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Everything is fine! Using “The Good Place” to teach administrative ethics

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ABSTRACT

Creating an engaging and educational experience in an ethics class can be difficult. But media, such as TV and movies, can supplement ethics education in public administration. For this study, I used the TV show “The Good Place” as a case study for a masters-level Administrative Ethics class. Through this, I explore the themes presented in the show and discussion questions which can be used to encourage conversation. Furthermore, building on previous literature, I explore how TV and movies can accent the ethics education in a public administration classroom.

KEYWORDS

Administrative ethics; The Good Place; TV and movies

Teaching ethics in public administration is difficult (Facer & Bradbury, 2005). It is an important part of the public education curriculum (Svara, 2014), and ethical leadership is connected to positive organizational outcomes (Bellé & Cantarelli, 2017; Downe et al., 2016; Mostafa & Abed El-Motalib, 2018). But there is debate about the best ways to teach ethics to students of public administration (Facer & Bradbury, 2005; Hejka-Ekins, 1988; Menzel, 1997; Nieuwenburg, 2003; Plant & Ran, 2009; Svara, 2014). This study adds to this debate by presenting ways that media, such as TV, can enhance the experience of an ethics class. I explore how to use the TV show *The Good Place* as a part of the ethics education, and using media as part of ethics education in general. TV shows and movies can help support the lessons taught in ethics education by applying the lessons taught in the class to a case study.

Within the education literature, there has been a lot of discussion on how to use media, such as TV shows, in college pedagogy (Hathaway, 2013; Hutton & Mak, 2014; Kernodle, 2009; Lee, 2001, 2004; Peterlin & Peters, 2018; Raisio & Lundström, 2017; Sementelli, 2009). TV shows and movies can be used in the same ways as case studies as well as an engaging way to encourage discussion around complicated issues. In public administration in particular, TV show such as *Parks and Recreation* (Borry, 2018a, 2018b) and *Game of Thrones* (Yu & Campbell, 2020) and various movies (Dubnick, 2000) have been identified as educational tools. But another option is also available. The TV show *The Good Place*, created by Mike Schur, provides an interesting and humorous examination of ethics. Used in conjunction with Public Administration ethics textbooks, this TV show can be used as an ethical case study to guide discussion for students.

This article adds to the public administration literature in several ways. To start, it presents the TV show *The Good Place* as an educational tool for a Master’s level ethics

class. Furthermore, it explores how television and other media can be used, in general, in public administration education. With so many television shows and movies available for streaming, critical analysis of modern popular culture allows students the ability to think critically in an engaging medium. Lastly, this article adds to the understanding of how we teach ethics. Building on the existing literature, this study helps explore ways that ethics education can be both creative and interesting.

Teaching administrative ethics

Understanding ethics is important as ethical leadership can help guide organizations toward ethical practices (Downe et al., 2016). Ethical leadership has been connected to work engagement and work meaningfulness (Mostafa & Abed El-Motalib, 2018). Unethical behavior can be caused by many things, including exposure to dishonesty, loss aversion, and self-justification (Bellé & Cantarelli, 2017). Though public service motivation has been found to have a strong connection to ethical behavior (Christensen & Wright, 2018; Olsen et al., 2019), moral reminders, such as codes of ethics and ethics education, are needed to promote ethical behavior within organizations and amongst students (Bellé & Cantarelli, 2017).

Ethics education has long been a part of the public administration curriculum. There are, in fact, diverse resources and perspectives on what this ethics education should look like (Hejka-Ekins, 1988; Menzel, 1997; Plant & Ran, 2009; Svara, 2014), or if it can be taught (Nieuwenburg, 2003). Various educational techniques have been explored in the literature. The use of code of ethics (Svara, 2014), ethical awareness (Hejka-Ekins, 1988), or some combination of both (Pickus & Dostert, 2002) have been suggested as a framework for ethics education. There are also multiple textbooks concerning public administration ethics (e.g., Balfour et al., 2014; Bowman & West, 2014; Menzel, 2014; Cooper, 2012), providing professors with many options. While most researchers suggest that ethics should be a part of the public administration education, there are divergent perspectives on how ethics should be taught.

Using media in education

The purpose of media as a pedagogical tool is to enhance to the experience of the readings and lectures through a case study approach. Recent literature has built on this foundation to explore how media, such as TV and movies, can be used to better explore ethical dilemmas which public administration students will face in the professional world. What makes TV an interesting medium, especially using one show over the period of a semester, is that it allows students to start seeing how the same people might respond to multiple ethical issues, as well as ethical growth.

The use of movies and TV shows has been found to help energize moral imagination and act as engaging case studies (Bharath, 2019; Dubnick, 2000; Mateer et al., 2016; Pandey, 2012). For example, Bharath (2019) used the movie *Captain America: Civil War* to better understand the complexities of ethical decision making. Other movies and TV shows which have been studied include *Parks and Recreation* (Borry, 2018a, 2018b), *Schindler's List* (Dubnick, 2000), *Grey's Anatomy* (Fariña, 2009), *The Simpsons* (Gillis & Hall, 2010), *Doctor Who* and *Star Trek* (Edwards, 2014), *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* (Pandey, 2012), *Game of Thrones* (Young et al., 2018), and *The Office* (DelCampo et al., 2010; Kernodle,

2009). In the field of economics, Mateer, O’Roark, and Holder (2016) have even come up with a list of the 10 greatest films for teaching. A website, TV for Economics, is also available to provide educational support for economics professors who would like to add TV episodes into their classroom (Matter et al., 2011). Dubnick (2000) provides a similar list of movies for the field of public administration.

Across disciplines, TV shows and movies have been used to explore the complex theories presented in class. Boyer et al. (2002) suggest that students can use films in ethics class to understand how people grapple with making decisions and conflicting interests. In classes which use film and television, students sometimes feel as though they can connect the theory taught to their daily life and the world around them (Stout, 2011). It can also be used to help students explore complex social relationships and how those relationship impact the work of public administrators (Marshall, 2012). Though there are many positives to using TV and movies as an educational device, there are ways in which it could be suboptimal. Media in the classroom should be a thoughtful and purposeful part of the classroom experience (Hobbs, 2006). Indeed, media should be used to help encourage an interactive learning environment, which is especially important for ethics education (Menzel, 1998).

In summary, there are many opportunities to use media, such as TV and movies, in undergraduate and graduate classes. The use of the media, similar to other educational decisions, needs to be purposeful and thought out. Helping the students understand what they should get out of the movie or TV show beforehand may even provide them with guidance in later discussion. Building on this perspective, the use of *The Good Place* provides a case study approach to ethics which can support students throughout the process.

Using *The Good Place* as a case study

The Good Place

The Good Place is a TV show on NBC created by Michael Schur, which is also available on Netflix and Hulu. The show follows four humans, Chidi (William Jackson Harper), Eleanor (Kristen Bell), Tahani (Jammela Jamil), and Jianyu/Jason (Manny Jacinto), who have died and are in the Good Place. Their neighborhood was created by Michael (Ted Danson), a Good Place architect and maintained by Janet (D’Arcy Carden), a personified information system. With the support of Chidi, a ethics professor, the main characters explore what it means to be a good person and how to live an ethical life and afterlife. Each person reaches the Good Place due to the point total of their good and bad deeds on earth. Based on that information, each person is sent to either the Good Place or the Bad Place. Specifically, each person is sent to a specific neighborhood in the Good Place where they live with their soulmate. During their time in the Good Place, the four humans, along with Michael and Janet, explore the complexities of being a good person once morality no longer matters. As the series progresses, the characters face a series of complex ethical decisions as they travel through their neighborhood, the Medium Place, the Bad Place, Earth, and various other parts of the afterlife architecture.

The show itself is serialized, with most episodes ending with a cliffhanger. To make things easier, the only episodes used were the ones available on Netflix. During the time of this class, this was only Seasons 1 and 2, but episodes of other seasons are now

available. The episodes used were specified on the syllabus so those interested could watch the episodes that we did not discuss in class, though those who did not watch the episodes between classes were still able to follow along. By using a highly serialized show, students can see how characters they know continue to make decisions and how they evolve as they learn new information about ethics and the mechanics of the world around them.

The reason this show was used is because it presents ethics in an approachable manner. The public administration literature has explored creative ways to teach ethics (e.g., Bharath, 2019; Borry, 2018a, 2018b; Matchett, 2009), questioning not only should ethics be taught, but how. Building on this literature, *The Good Place* was piloted for an ethics class due to its sense of humor as well as its direct discussion of ethics and its real-world implications.

Table 1 provides a listing of the episodes used, the discussion questions, the main themes, and some supplemental readings from public administration journals as well as those from allied fields. This includes questions the professor had prepared as well as questions the students asked and their thoughts about the episode. These episodes were chosen because they had explicit ethical discussions. During the time of this class, the third and fourth seasons were not available on Netflix and, therefore, not used. That said, Table 2 provides the episodes and themes from season 3 and 4.

Structure of the class

The use of *The Good Place* was piloted in an Administrative Ethics class at a small, public Masters in Public Administration program. The class was 2 hours 40 minutes once a week from 6:00 pm – 8:40 pm and had 9 students. All of the students came to the class from work or internship, including half of the students who worked at the university. Most of the students in the class had work experience previous to starting their MPA, providing a rich base for discussion. Due to the small size of the program, many of the students knew each other prior to the class.

The class was structured as follows: To begin, a ten-minute discussion around an ethical issue was used as a way to start the class, usually an ethical issue a student was facing or the professor had faced as a practitioner. Then, a different student each week did a presentation on an ethical issue. That was followed by a presentation on the reading and the topic of the week. Lastly, the episode of the Good Place was shown and discussed. Discussions around the episode were used to end the class. These discussions would sometimes go up to an hour, with the instructor ending class at 8:40 pm. As the class only had 9 students, all of the class was able to take part in one big conversation which often built on things mentioned in previous lecture or other classes in the program.

Episode and discussion

Using the structure of the work by Borry (2018a), this section will look at four episodes of *The Good Place*, the main themes, and the discussions around the episode. Most episodes of *The Good Place* are between 20 and 25 minutes. Furthermore, discussions in the class where this was piloted went for between 40 and 60 minutes.

Table 1. Good place discussion questions and main themes.

Episode	Discussion Questions	Main Themes	Supplemental Readings
Season 1, Episode 1: Everything is Fine	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it mean to be a good person? • How do we define good and bad? • Is honesty always ethical? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Honesty • Systems of defining good and bad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wells & Molina, 2017 • De Vries, 2002 • De Graaf & Paanakker, 2015
Season 1, Episode 5: Category 55 Emergency Doomsday Crisis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it mean to have a point system for morality? Is that different than the way we view our own morality or just another perspective? • What motivates us to do good? • What are the pluses and minuses of utilitarianism? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Utilitarianism • Point Systems for goodness and badness of actions • Virtue Signaling 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • McKay, 2000 • Wallace et al., 2020
Season 1, Episode 7: The Eternal Shriek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When do the ends justify the means? • At what point is it ethical to lie? What scenarios do we, as public administrators, need to lie? When should we tell the truth? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ends justify the means. • The ethics of lying 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wells & Molina, 2017 • De Vries, 2002 • Byrne et al., 2015 • Ball, 2009
Season 1, Episode 11: What's My Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it mean to start over? • What is our motivation for doing good? • What percentage of our motivation is selfish versus selfless. • Does the perception of what we do matter? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do we do good? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cunliffe & Jun, 2005 • Cooper, 2004 • De Waal, 2008 • Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003
Season 1, Episode 13: Michael's Gambit	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What happens when the person we trust to guide us lies? • How do we react when the person leading us is evil or is making decisions we identify as evil? • How do we understand evil? Who is evil? • How do we interact with each other? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative Evil. • Trust. • How do we interact with each other? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003 • Dillard & Ruchala, 2005 • Adams et al., 2006 • Adam, 2011 • Wang & Wan Wart, 2007
Season 2, Episode 3: Team Cockroach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why do we do what we do? • Who do we include as a part of our team? • How do we convince ourselves that we are ethical? • What's right for you versus what's right for the group 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethics versus emotion. • The individual versus the group. • Convincing ourselves that we are good. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lynn Jr., 2001 • Adam, 2011 • Ansell and Van Blerk, 2005
Season 2, Episode 5: The Trolley Problem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we decide in situations such as the trolley problem, where you have to hurt one person to help several. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trolley problem. • The idea of a "right" answer to a question. • How do we apologize and admit we are wrong? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resodihardjo et al., 2016 • Gold et al., 2015
Season 2, Episode 6: Janet and Michael	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we take care of ourselves? Of our employees? • When do we lie to our employees? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Burnout 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eldor, 2018 • Lewandowski, 2003
Season 2, Episode 7: Derek	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When is it right to lie? • Is the truth really important in all situations? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lying. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wells & Molina, 2017 • De Vries, 2002 • Byrne et al., 2015 • Ball, 2009

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued).

Episode	Discussion Questions	Main Themes	Supplemental Readings
Season 2, Episode 9: Best Self	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is our “best self”? What does that mean? • How do we know if we are our “best self”? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What does it mean to be one’s “Best Self”? • What are the different parts of ourselves and how does each part act ethically? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matchett, 2009
Season 2, Episode 11: The Burrito	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What test would be used to see if we have become a better person? • Can we be a good person on our own, or do we need other people? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How do we know if we have become a better person? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adam, 2011 • Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003 • Adams et al., 2006
Season 2, Episode 12: Somewhere Else	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When do we get second chances? • What encourages us to be good people? • Who encourages us to be good people? • What do we see in ourselves in the journey these six have gone through? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second chances • Moral desserts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cunliffe & Jun, 2005 • Cooper, 2004 • De Waal, 2008 • Fehr & Fischbacher, 2003

Season 1, episode 5: Category 55 emergency doomsday crisis

In this episode, there are multiple plotlines happening at once, all focused around a sinkhole in the center of town. First, Chidi teaches Eleanor and Jason about utilitarianism. Eleanor and Chidi get into a fight because Eleanor wants to continue learning but Chidi needs a break. Michael informs the whole neighborhood that, due to the sinkhole, no one may leave their houses, leaving Chidi and Eleanor stuck in the same house while fighting. To add tension to their situation, Chidi and Eleanor are asked to house a couple whose home was destroyed by the sinkhole. During this time, tensions flare up and the guests provide couples therapy to Chidi and Eleanor. Eleanor realizes the amount of stress she has caused Chidi and tries to make it up to him by setting up a boat for him once the sinkhole is gone. Michael asks for Eleanor’s help in figuring out the root of problems which have been happening in the neighborhood.

Table 2. Season 3 & 4 episodes and themes.

Episode	Major Theme
Season 3, Episode 5: Jeremy Bearimy	Nihilism, Virtue Ethics, and Consequentialism.
Season 3, Episode 6: The Ballad of Donkey Doug	What does it mean to teach someone to be ethical? Are there people who cannot be saved?
Season 3, Episode 7: The Worst Possible Use of Free Will	Determinism versus Free Will
Season 3, Episode 8: Don’t Let the Good Life Pass You By	What does it mean to live an ethical life?
Season 3, Episode 10: The Book of Dougs	How can following the rules hamper ethical decision making?
Season 3, Episode 12: Chidi Sees the Time-Knife	Unintended consequences and its impact on ethical living.
Season 4, Episode 3: Chillaxing	Can you torture someone to make them better? Torture someone for their own good?
Season 4, Episode 6: Help is Other People?	Who is worth saving? How do you decide?
Season 4, Episode 10: You’ve Changed, Man	What would be a fair way to create an afterlife? What does fair mean?

At the same time, Tahani is hosting a brunch for the residents of the neighborhood. During the brunch, Janet informs Michael that a sinkhole in the neighborhood is getting larger. As Michael and Janet leave the brunch to fix the sinkhole, Tahani accidentally looks at a file which totals all of her good and bad deeds on Earth. This total, known as points in the TV show, determine who gets into the Good Place and who gets into the Bad Place. Tahani later reveals, during a conversation with Michael, that all her life, she tried to be extraordinary but feels that nothing has ever been enough for her parents, which pushes her harder.

This episode deals with two main issues: Utilitarianism and a point system for how good people are. In the beginning of the episode, utilitarianism is introduced (Eleanor can also, later in the episode, be seen reading *Utilitarianism* by John Stewart Mills) and its basic principles discussed. As it applies to this episode, the more happiness that Eleanor gets through ethics education, the more pain she causes Chidi. This led to a discussion around the way utilitarianism plays into modern public administration. Specifically, how do public administrators balance creating a greater good along with meeting the needs of a minority constituency. Discussions in class explored social equity and representative bureaucracy, questioning who bureaucrats are supposed to represent: the majority of the population or the minority which may not have a voice within the community.

Furthermore, though the points system had been discussed in earlier episodes, this is the first episode which specifically explores its implications. Discussions during class focused on a few different aspects of a point system for how good one is, including what does it mean to have a points system for morality and is this something we do unconsciously. This leads to a question of how do we determine what is and is not included into a point system and how many points each action is worth¹. Through this discussion, we are also asked about what motivates us to do good, as we see Tahani is encouraged through her competition with her sister and need to make her parents happy. This leads to questions of why we do good things and act ethically. In other words, would (and should) our intention influence the amount of points we get for “doing good”? This connects to virtue signaling, the process of publicly displaying virtue, sometimes for attention rather than to help people. In the modern era, with people expressing their political preferences and charitable support on social media, students can question the ethics of this type of social interaction. Specifically, if you do good and announce it, does it change the ethics of what you have done (Wallace et al., 2020)? Furthermore, if we apply points to our actions as public administrators, how would that change the way we interact with our constituents and bureaucracy?

Season 1, episode 7: The Eternal Shriek

At the beginning of this episode, Michael announces his retirement as he believes he is the problem with the neighborhood. He asks Janet to call a train, which is the only way in and out of the neighborhood. As Tahani plans out a retirement party, Michael reveals that retirement is a painful experience, also known as “The Eternal Shriek.” Eleanor is in a moral quandary, since she is the reason that there are problems in the neighborhood. Eleanor was sent to the neighborhood by mistake and belongs in The Bad Place. Admitting this means she may be sent away. Eleanor would like to “kill” Janet (who is not a human but an information system) to prevent Michael from leaving. Chidi is concerned about the ethics of killing, as well as the ethics of lying. Chidi and Eleanor are debating whether or not to kill Janet, Jason arrives and moves to press a button to “kill” her. Chidi, when attempting to stop

Jason from killing Janet, accidentally presses the button, killing her. Chidi and Eleanor have an argument about the ethics of lying about killing Janet. At the end of the episode, in a neighborhood meeting, seeing how much the lying is having a negative effect on Chidi, Eleanor comes clean about not belonging.

This episode focuses on two ethical issues: When do the ends justify the means as well as the ethics of lying. In this particular instance, Chidi and Eleanor discuss killing Janet to save Michael from retirement, which will be painful for the rest of his existence. This builds on a deontological versus teleological argument of ethics, which was also explored in the textbook. In this sense, is it ethical to kill Janet to save Michael? This question is compounded by the fact that Janet is not a human but, instead, a vessel created to make the human's afterlife better.

During the discussion in class, intent was explored, as well as what it means to be human (or not human). With the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), questions focused on how to ethically work with robots in public and nonprofit organizations. As most of the ethics discussions we have in class focus on interpersonal relationships, in what ways can we apply ethics to non-human interactions. This episode builds on that question and asks how we can ethically relate to AI.

Season 2, episode 5: The trolley problem

While teaching the trolley problem to Michael, Eleanor, Tahani, and Jason, Chidi has problems helping Michael better understand the complexity of ethical living. Michael and Chidi discuss the ethics of *Les Misérables*, with Michael seeing ethics in terms of positive and negative points while Chidi understand ethics as a gray area. Michael wants the right answer to the trolley problem, but Chidi expresses that there is no “right” answer. To make it less theoretical and more concrete, Michael transports Chidi and Eleanor to a trolley to act out the problem in real time. Later, they explore various modifications to the trolley problem, again in a real-time simulation. As these modifications keep stressing Chidi out, it comes out that Michael is only doing this to torture Chidi. Chidi gets upset and he informs Michael that he is no longer welcome in his class. Eleanor confronts Michael, and Michael reveals that he is reacting to finding the class really difficult as it challenges his long-held belief on morality. Michael admits to screwing up and gives Tahani, Jason, Eleanor, and Chidi presents. Chidi feels that this is a bribe and rejects it. Michael admits to Chidi that he has been acting out because learning ethics is hard for him. At the end of the episode, Janet reveals that she is malfunctioning.

This episode mainly focuses on the trolley problem, which has a lot of implications for public administrators. The trolley problem asks the question that if you are on a trolley and you are going to kill five people if you keep on your course. If you change your track, you will only kill one person. Do you keep your course and kill five people or change the track and kill one person? The trolley problem is an important philosophical question within public administration because it shows the impact of individual decisions on the communities are served (Risse, 2019). This episode has the characters acting out variations of the trolley problem, including a friend being one of the people who might be hit by the trolley as well as the variation where a doctor needs to kill one of his friends to donate five organs to dying strangers. As public administrators, our students may be in positions where they need to make difficult decisions about who gets services. During this discussion, we also explored

how funds are distributed within government and nonprofit organizations, including if we spend more money to fund programs that help fewer people with higher needs or more money to support more people with lower needs.

One aspect that also came up in discussions around this episode is the ethics of admitting one is wrong. In public administration, we are constantly looking for the right answers to help our constituency, but one student questioned what happens when we make mistakes. The ethics of admitting that we are wrong and exploring ways we can (or cannot) make up for the mistakes provided an important end to the conversation.

Season 2, episode 7: Derek

To help manage Janet's malfunctioning due to attaining feelings, something she never had before, she creates a boyfriend named Derek, as she is jealous of Tahani and Jason dating. Michael informs Janet that no one can know about Derek, as it will put himself and the humans in danger. Michael runs to Eleanor and Chidi for help, asking about the ethics of either murdering Derek or breaking up Jason and Tahani so that Janet will stop glitching. Chidi informs the group that lying is ethical as long as it does not cause harm. As Derek and Janet start fighting, Michael becomes worried that his secret will be discovered and, because of it, he will be sent to The Bad Place. Chidi is worried about being sent to The Bad Place for acting unethically. Michael and Eleanor decide to tell Jason about Janet's feelings for him. Eleanor and Janet talk about how what Janet needs is not just a rebound boyfriend, like Derek, but real time to get over her love of Jason. They decide to put Derek into power mode. Eleanor and Michael end by discussing how hard it is to be ethical.

The discussion surrounding this episode mostly focused on lying. Specifically, when is it acceptable, or even ethical, to lie to your constituency. Students tend to agree that you do not need to always tell your constituency everything, but is there a point where it is OK to lie to your clients or those you work with? The students and professor explored the various reasons why lying would be ethical, when it would not be, and gray areas. Through this episode, the discussion around lying provides a thought-provoking exploration on what is usually seen as black and white (lying being bad and telling the truth being good). Instead, lying and telling the truth are, at times, complicated discussions. There may be times when public administrators may not be able to tell their constituency everything. While not necessarily lying, public administrators sometimes need to limit what information gets out to the public. This episode allows students to think about what information should be provided to different groups that they serve.

Challenges and thoughts

At the end of the class, students were asked, via anonymous survey, "In what ways did you find that *The Good Place* helped or hindered this class?" One student responded that "I felt it helped with a frame to work around with." Another student responded that "The discussions afterwards helped me understand key concepts in this class and provided visuals for how to make ethical decisions." Using a show like *The Good Place* seemed to help contextualize the topics which were being discussed in a humorous manner. In fact, one of the students started referring to himself as Chidi in class, seeing similarities in the way that the character is tortured by indecision. This connects with other research which has

shown how media is used to help students connect with the material (Boyer et al., 2002; Marshall, 2012; Stout, 2011)

The difficulty with using a show such as *The Good Place* is that it is serialized. Therefore, unlike a show such as *Parks and Recreation*, episodes need to be shown in order. The class sometimes needs to be framed around the episode, changing the way one may structure their ethics class. Indeed, in the survey, one student commented that “It definitely helped some understanding to the concepts being learned in class, but sometimes it was difficult to find the commonalities between the content and the show.” Creating that link between the class materials and the show is imperative.

Several reading lists can be found online which connect to *The Good Place*. Because the show mentions many major philosophers, such as Jeremy Bentham, Soren Kierkegaard, Michel Foucault, and Immanuel Kant, there are opportunities to suggest books which might be of interest for the students. For example, at the end of the class, students expressed an interest in reading *What We Owe to Each Other* by T.M. Scanlon, *Ordinary Vices* by Judith Shklar, and *The Most Good You Can Do* by Peter Singer. Indeed, this show is a good way to introduce ethics in an interesting manner and help build up guidance on how to explore ethics beyond the singular course.

One limitation of this paper is that it is only looking at one experience of a small class. Larger classes may do better with smaller group discussions, where the groups take notes and present the main points for the whole class. Having the same groups throughout the class allows the students to feel comfortable with each other to explore their personal experiences. As the public administration literature is rife with research on using different types of media for teaching, more case studies are useful to help professors better understand how to use media in the classroom. Future research can explore other TV shows and movies which have public administration implications, providing more best practices on using modern media in the classroom. A review article can be used in future research to compile best practices and support professors who would like to use this type of pedagogy. Creating this resource for professors can help provide valuable guidance and conversation around media as an educational tool.

The positive aspects of using TV shows like *The Good Place* are numerous. To start, it is an entertaining way to present ethical dilemmas. In class discussions around ethics can be difficult, especially a class that is over two hours long. Having something that both breaks the structure up a little and provides some levity while still encouraging complex examinations of ethics. TV shows can help students connect their ethics education to the real world (Marshall, 2012; Stout, 2011). Although this show presents many fanciful elements, the emotions and issues the six main characters face is very human and things which students relate to. Seeing the characters evolve ethically may also help the students by providing them with a pathway or a thought process on how they can evolve ethically as well. During the class, the professor can have the students chart their ethical growth to compare with the characters in the show. Overall, *The Good Place* provides a unique educational opportunity for ethics education.

Conclusions

This case study explores how a professor can use the TV Show *The Good Place* to teach ethics. Building on previous research which has used TV and film as a pedagogical tool (Borry, 2018a, 2018b; Dubnick, 2000; Mateer et al., 2016; Yu & Campbell, 2020), this study shows how an intentional approach can create a creative approach to teaching ethics.

Importantly, the use of TV should be thoughtful (Hobbs, 2006). Indeed, instead of just showing something, the professor should be clear to themselves or the students what they wish the students to get out of it. In this case, the students sometimes took the discussion in unexpected ways. Allowing this flexibility (and improvisation) to make the class discussion something that works well for the students.

The use of media, such as TV and movies, is not a new method of teaching. What has changed is, with streaming programs such as Hulu and Netflix, the availability of the media. This medium can provide entertaining insights for students and initiate important discussions that connect to the readings. To use media in a thoughtful way, the episodes need to be carefully chosen to match with the topic of the class, discussions need to be planned out in advance, and the professor needs to be prepared to bring the discussion to specific points connected to the class. This means having specific points that the professor would like to note in advance, as well as learning objectives which can be distributed in advance. Flexibility is key as students may identify important points which the professor did not. Allowing students to explore the ways in which the TV show impacts their life and understanding of public administration will create a more personalized educational experience for the students and an interesting class for everyone.

Using television as a resource for teaching ethics can provide an interesting class for both the students and the professor. With a serialized show such as *The Good Place*, students not only learn about ethics but also see characters grow as ethical beings. This allows students to identify their own growth in the class. Building on previous work (e.g., Borry, 2018a, 2018b; DelCampo et al., 2010; Kernodle, 2009; Young et al., 2018; Yu & Campbell, 2020), this case study adds to the literature on using TV and movies in the classroom. As more media is easily available to students and professors, it is important to understand not only what is available but, also, how it can be used in an educational manner. This study provides guidance so that professors can think about the way TV shows can be used in the undergraduate and graduate classroom setting.

Note

1. The ethics of a point system is also dealt with in season three episodes *Janet(s)*, *The Book of Dougs*, and *Chidi Sees the Time-Knife*. When planning out a syllabus using a TV show like *The Good Place*, one could show episodes with similar themes to show growth throughout the semester or diverse themes to provide various cases.

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