**Virtualness in Classroom-as-Organizations: problems and solutions when using technology**

**Abstract**

The Classroom-as-Organization (CAO) is an experiential education approach in which students create, manage, and lead an organization as part of class activities. Given the challenges that the CAO poses to students, it is likely that students conduct part of the CAO work outside of the classroom setting. In this roundtable discussion, we conceptualized the CAO as an organization with a certain degree of virtualness, a construct associated with several negative organizational outcomes. In the session, we will explore tools that CAO instructors might adopt, and discuss problems and solutions associated with the use of technology in a CAO.

Keywords: Classroom-as-Organization, virtualness, technology

**Introduction**

The purpose of the session is to discuss technology use in Classroom-as-Organizations (CAOs). More specifically, we will discuss why technology is being used in CAOs, possible tools or apps that instructors might adopt, problems that might emerge from the use of technology, and possible solutions or best practices. The target audience is instructors who are using the CAO approach or interested in adopting it. The intended outcome of the discussion session is to help instructors better run their CAO through the use of technology.

**Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

The Classroom-as-Organization (CAO) is an experiential education approach in which students create, manage, and lead an organization as part of class activities. The CAO originated in the work of Cohen (1976), who explained that “our objective is not to simulate an organization, but rather to create genuine organizational issues for students, to put them in the position of an organizational member” (p.13). Thus, the benefit of using such an approach is that students get to experience firsthand critical organizational issues, including problem-solving, conflict management, negotiations, teamwork, and leadership (Cohen, 1976; Romme, 2003).

Educators have described a variety of CAO models over time. For example, in some early models, the CAO organization was focused on teaching and managing the class content, applications, and student evaluations (Barry, 1990; Cohen, 1976; Putzel, 1992). More recently, educators used the CAO to create organizations where students applied knowledge in real-world settings, such as implementing business plans (Lynn, 2010) and organizing events (McDonald et al., 2011; McDonald & Spence, 2016; Sheehan et al., 2009). All those models have students organized in groups working on interdependent tasks. Students are given the freedom and responsibility to actively participate in the management of class activities (Cohen, 1976; Putzel, 1992; Sheehan et al., 2009). In this process, the professor transitions from the role of expert delivering content to one of a guide or manager that delegates much responsibility to students (Putzel, 1992; Romme, 2003).

Another common aspect among all the CAO models is that the CAOs involve students in very challenging experiences. Students' tasks are real and sometimes do not have easy solutions (Dixon, 2011; Putzel, 2007). Barry (1990) described that he presented his CAO students a “dramatic picture during the first class, emphasizing the intensity, long hours, dependence, and so forth that will be required” (p. 8). McDonald and Spence (2016) also noted that their CAO students were often surprised by the complexity of the problems and the effort they had to put into the class.

Given the intensity of the CAO experience and the complexity of the problems that need to be solved, we believe it is safe to assume that students do not just work on CAO-related issues during class time but also outside of official meeting times. The official meeting time of CAOs, as with any other classes in college, is limited to just a few hours a week. Given conflicts in schedule and other commitments, it is also likely that students in a CAO will do some of their work without meeting face-to-face but by using technology. In this sense, the Classroom-as-Organization term is incomplete. Not all the work of the organization is done in the classroom; instead, much of that work is done virtually, outside the classroom.

Thus the experience of the students in CAOs might better be described as a class-as-organization, in which the organization involves a certain degree of virtualness, ranging from not at all virtual to highly virtual (De Guinea et al., 2012). Schweitzer and Duxbury (2010) suggested that ‘‘to be considered virtual, a team must have some members who do not work in either the same place and/or at the same time, and therefore, cannot collaborate face-to-face all of the time” (p. 274). Conceptualizing CAO as an organization with a certain level of virtualness is essential, because as De Guinea and colleagues (2012) described in their meta-analysis, organizational virtualness positively relates to task conflict and negatively relates to communication frequency, knowledge sharing, team performance, and team satisfaction. While those outcomes are very important in organizations in general, they are particularly relevant in an educational setting in which the authority figure (the professor) tries to give as much control of the organization to students, to enhance their learning and development. Yet, most CAO research is not focused on what happens outside of the classroom setting and on how technology is used for virtual work and communication.

Vital questions arise, then. Should the CAO instructor allow students to choose the technology they use to coordinate their virtual work? What technological tools might better serve the purposes of the CAO? Should the CAO instructor participate in or monitor the communication of the students during their virtual work? When and how should the instructor participate in such communication? How do students and the instructor experience their virtual work in a CAO and the use of technology? What problems might the CAO instructor and the students run into while participating in virtual work? These are the questions that we hope to address in our proposed discussion session.

**Session Description**

In our session, we will first review the key characteristics of the CAO approach. We will also introduce the argument that it is important to see CAO as an organization with a degree of virtualness, in which students often use technology to communicate and get things done. We will then discuss the type of technologies that might be useful in a CAO and how the instructor might want to approach the use of technology in the class.

We will then present the context of a CAO that consisted of two semesters during the 2016-2017 academic year. In this CAO, students worked as an event management company to organize a large sports event at the end of April. In that CAO, the instructor adopted several technologies (Slack, Wrike, HubSpot CRM), with mixed results. Students also participated in a study in which they were interviewed at four different times during the two semesters. We will present the results of a qualitative analysis of what students said about the use of technology in the class.

Finally, given that virtualness is associated with a number of problems in organizations, including a rise in conflict, we will moderate a discussion on an actual situation that involved a conflict between students and the instructor of the CAO mentioned above. The conflict emerged during communication that took place virtually, on Slack. We will explore with the session participants why the conflict emerged, how the instructor handled things, and what lessons can be drawn for the future.

**Session timeline (60 minutes)**

1. Review the key characteristics of the CAO approach (10 minutes)
2. Introduce the argument that the CAO needs to be viewed as an organization with a level of virtualness, in which students often use technology to solve problems (5 minutes)
3. Moderate discussion on what apps/tools would best be appropriate to be adopted in a CAO and what instructors should keep in mind when using technology (10 minutes)
4. Present the results of a qualitative analysis of how students experienced working with technology in a two-semester CAO, at the end of which students organized a large sports festival (15 minutes)
5. Moderate discussion on a real situation in which the instructor and the students in the CAO mentioned above got into a conflict during virtual communication. Explore different options and best practices for the future. (20 minutes)

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