By David F. Morrill  
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NBC television’s *The Office* may be a comedy television series designed to keep its audiences in stitches, but for Inga Carboni it’s pure academic gold in her area of study.

“*I love the show and use clips in my classes,*” says Carboni, an assistant professor in the Mason School and expert in organizational behavior. “They help illustrate how groups form management coalitions, work out power issues, and communicate poorly.”

Although clips often produce laughter, the results of Carboni’s expertise are serious and play an important role in helping team members work together. She is particularly interested in understanding how groups manage issues related to productive and destructive forms of conflict.

“*Productive conflict is when you’re debating ideas and you’re really task-focused and disagreeing about how it should be done or the direction a particular project should take,*” Carboni explains. “Destructive conflict is when you start thinking the other person is a jerk.”

The latter type doesn’t propel projects forward, but the former, through vigorous debate and putting diverse perspectives on the table, is beneficial to any team or organization. “If you don’t have conflict you can’t innovate,” Carboni says. “The trick is to stimulate the conflict and not be afraid to disagree with each other, but be able to manage the inevitable tension.”

Carboni gets her points across in class by discussing common experiences in study teams. Most groups end up fighting, breaking into coalitions, grousing about slackers, and suffering the raised eyebrows of those who end up doing all the work. “The whole range of organizational behavior is all there,” Carboni says. “It’s a great way for students to learn how to live their professional lives.”

Prior to pursuing her doctorate at Boston College, Carboni put her skills in marketing, management consulting, and project development to good use in a number of industries. Her work with groups and team projects fostered an interest in how people relate and what comes out of group endeavor.

Carboni’s current research focuses on social brokers, people who build bridges between conflicting groups in larger organizations. She seeks to understand the possible psychological and performance disadvantages they might experience and what unique sets of skills puts them into that social brokerage role.

Now in her third year at William and Mary, Carboni has taught undergraduate and graduate courses in management and psychology, including group dynamics, interpersonal relations, organizational behavior and work-based experiential learning. The interdisciplinary nature of her field requires familiarity with a number of disciplines, including the latest in psychology and social psychology, social network analysis, and management literature. “That’s what I try to keep up with,” she says, laughing.

And, of course, there’s always an episode of *Hell’s Kitchen* that needs to be mined -- for her entertainment and for the classroom.