When it Goes Wrong in the Classroom: Reshaping, Reinventing, and Saving the Day

**Abstract**

As management educators, we strive to create a classroom environment where student learning is enhanced by group discussions, experiential exercises, and teamwork/group projects, among others. But, what happens when one of these unexpectedly takes a turn for the worse? Can it be rescued? In this session, we explore various pedagogical techniques that management educators can use to persevere through unexpected circumstances in the classroom. Attendees will reflect upon and discuss their own challenges, and presenters will offer ideas/potential solutions. Attendees will receive a handout outlining strategies to reshape, reinvent, and rescue the situation when the best laid plans go awry.

Keywords:*Decision making, student learning, reflection*

**Introduction**

We have all been there. We planned, practiced, prepared, and have even been excited about a particular classroom exercise or discussion. In fact, we were so prepared and so well-rehearsed that we enter the classroom believing nothing could go wrong. But, then something happened that resulted in the epic fail. Students—instead of engaging—respond with confusion, boredom, or increased interest in their computer screen. How did it happen? What can I do now? Can I still save the activity so that students still benefit?

In this session, we will engage in a symposium where panel members will open dialogue aimed at addressing the topic of what to do when things go wrong in the classroom. Collaborators will share their experiences and attendees will be encouraged to participate in this dialogue. Panel members will identify and discuss related incidents of unexpected classroom failures. In addition, suggestions and creative solutions will be offered to address commonly-encountered problems in the management classroom. Finally, panel members will also share ways these common problems can be addressed *before* they become an issue.

The target audience is early career, intermediate, and advanced faculty. The intended outcome is to provide attendees with solutions to difficulties encountered in the management classroom. The main purpose of this session is to open up a frank discussion about this topic and learn from others’ experiences.

T**heoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications:**

Discussing classroom failures can be an uncomfortable subject, as most educators would prefer to focus on what works in the classroom instead of what doesn’t (Weimer, 2014). However, even with the best preparation and planning, there can be unforeseen disasters when utilizing class exercises and engaging students in discussion (Artsen, n.d.). Session facilitators will explore how to react to and revise activities when class exercises do not lead to the intended impact. Lessons can go wrong for a variety of reasons (Creativeeducation.com), but examination of appropriate faculty responses has largely been unexplored. Adjusting in the moment can be difficult, so having a back-up plan/list of suggestions already in mind can help an educator quickly reshape and reinvent the exercise gone wrong (Lynch, 2014).

Though less than desired, ineffective teaching moments can be some of our greatest learning experiences as management educators (Noel, 2004). These activity failures challenge us to reflect on and revisit how to improve classroom exercises. By having a back-up plan to quickly execute a change in the moment, we can turn those situations around and still benefit student learning (Lynch, 2014). This requires self-reflection and the ability to learn from mistakes, which will be the focus of this symposium (Weimer, 2014).

**Symposium Overview**:

This symposium will be a panel discussion. Collaborators will discuss three primary areas of common classroom problems when using experiential exercises, team exercises, and engaging in controversial classroom discussions. Panelists will also discuss potential solutions that have been effective in the past. Attendees will participate by sharing their own challenges faced in these areas and potentially other classroom challenges. Panelists will offer potential solutions for common problems encountered. Please see the example charts below.

**Experiential Exercises**

**Common Problems**  **Solutions for Educators**

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| Coordinating/Organizing people or the exercises themselves. | Start your preparations early; Have a Plan B ready to go; Do a dry run. |
| Students aren’t taking it seriously. | Give students options/choices so that they can take ownership and make the exercise personally meaningful. |
| Students haven’t prepared ahead of time. | Set early deadlines for parts of the project, possibly with grades attached. |
| Student absences and the exercise is difficult to make up. | Have a back-up exercise planned for students to make up on their own. |
| Students’ reflection lacks depth. | Have students review the literature; guide in-class discussions; assign reflection papers with clear questions for students to answer. |

**Team Exercises**

**Common Problems Solutions for Educators**

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| --- | --- |
| Difficulty making decisions. | Set time limits; Provide information/options/resources. Know when to step in as the instructor. |
| Problems with coordinating group members’ schedules for work that needs to be completed outside the classroom. | Create a Doodle or use a pre-group survey that asks about personal schedules and use the results when creating the groups. This will match students who report the same availability. |
| Poor communication among group members. | Pre-team class discussion of what constitutes good communication. After teams are created, the instructor should set a time to check in on the team’s progress and check for communication problems. Use individual feedback forms that impact students’ grade. |
| Conflict. | Create a way for students to be able to report conflict to the instructor (possibly anonymously, such as through the Sarahah App.) Have in class discussions about conflict management. Create an assignment that prepares students on how to address challenges. |
| Different individual goals (such as different grades desired and/or varying effort among group members). | Use the pre-survey to ask students about their goals for the project, as well as the timeline they desire for completing the project. Group students according to the results. |
| Lack of participation. | Peer grading, feedback forms, incentives where appropriate, instructor schedules conference with group during the beginning – mid part of the project period, and instructor inquires about participation. |
| Groupthink. | Creative discussion questions. Make originality/creativity part of the grade. Do exercises in class that encourage students to think outside the box. |
| Leadership problems (such as not delegating tasks, failure to represent others’ ideas, passivity). | Discuss with the class these common leadership problems. The instructor must model good leadership. |

**Controversial Classroom Discussions**

**Common Problems Solutions for Management Educators**

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| --- | --- |
| Students are uncomfortable discussing the topic. | Set the tone early on that students should respect others and that all views are welcome. Also, permit students to write their thoughts instead of speaking them in front of the class. |
| Students are offended by the topic. | The instructor should stay neutral and where appropriate, lead a discussion about the assumptions behind offensive topic. Or, the instructor could ask students to debate/argue/defend the viewpoint that is opposite from their own as a class exercise. |
| Student cites false information when discussing the topic. | Instructors need to provide accurate information. If research is needed to get the accurate information, the instructor should indicate that he or she will take time to sort through the facts and be prepared to discuss the topic during the next class. |
| Student uses personal anecdote that is inappropriate. | The instructor should have compassion where appropriate, but move on quickly to redirect the conversation. The instructor should check back with the student later, and in certain situations, refer the student to campus resources. |

**Session Description:**

The discussion will be divided into three primary areas: experiential exercises, team exercises, and controversial classroom discussions. For each of these primary areas, the panelists will provide personal examples, as well as a list of possible solutions for management educators that find themselves in similar situations. Attendees will receive a handout that lists several options or solutions in each of the three primary areas. The handout can act as a quick reference if similar problems arise in the future.

5 Minutes – Introduction

30 Minutes – For a discussion of each of the three primary areas – experiential exercises, team exercises, and controversial classroom discussions (10 minutes each). Ideas and solutions that can save the day will also be discussed. Please see the example below regarding problems encountered during class discussions and potential solutions.

20 Minutes – Audience participation. Attendees will be encouraged to talk about the challenges they have faced in the classroom and discuss solutions that may or may not have worked.

5 Minutes – Wrap up, Questions, and Conclusion. Attendees will leave with a handout outlining the common problems and potential solutions. This handout can be use as a quick reference guide for management educators when dealing with future classroom lessons gone awry.

**References**

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