



Breaking the Paradigm: Using Literary Fiction as a Negotiation Case Study

Christopher J. Meyer

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Christopher J. Meyer 

Hankamer School of Business, Baylor University, Waco, Texas, USA

I adopted the use of literary fiction as a case study in a Master of Business Administration course in negotiation. I chose three novels (*The Lower River*, Theroux; *Lord of the Flies*, Golding; or *City of Thieves*, Benioff) for the focus on the human interactions within them. Each week, the class read half of one of the novels, focusing on the interactions between characters in the novel. The class members were divided into teams, and each week one team had the responsibility to present an analysis of the character interactions in half of a novel, focusing on the application of course topics to those character interactions. Teams that were not presenting were tasked with interacting, reviewing, and providing feedback for the presenting team. Additionally, each individual in the class provided a short reflective application of course material based on an interaction from the novel portion each week. The focus of the individual reflection was, “Applying the material from the course, how could the character(s) have reacted differently...” in the interaction you chose to analyze? These reflections were used as discussion points during the presentation and turned in for a grade based on application of course concepts. In order to successfully complete these deliverables, the members of the class were required to read and think critically about the novel section each week in addition to the course material.

Kidd and Castano (2013) first linked reading literary fiction with increases in empathy and perspective-taking. They found that individuals who read literary fiction scored significantly higher on measures of both empathy—which is crucial for interactions at all levels, but particularly useful in negotiation, and perspective-taking—which Roger Fisher calls the most important skill for a negotiator (Fisher, Ury, and Patton 1991). Activation of empathy and perspective-taking changes

the students’ thinking to mirror the world (Oatley 2011) outside of the classroom. This allows the students to construct meaning about the course content in a more realistic and engaging way. My experience provided some preliminary evidence that the use of literary fiction can increase empathy and perspective taking in students studying negotiation. This was particularly true for perspective-taking.

Anecdotally, the students in my section that read the novels were more engaged, more excited, and more connected to the material. They would often stop me in the hallway to talk about either the books we were reading in class, or about other books and how they also connected to the course content. The team-led discussions of the book were scheduled for an hour and fifteen minutes worth of class time in a two hour and forty-five-minute class. Most of the student discussions had to be stopped when they were well past their time. Often, after the students came back from a short break, they wanted to continue the discussion about application of concepts to the novel. There was a definite excitement about the material.

ORCID

Christopher J. Meyer  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3166-3101>

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