“Why Wasn’t More (Any?) Time Spent on These Topics in Graduate School?”

Abstract

This symposium addresses fundamental topics in course design rarely discussed in doctoral programs, faculty orientation programs, or even among peers. At the 2022 MOBTS meeting, some of these topics emerged from informal discussions among a group of attendees. Examples include “Who is the target market in my course?” and “What is the role of grades, and what should they signal to various stakeholders?” These and other seldom discussed topics will be discussed by faculty ranging from recent graduates to retired faculty and attendees in small groups. This symposium should create a Community of Practice addressing this type of topic.

*Key words: Unaddressed Topics in Course Design, Community of Practice*

**Introduction**

This proposed symposium has two basic goals. The first goal is to provide a venue for discussing some fundamental topics professors should consider before a new semester begins, particularly when they are teaching a new course, are at a new school or teaching in a new program at their school but get little instruction or guidance on those topics. The second is to use the session to begin to create a “Community of Practice” among members of the Management and Organizational Behavior Teaching Society that raises and discusses fundamental topics that do not have traditional formal venues in which they are discussed.

Following the 2022 session titled “Never Blow on a Tarantula” during last year’s MOBTS meeting, further discussions emerging following the session found some faculty discussing fundamental topics about the nature of courses that they have individually grappled with, often alone, but only occasionally successfully resolved. One of the main reasons faculty have to grapple with these questions is because they are seldom explicitly addressed in doctoral programs, informal mentoring during PhD programs, or through mentoring during their careers. Doctoral programs emphasize the content to be taught, how to teach it, and how to conduct and publish rigorous research on them or the teaching of them. However, several fundamental topics, often only thought of after one has established their career, were not presented or discussed previously. It appears there is an implicit assumption that doctoral students and faculty know the answers to the questions generated by often downplayed fundamental topics. A small sample of these topics listed by the faculty in discussions and correspondence since last year’s MOBTS meeting include:

* Who is the target market in this class, and what is my obligation to those who are not in that target market?
* What do grades signify and to whom?
* How can students take the lessons in my course and use them throughout their degree program?
* What are my role and responsibilities in writing letters of recommendation for jobs and graduate school applications?
* What role do I play in creating and maintaining a culture of honor and/or integrity in my school and university?

These questions should be overtly addressed and hopefully resolved before one begins selecting readings and drafting a syllabus for a course. However, most of the time, we accept what is precedent, our own, our colleagues at our school or what “the field” appears to have settled on as its standards, rather than begin by seriously considering these topics. Seldom, if ever, do faculty address these, and related topics, in a doctoral course or at a conference session. Instead, the focus is on the content to be taught, how to present it meaningful and memorable ways, and how to measure and evaluate what students have learned.

This symposium has a diverse array of faculty in organizing and facilitating roles. It will include experienced faculty (over 30 years of experience as a faculty member), mid-career faculty (10 to 30 years of faculty experience) and relatively new faculty (less than 10 years of experience), all of whom have confronted these questions in one way or another, seldom in a large formal setting. After brief comments by these faculty, all attendees can select topics they want to discuss in smaller group settings. The symposium organizers will facilitate the discussions and, in the last few minutes of the symposium, summarize the discussions for all attendees. The intent is that the session will be a springboard to further informal discussions during the remainder of the meeting and throughout the 2023-24 academic year, and perhaps beyond..

Any follow-up discussions will indicate this symposium-initiated process is becoming a Community of Practice (Wenger, 1998; Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). The discussions of topics central, but seldom addressed, to effective courses and teaching, will facilitate sharing of experiences, insights, resources among faculty with common interests in which they mentor and influence one another. In doing so, the participating faculty will fulfill the criteria stated by Satterly, Cullen, & Dyson’s (2018) that a Community of Practice exists when there is a group of people with the common purpose of improving the quality of teaching and learning of its members. Rather than having these topics remaining in the background, usually addressed on an individual and *ad hoc* basis, the symposium can establish a group, or set of groups, that continue to examine these topics using a more deliberate process. The Community will enable the discussion of these types of topics more quickly and their conclusions to be disseminated in a broader and more timely fashion.

**Teaching Implications**

This symposium will impact teaching by enabling faculty to review and address these fundamental topics consciously and comprehensively at the earliest stage of course modification (which should be considered every semester), revision or when developing a new course. Some will discover they previously have done an excellent analysis; some will discover they had completed some effective analysis while others will realize that they have not done this type of analysis. Most will recognize that it was generally accomplished by individual effort, when there were others, unknown to them, who were grappling with the same topic or had already resolved it for themselves and no one else knew it.

It goes without saying that students do not think like faculty because their role is to learn, while faculty roles are to teach and mentor. Much of this difference is based on different levels of knowledge and the different perspectives that a faculty member that may have that impact how students learn and what they think they should learn. While many of the experiences and development of current students has been like ours, some have had different experiences that we have not had. Students represent a different generation than any faculty member and often have a wider range of cultures that have shaped them. In addition, the scope and nature of management theories and practices have evolved, as well, since we were students, but we had the advantage of being witness to the change. For us management is dynamic, for students it is static.

For example, students’ relationships with media are more intimate and real time than it is for many faculty members. Students are used to 141-character messages, visual media messages and succinct statements and memes. Conversely, we often are comfortable and use elaborate written articles and oral discussions. The fundamental topics in this symposium provide a background to consider as we examine effective design and delivery of our courses.

For example, we generally know what to teach and how to teach to our students, but we seldom consciously determine who are the students who we are trying to address most strongly. When the target market has been identified, faculty will be able to more systematically identify students who are not in the target market and determine how to design the course to serve their needs as well. In turn, this can assist in determining what students should be able to demonstrate to show competence and what grades mean. This is especially important when one recognizes the role grades play to other stakeholders, in addition to students. What do they signal and mean to administrators, potential employers, graduate schools and peers who teach subsequent courses? This topic is important when one considers the impact and meaning of grade inflation to all stakeholders.

The other topics mentioned above have the same type of depth to them that can be developed when they are more carefully examined. They provide more insight in the impact of faculty roles in writing letters of recommendation, helping students understand how our courses can help them in subsequent courses, building and sustaining the culture of their school.

The symposium will encourage faculty to have a more comprehensive intentional approach to course design, as opposed to what appears to be a process that is more emergent and influenced by precedent. When changes in a course’s design are necessary, they will be developed more quickly and fully than a process that is built solely on precedent. Some faculty will become more proactive and anticipatory than they currently are.

**Symposium Overview**

The symposium will begin with a very quick set of introductions. The introduction of the faculty presenters and facilitators will be first. The second introduction, given by individual faculty members, will be of the key topics and why it is of interest to that faculty member. Next, attendees will choose to be part of a discussion group for one of the topics. The facilitators will coordinate the discussion and record key parts of the discussion on flip charts. At the end, the presenter and facilitator may make summary comments. This session will be 25 minutes long.

Next, attendees will choose whether to move to a group discussing another topic or continue discussing the original topic. This discussion also will be 25 minutes and follow the same process used in the first discussion session. Following this session, everyone will come back to a group of the whole. The facilitators will give a summary of the discussions they facilitated. Follow-up comments and questions from among all attendees will be requested.

**Session Description**

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| **Session Activity** | **Time** |
| 1. Introductions
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| 1. General Themes of Symposium
2. Presenters and Facilitators
 | 7 minutes  |
| 1. Topic & Importance:

by Individual Presenter | 2-3 minutes per topic |
| 1. Discussion Groups I
 | 25 minutes |
| 1. Discussion Groups II
 | 25 minutes |
| 1. Debrief & Summary
 | 15 minutes |

**References**

Satterly, B. A., Cullen, J., & Dyson, D. A. (2018). The intergenerational mentoring model: an alternative to traditional and reverse models of mentoring. *Mentoring & Tutoring: Partnership in Learning, 26*(4), 441-454. doi:10.1080/13611267.2018.1530172

Wenger, E., McDermott, R., & Snyder, W. M. (2002). *Cultivating Communities of Practice: A Guide to Managing Knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business School.