Observational Learning of Teams across Industries

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Introduction

With the current prevalence and growing importance of teams in organizations, this session will focus on our experience and reasoning for creating a unique course with an alternative perspective of teamwork. The goal was for students to learn about best team practices through both the study of current research on teams *and* through student observational learning of teams (in real time) across industries, including observations of local sports teams, businesses, and a professional theatre group. We will share our perspectives of this co-taught interdisciplinary team course with participants during this round table session and will provide multiple examples of *observational* assignments and class activities we use to engage students in connecting teams-related research to actual team dynamics.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Research on Teams and Observational Learning

Teams. Fascination with how workplace behaviors and teamwork affect productivity began in the late 1920's with Elton Mayo's ground breaking Hawthorne experiments. J. Richard Hackman, former professor at Harvard and Yale, began studying teams in the 1970's and in 40+ years of research, uncovered what he considered to be the basics of team effectiveness (Haas & Mortensen, 2016).

Hackman is not alone in trying to determine a model for team effectiveness. Hundreds of books and thousands of articles have been written about teams. More recently, an article reviewing and conducting a meta-analysis of teamwork interventions for the purpose of improving teamwork produced a literature search of over 16,000 articles (McEwan, Ruissen, Eys, Zumbo, & Beauchamp, 2017). Due to the ever changing landscape of how businesses will continue to innovate and operate in a digital and global world, understanding how effective

teams operate is more important than ever before (Bellman & Ryan, 2009; Kozlowski & Bell, 2001; Martin & Bal, 2006; Salas, Cooke, & Rosen, 2008). In reviewing the Chronicle of Higher Education's "The Future of Work", employers like Marie Artim, VP of Talent Acquisition at Enterprise Holdings, state that experience in working with teams of people is one of several skills that end up being most important in the job, with others being critical thinking and communication (Carlson, 2017).

Although teams can be studied a number of ways, this course focuses on *observational learning*. Allowing students to study real teams will enforce that "team research requires a method for observing teams under these conditions and not as static entities divorced from context" (Salas et al., 2008, p. 543). Although observations will not always reflect positive team member behaviors, observational research can reinforce the ways in which a student can strive to be an effective team member on any future teams. Viewing positive team member behavior should relay a "set of values that encourage listening and responding constructively to views expressed by others, giving others the benefit of the doubt, providing support, and recognizing the interests and achievements of others" (Katzenbach & Smith, 1993, p. 112).

In addition to observing live teams and individual team member behaviors and reading about research conducted on teams, our course encourages students to make connections to how teams can potentially influence overall organizational effectiveness. "Organizations increasingly rely on teams to carry out critical strategic and operational tasks. By implication, an organization's ability to learn – that is to improve its outcomes through better knowledge and insight (Fiol and Lyles, 1985) – is dependent on the ability of its teams to learn (Senge, 1990, Edmondson, 2002)" (as cited in Edmondson, Dillon, & Roloff, 2007, p. 2).

Observational Learning. Observational learning (also called vicarious learning) has been explored as a useful mechanism for learning in many fields, from anthropology and sociology, to psychology, business, sports, and beyond (e.g., Bandura, 1986; Craig, Chi, & VanLehn, 2009; Hancock, Rymal, & Ste-Marie, 2011; Trowell & Miles, 2004). Bandura's social learning theory explains how we learn through a process of observing others, imitating them, and watching subsequent rewards and punishments to learn attitudes, behaviors, and even cognitive skills (Bandura, 1969; 1997; 1986). There has also been extensive research in the neuroscience realm demonstrating that when we observe others' behaviors and emotional reactions, our brain activates (systems that activate: mirror neuron system, cortical midline structures, and limbic system) in the same manner as if we are the ones actually experiencing those behaviors and emotions (Bruton, Mellalieu, & Shearer, 2016). Furthermore, Monfardini et al. found "the processing of others' outcomes during learning-by-observation shares a common brain network with trial-and-error learning" (2013, p. 14).

This 'watch and learn' strategy can be an effective tool for students by going beyond pedagogical strategies such as traditional lecture or solely reading on a topic. The applied learning, experiential learning, and service-learning techniques that are commonly utilized within the realm of education are in part effective because of their ability to provide real life opportunities for learning within applied settings, which often include learning through observation of course concepts in action. Shebilske, Jordon, Goettl, and Paulus (1998) also found that observational learning can compensate for a lack of hands-on practice of a given skillset and can be efficient in regards to time and resources for training and teaching because of this. However, Trowell and Miles (2004, p. 3) note that "all too easily observation can become a superficial, meaningless exercise." Therefore, observational learning must be used strategically

and purposefully as a component of a course (or training in an organization for that matter). For example, the opportunity to practice developing one's own teamwork-related skills (e.g., conflict management, communication) in teams and reading about the best practices of effective teams in academic articles, can be supplemented by actual observations of live teams across industries to further hone these skills, which was the goal for our new take on a team-related course.

It should be noted that our decision to co-teach and do so in an interdisciplinary manner (one of us is an Organizational Leadership professor while one of us is a Psychology professor) was a strategic decision. Every class period, both professors are present and active; we co-teach the entire course (and grade jointly as well). By doing so, students observe us as an example of a team in that we have to constantly take cues from each other, work effectively together towards the goal of creating engaging and meaningful class periods, and respectfully voicing our differing opinions when there is value to this. This lays consistent groundwork for an additional observational learning opportunity for the students regarding an interdisciplinary team throughout the entire semester.

Learning Objectives of Session

1. Participants will learn about the value of observational learning in management courses.

2. Participants will be able to understand how to better incorporate sports, theatre, and company-related real life examples into their courses and how to get students to engage as observers in this process.

3. Participants will learn from our experience about the difficulties and benefits to creating a co-taught course.

4. Participants will brainstorm their own ideas of making their courses more interdisciplinary in nature with the help of feedback from others in the session (e.g.,

creating a co-taught course with someone in a different field, using examples across many industries, utilizing guest speakers from different fields).

Session Description

1. We will first provide an informal overview of our backgrounds so participants understand our interest in co-teaching a teams-focused course: 5 minutes

2. We will explain our process in creating the course itself such as how long it took, how we decided what types of assignments and activities to include in the course, developing partnerships with community members, and why observational learning was our underlying theme and focus throughout the course: 15 minutes

3. We will share and explain 3-5 of our actual assignments. We will provide templates to all participants for our reflection assignments, an interview assignment (students interview someone who works extensively in teams within their job), and directions for various observational activities with time built in for questions by participants. This is meant to be a lively interactive exchange among all participants and the presenters, as opposed to a structured question and answer period: 25 minutes

4. During the above timeframe, we will also share examples of student work such as their reflection assignment responses, which were geared towards developing their own self-awareness as well as teamwork and leadership skills.

5. We will finish by having participants discuss their ideas for making their own courses more interdisciplinary in nature, with time to receive feedback from others: 15 minutes

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