



Teaching Conference for  
Management Educators

## **OBTC 2017 at Providence College June 14<sup>th</sup> – 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017**

### 1) Title, Abstract & Keywords

**Title:** It's Only Rock and Roll: Using Musical Groups to Illustrate Cool Organizational Topics like Organizational Life Cycle

**Abstract:** Students love their music and thanks to their smart phones, they take it with them everywhere. In this interactive session, we'll explore how participants might use learner-selected musical groups to illustrate various management and organizational topics, such as organizational life cycle (the session's primary example) or other topics such as leadership, teams, and motivation. To optimize participants' learning experience, we'll use musical groups identified in advance by OBTC attendees and listen to their music. This session will replicate the activity used in the classroom and engage participants in critical review of the activity, enabling its improvement and expanding its utility.

**Key Words:** Musical groups, learner-driven pedagogy, organizational life cycle

### 2) Teaching Implications

One of my teaching goals is to draw upon students' experiences and expertise in order to facilitate their learning and engagement with class topics. While I rely upon various methods to achieve this goal, one of the more popular and effective approaches has been the use of students' favorite musical groups to illustrate different topics, such as organizational life cycle.

My students love their music. Besides using their smart phones to call, text, and access the Internet, most of my students use their phones to store their favorite music, by their favorite performers. Their music accompanies them while walking to class, while studying, while working out, while hanging out with friends – it is a constant in their busy lives.

I recognized this phenomenon several years ago, and determined that I must find ways to incorporate their musical preferences into our collective teaching and learning, in the same way that I had already incorporated the use of film and television clips familiar to my students. While teaching an undergraduate course in Organizational Theory, I had an “ah ha” moment – we could study musical groups as “organizations” in order to facilitate students’ understanding of organizational life cycles. In particular, I hoped that using “organizations” well-known to the students would enable their understanding of and ability to apply such complex concepts as population ecology, natural selection, organizational isomorphism, organizational growth, inertia, and organizational decline.

When teaching Organizational Theory, I begin the topic of organizational life cycle by asking each student to identify three of their favorite musical groups along with a favorite song or two by each group. They share this information with me on a 3x5 card along with their name. I make it clear that I respect their choices, regardless of genre, and that they don’t need to imagine what my favorite musical groups might be, since my preferences aren’t the focus of the activity.

I compile all of the choices into a spreadsheet. Each musical group occupies a column (A). Columns B-E are labeled “Birth,” “Growth,” “Decline,” and “Death.” Copies of the spreadsheet are printed and distributed to the class, with instructions that individuals should attempt to classify each musical group according to its stage in the life cycle. Once the individuals have worked on this for a bit, I ask them to self-assemble into groups of 4-5 students and attempt to reach consensus on the assignment of each musical group to one stage of the life cycle. While the students are working on this activity, I play samples of the songs listed by the students as favorites performed by their favorite groups. (I find these in my own music collection, which is extensive, or on YouTube. Sometimes I’m sufficiently intrigued by a group/song unfamiliar to me that I choose to purchase it for myself!) Once it appears that most of the student groups have classified most or all of the musical groups, I ask them to come to the front and list their ideas under each of the life cycle stages written on the board. Students quickly notice that there isn’t always a consensus, and that many groups will be listed under multiple categories. The energy in the room during this activity is phenomenal, as students invest great effort in “arguing” for their perceptions of birth, growth, decline, or death for their favorites and the other musical groups with which they are familiar.

Prior to this activity, I ask the students to come to class having read the text chapter so that they are familiar with the characteristics of each life cycle stage. Many will have been exposed to the basic ideas of life cycle in other courses (e.g., Principles of Marketing) and believe that it is easy to understand and apply. As we all know, however, that which seems clear on a printed page isn't always as straightforward when considering "real life" examples.

The lecture that follows the activity reviews a variety of concepts associated with each life cycle stage. I play samples of songs of their chosen musical groups throughout the lecture to punctuate key points. After discussing each stage in detail, we attempt to reach a consensus around which musical groups belong in each stage and why. This typically yields lots of energetic attempts at persuasion, all of which must rely on "data" known to the students (or quickly found on the Internet), as that data aligns (or doesn't align) with what has been discussed in the text and lecture for each stage. Students must use the intellectual "jargon" to make their arguments (e.g., musical groups popular in a given period tend to "look" and act the same in part due to mimetic isomorphism – an example being the boy bands of the 1990s) and as they make their arguments, they becoming increasingly adept and confident. Students are often surprised as the conversation continues and some of their assumptions and beliefs are called into question. Most amazing to me as the facilitator is the opportunity I have to witness the students experience multiple "ah ha!" moments throughout the activity/lecture. They get it!

By the time we have finished the topic of organizational life cycle, students are highly confident in their understanding of and ability to apply the material to different types of organizations. They excel on exam questions related to this topic – all of the students, on all of the questions, no matter how difficult the questions – and are highly skilled at applying the concepts to a real world organization they have been studying throughout the semester. Significantly, when I have met up with former students many years after their graduation, they routinely tell me that they loved it when we used musical groups in OT (our abbreviation for the "Organizational Theory" class) and that they can see where their current organization is in its life cycle. Then they'll proudly recite and describe terms like "mimetic isomorphism" to me. It's always a moment of shared positive emotions.

**Contribution to management pedagogy/andragogy.** This session highlights the value of using students' experiences and expertise to teach a topic at an advanced level and have the students succeed in effectively learning the topic. It's obvious to the students how they are co-instructors using this approach, as I openly acknowledge that they are the key experts on their chosen musical groups. While I am pretty darn knowledgeable about musical groups over the decades (I was a DJ in a former life – for real!), I rely on them to tell the class everything they know when arguing that their favorite musical group is in this or that stage of its organizational

life cycle. They also drive the conversation on what their favorite musical group might do to sustain or change its place in the life cycle.

Related to this, this session makes clear that when we value what students value, their general self-efficacy for academic learning increases. I demonstrate that I respect them and their preferences by not judging their preferred musical groups and by listening intently to their arguments. I learn a lot about my students' terminal and instrumental values as they tell me why they prefer some genres to others, some groups more than others, and some songs more than others. (As a side note, Millennials tend to like music across multiple genres (country, hip hop, classic rock) and they usually respect each other's musical preferences.)

This session also highlights the value of introducing emotion to enable long-term memory retention of topics. As I noted above, students will be chatting with me years after having taken this class, and they can remember extraordinary details about what they learned. I strongly believe that this high level of retention has much to do with the engagement of students' emotions. They'll have picked musical groups they love, for which they have a strong and possibly longstanding affective attachment, and then they will have argued (amidst laughter) that their chosen favorites belong in a given life cycle stage. For example, students will debate whether AC/DC, founded in 1973, is in the growth or decline stage. Yes, AC/DC – after all, many of our traditional age students grew up playing Guitar Hero and listening to AC/DC and other musical groups beloved by their parents in an earlier age. Those knowledgeable about AC/DC will inevitably dive into topics about the meaning of organizational existence, since AC/DC's original lead singer passed away before their landmark *Back in Black* album, and their second lead singer has now stepped away from performing due to health issues. Despite these and other personnel changes, and even though they haven't had a Top 10 hit in ages, they still tour and they still fill large venues.

Finally, the session also highlights the value of using music as a “backdrop” or accompaniment to our most engaged conversations and experiences. It's almost impossible to envision enjoying a film or other video experience without musical accompaniment. Heroes/heroines and villains are associated with musical tracks and “stick” with us. For example, it's hard to imagine Darth Vader from *Star Wars* without hearing “The Imperial March” in one's head. Playing music throughout the review of this topic helps students retain the material and gives them an auditory set of cues for the future.

### **Learning objectives**

1. Participants will *understand* the value of using learner-selected musical groups to illustrate organizational topics, especially the topic of organizational life cycle, and engage students' emotions in their learning.

2. Participants will *acquire the tools* needed to effectively use learner-selected musical groups in their classrooms.
3. Participants will *evaluate* the appropriateness of using learner-selected musical groups to illustrate various management/organizational topics in their classrooms.

### **Management or Teaching Topics**

1. Organizational life cycle
2. Leadership (musical groups and leadership – for example, is the lead singer the only leader? – work great together as topics)
3. Teams (musical groups and various issues associated with teams – such as roles, conflict, collaboration, heterogeneity, size, etc. – also work great together as topics)
4. Motivation (what motivates the individuals who comprise popular musical groups – Is it money? Fame? The opportunity to make good music?)
5. Emotion and learner retention
6. Learner-centered and selected pedagogy/andragogy

### **3) Session Description and Plan:**

The session will mimic what I do in the classroom. Prior to the OBTC, I will ask people on the OBTS listserv who are planning to attend the OBTC to share with me (via email to just me) their favorite three musical groups and a representative song or two from each. I will compile those selections prior to the OBTC, and select a sample of about 10 musical groups. Those 10 groups will be used during the session to illustrate the mini-lecture's key points. For the mini-lecture, I will use an abbreviated version of my lecture outline to engage session participants in a review of the organizational life cycle using the musical groups identified through my *a priori* polling. After completing the activity, we will engage in dialogue about (1) the activity's utility and effectiveness, (2) various means for enhancing the activity, (3) opportunities to use the basic pedagogy/andragogy to illustrate other management/organizational topics, and (4) challenges/issues associated with the activity.

#### **Timeline (90 minutes)**

##### 60 minutes

Participants will assign each of the 10 musical groups to an organizational life cycle stage, first individually and then in small groups. Participants will share their small group decisions with the larger group. Next, the session facilitator and participants together will work through the "mini-lecture" on organizational life cycle, using the musical groups to illustrate each stage and to highlight issues and areas of agreement and disagreement. Finally, the larger group will assess whether it has reached a consensus on the assignment of musical groups to the various stages of the organizational life cycle and discuss what a sample of those musical groups might do going forward to be sustainable entities.

### 30 minutes

Participants will debrief the activity by engaging in the dialogue described above. Briefly, we will discuss the activity, surprises – for better or worse – experienced by the participants, how to make the activity better, additional topics that might benefit from the use of learner-selected musical groups, and any perceived challenges/issues associated with the activity.

This will be a highly interactive session, with the facilitator and participants collaborating to achieve the session's learning objectives.

#### 4) Application to Conference theme:

Millennial students are often described as having short attention spans. They do not appreciate sitting and simply listening to their instructors as they lecture on and on. And on. Until death ensues. At least, that's how the learning experience can be perceived when students are not offered opportunities to engage authentically with course topics, with each other, and with their instructors in the classroom. Lecturing without actively involving students is a pedagogy that few of us can effectively pull off. While I would assert that students of all ages prefer to be absorbed in their learning, I think that Millennials in particular, and those who will follow them, crave opportunities to drive their own learning and find connections between what they already know and what we think they need to know.

This session best fits the theme of *Navigating the Changing Currents* as it relates to the bullet point of "Developing effective classroom experiences for our students in the changing academic environment." Interest in experiential learning, a longstanding tenet of the OBTS, has blossomed as faculty members discover and rediscover what "works" in their classrooms. "Flipping the classroom," where the classroom is transformed from lecture hall to practice facility, is evidence supporting this increasing interest in experiential learning. Enabling and celebrating learner-centered choices and decisions in the classroom, as advocated in this proposal, aligns well with these changing educational currents.

#### 5) Unique Contribution to OBTC:

I have not presented the work in this proposal before and it is not under review anywhere else. I was encouraged to submit this proposal after participating in a previous OBTC session in which the facilitators talked about how they use their own music and musical preferences in their classroom. During the Q&A part of that presentation, we were asked how we used music in the classroom and I briefly shared what I do with learner-selected musical groups. Other session participants said they were interested in learning more about the activity, and so I'm submitting this proposal. If the session is well received, I will likely write up the activity for publication consideration by either *Management Teaching Review* or the *Journal of Management Education*.