OBTC 2017 at Providence College

June 14th - 17th, 2017

Submission Template

SUBMISSION GUIDANCE

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1) Title, Abstract & Keywords

In your abstract, please include a brief session description (not to exceed 100 words), and three to four keywords. If your proposal is accepted, this description will be printed in the conference program.

The Pink Elephant in the Classroom: Pedagogical Techniques to Tackle Controversial Topics

With increased globalization, automation, and communication, the world is rapidly changing, thereby posing new questions. In the US, these changes manifest in controversial ways, from political polarization to racial and/or religious discrimination, and therefore it may prove easier to avoid discussing such sensitive issues in the classroom. Using social and cognitive psychological concepts, educators can create an environment in which these controversial topics can be addressed in an informed, critical, and respectful manner in order to optimize student engagement and learning. (controversial, politics, religion, race)

2) Teaching Implications:

What is the contribution of your session to management pedagogy/andragogy? Specifically, please include your learning objectives, and describe what management and/or teaching topics are relevant to your session, and why. Also, include theoretical, disciplinary, or theoretical foundations that will help reviewers understand how your ideas fit within the broader field of management.

1) **Educators will learn several techniques appropriate for addressing sensitive/controversial topics in the classroom**. Using social psychological concepts, including groupthink (Johnson & Weaver, 1992), group polarization (Ivengar & Westwood, 2015), as devil's advocate (Nemeth, Brown, & Rogers, 2001), we will discuss how to engage in discussion without falling prey to bias. Also, we will talk about special considerations, including institutional policies and state policies, that may interfere with open discussions of controversial topics. Finally, we will tap into how technological advances, including class polling and

quick access to online data, may help provide a strong, informed bases for arguments as well as resolve ongoing disagreements.

2) **Educators will learn how integrating sensitive/controversial topics into the curriculum may increase student learning and engagement.** Using cognitive and educational psychological concepts, we will address how controversial topics may increase student engagement and classroom performance (Kazeni & Onwu, 2013). The literature on learning as an evolutionary tool dictates that we learn concepts that will be useful in our close surroundings (Craik & Lockhart, 1973). Therefore, familiar stories and controversial topics that may influence our daily lives serve to increase understanding of classroom concepts. Furthermore, the literature on memory finds that current events that may be also encountered outside the classroom will reinforce concepts learned previously in the classroom (Pribam, 1992). Finally, the educational literature finds that student engagement increases with story-telling and a call for emotional topics (Stephens, Silbert, & Hasson, 2010).

3) **Educators will learn techniques for working with students who bring up topics or make comments that cause their peers to be uncomfortable or even feel threatened in the classroom.** College students frequently encounter prejudice, discrimination, and stereotypes, and it is important that the educator matches responses to the level of bias (Boysen, 2012). This session will encourage the participants to provide examples of these comments and behaviors, as they have observed and experienced, and share ways to effectively deal with them in conjunction with the seriousness of the perceived offense.

4) **Educators will have an opportunity for introspection regarding their roles as educators, employees, and citizens and how the demands and priorities of each intersect.** It's important to discuss, not only how, but whether these controversial topics should be addressed at all in the classroom. This question taps into the competing demands and priority of the educator. With the advent of attacks on free speech, the professor registry (a list of professors who supposedly perpetuate a left-wing bias in the classroom), and the delegitimizing of science in the public arena, it is critical to engage in introspection and discussion about the changing nature of our roles within such an unstable national environment.

This session can apply to most management or business courses, including leadership, human resources, change management, ethics, organizational behavior, etc. However, it is especially useful in smaller classes in which the instructor facilitates the open discussion. Furthermore, this session may be critical to more practice- rather than theory-oriented courses because the

students will not only learn about the concepts at hand, but also about present-day events that may influence their careers.

3) Session Description and Plan:

What will you actually do in this session? If appropriate, please include a timeline estimating the activities will you facilitate: how long will they take, and how will participants be involved? Please remember that reviewers will be evaluating how well the time request matches the activities you'd like to do, and the extent you can reasonably accomplish the session's goals. Reviewers will also be looking for how you are engaging the participants in the session.

We propose a 60-minute, discussion-driven session:

1) **Introduction** (10 minutes): This will consist of introducing the presenters and then briefly explaining the motivation and goals of the session, including a short presentation of what we mean by controversial topics as well as passing out handouts with summarized information about the session.

2) **Techniques** (5-7 minutes/presenter): Each presenter will discuss the pedagogical techniques they have found useful in their classrooms to tackle controversial topics. They will discuss these techniques' implementation, reception from the students, and the contextual factors that have aided/hindered their intended purpose. Rather than formal presentations, the presenters will apply a more informal, but more captivating, anecdotal format to convey their message.

3) **Discussion** (30 minutes): After each presenter discusses their techniques, there will be an open discussion with the participants about these techniques and whether they would be applicable to different contexts. The presenters will also provide questions to the participants in order to address any points that may be missed and will encourage participants to tell their stories and/or experiences as well.

4) Application to Conference theme:

How does your session fit with the overall OBTC theme of *Navigating the Changing Currents*?

This session fits with the theme of OBTC 2017 in two ways. First, it addresses how the changing context of the business world may be addressed in the classroom. In other words, this session specifically addresses how this changing context, which

manifests in politically, racially, and/or religiously sensitive ways, may be advantageous to the development of business professionals, our students.

Second, the changing currents theme is also addressed through the experience of the educator. As previously mentioned, the current political environment of fake news and post-truths has placed academia under scrutiny. This session also calls into question the role of the educator as a teacher, a citizen, and an individual. By asking ourselves how we can address sensitive, topical issues, we first have to ask about our obligation to our students, to our employers, and to ourselves.

5) Unique Contribution to OBTC:

Have you presented the work in this proposal before? If so, how will it be different? Is this proposal under current review somewhere else? If so, please explain. How will your proposal be different for the OBTC conference?

This is an original proposal developed exclusively for OBTC 2017.

References

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Stimulating quantity and quality. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 31,* 707-720.

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