



**OBTC 2017 at Providence College
June 14th – 17th, 2017**

Submission Template

SUBMISSION GUIDANCE

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Only one document should be submitted

Submission Template for the 2017 OBTC Teaching Conference for Management Educators

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.

Community Circles: An experiential exercise for an Introduction to Organizational Behavior course

Abstract

In this paper we describe the use of an experiential exercise, we call “Community Circles”, which facilitates cultural understanding and increases discussion participation in an Introduction to Organizational Behavior course. We suggest that this experiential exercise also increases psychological safety early on in the course. Prior research has shown that creating psychological safety for students helps learning on many levels, and it is essential for high participation in discussions. We describe how to use “Community Circles” and our experience using it in both undergraduate and graduate Introduction to Organizational Behavior courses.

Keywords: psychological safety, discussion participation, experiential

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.

This exercise is used in an Introduction to Organizational Behavior course.

Learning Objectives:

- Help students develop an appreciation for diversity.
- Increases awareness of how ones values are influenced by ones upbringing.

- Helps create a classroom environment that values the ideas others have to offer (critical for a discussion based course).

Teaching topics: cultural diversity, impact of values on behavior, communication, listening.

For more information, please see the paper below.

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.

I plan to run this activity with session participants. I expect to modify the questions used. This way participants can experience first-hand the power of this activity. Even though I use about 1 hour of class time in my course, I will conduct this activity at the conference in 30 minutes. This will be enough for participants to experience it.

4) Application to Conference theme:

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

Diversity (in various forms) is increasing in our class rooms and in our workplaces. We need to adapt. This activity is a small contribution to help increase understanding among various groups.

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?

I have presented a simplified version of this exercise at the IABPAD conference 2016 in Dallas. I only submitted an abstract to that conference and I presented a shorter version of it. I also did not conduct this exercise with the participants.

This paper is currently not under review anywhere.

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In this paper we describe the use of an experiential exercise, we call “Community Circles”, which facilitates cultural understanding and increases discussion participation in an Introduction to Organizational Behavior course. We suggest that this experiential exercise also increases psychological safety early on in the course. Prior research has shown that creating psychological safety for students helps learning on many levels, and it is essential for high participation in discussions. We describe how to use “Community Circles” and our experience using it in both undergraduate and graduate Introduction to Organizational Behavior courses.

Introduction

An introduction to organizational behavior course is required in several of our undergraduate and graduate degree programs. One of the assessed learning outcomes for this course is as follows: “Demonstrate an understanding of the sources and consequences of multi-ethnic and multi-cultural diversity and develop strategies to bridge differences and capitalize on the benefits of diversity in all its forms in organizations”. We have several projects that address this learning outcome. However, we were looking for an activity that provides a more interactive discussion of diversity issues in the workplace.

One of the authors, is a diversity consultant and has used a similar activity to the one described here with various community groups. We started to incorporate this activity in our course.

Our initial objective for this activity was to discuss cultural diversity in a more engaging way. However, after using this experiential exercise for several semesters we noticed that in courses where students participated in this exercise early on, we had much higher discussion participation for the remainder of the semester. In addition students seemed to be much more engaged in discussions and we had much broader participation. We do suspect that having this activity early on creates higher quality connections among students and this in turn facilitates psychological safety (Edmondson 1999 and Edmondson & Lei, 2014), which then leads to more, and more open discussion participation. Psychological safety is defined as “A shared belief held by members of a team that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking”, and “A sense of confidence that the team will not embarrass, reject, or punish someone for speaking up. It describes a team climate characterized by interpersonal trust and mutual respect in which people are comfortable being themselves” (Edmondson, 1999). Psychological safety is an important determinant of student participation, which in turn is critical for student learning (Rocca, 2010).

How we conduct this experiential exercise

In this section, we describe how we use this activity. This activity works very well with both undergraduate and graduate students. Each class will be divided into groups of 5 to 6 students, preferably classmates they don't yet know. This exercise can be conducted in any size classroom (from 10 to 50+ students). You should allow for at least 50 minutes. We hand out printed pages with the questions and principles for each group. This allows students to refer to them throughout the discussion. We recommend to use this activity early in the semester to get the most benefit. However, it obviously can be conducted at any time during a course.

Overview

Objectives:

- Helps students develop an appreciation for diversity.
- Increases awareness of how ones values are influenced by ones upbringing.
- Helps create a classroom environment that values the ideas others have to offer (critical for a discussion based course).

Logistics:

- any class size
- undergraduate – graduate

- groups of 5 to 6 – classmates they don't yet know
- at least 50 minutes
- hand out printed pages with principles and questions
- use it early in the semester

Suggestions:

- Reluctance to participate in this activity at first
- Students need encouragement to get started
- Once the conversations are flowing – hard to stop – students always want more time
- Reaction is consistently positive, “I would like to do it again”, “I learned things about my classmates that I did not expect”

Talking points for each slide (Appendix A):

Slide 1: Title slide

Slide 2: We use these quotes to emphasize the value of dialogue and conversation as a way to learn about others. Here we also refer to the contact hypothesis, which states that people will reduce biases and stereotypes about other people when they have the opportunity to interact with each other. Our exercise allows students to do that at a much deeper level than in regular conversations. We also point out that the art of conversation seems to be a “lost art” and that this activity will help them to experience the power of true conversation (Turkle, 2016).

Slide 3: We clearly state the objective for this exercise. These are the stated objectives for this activity. We do not discuss with students that we have found that this activity also seems to increase psychological safety which then results in more and deeper discussion participation throughout the semester.

Slide 4: This slide lists the agenda for the exercise. We suggest you allow for more than the 30 minutes group discussions if you can. We have experienced that students clearly enjoy these deeper conversations and learning more about their classmates. We usually use this activity in a 1 hour and 15 minutes class. Having 30 minutes for group discussions allows us to set up the exercise and debrief.

Slide 5: We strongly emphasize these principles to guide the discussion. Each group has a hard copy of these principles. We also point them out as we walk among the various groups throughout the exercise. This is a critical step so all students get heard. We generally see a tendency for some students to dominate the discussion, so it is important to make sure every student has a chance to participate.

Slide 6: A quote to emphasize the importance of listening to what others have to say.

Slide 7: Here we list the questions we would like our students to discuss in their small groups. These questions do vary and really depend on what best fits with your course objectives. We tell students to start with any questions that they are most comfortable with. Some groups will discuss most, some only a few. These questions merely function as discussion starters. We do find that students need some time to open up to this activity. Encourage them to start with whatever question they are most comfortable with. There is always someone in all the small groups who is willing to start and then usually it gets easier for others to follow along. Students always enjoy these conversations after some initial reservations. We always find it hard to break up the conversations at the end of the 30 minutes.

Debrief:

During the debrief phase we ask a few very general questions. For example: “What was your experience? What did you learn about your classmates?” We have found that most students are eager to share their experience. Quite frequently, participants point out that even though they initially thought that members of the group are very different, they consistently find a lot of things they have in common. Students are very surprised about this, since we have a very diverse student body.

Our experience

The student population at our university is very diverse. Our undergraduate population is made up of 29% Asian Americans, 18% Hispanics, 6 % African American and 37 % Anglo. Graduate and undergraduate students combined are 24% international, 21% Asian American and 13% Hispanic (based on Fall 2015 data). Participants in this exercise usually are surprised to find that they share similar values even though they might have grown up in different parts of the world or come from different age cohorts (we also have a large number of non-traditional students).

We have consistently noticed a reluctance to participate in this activity at first. We do make it clear in the beginning that participation is voluntary. We have never had anyone not participate. We spend time at the beginning of the discussion part to encourage students to get started. It usually takes a few minutes until they realize all they need to do is talk, and listen. We also consistently noticed that once the conversations are flowing, it is difficult to get students to stop. They frequently want more time. This means, if you can, plan for more time for the discussion phase. So far, we have had consistently positive feedback about this activity; both in comments to us and in the evaluation (Appendix B). Generally students suggest to us that they would love to do it again, that they learned things about their classmates that they did not expect and that they learned more about their classmates in this activity than they usually do sitting next to them for a whole semester.

Conclusion

We have used this exercise at the beginning of every Introduction to Organizational Behavior course for the last 6 years. The response from students has been overwhelmingly positive. They frequently ask for more time to discuss the questions in their groups. It almost seems as if students are craving this opportunity to have deeper face-to-face conversations. This activity allows deeper connections by encouraging face-to-face conversations, which have been declining (Turkle, 2016). Students clearly enjoy getting to know their classmates through this exercise.

The initial objective of this exercise was to use it as a starting point to discuss the benefits of diversity and the impact of one's values on behavior in organizations (a learning objective in our program). We were pleasantly surprised by the "side-effect" of increased discussion participation and a more open and welcoming class climate.

This exercise, even though it seems on paper to be very simple and "nothing new – people just talk", we find it to be very powerful. We use this exercise very early on in the course, most of the time during the 2nd or 3rd week of class. We then see a change in the class climate (compared to those courses in which we do not use this exercise). Students participate much more in the discussions for the remainder of the course, which is critical in a discussion based course and which in turn also influences student success (Fassinger 1995, Winne & Nesbitt 2010).

REFERENCES

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APPENDIX A:

COMMUNITY CIRCLE ACTIVITY – SLIDES

Slide 1:

Organizational Behavior

Community Circles *Celebrations and Conversations*

Slide 2:

“Conversation is a natural way
we humans think together.”

“It’s not differences that divide
us.

It’s our judgments about
each other that do.”

Margaret J. Wheatley

Slide 3:

Community Circles – Objectives

- **Get to know one another**
- **Building greater community**
- **Celebrate our community's cultural diversity**
- **Recognize that everyone is unique and has gifts to share**
- **Be aware that each of us can make a difference**

Topic	Duration
Purpose Principles Introductions	5 minutes
Group Celebrations and Conversations	30 minutes

Slide 4:

Closing Activities Evaluation Survey	10 minutes
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Slide 5:

Principles to guide the conversation

- **Speak honestly and truthfully from the heart**
- **Be brief**
- **Listen attentively: Try to really understand what others are saying and respond to it, especially when their ideas are different from yours.**

Slide 6:



One of the most
sincere forms
of respect is
actually listening
to what another
has to say.

Bryant McGill

Slide 7:

Questions

- **Tell us about your racial, ethnic, and social class background while you were growing up and something that you are proud of about your background and something that was difficult about your background.**
- **Describe your earliest memory of class (economic) differences. What information did you learn at that time? How did you get the information? What values were attached to what you learned?**
- **In what ways have your upbringing, experiences, or thinking influenced your life? How have they shaped your values and attitudes? Think about the most important factors that you think have contributed to how you see your own culture and other cultures.**
- **Reflect on a time when you experienced a different culture or interacted with someone from a different culture. How did the cultural differences influence your interaction?**

Slide 8:

THANK YOU!

APPENDIX B:

Evaluation Survey

Please take a few moments to answer the following questions based on your experience tonight.

1. This learning experience was valuable to me. (Circle the number that best applies)

1 *strongly disagree* 2 3 4 5 *strongly agree*

2. What did you gain from tonight’s experience? (Check all that apply)

- Gained greater appreciation for our diversity
- Learned about people’s backgrounds
- Made connections with people
- Found things in common with people from different backgrounds
- Learned ways to build greater community

3. What suggestions do you have for next time?

4. Would you be interested in doing this again? (Circle one) Yes No

5. Optional information:

Culture _____ Name _____

Thank you