

‘Outsourcing’ the Curriculum

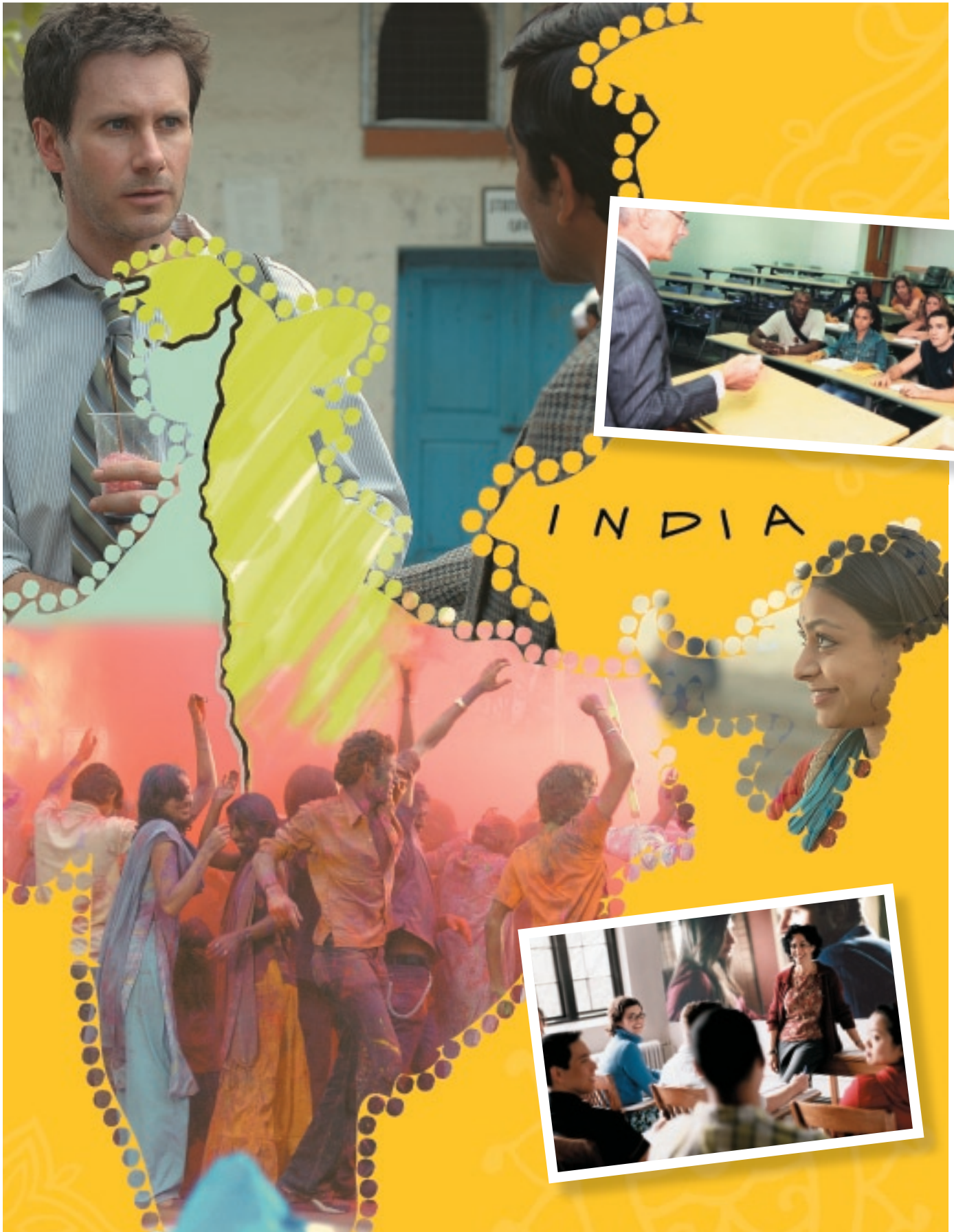
by Tricia Bisoux

When business professors Aneil and Karen Mishra saw the 2007 film comedy “Outsourced” last year, they thought they were just indulging in their love of independent films. But they quickly realized that the film had tremendous potential as a teaching tool in the business classroom.

The movie’s depiction of the outsourcing phenomenon, as seen through one manager’s eyes, covers many of the themes important to business, say the husband-and-wife pair. The story tackles the effects of globalization, the importance of appropriate cross-cultural communication, and the real human consequences of decision making, with a sense of humor that they thought would be especially accessible and relevant to business students.

The Mishras contacted the film’s producer, Tom Gorai, and director, John Jeffcoat, who also saw the educational potential. Gorai and Jeffcoat already were looking for a professor to create a business curriculum around the film, so they were more than willing to work with the Mishras on the project.

Two professors turn the independent film “Outsourced” into a tool to teach students the intricacies of leadership, listening, and cross-cultural understanding.



“We wanted to make this film because the script was funny and thoughtful,” says Gorai. “But we got a surprising response from educators and HR directors who told us that the film really gives viewers a sense of empathy and awareness. It helps them understand what motivates other people and how to effectively work together toward a common goal.”

The Mishras also saw how cross-cultural connections came into play in the film’s storyline. “We knew it would resonate with students,” says Karen Mishra, an assistant professor in the department of advertising, public relations, and retailing at Michigan State University in Lansing. After viewing and discussing “Outsourced,” she says, students understand more deeply how business decisions can have ripple effects on both sides of the ocean.

Springboard for Discussion

The Mishras were especially impressed with “Outsourced” as a tool for learning because it strikes an essential balance: As a fictional comedy, it allows students to critique and discuss its content freely, but its realistic, documentary-like portrayal provides students with a rich window into a global environment.

The movie’s plot centers around the character Todd, a middle manager at a novelty catalog company, who finds out that his department is being outsourced to an Indian call center. Even worse, he must travel to India to train his own replacement. During his time in India, Todd evolves from an American outsider puzzled and sometimes alarmed by the stark differences between India and America, to a true student of Indian culture. He soon realizes he has to work within India’s cultural framework to train the new manager, work with Indian employees, and improve the call center’s performance. Ultimately, he changes how he views the country.

“Some of our students talk about scenes from the movie and say, ‘That couldn’t happen,’” says Aneil Mishra, professor and associate director of the Human Resources Executive Education Center at Michigan State. “But an Indian student in the class will say, ‘That did happen—to *me*.’” Those kinds of exchanges don’t just promote further discussion, says Aneil. They inspire students to think more about the tensions between cultures and the cause-and-effect relationships in business.

The film-based curriculum includes an introduction to the film, an explanation of India’s culture and business environment, a discussion of the negative and positive impacts of outsourcing, and suggestions for additional reading. After they view the film, students then work through 14 sets of questions. Each set correlates to a moment in the film and



addresses subjects presented in the film from three disciplinary perspectives: leadership and change management, cross-cultural communication, and sales and marketing.

The questions are designed to spark discussion among students. Could Todd’s boss have shown greater compassion when he told Todd that the department would be outsourced? How could Todd have prepared himself more effectively for his immersion into Indian culture? What does Todd learn as he begins to integrate Indian cultural norms into his own management style?

One aspect of the film is particularly enlightening for students, says Aneil. In the story, Todd stays at a comfortable residence hall, much like a bed-and-breakfast. However, just over its high garden wall is an incredibly poor community. Todd frequently sees residence hall staff pass trays with meal leftovers across the wall to the unseen people just beyond. In one scene, Todd passes the remainder of his meal over as well. It’s a metaphorical moment that generates debate not only about the interactions between Indian and American cultures, says Aneil, but also about the barriers between rich and poor.

Learning to Listen and Lead

The course features modules that serve as extensions of the lessons the movie teaches. For instance, students can play a cross-cultural role-playing game, created by Roy Lewicki, that



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—Karen Mishra

is often part of organizational behavior curricula. The game, called Krunchian Role Play, breaks students into two groups: the Krunchians, who are members of a female-dominated culture, and consultants, who have come to teach the Krunchians to build airplanes. The student-consultants must navigate a cultural minefield, because the Krunchians do not speak English, do not trust men with responsibility, and punish any violation of their laws and customs with banishment.

To up the stakes, the student-consultants aren’t told at the outset that Krunchia is a matriarchal society. “The men often come in with typical Western attitudes and try to take charge, but the Krunchians don’t want to talk to the men and start banishing them,” says Karen. “The exercise can become quite comical as it plays out.”

As the game progresses, however, students are faced with the central difficulty Todd must overcome in “Outsourced”—how to work within a culture without forcing on it the values of another. “Students really start to listen to each other and communicate with each other,” Karen says. “They start to ask, ‘What is your culture like? How can we help you?’”

The Mishras continue that lesson with a module on effective listening. Students are placed in small groups to play one of three roles: speaker, listener, or observer. Over five minutes, the speaker shares a concern or problem, while the listener practices active listening skills such as maintaining eye contact, avoiding unnecessary interruptions, paraphrasing the speaker’s concern, and asking pertinent questions. At the end of five minutes, the observer provides feedback to the speaker and listener. Then, the students trade roles.

Such role-playing games reinforce the film’s depiction of communication and leadership—themes that are at the heart of research the Mishras have been working on for the last 20 years. Both professors have developed case studies about what happens at companies when they must downsize or displace their workforce. This research is the basis of their recent book, *Trust Is Everything: Become the Leader Others Will Follow*.

Too often, they say, the message for business is to “stay objective” and focus solely on the bottom line. But objectivity doesn’t always yield the most positive results, says Karen. For example, a company places its own future at risk if it lays off employees without also showing compassion—by helping laid-off employees find other work and reassuring the employees who remain that the company will try to save their jobs. Without that kind of reassurance, a company’s best people are likely to seek more secure positions elsewhere.

For leaders, compassion begins with the ability to listen and respond well to employee concerns, says Karen. “In

our research, we found that companies that downsize most effectively are those that treat their employees with respect and compassion. They’re the ones that build trust, preserve morale, and energize their remaining employees,” she says. “Even though they must downsize, these companies actually make their organizations better.”

The Human Component


Many business concepts have a technical, data-driven component, but students are more likely to remember the human stories that arise when these concepts are put to the test. That’s why “Outsourced” can be a powerful tool in the classroom, says Karen. “It’s so easy for people to say that, when companies need to cut costs, they can simply eliminate jobs without thinking about it. But when we interview managers, they often say that these are the decisions that haunt them most,” she stresses. “These decisions aren’t just on a spreadsheet. They can be devastating to actual human beings.”

The course is now being used in schools such as Boston College, Southern Methodist University, Tulane University, and Louisiana State University. The Mishras hope that it will take hold not only in MBA courses, but also in executive education.

For Gorai, the film has taken on new meaning since it was first released. He points to a scene where Asha, the female lead, jokingly tells Todd that if it doesn’t work out for her in India, “I’ll come to America and take your job.” That joke resonates differently today than it did just two years ago, Gorai says.

“People relate differently to that line now, because they realize how true it is—how closely tied together all the economies of the world really are,” Gorai says. “People have told me that, after viewing the film, they’re a little less aggravated by customer service calls. They realize there’s another human being on the other end of the line.”

The Mishras hope that students will come to similar realizations. Their goal is that faculty will use the film as an accessible and humorous gateway to a number of vitally important business topics, including the cross-cultural dimensions of business.

After all, many of today’s students won’t just pursue multiple careers in their lifetimes—they’ll pursue these careers in multiple countries, the Mishras emphasize. The “Outsourced” course introduces them to a dialogue that they will likely engage in for decades to come. 

For more information about using the film “Outsourced” in the business curriculum, visit www.outsourcedthemovie.com.

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