Session Title: Using history to teach behaviour

Abstract: One of the problems I have experienced when teaching a class of undergraduate students is overcoming apathy in the classroom. I battled this in the earlier part of my career until I decided enough was enough and I embarked on a journey to completely revamp my classroom. What I have done is created a classroom environment in which I am excited to teach using three of my passions: dialogue, history, and the case study. The purpose of this session will be to explore the use of historical events to aide in teaching organisational behaviour topics to undergraduate students using the case-study approach.

Keywords: Case studies, historical events, undergraduate organizational behaviour.

1. Introduction

Case-study analysis can be an integral part of any course in organisational behaviour. The purpose of a case study in my classroom is to provide students with experience of the problems humans face in organisations. A case study presents an account of what happened to a person, a team, a business, or industry over a number of years. It chronicles the events that people had to deal with, such as changes in the competitive environment, and charts people's responses, which usually involved changing how they or the organisation responded to a problem. The cases in my class cover a wide range of issues and problems that people have had to confront; however, the caveat is that the cases I choose are all based on interesting historical events. One case might explore group behaviour by examining the Challenger space shuttle disaster. Another might look at the 1977 Tenerife Air Disaster to discuss decision-making and communication. The underlying thread in all cases, however, is the use of management techniques to solve business and behavioural problems. Indeed, the entirety of the class is spent analysing case studies.

The first question my students ask is, ‘Why are we doing this?’ To answer this question, I usually argue that cases prove valuable in a behaviour course for several reasons. First, cases provide the student with experience of organizational problems that they probably have not had the opportunity to experience first-hand. In a relatively short period, they will have the chance to appreciate and analyze the problems faced by many different people and organisations and to understand how these issues were dealt with. Second, cases illustrate the theory and content of organizational behaviour. The meaning and implications of this information are made clearer when they are applied to case-study contexts. The theory and concepts help reveal what is going on in the case and allow the student to evaluate the solutions that specific people adopted to deal with their problems. Consequently, when the student analyses a case, they will act as a detective who, with a set of conceptual tools, probes what happened and what or who was responsible, then marshals the evidence that provides the solution. It is important to remember that no one knows the right answer. All we can do is make the best-evidenced argument for a certain course of action. In fact, managers say repeatedly that they are happy if they are right only half the time in solving behavioural problems. Behavior is an uncertain game, and using cases to see how theory can be put into practice is one way of improving students’ skills of diagnostic investigation. Finally, my hope is that the students are able to get a valuable experience out of the class. More specifically, through this in-class exercise, I expect the students will:

1. Gain expertise in the analysis of real, complex business situations in which the information available is incomplete and complex. The purpose of analysis is to lead to useful and soundly based recommendations that are derived from a set of reasonable alternatives.

2. Gain experience in making recommendations that are clear, practical, specific, action-oriented, and are supported by analysis. Since the cases are an exercise in communication, it is essential that we are clear in class and well-organized.
3. Get to discuss a real situation that they have analysed and tie those situations to theory. The critical ingredient of our class discussions is an incisive analysis of the issues. This analysis will be supported by factual examples, yet selective and targeted to particular theoretical objectives of the class.

2. Theoretical Foundation

For the case I plan to highlight in my session (the Tenerife Air Disaster), the theoretical foundations are based on the following areas:

1. **Value-attribution bias**

   Value attribution refers to our tendency to associate a person or a thing with certain qualities based on an initial perceived value rather than objective data. If we see something labeled a certain way, we will take that label at face value. Once we attribute a certain value to a thing or a person, our perceptions of subsequent information is drastically changed. Our expectations change our perception – facts are not independently observed, and the act of observation is already loaded with a construct (a theory) of what is being observed. Hence, expectations change our reality.

2. **Loss aversion**

   Loss aversion refers to our tendency to go to great lengths to avoid possible losses. We hate losses, and we value potential losses much higher than equal potential gains; we are willing to work hard to avoid losses and are prepared to take exceptionally high risks to reverse losses that have already materialized.

3. **Diagnosis bias**

   Diagnosis bias refers to our tendency to label people, things, and ideas based on our very first opinion of them. It describes our inability to change these judgments once we have made them, and to discard evidence that suggests we reconsider our initial judgments.

Some of the readings I assign to students are as follows:

- Ariely, D. (2008). *Predictably irrational: The hidden forces that shape our decisions*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Brafman, O., and R. Brafman (2009). *Sway: The irresistible pull of irrational behaviour*. London: Virgin Books.
- Cialdini, R. (2001). *Influence: Science and practice*. 4th ed. Needham Heights, MA: Pearson Education

3. Learning Objectives

For the participants in my session, I have the following learning objectives:

1. To show how to construct a syllabus that incentivises a very active and engaged classroom when using the case-study approach.
2. To show how to set up a case-study narrative that engages students where they are in their degree programme.
3. To highlight the types of questions and in-class mini-assignments that get students to engage with the case and the theory behind the case.

4. Exercise Overview

When I teach the Tenerife air disaster case, I run the class on two themes: *the irrational side of decision-making* on the one hand and *emplotment* on the other hand. I will outline how to teach this case in two 90-minute sessions. In the case discussion, I introduce only the main concepts and suggest a few examples from other contexts for illustration of the main concepts. I have used the case as a bracket that embraces a deeper discussion of at least three phenomena of decision-making biases or sources of irrational behavior: value-attribution bias, loss aversion, and diagnosis bias. For further suggestions on background reading to delve deeper into the theory, see Appendix 1 below.

<u>Timing:</u>

For the MOBTS session, I will have the participants first read sections of my syllabus, so they understand the incentives and class structure that are laid out for the students. Once that is completed, I will have the participants read sections of the case, which comes in three parts.

First, we will read Part A of the case (though in class, I would assign this as pre-reading). Then we will read Part B of the case after an initial overview of the types of student discussion/questions elicited from Part A. In class, I only make Part C available at the end of the session, after having covered the three theoretical phenomena; so as to follow that process, we will discuss Part C at the end of the session. Thus, the overall structure of the session plan will look as follows:

Table 1: Session Overview

Activity	***Description***	***Time Needed***
Introduction	• Discuss class size, goals, and demographics.	5 minutes
Syllabus	• Examine structure, incentives, grading, and problems of case-study approach in behaviour seminar class.	25 minutes
Case-study Examination	• Briefly discuss Case A. • Hand out Case B. • Discuss how phenomena of decision-making are explored: value-attribution bias, loss aversion, diagnosis bias. • Discuss Case B. • Hand out and discuss parts of Case C.	50-55 minutes
Wrap-up	• Offer concluding remarks and take final questions.	5-10 minutes

Note: Sometimes, depending on the class, I may decide to add more sections on further phenomena – status-quo effects, overconfidence, risk attitude, etc.

Materials:

The materials used will be: 1) a PowerPoint presentation to keep my session on track and for visual aide, 2) copies of my class syllabus for participants in the session, 3) excerpts from the case study the participants will use during the session.

<u>Class Size:</u>

My typical capstone seminar is made up of all fourth-years (seniors). They have taken classes such as introductory organisational behaviour, introductory human resource management, marketing, finance, business law, and other typical business classes. The class, generally speaking, will have between 15 and 20 students. We meet twice a week for 90 minutes. There are no tutorial sessions attached to the class. The gender breakdown is typically 60% female and 40% male.

5. Session Description

Timeline requested: 90 minutes

Overview of session:

1. Introduce the class types I teach and my institution. Here, I would like to engage with participants about their institutions and the types of classes they teach. (5 – 10 minutes)
2. Overview of syllabus and expectations of students in my classes. This will include how I create an environment in which my approach to case studies works. In addition, this part will include distributing parts of a syllabus, participants reading the section, and discussing the usefulness of certain elements in engaging with students. (25 minutes)
3. Examination of excerpts of a case study. The final part of my session will take an actual case I use in class and have participants read parts of it. I will then go through what I actually do in class to elicit discussion, provide links to theory, and engage the undergraduate students I teach. (50 - 55 minutes)
4. Wrap up and present takeaway points for anyone wanting to try this approach. (5 minutes)

Appendices

Appendix 1: Further Readings

- Ariely, D. (2008). *Predictably irrational: The hidden forces that shape our decisions*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Brafman, O., and R. Brafman (2009*). Sway: The irresistible pull of irrational behaviour*. London: Virgin Books.
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