hunt, C.S. (2001), Must See TV: The Timelessness of Television as a Teaching Tool. *Journal of Management Education*, 25(6), 631-647.
- Janis, I. (1982) *Groupthink*. Second Edition. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Leslie, B., Aring, M.K. & Brand B. (1998). Informal Learning: The New Frontier of Employee & Organizational Development. *Economic Development Review*: 15(4), 12-18.
- Maslow, A. (1943). A Theory of Human Motivation. *Psychological Review*, 50, 370-396.
- McClelland, D.C. (1961). *The Achieving Society*. Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand Reinhold.
- Shaw, J.B & Fisher, C.D. (1999). Practical Organizational Behavior Education (PROBE): Modifications and Innovations. *Journal of Management Education*, 23(1), 13-30.
- Stanton, A. (2003). *Finding Nemo*. USA, Disney/Pixar Studios: 100 minutes.
- Vroom, V.H. (1964). *Work and Motivation*. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons.

## APPENDIX

### Scene & Concept Analysis for Disney's *Finding Nemo*

**Organizational Behavior Key Concept:** Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

**Theoretical Background:** Maslow (1943) developed a framework for understanding human behavior that suggests our actions can be determined by the fulfillment and attainment of lower

and higher order needs. Lower order needs typically are physiological such as the need for food, clothing and shelter. Higher order needs are represented by spiritual enlightenment and career goals.

**Scene Marker:** 02:24

**Scene Description:** Coral (Nemo's mother) sacrifices her life in order to protect her offspring. She contemplates the impending attack of a shark, and swims in the shark's path so that none of her children become bait for the vicious animal.

**Practical Application:** In this scene, Coral places a higher-order need before a lower-order need of survival. Many times in corporations, employees and executives challenge Maslow's Hierarchy by rearranging the priority of needs. In addition, as the literature suggests, Maslow's theory does little to address cultural diversity.

**Organizational Behavior Key Concept:** McClelland's Learned Needs Theory (nAff, NPw, NAch)

**Theoretical Background:** David McClelland (1961) posited that human behavior can be predicted by determining the type of needs that motivate people to act. He distinguished three categories for these needs; power, affiliation or achievement. Each of us are said to belong to a particular need type and this greatly influences and/or determines our behavior.

**Scene Marker:** 07:32

**Scene Description:** Marlin is persuaded to tell the other fish a joke despite his inability to be a comedian.

**Practical Application:** In his quest to affiliate, Marlin attempted to perform a task for which he was poorly qualified and subsequently embarrassed himself. Students should be able to draw a parallel of personal moments wherein their need for power, achievement, or affiliation has influenced their behavior. This scene shows support for McClelland's theory as should student experiences in test preparation, college admissions or fraternity/sorority membership.

**Organizational Behavior Key Concept:** Self-Efficacy

**Theoretical Background:** Self-Efficacy is task-specific self-confidence. In short, it is one's ability to believe that she/he can complete a task successfully. It is a vital component that influences our behavior and motivation. Research suggests that if our degree of self-efficacy is high, the greater the likelihood that we will complete assigned tasks.

**Scene Marker:** 12:20

**Scene Description:** Nemo tells his father that he can swim out to the boat and later defies his father's instruction.

**Practical Application:** Nemo's level of task specific self-confidence motivated him to complete the task, although his disregard for his father's advice led to painful results. Nemo's behavior and response was directly influenced by his high degree of self-efficacy.

**Organizational Behavior Key Concept:** Expectancy Theory, Effort (E)—Performance (P)—Reward (R), Instrumentality, and Valence

**Theoretical Background:** We use the Expectancy Theory (Vroom, 1964) of motivation to help us understand how individuals make decisions regarding various behavioral alternatives. This model deals with the direction aspect of motivation, that is, once behavior is energized, what behavioral alternatives are individuals likely to pursue. Expectancy is the belief that one's effort

(E) will result in realization of preferred performance (P) goals. This belief is generally based on an individual's past experience, self confidence, and the perceived difficulty of the performance standard or goal. The instrumentality is the belief that if one does meet performance expectations, he or she will receive a greater reward. This reward (R) may come in a variety of forms. The valance refers the value the individual places on the rewards.

**Scene Marker:** 15:57

**Scene Description:** Marlin attempts to find and rescue Nemo.

**Practical Application:** Marlin's internationalization of a goal drives his effort and subsequent performance in hopes of finding Nemo and holding true to his promise of perpetual protection of his offspring. He believes that his efforts will help him reach his performance goal and enable him to locate his son.

**Organizational Behavior Concept:** Group Development Processes (Forming, Norming, Storming, Performing and Adjourning)

**Theoretical Background:** This framework serves as a process for understanding group/team development and what can influence a team's performance. The architects of this framework suggest that if a team participates in idea generation, setting member expectations, performing and holding each other accountable, the team will generally perform higher than other teams that do not complete these steps.

**Scene Marker:** 19:38

**Scene Description:** Group Meeting officiated by Bruce

**Practical Application:** In this scene, the group shows its forming rituals as well as its member expectations or norms. Students should be able to apply this illustration to campus fraternities and sororities or any other teams or groups that they may be members of.

**Organizational Behavior Concept:** Group Performance

**Theoretical Background:** This concept simply draws students' attention to the processes and behaviors that a group engages in while attempting to accomplish a task. Performance will typically be ranked from low to high but it is usually dependent upon subjective characteristics as well as the actual attainment of the goal.

**Scene Marker:** 26:18

**Scene Description:** Nemo's initiation into the aquarium

**Practical Application:** Through Nemo's application, we see how a group creates its own rules and forces those rules of conformity onto outsiders. In addition, we witness the process that the group enacts to introduce a new member into its fold.

**Organizational Behavior Concept:** GroupThink

**Theoretical Background:** GroupThink was defined by Janis (1982) as a dysfunctional team process wherein group members feel pressured by other members to accept an idea and withhold criticism or suggestions of alternatives. The dysfunction usually occurs because the accepted idea does not enable the team's success.

**Scene Marker:** 38:45

**Scene Description:** Gill puts forth his plan of escape

**Practical Application:** As this scene unfolds, none of the members of the group are allowed or encouraged to disagree or amend Gill's plan. The concept of groupthink suggests that innova-

tion and creativity are limited as members of the group stifle their ideas and accept the prevailing idea of the leader.

**Organizational Behavior Concept:** Motivation

**Theoretical Background:** Motivation is defined as the force that energizes, directs and sustains behavior. It typically triggers our behavior and actions. Almost any activity that students mention is precipitated by some form of motivation.

**Scene Marker:** 48:57

**Scene Description:** Nemo's first attempt to stop the filter

**Practical Application:** Students will witness Nemo's internal and extrinsic motivation to complete a task of which he is not familiar simply because the other fish in the aquarium build his self-confidence with verbal support. He also sees similarities of handicap with Gill.

**Organizational Behavior Concept:** Leadership

**Theoretical Background:** Leadership speaks to any individual or collection of individuals that are responsible for providing direction and oversight. A frequent debate in the leadership literature is the question of whether leaders are born or developed. Students should find many examples of leadership within the university as well as the larger community.

**Scene Marker:** 28:20

**Scene Description:** Gill's plan of escape

**Practical Application:** In this scene, students will encounter Gill's leadership and the power, influence and authority that are yielded to him by the other captive fish.

Rayshad Holmes is a doctoral student in the Organizational Behavior and Development Program at George Washington University. His primary research interests include Emotional Intelligence, Gender and Ethnic Diversity Challenges and Management Pedagogy. Mr. Holmes is especially grateful for the insightful wisdom and encouragement of Steve Meisel and two anonymous OMJ reviewers. In addition, he extends heartfelt appreciation to his nieces; Taylor, Tiffany and Tanner who provided the stimulation and inspiration for this exercise. Email: [rholmes@gwu.edu](mailto:rholmes@gwu.edu)

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2004 Eastern Academy of Management Conference.