

Redesigning an Organizational Behavior Class Using the Understanding by Design framework

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Abstract: *If our job as university professors is to guide our students in their learning process, then we must carefully consider what learning we should guide them toward. This paper describes the backwards design process, based on Wiggins and McTighe (2006) that the authors used to meld student opinion with their own academic and professional experience to develop learning outcomes for an undergraduate course in Organizational Behavior.*

Learning Outcomes Driven Course Design

Our institution is under the watchful eyes of two accreditation agencies, the Higher Learning Commission and AACSB. While they use different names for it, Assessment versus Assurance of Learning, they both want a formal system to measure student learning outcomes.

Anyone who has tried to graft learning outcomes onto a class after the fact knows that it is an awkward and artificial process that generally seems like it is more work than it is worth. When the assessment is imbedded in the design of the course, that assessment becomes a natural and relatively easy outcome of the process.

Backwards Design Approach

The Understanding by Design framework was developed by Wiggins & McTighe (2006) as a method for curricular design to attain more effective and engaging learning. It is a backwards design methodology that begins by identifying the Enduring Understandings (EUs) in the field of study. From these understandings come the Essential Questions (EQs) that students must be able to address. It is only when the Enduring Understandings and the Essential Questions have been defined that we are in a position to develop Learning Outcomes and the related Learning Activities.

The three stages of the backwards design process are:

1. Identify the Desired Result
2. Determine Acceptable Evidence
3. Plan Learning Experiences and Instruction

This article focuses on stage one. We use student opinion along with our own academic and professional experience to determine enduring understandings and essential

questions and develop learning outcomes. We accomplish this by determining what matters most in the study of organizational behavior to the instructors and to the students.

Student Opinion and Feedback

For two semesters, students in the class were asked in an open ended question to reflect on what they had learned, and to identify the three things that they thought would be most useful for them in their academic and professional careers. This reflection is the last assignment of the semester and is not due until after the last day of classes. In eight sections, 232 students completed the assignment. These students generated 752 comments, which are summarized in Table 1 below and in Appendix A with additional detail.

Understanding of motivation, leadership, and organizational structure can be thought of as examples of course specific job skills. These are the elements of curricular content that are specific to the course at hand. Skills such as decision making and communication are transferable skills. While they exist and are discussed in an organizational context, they are readily and easily generalizable beyond the specific subject area. The student comments are separated into the two general categories of Course Specific Skills and Transferable Skills.

Table 1: Summary of Student Feedback

Course Specific Skill Category	Comment Count
Motivation	201
Leadership	171
Stress Management	49
Personality	48
Teams	44
Conflict Management	35
Power & Politics	22
Organizational Culture & Diversity	24
Organizational Structure	15
Course Specific subtotal	609
Transferable Skill Category	
Decision Making	76
Communication	14
Transferable subtotal	90
Structural Elements of Course	53
Total Comments	752

The two general categories that students found most valuable were Motivation with 201 mentions and Leadership with 171 mentions. These two categories make up almost 50% of the total student comments and over 61% of the comments on course specific skills.

Instructor Interpretation of Feedback

In the student feedback, Motivation and Leadership were highly valued and organizational structure was, at least in the opinion of the authors, highly undervalued. Of the nine course specific skill categories listed in Table 1, the category that is last in students minds is organizational structure. The authors found this puzzling, troubling and perhaps a little bit depressing. The way the class is currently taught, roughly a 1/4th of the semester is devoted to topics related to organizational structure. This would explain it being relatively low on the list, but wouldn't explain it being less than 2% of the comments.

It is the authors' belief that students can easily see the potential for using motivation and leadership early in their career. They may not foresee that they will ever be in a position change an organization's structural characteristics. They almost certainly think it will be irrelevant in their first position after graduating. In stark contrast it is the authors' belief that an understanding of organizational structure and the factors that drive and are driven by structure will be beneficial throughout their career.

Backwards Design Methodology

According to the Understanding by Design (UbD) framework (Wiggins & McTighe, 2006) before you design lectures, homework assignments and exams, you need to determine what understandings you want your students to carry forward long after the completion of the course. These enduring understandings are the big ideas in the subject area. Think about what you want your students to understand about these big ideas.

One key to writing good EUs is to start them with "Students will understand that..." You can insure that you are dealing with big ideas instead of just course content by the inclusion of the word "that" in your statement. If you simply say that your students will understand something, such as Maslow's hierarchy, charismatic leadership or the functional form of organization, then you are describing content instead of big ideas.

Once the enduring understandings are defined, the next question becomes "What provocative questions will foster inquiry, understanding and transfer of learning?" These are the essential questions related to the particular EUs that you have defined. These questions are the link between the EUs and the learning outcomes for the course.

Learning outcomes define what the student should know and be able to do. This is where one would make the connection to Bloom's taxonomy. It is with the learning

outcomes in hand that we will move to the next stage of determining acceptable evidence of learning.

When deciding what content to cover and what content to omit you are determining Content Priorities. Ideally, these decisions should be made in the course design phase. In practice, they are sometimes made in the last weeks of the semester after you have fallen behind your ideal, but overloaded class schedule. UbD provides a framework for prioritizing course content, grouping it into three general categories.

1. Big Ideas and Core Tasks
2. Important to Know and Do
3. Worth Being Familiar With

You can think of these categories as Vital, Important, and Nice. The Big Ideas and Core Tasks that we believe are at the center of Organizational Behavior, or at least at the center of an introductory OB course are expressed in our defining or our the enduring understandings, essential questions and learning outcomes. If these vital areas are covered, you have a good course. If you can work in other important content items, you have a better course. If you can only make passing mention of the third category, or of parts of it are missing altogether, you still have a good course.

This entire section is based on the ideas of Wiggins and McTighe (2004, 2006) and the UWSP Curriculum Redesign Workshops led by Paula Dehart (2011, 2012) which are based on the Wiggins and McTighe UbD methodology.

EUs, EQs and LOs for Organizational Behavior

Enduring Understandings

When we defined the broadest set of categories for organizing the ideas in an Organizational Behavior class, were only two, the organization itself and the people who populate it. This is shown in the mind-map in Appendix B. These two categories lead us to our two enduring understandings (EUs).

The first EU deals with the people. Anything that gets done by an organization gets done through its people. The array of tools and techniques that are intended to move people toward alignment with and attainment of the organization's goals include motivation, leadership, and the various forces that influence individual behavior and group effectiveness. Managers do not get compliance simply by issuing commands.

EU 1: Students should understand that management directives are mediated by employee compliance and/or noncompliance and that the actions taken by employees are not always consistent with organizational goals.

The second EU deals with the structure of the organization itself. More specifically, it deals with structural choice and structural change.

EU 2: Students should understand that the appropriate organizational structure is contingent on a variety of internal and external factors and is subject to change over time.

We have ordered these EUs in the order that matches both our students' perception of their value and our emphasis on them based on the amount of time dedicated to them in a semester.

Essential Questions

The essential questions are the link between the big ideas of the enduring understandings and the curricular content captured in the learning outcomes. Our EUs deal with the structure of the organization and the actions of the people that populate that organization. This leads to two essential questions:

EQ 1: What makes employees behave in ways that are, or are not consistent with organizational goals?

EQ 2: How do internal and external factors operate and interact to shape an organization's structure?

Learning Outcomes

The desire to have students able to answer the essential questions leads us to the learning outcomes and specific pieces of course content. LO1.1, LO1.2 and LO1.3 are derived from EU1 and EQ1.

LO 1.1: Students should be able to relate the need levels in needs based theories of motivation to each other, relate needs based theories to process based theories and to motivation in general.

LO 1.2: Students should be able to describe, discuss and give examples of various leadership theories.

LO 1.3: Students should be able to discuss various forces that influence individual behavior and group effectiveness including culture, diversity, personality, conflict, stress, inequity, unjust treatment and political behavior.

Based on the student feedback, our LOs for EQ1 focus on motivation (LO1.1) and leadership (LO1.2). These two outcomes can be measured with focused assignments, such as a case analysis. LO1.3 deals with the various forces that influence individual behavior. While it would be difficult to put all of these into a single case, it would be

relatively easy to track a set of exam questions on the individual topics and compile them into a single measure.

Our second set of learning outcomes follow from EU2 and EQ2, and deal with organizational structure.

LO 2.1: Students should be able to describe, diagram and discuss the relative merits of organic and mechanistic organizational structures.

LO 2.2: Students should be able to describe, diagram and discuss the relative merits of functional, geographic, matrix and hybrid organizational structures.

LO 2.3: Students should be able to describe and diagram a model for implementing continuous organizational change, including describing key managerial roles.

LO 2.4: Students should be able to discuss the benefits and challenges of a team based structure, and should be able to describe the process for converting from a hierarchical structure to a team based structure.

As with the previous set of learning outcomes, each of the LOs related to organizational structure can be easily measured with a single assignment or a set of exam questions. The full set of EUs, EQs and LOs appear organized in a hierarchical structure in Appendix C.

Next Steps

Having used student opinion along with our academic and professional experience to determine enduring understandings, detail essential questions and develop learning outcomes we look forward to completing the implementation of the above. The next step will be to design 7 focused assignments, assignment sets or sets of exam questions, one for each learning outcome. By evaluating these assignments, we can determine the extent to which our students have learned the essential material in the course. If these assignments show a particular area where student understanding is not up to par, we move to the final step of investigating that area of the course and making changes to improve student learning.

Conclusion

While the Wiggins & McTighe (2004, 2006) Understanding by Design methodology is well known in schools of education, it is less well known in business programs. With HLC's continuing emphasis on assessment, and with a growing number of institutions pursuing AACSB accreditation there is an increasing need for a better understanding of assessment tools. It is the authors hope that introducing the UbD methodology through the applied example of redesigning an Organizational Behavior class, assist our colleagues in their assessment efforts.

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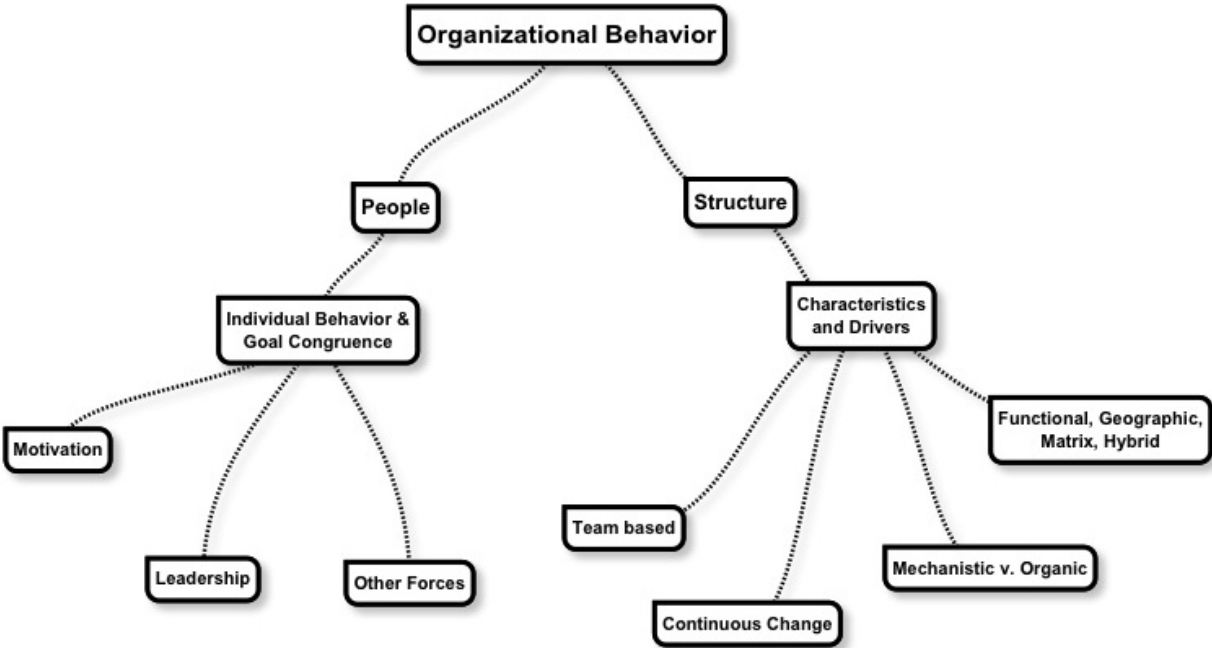
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Appendix A: Student Opinion on Value of Content

201	Motivation 59 Needs Based Theories (Maslow, ERG) 15 Goal Setting (Locke, SMART...) 13 Equity Theory 12 Expectancy Theory 11 Rewards, Reward Systems 7 Herzberg Dual Structure 6 Job Characteristics Theory 78 Other Motivation	Learning Outcome 1.1
171	Leadership 23 Path-Goal 21 Charismatic Leadership 10 Behavioral Approach (Michigan & Ohio Studies) 10 Least Preferred Coworker 9 Leadership and Management 9 Leadership Spotlight 8 Leadership Styles 6 Vroom's Decision Tree 5 Leaders as Coaches 70 Other Leadership	Learning Outcome 1.3
49	Stress Management	Learning Outcome 1.4
48	Personality 31 Myers-Briggs 10 Big Five Traits 7 Other Personality	Learning Outcome 1.4
44	Teams 11 Implementing Teams 6 Team Project 27 Other Teams	Learning Outcome 2.4
35	Conflict Management 15 Manage/Resolve Conflict 5 Conflict as positive 15 Other Conflict	Learning Outcome 1.4
24	Organizational Culture & Diversity	Learning Outcome 1.4
22	Power & Politics	Learning Outcome 1.2
15	Organizational Structure	Learning Outcome 2.1-2.4
76	Decision Making 22 Game Theory 20 Groupthink 9 Rational Approach 25 Other Decision Making	Transferable Skills
53	Structural Elements of Course 33 Study Methods 20 External Readings	Transferable Skills
14	Communication	Transferable Skills
752	Total Comments	

Appendix B: Mind-Map



Appendix C: Design Elements for Organizational Behavior (EU, EQ, LO)

EU1: Students should understand that management directives are mediated by employee compliance and/or noncompliance and that the actions taken by employees are not always consistent with organizational goals.

EQ 1.1: What makes employees behave in ways that are, or are not consistent with organizational goals?

LO 1.1: Students should be able to relate the need levels in needs based theories of motivation to each other, relate needs based theories to process based theories and to motivation in general.

LO 1.2: Students should be able to describe, discuss and give examples of various leadership theories.

LO 1.3: Students should be able to discuss various forces that influence individual behavior and group effectiveness including culture, diversity, personality, conflict, stress, inequity, unjust treatment and political behavior.

EU2: Students should understand that the appropriate organizational structure is contingent on a variety of internal and external factors and is subject to change over time.

EQ 2.1: How do internal and external factors operate and interact to shape an organization's structure?

LO 2.1: Students should be able to describe, diagram and discuss the relative merits of organic and mechanistic organizational structures.

LO 2.2: Students should be able to describe, diagram and discuss the relative merits of functional, geographic, matrix and hybrid organizational structures.

LO 2.3: Students should be able to describe and diagram a model for implementing continuous organizational change, including describing key managerial roles.

LO 2.4: Students should be able to discuss the benefits and challenges of a team based structure, and should be able to describe the process for converting from a hierarchical structure to a team based structure.