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# Application of Organizational Behavior Concepts Through Student Workshops

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*Applying organizational behavior concepts in the classroom often takes place through experiential learning exercises, case discussions, and other techniques. Although these can be positive experiences, they frequently do not introduce students to real-life managers and problems. The Student Seminar Series was designed to help OB students apply concepts while interacting with managers and executives.*

## **Introduction**

Experiential learning is often used by teachers in the classroom and in consulting situations. In most cases the transfer of learning goes from professor to student or professor to participant.

Graduate students in a Health Services Management program were required to take an organizational behavior (OB) course, where this instructor offered the option of conducting a workshop in lieu of a term paper.

We applied the medical school concept of "See one, do one, teach one." Early in the semester, the class participated in a day-long workshop (seeing), facilitated by the instructor. As the course progressed, students were involved in experiential exercises, cases, and theories (doing). Finally, the class produced its own workshop (teaching).

## **Educational Objective and Basis**

The project's learning objectives, using Bloom's [1] and Bruner's [2] learning theories as a model were, (1) to know and understand the purpose and use of workshops; (2) to be able to apply this knowledge by planning and conducting workshops and to apply various OB concepts in the process; and (3) to analyze and evaluate the product.

According to Bruner [2, pp.48-49] the process of learning involves three almost simultaneous processes, that is, acquisition of new information, transformation and manipulation of knowledge, and evaluation.

Bloom's [1] taxonomy of educational objectives identifies six levels of

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learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. By the end of the semester, the Student Seminar Series offered the opportunity for the students to learn on all six levels, as explained below.

### **Knowledge**

Students were able to recall a wide range of material, such as facts, concepts, principles, and theories relating to organizational behavior and group dynamics, as they had to do extensive research in preparation for the workshop.

### **Comprehension**

Students understood the principles and concepts and were able to know which OB concepts fit with particular case problems and exercises. In addition, they began to comprehend which theories fit the problems they themselves were facing, that is, group and interpersonal issues.

### **Application**

They developed the ability to determine which experiential exercises could be applied to achieve a certain objective, while at the same time learning to apply principles of communication, group theory, and so forth to their developing groups.

### **Analysis**

One area of analysis developed by the students was the ability to recognize specific techniques used in organizing and delivering a training program. Another exercise was to analyze what had occurred in their group—determining which issues were relevant and how to handle them.

### **Synthesis**

Three areas of synthesis were employed: the ability to use a personal experience effectively while discussing a concept; planning a unit of instruction for this particular teaching situation; and bringing all their learning together to solve their own group organizational problems.

### **Evaluation**

Students participated in a general feedback session and were later required to turn in a written evaluation of the total workshop, as well as evaluations of their personal performances.

**OB Concepts  
Applied**

Working together on this group project for 10 weeks proved an intense experience for the eight students, partly because it was a new type of program for them to develop, but also because they were required to perform in front of managers and executives. This was no simple classroom presentation, and they rightly believed that much was at stake here.

As a result, the 10 weeks proved a minilab of sorts, wherein various OB issues surfaced. The students had to learn to deal with them and solve their group/individual problems, which included the following:

1. *Cohesion.* As the project group spent more time together planning and generally interacting, they naturally became a more cohesive group [3]. This meant the other people in the course were now the out group, causing tension to arise between the two groups [4]. Therefore, in order to maintain a comfortable climate in the classroom, students were forced to downplay allegiance to the project group during class periods. Nonetheless, the out group still felt left out and its members, too, learned about advantages and disadvantages of cohesion.

Another issue relating to cohesion was a type of groupthink [5]. As planning for the workshop developed, the group's cohesiveness grew as well, and there was a tendency to avoid criticism of others' ideas. The instructor intervened a few times to make them aware that groupthink was counterproductive to the final outcome.

2. *Leadership.* Both times the workshop option was offered, student leaders emerged in the groups. They turned out to be students who enjoyed high external status within the larger student body and also within the class [6]. Although the students selected one of the class members to be the emcee or introducer of the workshop, this person was not necessarily the informal leader who emerged. After the workshop, during the evaluation or debriefing, a useful exercise is to identify the informal leaders and to determine their leadership styles, in order for the student to see these principles in operation.
3. *Motivation.* As the 10 weeks progressed, it became clear to the group that various levels of commitment existed within the group. It then became important for the group to analyze the motivational factors involved and to keep the group together, rather than having some members become uninvolved. This was an issue of group norms and dealing with the deviants, who were not contributing as much as the others [3,7].
4. *Group Development.* As the group progresses, it is useful to analyze the stages it goes through. We used the Cog's Ladder model [8], but another excellent model is Cohen et al's developmental phases of groups [7].
5. *Communication Skills—Interpersonal.* Because of the perceived importance of the task, the groups felt under pressure to perform well; communication gaps created anxiety. Analyzing the source of the problem (i.e., coding differences, faulty assumptions, personality conflicts, and so on) works well in helping the student understand what is happening and how to resolve the difficulties.
6. *Communication Skills—Group.* Nearly everyone on the project groups presented a lecture or experiential exercise during the workshops. Each participant practiced diligently, received feedback from fellow students as well as the instructor, and generally was better equipped to present the material after several weeks of rehearsals.

This especially brought out the more reserved students. But everyone's self-confidence increased after participation in the workshop, because the feedback from the participants was very positive.

**The Procedure** For those interested in using the Student Seminar format, a description of the procedure is include here.

Planning for the workshop was done by the students with periodic feedback sessions with the instructor. Knowles [9] gives supportive argument for learners accepting responsibility for planning and operating their learning experiences, as well as having them participate actively in the learning process itself. Development of the workshop went as follows:

### **1. Learning about Workshops**

Definition, purpose, possible audiences, and so forth. To develop an appreciation for the what and how of workshops, students were early on given two readings from the University Associates Handbooks (see [10,11]).

About 3 weeks into the semester, the whole class attended a full-day workshop on group dynamics facilitated by the instructor. The twofold purpose was (1) to develop a more cohesive group and (2) to give the students a clearer understanding of what a workshop is.

### **2. Decision: Who Will Be the Workshop Team?**

After learning about workshops and basically how they are put together, the students were given the option of devoting their time to the workshop or to a term paper.

### **3. Selection of Target Audience**

Students chose middle managers in health-care organizations. Because of their status as graduate students, students believed that an appropriate audience would be middle managers. However, a number of chief executive officers (CEO's) and top-level managers attended the workshops.

### **4. Assignment of Responsibilities**

Students decided who would take care of the needs analysis, brochure, mailing and distribution of brochure, room and meal arrangements, and curriculum; who would facilitate each section; and who would be emcee.

*Emcee.* As the workshop was to be facilitated by a number of students, an emcee was chosen who would represent the thread of continuity for the attendees. The students were asked not to choose this position on a volunteer basis, but rather to critically examine the skills of group members, as it was a vital position.

*Other position.* Some students wanted to do more behind-the-scenes work, such as brochure preparation and room and meal arrangements. Others chose to spend more time on curriculum development and facilitation.

### **5. Needs Analysis of Target Audience**

A group of 30 health-care middle managers were surveyed with a needs-assessment instrument by two group members who attended a course the 30 students were taking. Motivation and communication came out as the greatest needs for training program.

### **6. Development of Educational Objectives and Curriculum**

Students were asked to list a few basic objectives, such as being able to identify common communication blocks, and to develop the 6-hr program based on those objectives. At the end of the workshop, the participants should have achieved these objectives, and all exercises had to be related to them.

The emphasis was on simplicity, that is, to avoid too many objectives or too many short exercises. A change of pace and continuous momentum buildup were built into the program.

### **7. Working with Experienced Seminar Staff People to Prepare a Budget**

Items to consider: brochure printing, handout duplication, notebooks, nametags, film rental, meals, coffee breaks, and the university overhead of 15%.

### **8. Brochure Design, Printing, and Distribution**

The original idea was to mimeograph and fold a brochure and then mail it out. But after some deliberation, the students opted for a professionally printed brochure. Although it cost more, we were certain it made a great difference, that is, bringing in more and higher-level registrants. Postage was conserved by distributing the brochure through our network of a alumni and administrative residents.

### **9. Dress Rehearsal of Workshop**

The day before the workshop, the instructor spent about 4-hr going over each facilitator's lead-in and conclusion. Critical feedback was given tactfully, so that more positive feedback would be given by the attendees.

### **10. Facilitating Actual Workshop**

In order to increase attendance, we planned the workshop for a Friday, going from 8:30 AM to 3:30 PM, with a 1-hr scheduled lunch. About 30 middle- to upper-level managers attended both workshops.

### **11. Evaluation**

Evaluation forms containing each student facilitator's name and an effectiveness scale of 1 to 10 were distributed to the participants at the end. Ratings for the workshops were generally high. In addition, student facilitators and instructor spent 1-hr at the end of the day reviewing the total workshop. Finally, student facilitators were required to submit their own written evaluations.

**Timetable** On the basis of our experience, the following was developed:

1. Date and workshop topic, along with educational objectives chosen 7–8 weeks before workshop.
2. Brochures to printer at least 6 weeks before workshop. Brochures in mail at least 4 weeks before workshop.
3. Lunch room reserved and meal arranged 4–5 weeks before workshop.
4. Flow of topics for workshop chosen 4 weeks before.
5. Newspaper article written 4 weeks before; article sent to press 3 weeks before workshop.
6. Specific exercises chosen 3 weeks before.
7. Handouts given for duplication 2 weeks before.
8. Practice and ready to go last week before workshop.

**Conclusion** The Student Seminar Series proved a successful venture. The students had the opportunity not only to apply OB concepts, but also to be an instructor to managers. In addition, the community responded favorably, because the cost was relatively low—about \$20 per person to attend. In fact, we received several invitations to repeat our workshop for individual organizations.

It should be noted, however, that while the first workshop was being planned, the instructor—also the present writer—was somewhat anxious about the results. The risk was great. What if they did a poor job? How much would it reflect on their professional credibility in the community? Fortunately, though, the first workshop went extremely well, and during the planning for the second one, less concern was felt over potential failure.

Such an ambitious project cannot be taken lightly, however. A great deal of planning, directing, and evaluating must go into it. But the rewards—in our case at least—were great.

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