

EXPANSION OF SUMMITTING MOUNT EVEREST FOR CLASSROOM AND ONLINE DELIVERY: AN EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING APPLICATION FOR ORGANIZATIONAL BEHAVIOR

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ABSTRACT

Organizational behavior, often included as core business curriculum, instructs students how individuals and teams successfully work within organizations. This theory-based course, which often utilizes case studies, can be challenging to transform into a hands-on, applied learning approach. In 2016, an experiential course design for an organizational behavior was presented with the theme of summiting Mount Everest. This model utilized a variety of activities, along with a short computer simulation, to allow students to experience the challenges of ascending the famous mountain. This current paper presents an expanded version of the Mount Everest design with a new “trek to basecamp” component in the early course stages and a fully flipped design for both classroom and online delivery. The expanded model allows students to be fully immersed into the Everest environment in order for students to apply and test approaches, discover solutions, and personalize tasks to bring greater meaning and learning to organizational behavior theory. The students encounter what it is like to maintain individual motivation, communicate effectively, develop trust within their team, build a culture, and experience conflict and change, all while negotiating the demanding environment of the Himalayas and Mount Everest. This paper provides a background, summary of the original model, details of the expanded design for both online and classroom, as well as assessment of all the models.

Keyword: Organizational behavior, experiential learning, team, Mount Everest

INTRODUCTION

This paper presents an expanded version of the article, *Summitting Mount Everest: An Experiential Learning Application for Organizational Behavior* (Beaudry, 2016). This new adaptation provides an updated and broadened application of the Everest theme in the first stages of the course. The new version also provides details of how this new model was updated for an online delivery. This model has built a “trek to basecamp” component for the first module, which more closely simulates the experience of an actual climber. Additionally, this model utilizes a structured flipped classroom pedagogy, and active learning exercises within a consistent theme to provide students with an experiential learning environment in which to apply organizational behavior concepts. The following will present the background, course design, and assessment comparison of the new classroom and online designs with a traditional lecture-based instruction method as well as the original Mount Everest design.

BACKGROUND

Organizational behavior applies psychology theories to business organizations and operations in terms of how they affect employees, customers, and the community (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009). The Everest-themed organizational behavior course explores the behaviors of the individual and team, as well as structural characteristics that impact the overall effectiveness of an organization. The learning outcomes of the course serve to reinforce various roles and functions of employees and managers in relation to issues involving communication, motivation, conflict management, negotiation, and corporate culture.

Designing activities that anchor students’ performance tasks to course objectives in an applied environment is a challenge for a class that contains psychological theoretical content. Studies have found that a stimulating and positive climate energizes student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Moreover, according to Wiggins and McTighe (2005), involving students in a real or simulated setting with many of the same challenges and settings that would be encountered in a real environment become authentic for students. Using a specific purpose and opportunity allows students to test approaches, discover solutions and personalize tasks to bring greater meaning and learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005).

While computer business simulations have been known to create a realistic environment, in which concepts can be practiced, the goal of this experiential learning design was to simulate psychological fidelity, or underlying psychological process relevant to performing within an organization (Hall, J. 2015). The goal is to improve performance enhanced by the psychological environment (Hall, J. 2015). Therefore, the continual Mount Everest theme throughout the course builds engagement during the length of the course so students experience a beginning, middle and end, as well as the trials, errors, stressors, and a sense of accomplishment. In addition, a flipped classroom pedagogy was utilized with student responsible for learning basic concepts outside of the class to apply their learning through a series of team activities in the class.

This expanded experiential design takes the original Mount Everest course design and strengthens several areas to further challenge students, by placing them in various mountaineering expedition roles. They journey to the world of the Himalayas, hike to basecamp, attempt a summit of Mount Everest, and finally design and build an expedition organization using what they have learned. Building the course in a simulated environment helps student to obtain workforce skills by enabling them to practice critical thinking, decision making and problem solving (Caruso, 2019).

COURSE DESIGN IN THREE MODULES

The Mount Everest-themed Organizational Behavior course design was presented in 2016. It involved students analyzing theories related to individuals, groups, and the organization through a simulated experience (Beaudry, 2016). By placing students into this new experience of a Mount Everest climb, students applied theories such as motivation, team dynamics and organizational design to this challenging new environment. To provide background, the following summary lays out the prior iteration of this model. Reference the prior paper for a full description of the original Mount Everest course design for Organizational Behavior (Beaudry, 2016).

In organizational behavior, students are required to analyze theories related to individuals, groups, and the organization; therefore, this course was designed within three modules with this emphasis in mind.

- **Module 1 - The Individual:** The course begins with researching Edmund Hillary and Tenzing Norgay and the British team, who made the first successful summit of Mt. Everest in 1953. During this module students learn and applying theories to themselves and share results and reflection with teammates. They also learn about the history of Mount Everest and apply these theories to the first climbers.
- **Module 2 - The Team:** This is then followed by a computer simulated summit attempt with their climbing team. Included in this experiential model is a short computer simulation called, Leadership and Team Simulation: Everest V2 (Roberto, & Edmondson, 2011). Each role within the simulation has competing goals that test the team's cohesion and communication. This simulation is fully described by Nichols and Wright's (2015) study in which they found that it aided novice students in understanding threshold concepts in core business courses. Along with the simulated climb, the team works through several team building exercises. The module culminates with a team video that mimics their simulated climb.
- **Module 3 - The Organization:** Lastly, the final module involves a merger of the teams to create a world-class climbing expedition organization. They work together to determine the organizational design, communication, and culture prior to developing and delivering a "pitch" to investors about their expedition company. Students begin the course with little to no information about Mount Everest and its history. Yet, by the end of the course, they have developed knowledge about the course concepts, applied them to the Mt. Everest environment, and reflected how this experience applies to any work environment.

While this course design was highly successful, even developing a reputation at the institution, there were elements that needed improvement to fully immerse students in the Everest experience from the first day to the last. Moreover, the class had not been modified for online delivery. The following lays out how the course was improved as well as modified for the online environment.

NEW COURSE DESIGN ELEMENTS

In 2019, several modifications were made to the Summiting Mount Everest course design to better engage students with the course content and to ensure the Everest theme was experienced equally from beginning to end. The improvements to the new expanded version include a fully undated module one, as well as a flipped teaching approach. While the class was designed for classroom delivery during the 2019-20 academic year, the course was modified for online delivery due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Updated Module One: Trek to Basecamp

The first stage of the course focuses on the individual within an organization, including how values, learning styles, motivation, and decision-making can affect individual success and organizational dynamics (McShane & Von Glinow, 2009, Beaudry, 2016). The prior iteration of this module was effective but did not fully immerse the students in the Mount Everest experience. The new modification of this module more closely emulates the process of individuals coming together as a team based on what actual Mount Everest climbers experience including the cultural shock of a new city followed by a challenging two-week journey by air and foot to basecamp.

The prior design had student climbing teams magically arriving at Everest Base Camp in the second module after learning about the history of the mountain in the first module. This newly designed module has students experiencing the challenges of traveling from the bustling city of Kathmandu, a dangerous flight to Lukla, and then a two-week hike through the Himalayan towns and villages to reach Everest basecamp. The updated model begins with the students virtually landing in Katmandu, to begin their climb, as all climbers typically do. The virtual trek was built in the learning management system (LMS). Students are placed in teams of five for both their discussion and "climbing team" in the LMS, so students interact only with their teammates throughout this module. Each segment of the trek is described within a LMS "page" with a narrative of what they would encounter if hiking

along that stretch. Each page includes photos of the environment, a video describing the area, and travel information such as elevation, and distance from the last stop. For each leg of the trip, students work with their teammates to apply and discuss related course content topics. The following summarizes the journey students experience:

- **Meet your Climbing Team in Kathmandu:** Students arrive in the bustling city of Kathmandu. Students introduced themselves by sharing places they have lived that built their sense of value. They also share a place where they have experienced culture shock. Although not required, most students share photos in this assignment. The content topics include values and culture.
- **Lukla to Phakding:** As with the real travel that is required to get to Everest base camp, students take a high-risk flight to Lukla. Students assess and share their locus of control and discuss how that may affect them in new challenges. The content topic includes locus of control.
- **Phakding to Namche Bazaar:** Traveling through this portion of the journey introduces the students to elevation challenges. Also, following the viewing of *Beyond the Edge* film (Madigan, Metcalfe, & Pooley, 2013), students share what motivated individuals like Edmond Hillary, Tenzing Norgay and/or (the expedition leader) John Hunt to perform in teams. The content topic is motivation.
- **Namche to Tengboche:** During this segment of the travel, students are introduced to the infamous Sherpa who are so essential to any successful climbing team. The students are also asked to design a process to change behavior. The content topic is behavior modification.
- **Tengboche to Dingboche:** Students learn about the important Buddhist Monastery in Tengboche village. The groups are asked to discuss the pros and cons of group decision-making during this leg of the trip. The content topic is group decision making.
- **Acclimatize in Dingboche:** During this acclimatization stop on the trek, students watch a video about some of the tragedies that have occurred when climbers have made emotional decisions on Mt. Everest. The content topic is emotional decision making.
- **Dingboche to Lobuche:** Students learn that accommodations are at a minimum and travel is particularly slow at the elevation. During this segment, students apply motivation theory to Everest environment, as well as the workplace. The content topic is motivation and needs.
- **Lochucho to Everest Base Camp:** As students end this leg of the journey, the last discussion asks student teams to reflect upon what they learned along the trek from Kathmandu to Base Camp.

The redesign of the first module made a significant impact on the student engagement. While the prior design had students learning about Mount Everest history, this was really the only component that immersed students into the Mt. Everest environment. The new design immediately engages students into this new world and simulated the journey that actual climbers would take before attempting to climb Mount Everest. This provided an opportunity to immediately apply course concepts into this new environment as they learn about individual theories and begin to form their teams.

The Sherpa Community

The expanded model also includes some activities focused on the role of the Sherpa community and their culture. This history was added during the second module (The Team) to ensure students are aware of the significant role that Sherpa have on an effective climbing team. Moreover, this content was added to bring awareness of the affect that the tourism industry has had on the Sherpa, both good and bad. This section features the 2014 tragedy of the avalanche on Mount Everest where 13 Sherpa died, and some of the aftermath that occurred to better protect this community of people (Jenkins, 2014). This additional content led to many students to focus on social reform issues when designing and building the Everest expedition organization in the final unit.

FLIPPED CONTENT DELIVERY

While the prior course had a general flipped delivery, it was less structured which lead to a portion of the class being used to cover concepts. The expanded version of the design implemented a structured flipped delivery to focus the student effort on working through each leg and challenge of the journey. Lage, Platt and Treglia, first described the concept of flipped pedagogy as “inverting the classroom means that events that have traditionally taken place inside the classroom now take place outside the classroom and vice versa” (pg. 32, 2000). Rather than use class time to deliver content lectures, instructors employ this approach to take full advantage of having students come together to apply concepts and problem-solve with each other with the support of the instructor. The flipped approach has gained wider acceptance and use as a more instructors embrace the student-centered approach to learning and teaching. Moreover, according to Bishop and Verleger (2013), the advancement of technology to support online instruction further bolstered the flipped approach.

The previous course design provided at least one-third to a half of the class period delivering course content, while the other portion was focused on students working on various activities related to the content, the simulation, or other projects. In the updated model, the flipped approach is used to fully utilize the classroom periods for students to work together through the various activities and challenges in the course. Content topics are prepared by the development of short videos that require students to answer questions for homework. This creates a classroom environment where students are prepared to engage in the team discussions and activities. The instructor moves from team to team to provide additional explanations and assistance as students work through

activities.

Model for the Classroom

The expanded version of the Mount Everest Class was implemented during the winter of 2020. The “Trek to Basecamp” design immediately engaged the students in the theme of the class. Moreover, the new flipped delivery method allowed students to engage in longer and more in-depth discussions for the related activities. Some of the “Trek” activities included movement around the campus. For example, one activity included a barter activity (which mimics the environment at Namche Bazaar) which took them around several buildings on campus. Students were given freedom during many of these activities to use resources on campus, with the requirement of photographing their journey (as they would if the Trek to Basecamp was real). These activities, particularly during the beginning terms, served as active teambuilding exercises to move groups through the stages of team development.

Model for Online Delivery

During the spring of 2020, when the world was hit with the Covid-19 global pandemic, instructors had to quickly modify courses to work within an online or remote delivery model. This course was modified for the online deliver through the use of discussion boards and modified assignments.

For the classroom delivery, the ‘Trek to Basecamp’ design in the LMS for the first Module, The Individual, served as in-class activities for student teams to work through. For the move to online, these same activities, were moved into online discussions boards for student teams. As noted, students were placed in teams in the online class and these teams were also placed in discussion groups in the LMS. The groups worked through the “Trek to Basecamp” discussions and activities during the first several weeks.

The second module, The Team, was slightly modified for online delivery. Each student team worked on the Mount Everest Summit as a group. The teams were instructed to work together to establish a time that would work for the group to complete the simulation together. Given that there are many virtual meeting platforms available, students were encouraged to find a solution that would work for them, however the instructor offered Zoom if needed. While some teams successfully navigated the logistical issues of creating a common meeting time, others were not, suggesting that the instructor set a time in advance for the class. For future terms, the instructor will pre-arranged live meeting times so students are able to work though the summing Everest simulation using Zoom. Also, instead of the group video assignment, students completed individual videos which were shared with their teammates.

The final module, The Organization, was also modified for online delivery. While the content of the assignments remained consistent, rather than completing these activities with the whole class, this last section was broken down into individual and team activities. While the students did not get the experience of working in a large group, individual students completed work in every area of the last module. This provided each student an opportunity to design their own Everest Expedition company and share it with their teammates.

Overall, the expanded Mount Everest design for the Organizational Behavior class served to engage student more successfully in the theme from start to finish. The flip designed allowed students to use the class time or online discussions to build their team before their summit attempt through the simulation. This new design was assessed in several ways to learn about the effect on student learning and engagement.

ASSESSMENT

This new model was also reviewed to determine the effectiveness of this design. Both the updated classroom and online model have been compared with the prior model and traditional lecture method. The following will discuss exam assessment, student feedback, retention and attendance, instructor observations, along with general conclusions.

Exams

When comparing final exam raw scores between courses utilizing the Mount Everest design to a more traditional course design, scores showed improvement. Since the expanded design’s focus is on the first module of the course, a further review of the first exam was compared among the traditional design, the original experiential design, and the new expanded design for both classroom and online.

**TABLE 1
MEAN EXAM RESULTS**

	Traditional Design Mean	Experiential Design Mean	Expanded Design: Classroom Mean	Expanded Design: Online Mean
Exam #1: Individual	75.3	77.5	80.0	82.0

As seen in *Table 1*, scores on exam #1 show an improvement from the traditional to the original experiential Mount Everest design. The scores continue to show improvement with the new course design for both the classroom and online delivery modes. For this limited comparison analysis, the results seem to indicate that moving from a traditional lecture-based approach to this experiential approach may aid students' ability to grasp core organizational behavior concepts. Moreover, the new "Trek to basecamp" module may have helped engage students with the content more effectively.

Student Feedback

In addition to exam assessment, student feedback was gathered utilizing the IDEA diagnostic course feedback tool (IDEA Center, 2015, 2020). For the purpose of this comparison, this tool was used to specifically assess student feedback regarding to following learning outcomes:

- Gaining factual knowledge (related to the learning outcomes for the course)
- Acquiring skills to work with others as member of a team

While the traditional class scored in the moderate to substantial progress level in both areas, an increase was seen in both factual knowledge and acquiring team skills with the experiential model. Improvements continued to be experienced regarding both of these learning outcomes for the new design for class and online delivery. As seen in *Table 2*, student feedback from the expanded experiential model was evaluated as having gained substantial progress in both knowledge and team skills.

**TABLE 2
STUDENT FEEDBACK**

	Traditional Design		Experiential Design		Expanded Design: Classroom		Expanded Design: Online	
	Average	SD	Average	SD	Average	SD	Ave	SD
Gaining factual knowledge	3.9	0.7	4.3	0.7	4.33	.7	4.45	.7
Acquiring teamwork skills	4.1	0.8	4.5	0.7	4.6	.75	4.6	.7

- 1=No apparent progress
- 2=Less than most
- 3=Moderate progress
- 4=Substantial progress
- 5=Exceptional progress

Additionally, significant feedback was collected from students throughout the classes in addition to the formal IDEA diagnostic course tool. Students were asked about their engagement, the flipped design, as well as communication with their teams. The following themes emerged from this qualitative assessment:

- **Student Engagement (Classroom):** Students in the expanded model in the classroom reported a positive experience. The Everest theme coupled with the flipped model seemed to enhance the engagement.
 - The instructor made this a really fun class with the simulation and group work. I was a little nervous at the beginning having to rely on my teammates to make it to class, but it turned out that all of use came together and didn't let each other down. The way this course built my group working skills and incorporated concepts to be an effective team will help tremendously when going into the work force.
 - I was extremely skeptical at first about the whole class being built around Climbing Everest, but as the term ended, I ended up having an enjoyable time in that class. It was fun being able to complete all work in class, with the small at home assignments. Super Fun Class. Thank you!
 - I loved the Everest expedition because I got to learn about something I had no knowledge about while also learning to cooperate with teams.
- **Student Engagement (Online):** Students in the expanded model in the online class also reported a positive experience. The use of engaging discussion topics coupled with the "Trek to basecamp" addition engaged students with the content and with teammates.
 - I think this class works really well online! The activities were fun and the discussions helped with grasping the material.
 - I was very bummed about the classes shutting down for I really wanted to experience having you as a teacher. I was thoroughly pleased though that we were still able to have a great class experience. I really enjoyed your beginning of each week videos explaining to us what the week looks like and explaining chapters to us. I appreciated how we were able to still have a team for that really helped us not feel so alone.
 - I think you have done a wonderful job keeping everyone engaged through your use of discussions.

- **Flipped Course Structure & Communication:** The movement to a structured flipped approach was also noted as effective by the students. While classroom students enjoyed using the whole class period for activities, the online students found the structure helpful to reinforce learning the content.
 - *I really liked the course structure and would not change anything!*
 - *It is hard to put into words how much I appreciated the course videos, recorded lectures, and the announcements put up at the beginning of the week and prior to the major assignments. It all made the course material easier to assimilate and to learn the subject in general.*
 - *I think this term went fairly well, and I think the assignments/reading/videos were pretty effective at delivering the content.*
 - *I liked having no lectures in class!*
- **Team Interaction (Online):** While the online students were encouraged to arrange meetings with their teams on their own, several teams suggested it would be helpful for the instructor to arrange this through a tool like Zoom at a specific pre-arranged time. As noted, after the spring online class, this suggestion was implemented for the next term. Most students were able to meet virtually a few times during the term, especially during the simulation.
 - *Our team had no problem arranging meetings and meeting virtually on our own.*
 - *I do think zoom break-out sessions would be beneficial prior to the simulation.*
 - *The only changes would be possibly having a few check-in zoom meetings just so we can all see each other and ask questions if we need.*
 - *Zoom breakout rooms may help a little with connecting to the group.*

Attendance & Retention

The course retention was also reviewed for this course design. For the purpose of this paper, course retention considers the rate at which students withdrawal from the course or receive an F or D. In other words, what is the percentage of students that successfully completed the class. Prior to implementing the Everest design, the retention rate for the traditional model was 92.3%, (sometimes dipping to as low as 87%) which typically translates to losing at least one student per term (*see Table 3*). After implementing the original Everest model, retention rate rose to 100% consistently term after term. The new expanded model maintained that rate for both classroom and online delivery models.

In addition, student attendance has also been tracked once the original Everest model was implemented. The attendance for the class is consistently close to 100% each term. Teamwork is emphasized as highly important component of the class, and individual attendance and participation counts towards the group work. As such, early in the class, students exchange contact information and encourage each other's attendance. Moreover, starting with the original Everest design, students were allowed to use technology such as Facetime or Skype to participate with teammate if they could not come to class. This certainly encouraged attendance.

**TABLE 3
COURSE RETENTION RESULTS**

	Traditional Design	Experiential Design	New Design: Classroom	New Design: Online
Retention (Total enrollment minus course withdrawals, or final grades of F or D)	92.3 Over three terms	100.0 Over nine terms	100.0 Over one term	100.0 Over one term

While the assessment of the expanded model is limited in scope, when comparing the results of the traditional application of the course to the original and expanded mode, there is evidence that the experiential model is more effective in meeting outcomes regarding retention of the theories and knowledge of organizational behavior. Additionally, based on student feedback as well as instructor observation, students were more successful in learning and applying skills needed to successfully work in a team. The instructor noted fewer instances of poor group dynamics. Moreover, groups were far more willing and able to confront individuals not meeting agreed upon workload requirements, often enabling the team to resurrect successful team dynamics. Lastly, course retention of the Everest model has shown positive results over time.

CONCLUSIONS

The expanded experiential learning model for organizational behavior was developed utilizing a Mount Everest theme for students to apply organizational behavior theory in a simulated environment. The prior model, using the Everest V2 computer simulation, as well as a consistent Mount Everest theme designed activities and assignment, was successful in engaging students. However, the expanded model now immerses students from the very beginning of the class into the fascinating and challenging world of the Himalayas so students experience what a climber must face summiting the highest point on earth. This new model was then applied successfully to both a classroom and online delivery. Assessment results yielded positive results, most significantly in students' ability to learn and apply teamwork skills.

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