

# Teaching Professional Responsibility through Fiction and Film

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## Abstract

Why teach Professional Responsibility through fiction or film? What do students stand to gain besides an entertaining diversion from the traditional casebook reading assignments? Commentators have identified a number of reasons for studying literature or film to enhance one's understanding of legal ethics. My project explores whether these ideas are supported in practice.

## The Assignment

Students in my Professional Responsibility course were required to select a novel or film as the basis for a written analysis on the topic of how lawyers resolve (or fail to resolve) ethical dilemmas. Students were asked to identify potential violations of the ABA Model Rules of Professional Conduct as well as to consider the tension between moral convictions and professional obligations.

## Analysis

Students completed two surveys regarding the assignment – one before starting the assignment and one after finishing it. The purpose of the surveys was to identify students' initial perception of the assignment and to evaluate the merits of the assignment upon completion. My goal was to ascertain what learning benefits, if any, the assignment might provide the students.



## Observations

I am a big fan of law stories and movies, but I was unsure whether this assignment would be welcomed by my students, particularly because it is not something typically required in other law school classes. I was pleased to see that students' feedback generally was positive, especially after completing the assignment, and that students found reading a novel or viewing a film, combined with written reflection, to be an effective tool for engaging more fully with the issues raised in class.

In short, I recommend incorporating fiction and film into a professional responsibility or legal ethics course because it allows students to engage more fully with the material, to reflect on their roles as lawyers in a way that is different from reading cases or rules, and to enjoy a change of pace from standard law school teaching methods.

## Student Feedback

Prior to completing the assignment, the majority of students (52%) did not expect it would help them understand issues raised in class, though:

- nearly 60% expected that the assignment would make a PR course more interesting; and
- 70% said they would be more likely to take a PR course that include such an assignment over one that did not.

After the assignment, over 90% of students viewed the assignment favorably and identified specific learning benefits. For example, students stated that the assignment was:

- “thought provoking and enlightening ... shed[ding] a different light on the [Model Rules] than the examples in the casebook”
- “a useful exercise [and] got me thinking about how [the Model Rules] play out, and what I would do if faced with the situation”
- “a refreshing break from law school reading”
- “a chance to think about professional responsibility in a different perspective”
- “quite helpful in applying what we learned in class. ... [unlike reading the casebook where] it is obvious professional responsibility issues are going to be implicated, ... when looking at a book or movie ... these issues are not always readily apparent”

