

Historically Speaking: Teaching Organizational Culture Using Students' Lived Experiences

Abstract

I will explain how the histories of our respective institutions can be used to teach students about management concepts, particularly organizational culture. By making connections between past and present, students recognize cultural transmission in action and their role in that process. I will discuss how tapping into campus history can engage students and will share strategies for adapting this lesson to attendees' own campuses.

Keywords

Organizational Behavior, Teaching, Culture

Introduction

Higher education provides examples of organizational culture across multiple levels comprising a variety of stakeholders. At the institutional level and among groups including faculty, staff, and students, organizational culture—both distinct and overlapping—offer management teachers a rich collection of case studies from which they may draw. Of particular interest to college students are the ways in which their student-specific culture has evolved and continues to exist and evolve through them. The activity described herein taps into that interest to teach students the ways in which organizational culture is acquired and transmitted: language, stories, rituals, and symbols (Scandura, 2019).

Theoretical

The relevant theoretical grounding for this activity is derived from Schein (1979), who defined organizational culture as:

the pattern of basic assumptions that a given group has invented, discovered, or developed in learning to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, and that have worked well enough to be considered valid, and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 3)

This activity focuses on the “basic assumptions” Schein refers to in the quote above, challenging students to identify and contextualize their own and their peers’ behavior as vehicles for cultural transmission. This takes what can be a dry, abstract concept and transforms it into one with immediacy, relevance, and applicability to management students.

Learning Objectives

At the conclusion of this activity, students should be able to identify and differentiate four modes of cultural transmission (language, stories, rituals, symbols), use those four modes to evaluate cultural phenomena within organizations, and critique their relative value for cultural transmission across different contexts. Using students' own institution-specific experiences to interpret these concepts, instructors can expect students to demonstrate the ability to extrapolate how these ideas could translate to other organizations in both the public and private sectors.

Teaching topics relevant to this presentation include organizational theory and organizational culture. These can be used in a standalone organizational behavior course or in introductory-level management courses where OB is discussed in an abbreviated way as part of a broader survey of the field.

Exercise Overview

This activity can be broken down into six steps:

1. Briefly define and contextualize cultural transmission and its four components.
2. Share a PowerPoint slideshow on how college students create and perpetuate organizational culture. Multiple contemporary and historical examples should be incorporated, including instances of student life and traditions, as well as institutionally-relevant symbols (such as university logos or mascots, significant campus buildings, or other defining features of the campus). Pictures of student life, especially from previous eras of the institution, are instructive here.
3. Prompt students brainstorm, based on their own experiences, these four phenomena (language, stories, rituals, symbols) at their institution. They should be prompted to pay particular attention to those things that are immediately recognizable to all students and

alumni (such as well-known campus landmarks) and those with which they have personal experience (such as convocation ceremonies or activities related to Greek letter organizations).

4. Have them collaborate in groups to compile results.
5. Talk them through why these things are important (both to them and the institution).
6. Have them articulate how organizational culture can impact their future career plans.

Logistics

This activity is designed for one hour of class time, though there are some variables that can shorten or lengthen that depending on instructor needs and interests. Having students complete the brainstorming process as homework can shorten the activity by 10-15 minutes. If students have pre-existing teams or workgroups, the processes of brainstorming and compiling can both be completed prior to class, further reducing in-class time devoted to the activity. Also, this is easily scalable, as there are no requirements for materials and no elements constrained by class size. I have run variations of this activity in class sizes ranging from as few as 8 students up to 43 students, though there is no reason it could not be scaled up for even larger audiences.

Conversely, the time devoted to this activity can be lengthened as well. A more robust presentation of student culture by the instructor can add richness and interest to the topic, potentially adding an additional 10-15 minutes.

Flow

This exercise flows best when students are engaged with the concept right off the bat. In my experience, that is best accomplished with a story. In my case, that story is about a naked bike ride that was a campus tradition at one of my former institutions. The personal connection

helps to set the tone. Instructors should anticipate students wanting to ask questions or request additional stories from their instructor and may wish to build in time for it. Putting students in the mental space of connecting organizational culture as a concept with its influence on their lived experience leads to high levels of engagement.

Variations or Alternate Applications

Instructors will find that there are several ways to tweak this exercise to suit course objectives. For OB courses that lean more fully into the culture aspect, this is a great opportunity to bring in a guest speaker. The campus archivist can sometimes offer interesting insights into campus life, and he or she may be privy to knowledge and/or have access to campus relics that can add interest to the topic. One might also consider pulling in a faculty member from history or sociology to highlight relevant concepts complementary to scholarship in those disciplines.

Instructors may also choose to have students venture out into the campus to explore certain cultural artifacts. I have used this activity in conjunction with a scavenger hunt that tasked students with finding certain relevant campus landmarks. In the subsequent class period, I used that activity as a vehicle for discussing which stakeholders get to determine which aspects of campus culture are preserved—potentially a useful conversation in an OB class where there is time to devote to such issues.

This exercise is most effective for introductory-level undergraduate courses where students are unfamiliar or minimally familiar with basic OB concepts.

Debriefing Guidelines

The topic of culture offers many avenues for discussion. Questions that instructors might consider using include:

- What role does organizational culture play in the student experience? [leads into a discussion of things such as brand loyalty, organizational climate, diversity]
- In what ways might student culture clash with the cultural values of other stakeholders (faculty, staff, administrators, community members, law enforcement, etc.)? [useful for discussion of what factors shape culture, what those levels of culture are, and whose views are promoted/subjugated within them]
- What interest does the institution have in controlling culture? [good for discussion of stakeholders; can be extrapolated to talking about culture in corporate settings and why values/norms are important to organizations]
- Why is it important for culture to grow and change over time? [helpful for addressing past practices that are no longer appropriate]
- What role might organizational culture play in where you decide to work after graduation? [taps into awareness of how culture impacts working conditions]

Generally, students' responses reflect a growing awareness that they are not passive observers of culture—rather, they are living it daily through the college experience. It's fun to “watch the lightbulb go on” when they realize that their parents and grandparents who attended college were doing some of the same things they are now. They realize that their parents may have partied, pulled pranks, and engaged in frivolous debauchery—quite a surprising revelation for some! Some of the best answers come from the last question, with students realizing that organizational culture can have a palpable effect on their work life and careers. Overall, my experience with this activity and the conversations it sparks with students has been very positive.

In terms of questions that instructors might anticipate from students, most tend to center on basic procedural issues such as how many examples are expected.

Session Description

The time breakdown of this session, proposed for 60 minutes, is as follows:

[10 minutes] Overview of the topic, including a brief explanation of cultural transmission, the origin of this activity, and its applicability to management and organizational behavior courses

[12 minutes] Demonstration of the activity

[10 minutes] Presentation and distribution of a template attendees can use to construct an exercise of this type (includes suggested slides and ordering, identification of on-campus and online resources for faculty, and ideas for adapting it to campus-specific issues)

[15 minutes] Discussion with participants about their past and present campus experiences and how those can be incorporated into the design of this activity

[13 minutes] Lessons learned, future directions and ideas, and potential paths for collaboration across disciplines and institutions

With respect to logistics, I would need a classroom with an overhead projector for this session.

References

Scandura, T.A. (2019). *Essentials of Organizational Behavior: An evidence-based approach*. (2nd ed.). Sage.

Schein, E.H. (1979). Coming to a new awareness of organizational culture. *Sloan Management Review*, 25(2), 3-16.