

**Title:** There goes my hero! A roundtable on the advantages and disadvantages of using superheroes in the classroom.

**Abstract:** This lively roundtable session will bring together participants who would like to learn more about how we have used everyday heroes and superheroes in human resource management and organizational behavior classes as an engagement strategy. In the Fall semester (2021), students of an Introduction to Human Resource Management (HRM) class were assigned a group project where they had to pick a group of heroes (either superheroes or those performing heroic work). The goal was to get students to apply every facet of HRM to their chosen heroes. The advantages and disadvantages of this approach will be explored along with some specific activities, projects and rubrics that have been used. Participants will have the opportunity to share their own experiences in using heroes in the classroom. Participants will share their own best practices with the presenters and other participants.

**Keywords:** High engagement strategies, Superheroes, Everyday heroes, human resource management, selection

## **Introduction:**

This roundtable provides participants an opportunity to exchange ideas on the potential of using everyday heroes (e.g. nurses) and Hollywood superheroes (e.g. Batman) as part of their courses. The presenters have used heroes in a variety of ways including a group project that allowed students to incorporate the fundamental concepts in human resource management as well as film clips to illustrate a variety of concepts in organizational behavior (e.g. team building, communication). The presenters will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using heroes in classroom activities and assignments. We will also provide specific relevant assignment rubrics. Participants will have an opportunity to raise questions, discuss some concerns or suggestions as well as share their own experiences with this topic. We feel this topic will appeal to a wide range of participants: doctoral students, early, middle and late career educators. These applications can also be used in different modalities such as face to face or online and across a range of courses. The intended outcome of the session will be to provide participants with some novel ways of exploring concepts with a high engagement approach and the opportunity to learn from each other to avoid potential pitfalls and capitalize on each others' suggestions.

## **Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications**

The recent pandemic has forced most educators to pivot to online learning and/or modify how we conduct in-class exercises and activities due to changing public health guidelines. There have been some articles expressing student dissatisfaction with online learning relative to the classroom experience (e.g. Ong et al., 2020). Thus, post-secondary instructors are tasked with developing new ways of engaging students when both instructors and students may be struggling with a great deal of uncertainty in their lives as a result of the pandemic (e.g. potential changes in income, living arrangements, concern about personal health as well as family members). We

wanted to capitalize on the current fascination with everyday heroes and superheroes. The recent pandemic saw many news outlets celebrating and lionizing everyday heroes in our community who risked their personal safety to keep us safe and ensure we had essential goods and services (e.g. medical professionals, paramedics, truck drivers, retail employees). Furthermore, anecdotally we have found that the majority of our undergraduate students are fascinated by heroes and superheroes and consume these stories in various forms (e.g. videogames, movies, tv shows). Heroes and superheroes have universal appeal among both our domestic and international students who often cite tv shows such as Grey's Anatomy and Chicago Fire and the gamut of Marvel and DC movies as their favorites.

We see many possible avenues for using these heroes as part of a course in organizational behavior and HRM (human resource management). Clips of superheroes could be shown in class to illustrate a concept in Organizational Behavior such as team building, motivation, conflict management and communication. Some in the literature have argued for the value of showing superhero films to illustrate class concepts such as leadership (Urlick & Sprinkle, 2019) and team-related concepts (Li & Urlick, 2020).

Furthermore, instructors may wish to consider class activities and assignments that use these familiar characters and jobs. In the Fall 2021 semester, students of an Introduction to Human Resource Management (HRM) had to choose a group of heroes (either superheroes or heroes closer to home such as emergency services or medical services personnel). Perhaps because of the context of the pandemic, most student groups chose emergency services (e.g. firefighters) or medical services (e.g. nurses, doctors). Only two of the nine groups explicitly chose fictional superheroes as seen in the Marvel Universe. Please see Appendix A for the group project and a summary of questions that students must answer. Such an approach allows students

to focus on many aspects of an Introductory HRM course including: job analysis/job description, steps in the recruitment and selection process, training and orientation, compensation, equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) and even health and safety. Thus, hero or superhero teams are used to help motivate students in applying and learning class concepts. This practice builds on teaching and learning scholarship that associates high engagement teaching strategies with higher levels of student motivation (e.g. Paolini, 2015; White, 2019).

We have implemented these approaches and applications and will share rubrics and examples to attendees. We will also discuss some of the advantages and disadvantages of this approach. For example, there is some anecdotal evidence from nurses that they are uncomfortable with the “hero” moniker. Finally, we will discuss the potential for heroes/superheroes to be used for group projects in other courses such as organizational behavior (OB). Tasked with creating a team of heroes/superheroes, students could apply OB principles such as: leadership, organizational culture, communication, teamwork and conflict resolution among other topics.

### **Session Description**

This roundtable will begin with the presenters discussing their favorite childhood hero/superhero and asking participants to briefly share their own example. The presenters will then provide examples of how they have used heroes in classroom discussions (either online or in person) and how they have used the group project idea with students. Presenters will then have participants discuss their own experiences with this topic. If presenters have not used heroes in the past, presenters will encourage participants to share their own suggestions, thoughts and concerns. This roundtable supports the theme of the conference of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion because historically superheroes has been perceived as the domain of young males

which gives us pause when we consider the diverse composition of our students. Thus, we will also explore how to make the use of superheroes more inclusive for all learners. We have provided the following proposed timeline:

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
Icebreaker: Favorite superhero	5-10 minutes
How we have used superheroes in the classroom and for this group project.	15 minutes
Question 1: What you would like to share about this approach (i.e. using heroes/superheroes)? Concerns/thoughts/suggestions?	10 minutes
Question 2: How can potential issues of equity, diversity and inclusion be addressed?	10 minutes
Question 3: What other courses might this approach be used and what would that look like?	10 minutes
Conclusion/Wrap up	5 minutes
Total	55-60 minutes

## References

- Li, J. & Urick, M. J. (2020). *Using Marvel's The Avengers to teach team-related concepts. Journal of Organizational Behavior Education, 13*, 103-130.
- Ong, J., De Santo, Heir, J., Siu, E., Nirmalan, N., Ofori, M.B., Abiola, A., Hassan, O., Ramos, R., Badaoui, T., Ogley, V., Saad, C., Sabbatasso, E., and Wyse, S.M. (2020). 7 missing pieces: why students prefer in-person learning over online classes. University Affairs. <https://www.universityaffairs.ca/features/feature-article/7-missing-pieces-why-students-prefer-in-person-over-online-classes//>
- Paolini, A. (2015). Enhancing teaching effectiveness and student learning outcomes. *The Journal of Effective Teaching, 15(1)*, 20-33.
- Urick, M. J. & Sprinkle. T. A. (2019). Teaching leadership: Using Wonder Woman to highlight the importance of gender diversity. *Management Teaching Review, 4 (2)*, 173-181.
- White, A. (2020). Thinking like a manager: A participatory exercise for understanding managerial roles. *Management Teaching Review, 5 (2)*, 103-114.

## Appendix A (Sample Group Project Instructions)

### Group Project (Report) (25%)

I will create your team for this project with the goal of having 4-5 students per group. If there is someone you would like to work with (or not work with), you can email me confidentially **on or before (XXXXX)**. I will do my best to respect your wishes but of course, I cannot guarantee your preference.

Heroes take on many different roles and forms in our society. Superheroes are often called upon to perform extraordinary acts of sacrifice for the greater good.

It is up to you and your group how you define superhero. You may choose superheroes from the Marvel or DC universe or superheroes closer to home (e.g. emergency services personnel, medical personnel).

You will be putting together a team of these superheroes and applying all the lessons from this course. You will develop a report for this group project. You should answer the following questions in your report.

- 1) What will your superhero team do? In other words, what's their mission? You will need to discuss which job analysis methods would you recommend (and why) and what does your job description look like?
- 2) Identify the most important bona fide occupational requirements for these positions.
- 3) Which recruitment channels did you recommend (and why) and what does your sample job advertisement look like?

- 4) Which selection methods did you recommend? Please provide several sample interview questions, recommend at least one sample selection test (and say why you picked this test) and several sample reference check questions. Don't forget to briefly discuss the realistic job preview!
- 5) What does the recommended compensation, benefits and incentive system look like for this team? Explain how you arrived at your recommendations.
- 6) Please provide a SMART performance objective.
- 7) Identify the health and safety risks for this team. Recommend ways to mitigate these risks.
- 8) How will you evaluate your efforts? In other words, how will you specifically measure "success"?
- 9) Discuss how you will factor in inclusion, diversity and equity into your HR practices.

### **Your Report**

You will create a report using Word that answers the previous questions listed in the course outline. Your goal is to do your best to apply the HR concepts to this situation. Your report will also have a self-reflection section where your group outlines for me: What went well with this project? What did not go well with this project? What would your group do differently next time? Your report should have a cover page with the course code, all your group members' first and last names plus your student numbers, your group number and the title of your report. Your report should be a maximum of 14 pages double spaced. The page limitations does not include appendices, cover page or references. You will submit this report to me via email (instructor email) by (XXXXX).