

CHALLENGES OF TEACHING UNDERGRADUATE ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR IN A NONTRADITIONAL TIME FORMAT

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive research examines the challenges of teaching an organizational behavior class in a condensed time frame. The Organizational Behavior class met for four hours Friday night, and six hours Saturday for one month. Changes made to the traditional semester long course are discussed. Challenges faced to provide an effective learning experience for students are presented along with a description of strategies used to overcome these challenges. A summary of useful tips for instructors considering such a modified format is presented.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The University has been growing rapidly. A campus designed for 6000 students is now expected to cater to 9000 students. As a result there is a drastic shortage in classroom space. This problem is made worse by the student preference to attend classes two days a week so that they can continue their employment. In the past, scheduling classes Monday and Wednesday or Tuesday and Thursday met students' needs. While the institution was small, this schedule worked well, but as the institution grew, not using classroom space throughout the entire week became a problem. While there are a few miscellaneous classes scheduled for a 3-hour time block on Fridays, and even an occasional class scheduled for one night a week and all day on Saturdays, the utilization pattern for these classrooms is not consistent. Thus, scheduling classes Monday through Thursday resulted in a shortfall of classrooms. In the state of Florida, additional classrooms won't be authorized unless existing ones are better utilized. The university's need for better utilization on Fridays and Saturdays has prompted administrators to encourage faculty to, among other things, modify course schedules to utilize classrooms across the week.

In this article, we describe the challenges faced in developing and delivering an undergraduate organizational behavior course over a four week period. We discuss new strategies that were tried. We compare the outcomes in condensed format with those in the traditional format. A summary of useful tips for instructors is also presented.

CURRICULUM MODIFICATIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL ASSESSMENTS

The first description explains the assessments used to measure individual student outcomes. These assessments included, quizzes, written homework questions, peer appraisals, and a final exam.

For the concentrated course the quizzes were dropped. During the 16-week course students completed quizzes at the beginning of the class. Since students who were late were not allowed to take quizzes, this practice assured students were in class on time; the quizzes also served as an indicator that students read and recognized basic definitions and concepts. In the concentrated class the method of evaluating student understandings of the textbook was unique. Instead of short quizzes, a new special assignment, designed to provoke student reflection, called the "Personal Assessment of Learning" (PAL), was created. The assignment was an essay assignment similar to a journal. The assignment required students to demonstrate what they learned by describing the applicable in-class exercise, how they felt about the exercise, relevant theories, application of the theories and what they (students) learned about themselves. A total of three of these PALs were required, one due the 2nd week of class, one due the 3rd week of class, and one due the final week of class.

Since PALs were due after the chapters were discussed, students needed encouragement to complete the reading assignments before class. Readings prepared students for in-class experiential exercises. Thus, the requirement for written Homework Assignment Questions (HAQs)

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remained in tact for the concentrated course. The HAQs consisted of three or four instructor-designed, essay questions per chapter that highlighted topics the instructor deemed important.

In summary, the tools used to assess individual performance for the concentrated course were Personal Assessments of Learning (PALs), Homework Assignment Questions and student peer appraisals. The structured peer appraisals were designed for students, in their groups, to give both positive and constructive feedback about individual group members' performance during the group projects. Final exams required students to demonstrate comprehensive knowledge of OB. Peer appraisals, final exams, and HAQs remained the same for both class formats.

CURRICULUM MODIFICATIONS FOR GROUP ASSESSMENTS

This section describes the assessments used to measure group objectives. Group grades were given for each of two group projects and for presenting the group project(s) to the class. During the traditional semester, students had one month to complete each group project. For the concentrated class, groups had four hours to complete the first project, and barely two weeks to complete the second project. In order to ensure students could achieve similar goals during the 3-hours of class time allocated, project number one was different in the 4-week class than in the 16-week class. Still, the outcomes evoked for both projects were similar with one exception. The groups in the 4-week class demonstrated their learning outcomes for the first group project with a Power Point presentation. In contrast students in the 16-week class demonstrated their learning outcomes with a written report.

Goals for the first group project were: to identify specific roles of group members which contribute to effective, or ineffective group functioning; to diagnose group dynamics within the group, and to develop some general principles about group dynamics with which to operate in other classes or employment settings. To accomplish these goals, groups were asked to observe their own behaviors as they built a specific object.

For the first group project in the 16-week class, students set up a videotape to watch themselves build a model home. Then, students completed required readings, watched themselves on the videotape and gave structured feedback to each other concerning their leadership behaviors. Next, students prepared a written report (but no Power point presentation), concerning the behaviors they observed which demonstrated their knowledge of individual behaviors and group dynamics. Finally, the instructor facilitated a class discussion about individual behaviors and group dynamics.

For the first group project in the concentrated class students read about group dynamics, built a mobile vehicle, competed and judged the vehicles, gave each other immediate, verbal feedback, and prepared 12 minute Power Point presentations about the process they observed.

Students completed the project in three hours, then delivered group presentations. The groups were asked to build some mode of transportation out of the materials provided by the instructor. The vehicle could be a car, boat blimp, plane, bike, etc. as long as it resembled a mode of transportation that could be identified by the general public. Since the project was completed in 2-3 days, rather than 2-3 weeks students gained the necessary practice to familiarize them with the intended group dynamic-feedback process.

TIPS FOR INSTRUCTORS

The following are a few suggestions for faculty who want to teach organizational behavior or other similar courses in a concentrated time frame. These tips were derived from the strategies that appeared to work well in this course.

1. Design an exercise or activity which fosters positive social interaction. Social interaction facilitates interpersonal relationships through which learning occurs. If the activity respects and highlights individual differences in positive ways then, groups have a good start toward liking each other and achieving group cohesiveness.
2. Maintain regular contact with students via email. A large proportion of students work; and, the trend is toward more students working more hours (<http://www.pirg.org/inpirg/incamppus.asp?id2=6478>). Unless instructors find ways to communicate regularly with students, they will miss valuable instructor guidance and feedback. As a result, learning outcomes will be lessened, and students will be less satisfied with the course. Develop an instructor Web-site, or use one of the distance learning technologies, e.g. Prometheus, Web-CT, etc., to maintain regular communication with students.
3. Keep up with grading. Return homework promptly. That students need prompt feedback (Chickering and Gameson, 1987) is well known among educators. And, high achieving students request the feedback more regularly than low-achieving students. Checking 180 pages of homework and grading and providing feedback on 135-180 essay type assignments per week will keep the instructor busy. Putting off making these corrections for a week would result in an overwhelming workload for the instructor.
4. Grade group presentations the day they are delivered. For the instructor this means evaluating and commenting on presentations as they are done. Presentation points, may be a part of the total group grade, or may be stand alone grades. Nevertheless presentation grades can generally be divided into a few elements and graded on a likert scale. The instructor may assign another task or provide a classroom break in order to finish the

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grading during the same classroom meeting. Immediate feedback is more likely to result in behavioral change. That is, students are more likely to incorporate needed changes into their next presentation. Develop clear descriptions of assignments and projects. Include examples and sample projects. In addition, students want to know how they will be evaluated on projects. When instructors develop clear assessments, students benefit because they have more information about the activity and instructors benefit as they can use the assessment as guide for awarding grades.

CONCLUSION

Creative scheduling for an undergraduate course in Organizational Behavior can result in effective learning outcomes and student satisfaction with attention to appropriate planning areas.

References available upon request.