**Harnessing humility to avoid getting burned when the experiential fire becomes a garbage fire**

MOBTS has a rich history of sharing experiential learning exercises. As attendees, we are often striving to be *Teaching Agents for Positive Change*, often through getting great ideas from our fellow attendees’ sessions. As we approach MOBTS 2019, we strive to pay homage to a classic *session Gather ‘round the experiential fire* (Andre, et al., 2010) that has been a tradition 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). In 2017, when we first had a garbage fire session, it was an interesting discussion at Providence College with approximately 8 attendees. Though there wasn’t a plethora of attendees, all present agreed it was interesting and we ought to try it again the following year. Last year at Coastal Carolina University, we expected another relatively intimate gathering. Instead, we were pleasantly surprised to see standing room only attendance for our session. It was a sign to us, that we needed to continue, and not only because people experience schadenfreude.

Management educators who attend MOBTS, inspired by other educators and practitioners are generally open to new experiences, and learning from others’ great ideas. But sometimes the experiential fire which we try to harness burns us instead. Well-intentioned new ideas fail. Oft-practiced activities drawn from our society’s own journals aren’t executed in our own classrooms as well as they were drawn up on the pages of those journals. Even exercises from the revered *Gather ‘round the experiential fire* sometimes don’t go as planned. Each of us (session facilitators) have failed in bringing what we hoped would be an innovative activity to our classroom. And most educators can likely reflect on their own classroom situations gone awry; which may be why we were filled to capacity last year – misery loves company? Or perhaps a greater desire to earn from each others’ failures.

The pop-culture management refrain to “fail fast and fail forward” (e.g., Maxwell, 1982) is meant to encourage creative solutions to problems. As educators, we often encourage our students to take risks in the safe environment of our classrooms. And some of us also take those same risks by inventing new exercises, or trying established exercises in new contexts. This session is about embracing a quotation often (falsely[[1]](#footnote-1)) attributed to Churchill: “*Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts.*” As garbage fire presenters, we know that we have (and will continue to) make mistakes, but we are committed to persevering. Conversely, we have (and hope to continue to) have successful classroom experiences, but recognize that these successes are not permanent either. We must continue to evolve as educators, and learning from failure is not only meme- and inspirational quote-worthy, but rather also an integral part of our own professional development.

In this session, we invite attendees to 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; jointly 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.

Based off our past experiences, we plan to offer a brief introduction to the format of the session, and each of the facilitators. We will then break into smaller discussion groups led by each of the facilitators, following the experiential learning model presented above. We plan to break back out to a full room discussion in the final half hour of the session, allowing each of the smaller groups to present examples of how their small-group session helped with their professional growth and learning.

Of note, and building off previous sessions and the experiences we’ve both presented and learned from, we plan on exploring with attendees how instructor humility (e.g., Edelson, Lo, Nelson, Stark, Stratton, van Esch, In Press) can serve as a path from the garbage fire to safe, burn-free existence. 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.

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 or location or other types of mistakes 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 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.

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 – or at least know how to heal those wounds.

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1. According to Richard Langworth, Senior Fellow, Hillsdale College Churchill project https://richardlangworth.com/success [↑](#footnote-ref-1)