

Discussing Sexual Harassment in the Classroom (or Online): An Interactive Exercise

ABSTRACT

This activity is suitable for undergraduate Organizational Behavior courses to discuss the topic of sexual harassment in a relatable, interactive manner, instead of just relying on legal definitions. Students are shown a short video portraying two young people interacting in a workplace situation, where the male character makes inappropriate advances towards the female character. The situation portrayed is very life-like, but not so disturbing that it could make some students feel uncomfortable. The follow-up questions and discussion allow students to hear each other's opinions on the behaviors of the two characters.

Keywords: sexual harassment, experiential learning, organizational behavior

Time requested: 60 minutes

Activity/Exercise

Unique Contribution: This work has not been presented or published before

Introduction:

Statistics show that 81% of women and 43% of men have experienced some sort of sexual harassment and/or assault in their lifetimes (Stop Street Harassment, 2018). Further, 38% of women and 13% of men have experienced sexual harassment at work. Sexual harassment continues to be a very important topic both in and out of the workplace and the 2017 #MeToo movement (initiated by Alyssa Milano) further increased the visibility and pervasiveness of this issue.

Sexual harassment is usually only briefly covered in Organizational Behavior textbooks either under the Job Performance/Counterproductive Behavior/Personal Aggression (e.g., Colquitt, LePine, and Wesson, 2019) or under Culture and Diversity/Gender Diversity (e.g., Nahavandi et. al, 2015). Often, textbooks only provide the legal definition: “unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature” (EEOC) with the occasional related statistics, but do not offer any examples or discussions on this topic.

Teaching students about the legal definition of sexual harassment is not enough. We need to get students engaged in the topic, so they are willing to discuss these issues openly. With this goal in mind, I have been using an interactive method to introduce and discuss sexual harassment in the classroom. I use this activity in my undergraduate Organizational Behavioral (Managing People in Organizations) course. The students enrolled in these classes are typically juniors. I have used this activity in a traditional classroom setting, but I will conduct the same activity in my upcoming online course as well.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

Higher education is often accused of not teaching information that are used in real life and/or not teaching students HOW to transfer this context specific knowledge to their careers or lives (Lave & Wegner, 1991, Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). Hence, we want to introduce problem solving activities and assignments in our classes that aid this knowledge transfer process. This exercise is rooted in experiential, problem-based learning which focuses on complex, real-world situations that require student discussion and reflection. The way the activity is created fits well with the experiential learning cycle (concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract thinking, and active experimentation) outlined by Kolb (2015). Experiential learning paired with activities that have “real life implications” tend to increase student engagement (Svinicki & McKeachie, 2014). Students will likely face sexual harassment situations at some point in their lives, either first-hand (as a victim, a perpetrator, or an outside observer), or as a manager or HR professional who needs to address a complaint.

Learning Objectives

This activity is conducted in my Managing People in Organization (Organizational Behavior) (a 3000 level, required Business Administration course) when I cover the topic of counterproductive behavior. Counterproductive behavior includes the category of *Personal Aggression* and *Harassment* is listed under this category. The current textbook that I use has one sentence that covers “harassment,” and does not even specifically addresses *sexual* harassment. Given the statistics highlighted in the introduction section and the damaging effects of sexual harassment on victim’s personal and professional lives, I feel that it is very important to discuss this topic with our students, so they do not become victims or perpetrators.

This exercise provides an opportunity to critically evaluate and discuss a life-like scenario and allows students to engage in an open-forum discussion and to hear each other's (potentially opposing) thoughts and opinions. It is interesting to see that sometimes one or two males in the class would have a very different "read" on the portrayed situation. Having an honest discussion about this sensitive topic helps students to be better prepared for the workplace and to be able to deal with these types of situations in a more professional and informed manner.

Exercise Overview

Students are shown Part 1 of a YouTube video created by the BBC showing a hypothetical interaction between a young male and female coworker working in a bar. The female character is a new employee and the video shows the male character interacting with her in various situations, which leads to the final scene where he tries to follow her home and to kiss her. She turns him down. At this point I pause the video.

I then conduct an anonymous online poll with two questions: Do you think Ryan (the male character) did something wrong in this situation? Do you think Cat (the female character) did something wrong in this situation? I also allow the responding students to indicate if they are male or female in order to see if there are any gender differences among the responses. There is usually more consensus about the actions of the male character, but responses vary for the female character. After the poll, I ask some follow-up questions (e.g., What could Cat do in this situation?) and open up the floor for a discussion. Once the discussion concludes, I will show Part 2 of the video where other young people (males and females in separate focus groups) give their feedback on the situation presented earlier. This helps students see the varying viewpoints on the subject, in addition to the class exchange.

Once this part of the discussion is concluded, I continue the video, where the male character is now in court (tribunal) and further evidence is revealed about his intentions. This part usually generates more discussion (and uproar). To conclude this activity, I show another video that goes over the legal definitions, specific examples, and ramifications of sexual harassment and I also have a PowerPoint slide outlining the procedures for reporting sexual harassment cases.

This activity only requires standard classroom equipment (computer and projector). In the past, I used Top Hat for the poll, but there are other platforms that will allow anonymous polling. Similarly, in an online situation, Zoom, Webex can also be used for polling.

As far as timing, the entire BBC video is 6 minutes. The polling questions and follow-up discussions can take anywhere from 20-30 minutes. I was pleasantly surprised how willing and engaged students were discussing this topic. The legal implications video is another 6:25 minutes.

Session Description

The sessions will be conducted the same way as I use the activity in the classroom. Session participants will take the role of students during the first part of the session (before the Q&A part.) Given the virtual conference design, instead of showing the videos through Zoom/Webex (which sometimes glitches for video sharing), I will post the links in the chatbox and have participants run the videos themselves before we continue our discussion.

In the Q&A section, I will ask participants to share their own experiences on how they address the topic of sexual harassment or if they have any suggestions how to improve this activity.

Timeline: 60 minutes with breakdown is as follows:

- **Introductions** (presenter and participants): 6-10 min
- **Video (Part 1 – the situation):** 2 min
- **Polling questions** (presenter and participants): 2 min
- **Discussion** (presenter and participants): 15 min
- **Video (Part 2 – focus group feedback and tribunal scene):** 5 min
- **Video (legal implications, examples, prevention):** 6 min
- **Q&A and open discussion about the topic/activity** (presenter and participants): @ 20 min

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