Online garbage fires: How going virtual hasn’t stopped our (trial and) errors.

**Introduction**

The past year and the COVID-19 pandemic has brought management educators many challenges. The past academic year was filled with classrooms transitioning from traditional in-class to being moved online, in whole or in part. Some universities have returned to “face-to-face” learning, but been forced, due to space limitations and “COVID-caps” on classroom size, to adjust to a hybrid or hyflex model of learning. Other universities have suspended “face-to-face” learning for the entire academic year, opting for completely online, using either synchronous or asynchronous models.

As we’ve detailed in the past, MOBTS has a rich history of sharing positive experiences with experiential learning exercises, and since 2017 when we first had a *Garbage Fire* session, there has been a growing history of learning from each other when our efforts, while possibly innovative, didn’t succeed. In 2017, we had an interesting discussion at Providence College with approximately 8 attendees. Though there wasn’t an overflowing audience, all present agreed it was interesting and we ought to try it again the following year. 2018 saw a standing room only crowd at Coastal Carolina University, in 2019 at Ramapo College saw another room filled with participants; clearly attendees had an appetite not only for schadenfreude, but for innovation and collaboration around learning from failure. Last year’s virtual conference saw a packed zoom screen that facilitators needed to scroll through, with breakout rooms to enable richer discussion.

As MOBTS attendees, the very nature of the conference often revolves around trying new things and embracing experiential learning. As we move toward vMOBTS 2021, we acknowledge the shoulders of giants upon whom we stand even when we get burnt by the experiential fire. The classic *Gather ‘round the experiential fire* (Andre, et al., 2010) sessions that have been an anxiously-awaited session 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). This year, we were disappointed to hear rumors that there might not be a *Gather ‘round the experiential fire* session, but that won’t stop us from gathering ‘round the garbage fires!

***Where tradition meets technology: Finding ways forward*** is the theme of this year’s conference. The tradition that we have of trying experiential exercises in our classrooms isn’t halted just because we’ve gone online (whether pandemic-induced or through our regularly scheduled online classes). So whether we’ve been teaching online for a semester or a decade or more, vMOBTS attendees have been trying to leverage technological tools to find ways forward in our classrooms; unfortunately, not all of our efforts prove successful, but that doesn’t mean we don’t learn from them.

Management educators who attend MOBTS (and vMOBTS) inspired by other educators and practitioners are generally open to new experiences, and have been trying to find ways forward by learning from others’ great ideas. As we’ve noted in years past, 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 (often repeatedly) in bringing what we hoped would be an innovative activity to our classrooms, and that spirit of experimentation (and failure) hasn’t been dampened by the shift to online learning. Most attendees can likely reflect on their own classroom situations gone awry; which may be why we have seen many attendees at our sessions – misery loves company? Or, perhaps moreso, a greater desire to learn from our collective failures and move forward with new efforts. This schadenfreude doesn’t stop with an online setting – we can both learn from others, and also appreciate that we didn’t have to make those mistakes ourselves.

**Theoretical Foundations**

The pop-culture management maxim 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 safety of our classrooms. Some of us also follow our own advice and take those same risks by inventing new exercises, or trying established exercises in new contexts. 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 online experiential activities that had unintended outcomes and we encourage them to frame their 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.

**Session Description**

***0-0.20.*** 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 also offer examples of online garbage fires from at least one of the facilitators, following the experiential learning model outline above.

***0.20-0.60.*** We will break into smaller discussion groups (breakout rooms) led by each of the facilitators, following the experiential learning model presented above. We will encourage attendees to share their experiences, but also to provide suggestions from which their peers can continue to learn.

***0.60-0.90***. We plan to return 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. This also will continue to offer attendees a chance to continue getting feedback on how to revise their sessions for future online classes, so they may avoid getting burnt by the same virtual fires again.

Building off previous sessions, we have found that focusing on not just the execution of the activity, but rather the instructor’s humility (e.g., Edelson, Lo, Nelson, Stark, Stratton, van Esch, 2019) can serve as a path from virtual burns to student and instructor success. Online or in person, 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 again focusing breakout discussions on this element of humble leadership from an instructor’s perspective. It is the very lack of success that creates value. The grit of attendees who take chances and fail online (sometimes spectacularly) – but ultimately learn and grow– leads to greater victories for all who attend.

**Conclusion**

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. Additionally, we plan to consider the extent to which on-ground exercises can be adapted online, and/or whether there are exercises that work better online than on-ground.

This session is appropriate for all types of online exercises, individual and group-oriented at both undergraduate and MBA levels, across the spectrum of management topics. Effectively, we hope that this session, much like its predecessors can be used as an analogical fire safety tool as we help our colleagues who have been singed, and prevent future scorches.

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