What's for Dinner? An Interactive Activity to Highlight Differences Between Rational Decision-making Models and Realistic Decision-making

Abstract

There is an abundance of abstract concepts within OB that can easily/quickly confuse students. Oftentimes, it is incumbent upon the teacher to devise a real-world example or activity that clearly illuminates a concept or model and helps students understand how it affects one's behavior outside the classroom. We have created such an activity that is easy to implement yet highly engaging, and enables students to visualize the Rational Choice Paradigm (i.e., rational decision-making model). The purpose of this session is to demonstrate how this activity provides students with a fun opportunity to learn about decision-making. Relevant materials will be provided.

Keywords

Rational Choice Paradigm, Decision-making, In-class Activity, Think-Pair-Share

Introduction

Based on our experiences of teaching Organizational Behavior (OB), students tend to be more engaged when they are able to relate course concepts to their own personal experiences. The tricky part we as faculty must contend with is crafting a realistic example from outside of the classroom that clearly illustrates how a theory, model, or concept works in the real world. We have devised one such example to help students learn about the Rational Choice Paradigm (i.e., the rational decision-making model), which is a common fixture when teaching students about decision-making.

During a typical discussion of this paradigm, students learn about the six steps of making a rational decision (i.e., defining the problem, identifying the decision criteria, allocating weights, and developing, evaluating, and selecting an alternative) (Anderson, 1983; Harrison, 1995). Roughly between the third or fourth step, students' eyes tend to glaze over, and hands start reaching for phones. Therefore, we designed an in-class activity that not only describes the Rational Choice Paradigm of decision-making, but also highlights the differences between how the model states that we *should* make decisions and how we *actually* make decisions. Accordingly, we have students follow the Rational Choice Paradigm to make an everyday decision: "What's for dinner?" Once students stop and think about the incredible amount of time and effort it would take to follow this model and the myriad options/choices they must consider, especially with such a seemingly simplistic decision, it becomes clear that another type of decision-making model must influence our decision-making and behavior. This provides a nice segue to bounded rationality, which is often the next topic found in many OB textbooks. Thus, due to the subject matter and interactive nature of this activity, it is intended for undergraduate OB students in a traditional, face-to-face classroom.

Theoretical Foundation & Teaching Implications

This activity draws upon three of the management learning agendas (see Kayes, 2002 for review): cognition, reflection, and experience. *Cognition* involves simplifying complex real-world problems (Kegan, 1994; Klein, 1998; Senge, 1990; Wegner, 1987); *reflection* involves critically reflecting on assumptions and beliefs, thereby freeing students from assumptions that may limit perspectives (Dehler, Welsh, & Lewis, 2001; Mezirow, 1991; Reynolds, 1999; Vince, 1998); and through *experience*, students develop a better, more realistic understanding of themselves (Heron, 1992; Kolb, 1984; Reason, 1994; Torbert, 1972). Through this activity, we hope to illustrate to students the reality of how people make real-world decisions. Regarding *cognition*, the activity depicts the Rational Choice Paradigm of decision-making (Anderson, 1983), which students often do not fully understand due to the complex, time-consuming, and unrealistic nature of the process. One of the goals of this activity, then, is to clarify and simplify this complex paradigm and to juxtapose it with how students actually make decisions. Moreover, we find that students often claim to be very rational in their decision-making. Therefore, in regard to *reflection*, this activity will remove students' assumptions of their rationality when it comes to making decisions. Finally, this activity speaks to *experience*, as students will develop an understanding of themselves as decision makers, as well as an awareness of some of the biases and shortcuts they may utilize when facing decisions.

Both authors performed this activity in two different sections. While this is a class-wide activity, there are variations that may be used. One way to conduct the activity is simply to ask the whole class, "What's for dinner tonight? Let's decide as a class. What do we need to take into consideration when deciding this?" then immediately start writing things on the whiteboard.

This method works especially well with classes that tend to be more engaged and talkative. The other way to conduct this activity, which may work better with classes that are a little quieter, is to pose the question and then have students engage in think-pair-share (e.g., Kaddoura, 2013). Both methods elicited about the same amount of engagement in the activity. Additionally, the second author used this in the class period following the Carter Racing Activity (Brittain & Sitkin, 1990) and prompted the current activity with, "Last class we made a pretty high-stakes decision; today we are going to make a decision that we have to make every day." The juxtaposition of these two activities allows students to see that our bounded rationality does not only apply to larger-stakes decisions, but also to small, everyday decisions to which students can strongly relate.

Learning Objectives

In this activity, students will follow the Rational Choice Paradigm to make a decision that they make every day: What is for dinner? By engaging in this activity, students will be able to grasp just how unwieldly following this process is. At the end of this activity, the instructor should ask the class, "How many of you go through this process when you decide what to eat?" At this point, students can clearly contrast this process with the process they actually use to decide what to eat for dinner. As discussed above, many students claim to be wholly rational when they make decisions, and even take pride in doing so. At the end of this activity, students will be able to clearly identify how there are boundaries to their rationality. We typically follow this activity with a more theory-driven discussion of bounded rationality, including the assumptions the Rational Choice Paradigm makes and how that contrasts with our true decision making processes (e.g., maximizing versus satisficing, implicit favorites, etc.). Having this

activity to refer to allows students to easily comprehend these concepts. Finally, since this is an activity to which they can easily relate, students are quick to apply the course concept of bounded rationality to their everyday lives as well as to management/organizational contexts.

To exemplify the outcomes of this activity, in a reflection, one student wrote, "If we thought of every possible option from where we are going to get food from for dinner/eat at home, it would be too long of a process. By the time you are done mapping out every option, you are going to be so hungry that you settle for the fastest thing available, which is not going to be the best option."

Activity Overview

Logistics

This activity is intended to take about 10-15 minutes. The only materials necessary are a large dry-erase board (chalkboard) and a marker (chalk). As described below, this activity can be used for any size class, although we have used it for class sizes of 20-30 students.

Flow

We designed this activity as a way to begin the lecture/discussion on decision-making. Once students are settled, we ask "What's for dinner?" (or lunch, depending on the time of day). This usually results in blank stares from students, so we then ask, "How do you make that decision? What's there to consider?" At this point, students typically start to raise their hands and provide examples of what's available to eat in the cafeteria or their fridge. The most common decision-making criteria they consider are:

- Money/cost (leftovers at home vs dining hall vs off-campus)

- Time

- Transportation (e.g., walk, bike, bus, car, friend's car, taxi/Uber)

- Weather (delivery vs go out)

- Type of cuisine (e.g., fast-food, Indian, Mexican, Italian, cereal)

- Allergies

- Diet/preferences (e.g., vegan)

- Previous meals

- Restaurant ratings (e.g., friends, Yelp)

- Acceptable attire

- Friend's/significant other's schedule, preferences, etc.

Of course, students rarely consider all of these criteria, so it is useful to have some prepared ideas to prompt the students if they become stuck. The above list should be adequate, given the timing of the activity. In either case, it is fun to watch the students' expressions as they see the board filling up with the overwhelming multitude of decision-making criteria to consider (See Appendix A).

As with most decisions, once you start considering a single decision-making criterion (e.g., "time"), it often leads to a flurry of additional questions. For example, students must consider if they have time to eat dinner given their studies and various commitments, and if so, how much time they can afford. Is there only time to go to a certain dining hall or can they go out to eat? What's still open, how long will it take to get there? How will they get there, who

will they go with, what should they wear? The possibilities are truly endless, and many students often enjoy the opportunity to be creative/funny with their responses.

As for alternatives to conducting this activity, instead of a traditional, class-wide discussion, depending on the class size or their willingness to speak in class, we have conducted this exercise using the "think-pair-share" technique with equal success. Finally, depending on the timing and semester, the opening question prompt could be replaced with, "Where will you go for Spring Break?" However, although this is a fun topic for many students to discuss, based on our students' reactions, many work during the break and some have become a little jealous as others promote their exciting/expensive upcoming trips.

Debriefing Guidelines

Once the board is sufficiently filled with decision-making criteria, we then ask, "Who does all this? Who has time to calculate the answers to all these questions?" We then often add in some humor by answering our own questions with, "The answer? Nobody. Otherwise you'd miss dinner." We then explain how this entire process represents the Rational Choice Paradigm, and that in order to be truly rational and use this model, one would need complete information, a total lack of bias, and a brain like a computer. Since humans lack all three of those things, as well as time to calculate the optimal alternative, we instead rely on "bounded rationality," at which time we segue into a discussion of that term, while also defining "satisficing" in order to explain to students how most people actually make decisions.

Session Description

Overview

After welcoming everyone and introducing ourselves, we will engage in a dialogue with attendees about the issues we have experienced when teaching the rational decision-making model to OB students, and how difficult it is to hold students' attention. After addressing the need for this activity and describing its learning objectives, we will then implement the activity by asking audience members – "What's for dinner?" This should lead to a lively and humorous exploration of the criteria that students typically use when making this decision. Once the board is completely full, we will address the aforementioned different variations of the activity, discuss additional best practices (including how to segue to bounded rationality), and allow attendees to ask questions.

Timeline

Activity	Duration for 60-minute program
Welcome & introductions	10
Explanation of activity (theoretical foundation and learning objectives)	10
Interactive, step-by-step demonstration of activity	30
Distribute handout, Q&A, and share tips and best practices to ensure the activity is a success	10
TOTAL	**60**

Appendix A. Images of completed board (October, 2018)

Class-wide Discussion
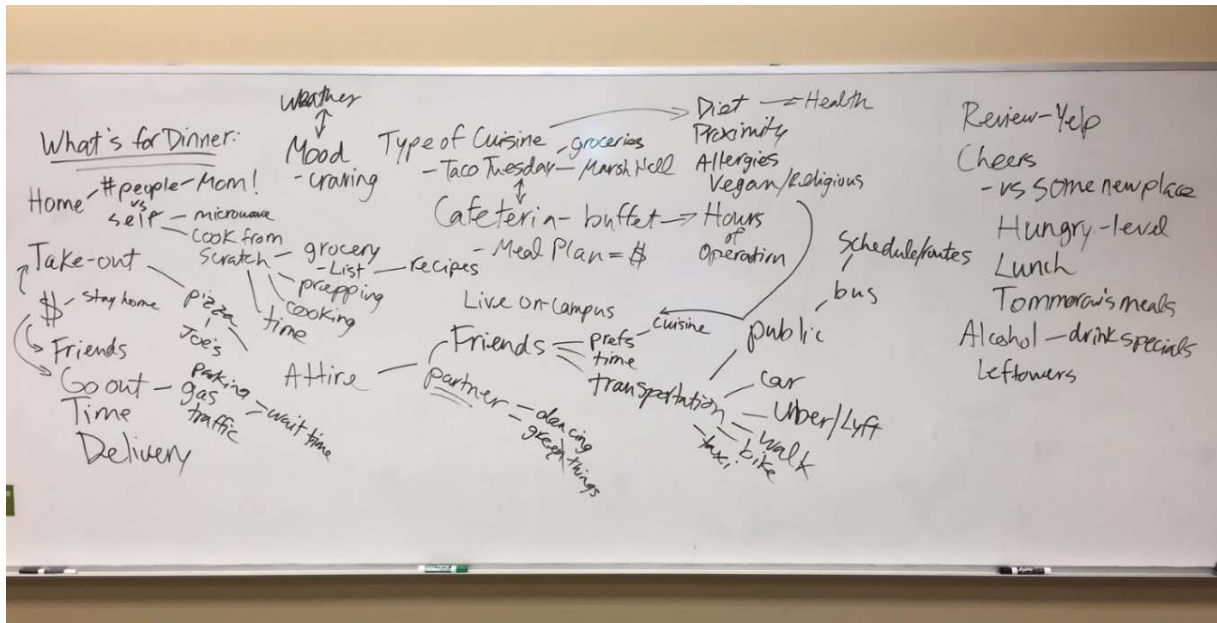
Think, Pair, Share
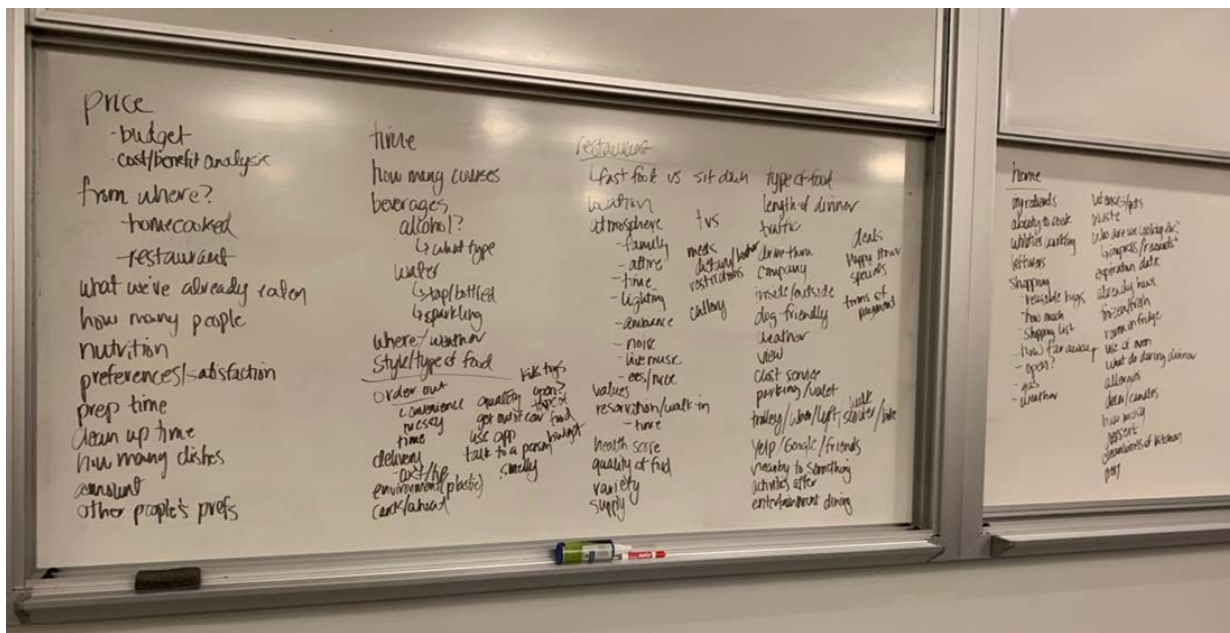
References

Anderson, P. A. (1983). Decision making by objection and the Cuban missile crisis.

    Administrative Science Quarterly, 201-222.

Brittain, J., & Sitkin, S. B. (1990). Facts, figures, and organizational decisions: Carter racing and

    quantitative analysis in the organizational behavior classroom. *Organizational Behavior*

    Teaching Review, *14*(1), 62-81.

Dehler, G. E., Welsh, M. A., & Lewis, M. W. (2001). Critical pedagogy in the "new paradigm."

    Management Learning, 32, 493-511.

Harrison, E. F. (1995). *The managerial decision-making process.* (Vol. 4, pp. 1-39). Boston,

    MA: Houghton Mifflin.

Heron, J. (1992). Feeling and personhood: Psychology in another key. Thousand Oaks, CA:

    Sage.

Kaddoura, M. (2013). Think pair share: A teaching learning strategy to enhance students' critical

    thinking. *Educational Research Quarterly*, *36*(4), 3-24.

Kayes, D.C. (2002). Experiential learning and its critics: Preserving the role of experience in

    management learning and education. *Academy of Management Learning & Education*,

    1(2), 137-149.

Kegan, R. (1994). *In over our heads: The mental demands of modern life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.

Klein, G. (1998). *Sources of power: How people make decisions*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Mezirow, J. 1991. Transformative dimensions of adult learning. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Reason, P. (Ed.). (1994). *Participation in human inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Reynolds, M. (1999). Critical reflection and management educaion: Rehabilitating less hierarchical approaches. *Journal of Management Education*, *23*, 537-553.

Senge, P. M. (1990). The fifth discipline: The art & practice of the learning organization. New York: Currency Doubleday.

Torbert, W. R. (1972). *Learning from experience: Toward consciousness*. New York: Columbia University

Vince, R. (1998). Behind and beyond Kolb's learning cycle. *Journal of Management Education*, *22*, 304-319.

Wegner, D. (1987). Transactive memory: A contemporary analysis of group mind. In B. Mullen, & G. R. Goethals (Eds.), *Theories of group behavior*: 185-208. New York: Springer-Verlag.