

## Using *The New Yorker* Cartoons to Stimulate Creative Group Problem-Solving

An Activity/Exercise submitted to the 2019 MOBTS Conference

### Abstract:

This submission presents an activity in creative decision-making in which the participants attempt to create a cartoon caption both individually and in small groups. The cartoons all come from *The New Yorker* magazine's weekly Cartoon Caption Contest. The exercise allows the participants to get some experience in creative problem solving and decision-making as group members. In addition to covering these Organizational Behavior topics, the exercise proves to be a lighthearted way for students to get to know each other and helps create an interactive class environment for the rest of the semester.

Keywords: Creativity, group decision-making, brainstorming

## INTRODUCTION

For nearly a century, *The New Yorker* has published its weekly magazine featuring esteemed authors such as Dorothy Parker, J. D. Salinger, and John Updike. Alongside its literary reputation, it is perhaps equally famous for its cartoons, having published drawings by Charles Addams, Peter Arno, Roz Chast and many others (Yagoda, 2001). Since 2005, *The New Yorker* has printed its weekly “Cartoon Caption Contest,” on the back page of every issue (Mankoff, 2014). The contest contains a picture drawn by one of the magazine’s cartoonists, but the picture lacks a caption. Readers then submit captions to match the picture; after which the magazine winnows all the submissions down to three finalists. The magazine reprints the cartoon with the three final captions, and the readers vote for their favorite, which gets published the following week.

For example, Figure 1 shows a recent Mick Stevens (2018) cartoon that was published captionless in the December 10, 2018 issue of the magazine. It’s a picture of a shady looking baker confronting a passing woman from a narrow alleyway. The magazine selected the three finalists and published their names and captions in a subsequent edition. The winning caption, “Vinnie would appreciate it if you reconsidered that Yelp rating,” (Skuts, 2019) was announced in the January 7, 2019 issue of the magazine.

++ **Insert Figure 1 about here** ++

What is a fun, interactive feature for *New Yorker* readers has turned into an amusing in-class exercise for my Organizational Behavior (OB) class that integrates two key topics: group decision making and creative problem solving. Students have a problem to solve: creating a humorous caption for a cartoon, and they do it first individually and then as group exercise.

This paper presents an Activity/Exercise I have used with some success in my undergraduate Organizational Behavior class. It gives the students an opportunity practice creative problem solving in a group setting, allowing them to interact and experience interpersonal dynamics as well. In explaining the exercise, this paper contains five sections. The first is a brief overview of the OB topics, creative problem solving and group decision-making. Secondly, is a description of the two learning objectives of the activity. Third is an overview of how I administer the exercise in my classes, followed by how I would present it as a conference session. Additional thoughts and observations conclude the paper.

## **ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR TOPICS**

### **Creative Problem Solving**

In rational decision-making, decision makers attempt to make an optimal decision usually based upon a predetermined set of criteria and options. Ideally, they have all the necessary resources to evaluate, weight, and rank the existing options (Simon, 1986). By comparison, creative problem solving involves addressing a problem in an innovative, untested manner (Riordan & O'Reilly, 2011). Thus, this exercise is a simple example of a problem requiring creative decision-making. Admittedly, since the problem is predetermined, some might argue that this activity is not truly an exercise in true creative decision-making. They make a good point, but for the sake of the exercise, I let this pass. Since the students create all the options to consider for their final decision, there are certainly elements of creative problem-solving to this exercise.

In the “Three Component Model of Creativity” Teresa Amabile (1997) identifies three inputs that enhance creativity: expertise, task motivation and creativity skills. For this exercise, students are on a fairly level playing field. They have no expertise; virtually no student in my

classes has had prior experience in cartooning. They also have the same motivation. To keep this exercise fun and lighthearted, the only motivation is the intrinsic satisfaction of creating something funny and clever. There might be some variation in the creativity skills among the students (Barron & Harrington, 1981), but it is rarely a distinct advantage in such a short exercise. One of the reasons this exercise works is because practically all students are equal in their ability to come up with humorous captions. In this exercise, groups typically use brainstorming techniques to come up with their captions. In brainstorming, members generate ideas, while other members are not allowed to criticize others' ideas (McGlynn, McGurk, Sprague Effland, Johill, & Harding, 2004).

### **Group Decision Making**

The benefits of group of decision-making over individual decision-making are well documented in the organizational literature. Assuming “two heads are better than one,” multiple people bring multiple perspectives so that the group has more knowledge at its disposal than an individual to address a problem (Foote, Matson, Weiss, & Wenger, 2002). Diversity among group members amplifies this phenomenon (Wanous & Youtz, 1986). Certainly group dynamics moderate the effectiveness of groups, and factors such as group size, group make-up, individual personalities can affect the quality of a group's decision. Also, the time involved in group decision-making is typically greater than that of individual decision-making (Collins & Guetzkow, 1964).

### **LEARNING OBJECTIVES**

Being a simple exercise, its learning objectives are not complicated. Nevertheless, they offer the students the opportunity to practice Organizational Behavior concepts rather than simply cover them in a classroom presentation. The learning objectives are:

- Learning Objective 1: Provide students a better understanding of Creative Problem Solving by allowing them to participate in an interactive problem solving exercise, and
- Learning Objective 2: Provide students the opportunity to experience the benefits (and detriments) of Group Decision Making.

### **EXERCISE OVERVIEW WITH VARIATIONS**

At our school, Organizational Behavior class sizes range between 30-35 students. The students sit in non-stationary chairs with flip-desk surfaces that can be arranged in small groups. This allows the individual students to easily cluster into small groups.

- 1) Prior to administering the exercise, I generally show a few PowerPoint slides of *New Yorker* cartoons to give the students a taste of the magazine's humor. They see the cartoons are clever without being obscene.
- 2) Then, I pass out individual copies of a captionless cartoon to the students, asking them to come up with a funny caption and write it on the back. This is easier said than done, and many of the students are too stumped to come with a single useable caption. Some students write something, but most these captions tend to be weak.
- 3) After a few moments of working independently, I ask the students to arrange themselves in groups of three or four, and ask them to share what they've written, and collectively create a caption the group deems funniest.
  - a. To spur their process, I sometimes give them additional information, such as instructions on brainstorming, breaking down the problem, or the use of analogies and associations. These are described under "Variations" below.
- 4) After ten or fifteen minutes, groups share their funniest caption with the rest of the class.

- 5) We typically conclude the exercise with a discussion. Among the topics of discussion is how the individual students' captions compared to the groups' captions. The vast majority find that the funnier captions were the result of the group effort.

Variations:

- **Brainstorming:** Prior to the exercise, cover the topic of Brainstorming in class, including the caveat that no one should be judgmental of another's idea. When the individuals meet as a group their assignment is to apply brainstorming techniques to come up with the caption.
- **Breaking down the problem:** Ask the students to deconstruct the cartoon by breaking it down into individual components. What do they see? Who's talking? What's the relationship among the figures in the cartoon? By breaking down the cartoon, the students can address it from single angles rather than addressing the whole picture.
- **Associations/analogy:** Ask the students whether the cartoon reminds them of anything, maybe a current event? or a literary character? By associating the cartoon with another idea, the students may find a clever connection upon which to base their caption.

## **SESSION DESCRIPTION**

If accepted for the MOBTS Conference, this session would be very similar to what I do in class. Ideally, the room will be structured in such a way that individual participants will be able to break into groups of 3-4. The only equipment needed would be a computer and projector for a brief PowerPoint presentation. I have organized this into a 60 minute activity.

- **Minutes 1-5:** Overview of the session and an introduction to *The New Yorker* Cartoon Caption contest with several examples

- Minutes 6-10: Distribution of a captionless cartoon to individual participants, with the instructions for them to come up with a humorous caption by themselves (depending upon the size of the group, there may be multiple cartoons)
- Minutes 11-30: Organization of groups, with instructions that the individuals share their captions with each other and come up with what the group determined is the best one
- Minutes 31-35: Groups share their captions with the rest of the session
- Minutes 36-60: Session discussion and post-mortem to reinforce the learning objectives of the exercise; also an opportunity for participants to provide feedback so that I can improve the activity

## CONCLUSION

Admittedly, this cartoon caption exercise is a light-hearted and fun attempt to get students to participate in creative decision making in a group context. Based on experiences, the results support the benefits of group decision-making, that being, most admit their group's solution was better than their individual solutions. Certainly, there have been instances when individuals preferred their own caption to that of the group, but group dynamics forced them to back down. When this happens, I try to integrate this into the post exercise discussion.

Group dynamics obviously play a role in these activities. It is interesting to watch the group members interact as they discuss something as subjective as what's funny. Nevertheless, the groups come up with their final decisions, and, more-often-than-not, they're pretty clever.

To keep with the light-hearted nature of the exercise, I don't award points or credit for the activity. The only motivation is intrinsic. Interestingly, I've never had anyone refuse to participate or ask to sit out. The activity itself is engaging, and despite the "no-stakes" nature,

most students take it seriously. Quite often, there is good-natured competition as to which group came up with the best caption. Moreover, in the follow-up discussion, the students agree the experience gave them greater insight on creative problem solving and group decision-making.

Worth mentioning, there are two unintended benefits I have found doing this activity. The first is that it is a very effective ice-breaker for the students. It's an opportunity for them to introduce themselves to each other and interact in a fun, non-threatening manner. When students are comfortable around each other, the class environment improves dramatically. They are more engaged and more participative in class discussions. Also, for a generation of students that is more comfortable staring at their smart phones, they tend to appreciate the face-to-face interaction this exercise requires.

Secondly, for many students this is their first exposure to *The New Yorker*. As a long-time reader and subscriber, I'm delighted to introduce students to the magazine.



## References

- Amabile, T. M. (1997). Motivating Creativity in Organizations: On Doing What You Love and Loving What You Do. *California Management Review*, 40(1), 39–58.
- Barron, F., & Harrington, D. M. (1981). Creativity, Intelligence, and Personality. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 32(1), 439–476.
- Collins, B., & Guetzkow, H. (1964). *A Social Psychology of Group Processes for Decision-Making*. New York: Wiley.
- Foote, N., Matson, E., Weiss, L., & Wenger, E. (2002). Leveraging Group Knowledge for High-Performance Decision Making. *Organizational Dynamics*, 31(3), 280–295.  
[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0090-2616\(02\)00114-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0090-2616(02)00114-6)
- Mankoff, B. (2014). *How About Never Is Never Good For You?: My Life in Cartoons*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- McGlynn, R., McGurk, D., Sprague Effland, V., Johill, N., & Harding, D. (2004). Brainstorming and Task Performance in Groups Constrained by Evidence. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 93(1).
- Riordan, N. O., & O'Reilly, P. (2011). S(t)imulating Creativity in Decision Making. *Journal of Decision Systems*, 20(3), 325–351. <https://doi.org/10.3166/jds.20.325-351>
- Simon, H. A. (1986). Rationality in Psychology and Economics. *The Journal of Business*, 59(4), S209–S224.
- Skuts, P. (2019). Caption Contest #642 winner. *The New Yorker*. Retrieved from <https://www.newyorker.com/cartoons/contest#winner>
- Stevens, M. (2018). Caption Contest #642. *The New Yorker*, 82.

Wanous, J. P., & Youtz, M. A. (1986). Solution Diversity and the Quality of Group Decisions.

*The Academy of Management Journal*, 29(1), 149–159. <https://doi.org/10.2307/255866>

Yagoda, B. (2001). *About Town: The New Yorker and the World it Made*. Da Capo Press.

Figure 1



WINNING CAPTION

*"Vinnie would appreciate it if you reconsidered that Yelp rating."*  
Peter Skuts, Los Angeles, Calif.

SECOND PLACE

*"Psst...two thousand calories...no kale."*  
Howard Cowan, Woodland Hills, Calif.

THIRD PLACE

*"Of course it's hot. It's stolen."*  
Steve Ferguson, San Rafael, Calif.