

Organizational Theory Roundtable – It’s Actually Super Fun to Teach OT!

Abstract:

This round-table discussion brings together numerous teacher-scholars who teach courses related to organizational theory. We will discuss our different approaches to teaching organizational theory and show how it rounds out a management curriculum for undergraduate and graduate students. After discussing some of our own favorite exercises and approaches to the subject, we will engage in a healthy debate of best practices and do our best to answer any burning audience questions.

Keywords: Organizational Theory, Practice, Organizational Metaphors

Introduction

The purpose of this session is to discuss different approaches to teaching Organizational Theory (OT) courses. OT is often considered a challenging course to teach (and take!) due to the conceptual nature of the material and the difficulty associated with making macro-level topics, typically covered in OT, relevant to students with limited work experience. This is an important session for MOBTS because professors with management and Organizational Behavior (OB) backgrounds are frequently asked to teach OT courses in business schools. As such, the target audience will be those who have or will be teaching OT related courses who want to create dynamic and effective learning experiences for their students. Additionally, anyone teaching OB or strategy may be interested to attend to find ways to provide a gestalt learning approach in their courses or to be more aware of what topics are being covered in other parts of the curriculum. Participants will come away from the session with well-tested ideas for teaching OT.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Organizational Theory (OT) is a management topic for which courses are offered at business schools around the world. It is often seen as the macro counterpart to Organizational Behavior (OB) courses, enabling students who take both courses to look at and lead organizations from a holistic perspective. Some of the greatest challenges of teaching OT include: (1) relatively small selection of textbooks (as compared to the number of OB textbooks), (2) differentiating OT topics from OB, Strategic Management, and other management courses, (3) making OT more relevant and interesting to students, as its macro-level theory nature, jargon and focus on often invisible aspects of organizations can disengage students, and (4) developing

assignments that engage students in meaningful discovery and assimilation of OT topics and applications.

These are some of the challenges that we, as OT instructors, would like to discuss with others who have either taught OT courses or are preparing to teach their first OT course. Some of the questions related to these challenges that we hope to address during this roundtable are:

1. How do we help students get excited about learning OT, especially undergraduate students?
 - (a) Why does the study of OT matter? As scholars, we are likely well versed in concepts such as isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), population ecology (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) and organizational metaphors (Morgan, 2006), but how do we make those topics – and their jargon – relevant for students?
 - (b) What approaches to teaching OT will best enable students’ learning and engagement? What has been tried and doesn’t work?
 - (c) What kinds of assignments bring OT to life for students? What kills student motivation to study OT?
 - (d) How might we draw on students’ own experiences, which may have been limited to front-line positions (far from the organization level “big picture”), to enhance their learning of OT?
2. Which OT topics are most practical and necessary for undergraduate and graduate students given the environment facing most organizations today? Since so many students study

strategic management and OB as separate courses, how do we decide what should and shouldn’t be covered in OT?

3. How do we convince deans/department chairs that OT matters enough to merit its own course?

Roundtable participants will share practical – and winning! – strategies associated with each of these questions. We will also solicit ideas from those attending and compile as many ideas as practicable in the hour, creating a “teacher’s toolkit” for teaching OT related courses in the most engaging way possible.

Some intended outcomes include knowledge transfer of strategies rooted in experiential learning and positive pedagogy and enhanced enthusiasm for teaching a course that people may shy away from teaching and taking.

Session Description

All of the discussants in this roundtable have taught an OT at least once, some more than 20 times. We will convey our approaches to teaching OT in terms of the course content, assignments, and teaching techniques we implement to make our courses engaging and relevant. We will also share syllabi with complete assignment descriptions, either in the form of paper copies (at the session) or via e-mail (by collecting e-mails and sending after the session).

We will distribute copies of the questions listed in the previous section to audience participants and solicit their responses and questions in addition to describing what we have

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learned through teaching OT courses. The first question has multiple parts and would seem to be the most important question to address as educators. Accordingly, the questions are listed in order of importance, but we can adapt the sequence based on attendee interests.

Timeline:

1. Introduction of roundtable theme and participants, including information on experience teaching OT. Solicitation of audience names and emails for later distribution of materials, including the session summary. (8 minutes)
2. Distribution of questions (1 through 3 and sub-questions, from above) (1 minute)
3. Solicitation of audience interest in questions – what path should we take over the next 45 minutes to best use everyone’s time and energy? (4 minutes)
4. Interactive discussion of questions 1 through 3 and audience questions, along with simultaneous compilation of ideas (45 minutes)
5. Wrap, including next steps (2 minutes)

Total: 60 minutes.

References:

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, 48(2), 147-160.

Hannan, M. T., & Freeman, J. (1977). The population ecology of organizations. *American Journal of Sociology*, 82(5), 929-964.

Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of Organization (Updated Edition)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications. ISBN: 978-1412939799.