**Returning to face the garbage fire in person! Reflections on experiential learning gone wrong**

**Abstract**

MOBTS has a rich history of sharing experiential learning exercises. As we approach MOBTS 2022, we strive to both pay homage to a classic perennial MOBTS session *Gather ‘round the experiential fire* (Andre, et al., 2010), and also look to welcome attendees back from pandemic-induced Zoom exile to the classroom to continue learning through failure in a supportive, collaborative environment.

**Keywords:** Failure, Learning, Garbage

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**Introduction**

Many MOBTS participants enjoy the rich history of sharing their positive experiences with experiential learning exercises. Session after session of creative, collaborative, experiential exercises dot the classrooms, and even the evening social sessions feature discussions of the great things attendees have learned during the day.

However, since 2017 at Providence College when the first *Garbage Fire* session took place, there has been a growing history of learning from each other when our efforts, while usually creative, didn’t succeed. In 2017, we had an interesting discussion at Providence College with approximately 8 attendees. Both 2018 and 2019 saw full rooms of participants both willing to engage in the schadenfreude of others’ missteps, but also to collaborate and innovate about how all involved could learn from failure.

In this session, we pay tribute to the classic *Gather ‘round the experiential fire* (Andre, et al., 2010) sessions that have been an anxiously awaited session since before many of us (the facilitators of this session) attended our first OBTC/MOBTS conference. These sessions are heartily attended, have near-legendary status and have spawned related sessions (e.g., Quijada, Baldwin, & Marx, 2018).

Our aim in presenting this session is to welcome attendees back to a face-to-face MOBTS and encourage them to share their “**F**irst **A**ttempts **I**n **L**earn**INGS**” (FAILINGS) be these in traditional classes, online classes, hybrid, or hy-flex settings. We recognize that the pandemic has brought upon academia many challenges, but also many opportunities to experiment with our pedagogy. These experiments, as we know all too well don’t always end as desired, but always should end up with lessons for us as educators.

**Theoretical Foundation**

We understand that research and practice are intertwined, and our session is a clear homage to one of the most popular sessions at the MOBTS conference each year. Using our failure to create successful future iterations is at the heart of experiential learning (e.g. Kolb 2014; Kolb & Kolb, 2005). Just as we teach our students the cycle of experiential learning and how past experience informs future actions, we encourage management educators to collectively learn from each others’ failures to inform future successful classroom initiatives.

Many of us use experiential learning techniques to address criticisms levied at management education about the disconnect between academia and practitioners’ reality (Stewart, 1984); Chia (1996) noted that, “business schools as such are deemed, in most instances, to have failed to equip their graduates with the necessary imagination, resourcefulness, and process skills to cope with the complexities of ‘real’ business situations” (p. 410). Experiential learning also serves to balance academic rigor with practical relevance (Berggren & Soderlund, 2011) and aid in the development of integrative learners (Welsh & Dehler, 2003).

We recognize the benefits of experiential learning theory, which is arguably one of the most influential theories in management education (Vince, 1988). This approach to learning is best described by Kolb’s definition wherein “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.” (p. 49, 2014) This is achieved through deliberate activity and course design in which a recursive spiral of learning enables students to learn how to learn based on a cycle of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting.

In this session, we reflect on experiential activities that had unintended outcomes and we frame our experiences in Kolb’s (e.g., Kolb & Kolb, 2005) experiential model of experiencing, reflecting, thinking and acting. That is to say, for each activity we: encourage session attendees to present experiences that led them to integrate the particular activity in class; reflect upon what went wrong; express our collective thinking on what remedies are appropriate; and suggest actions that we recommend for one another as we think of using these activities. In doing so, we hope the collective knowledge of management educators increases, leading their initial experiences to be more positive so that their own recursive cycle of experiential learning begins with greater success.

**Session Description**

Similar to the well-established inspiration for this session, after a brief introduction to the format of the session, each attendee (including the session organizers) will have three minutes to present his or her failed experiential exercise. Following the presentation of their ultimately unsuccessful activity, we’ll use the wisdom of the masses and harness our heritage to reflect, think and hopefully reshape our management education exercises, rescuing them from the flames. Should the attendance at this session necessitate, we will break attendees into smaller groups by some unifying theme (to be determined by the themes brought up by attendees) overseen by one of the session organizers.

All session attendees and organizers will work together to overcome the unforeseen obstacles that heretofore prevented well-intentioned exercises from succeeding, and will leave with fresh ideas on how to resuscitate these exercises to allow the phoenix of their teaching dreams to rise again.

The exercises we present in this session and will solicit from attendees will differ from traditional experiential exercises that might be gathering ‘round another fire, not in their solid grounding in experiential pedagogy and andragogy, but in the errors of execution that led to their lack of success. Our exercises share the foundations of the successful exercises one often finds at MOBTS, and we include our own failed experiences with exercises that others have implemented successfully. It is, however, our very lack of success that creates value; the resilience and persistence of management educators who are willing to take chances and fail (sometimes spectacularly) – but ultimately learn – has led to successes as well.

We continue to build off of previous MOBTS and vMOBTS sessions we’ve led in this area, and plan to continue exploring how instructor humility (e.g., Edelson, Lo, Nelson, Stark, Stratton, van Esch, 2019) can serve as a path from the flames of failure to a healing salve of learning and adjustment. Educators, as leaders, should exemplify emotional management through their ability to 1) admit mistakes and limitations, 2) spotlight others’ contributions and strengths, and 3) model teachability (i.e. being open to feedback, new information/ideas, and listening). (Owens & Heckman, 2012). We plan on focusing on this element of humble leadership from an instructor’s perspective.

We invite attendees to experience and enjoy (i.e., schadenfreude) stories of experiential exercises that didn’t quite go the way they were intended. This session includes all types of exercises, online and in-class, individual and group-oriented at both undergraduate and MBA levels, across the spectrum of management topics. Effectively, we hope that this paper will be used as an analogical fire safety tool as we rescue our exercises from the flames and help others not to be burned.

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