Journal of Modern Education Review, ISSN 2155-7993, USA
March 2013, Volume 3, No. 3, pp. 244–249

http://www.academicstar.us

Using Op-Eds, LTEs, and Other Media Tools to Teach Theory to Students

Cheryl McFadden
(Department of Higher, Adult and Counselor Education, East Carolina University, Greenville, NC 27858, USA)

Abstract: "Why do we have to learn theory?" "I don't see the relevancy of theory to my job." How often do professors hear these kinds of comments from their students? If the students don't voice these comments, I would venture to say they are thinking these comments. Graduate students demand content that is relevant to their jobs and professors have a responsibility to help them understand the theoretical concepts that explain organizational behavior. The purpose of this paper is to describe the benefits of using the opposite the editor page (Op-Ed), the letter to the editor (LTE), and other media tools to teach students theory in a relevant and meaning way. The researcher describes how she used these tools in a graduate level course that had some surprising outcomes for both the students and the instructor. She concludes the paper with a learning theory that supports the use of media as an instructional strategy.

Key words: Op-Eds, LTEs, blogging, media tools, organizational theory and culture

1. Genesis

As the second year doctoral students entered the classroom, I overheard one of them commenting to another student, "Just the name of this course alone is enough to put me to sleep." "I hope the professor can liven up the course or we are going to be bored." The other student nodded in agreement. The title of the course was "organizational theory and culture." At that moment, I realized that I had to significantly change the way I was planning to teach the course or I would have "bored" students. As the students set down and focused their attention on me, I had an insight that changed not only how I taught this particular course, but how I facilitate student learning in every course since then. I shared with the students that theory and culture were important to understanding organizational behavior and that this would help them to be more effective in their jobs. I admitted that I had overheard one of them anticipating that the course was going to be boring and had decided to make some changes that would hopefully, create a more relevant and meaningful experience for them. I needed their participation and willingness to learn the content in a different way. I would have to revise the syllabus with their involvement in terms of requirements and expectations, but the objectives for the course would remain the same. The students were eager and I was inspired by their willingness to "experiment" with their educational experience.

2. First Steps — Assignments

The students and I discussed the objectives of the course which were to:

- understand the relationship among cultures, function and structure of an effective educational organization;

Cheryl McFadden, Ph.D., Associate Professor, Department of Higher, Adult and Counselor Education, East Carolina University; research areas: teaching and learning in higher education; leadership styles and behaviors; online education; international education. E-mail: MCFADDENCH@ecu.edu.

- understand the relationship between leadership style and organizational culture;
- understand the procedures involved in diagnosis and shaping of organizational culture;
- identify the cultural assumptions, norms, and values in a particular educational organization;
- describe the impact of a particular organization's culture;
- describe the impact of an organization’s culture on its instructional program;
- describe leadership strategies that can shape organizational culture; and
- discuss the relationship between various schools of administrative theory and organizational culture.

The first task was to consider how these objectives were to be met in a way that was relevant to their jobs and challenging. The students identified two critical functions of their jobs — communication and technology. How they communicated in their work place environment was critical to their effectiveness and ultimately to their success in the organization. The majority of their communication tasks were performed using technology. It made perfect sense to link the two functions together and create a platform for meeting the objectives of the course while simultaneously improving their skills for the work place environment.

3. Second Step — Data Collection

The second task was not so easy because it required us to determine how they were going to collect data about their particular culture (assumptions, norms, and values) and the administrative theories that supported this culture. Once these data sets were collected, the students would have to determine the leadership styles and strategies that were effective in diagnosing and shaping this culture. Always in the forefront of our discussions was the need for the assignment to be relevant to their responsibilities in their workplace environment. After much discussion, we decided that three assignments would meet the course objectives and satisfy their requirement of relevancy. The students would have the option of summarizing the information learned from the assignments in an opposite the editorial page (Op-Ed), a letter to the editor (LTE) or any other media tool that would be appropriate for their particular audience. The only requirement was that technology had to be the platform used and it had to be published locally, regionally, statewide or nationally.

The first assignment required the students to reflect on the ways programs, policies, and practices within their organization were shaped by a pluralism of cultural values, a diversity of backgrounds and experiences, and conditions of social interdependence. The assignment also required them to identify existing or new strategies for constructive cross-cultural engagement within their organization.

The second assignment required the student to use organizational theory to analyze a specific organizational issue, problem, or challenge in their education setting. All of the students were employed by a public school system as either a principal, central office personnel or by a state agency. The students assured me that there were multiple issues, problems, and challenges that they experienced on a regular basis. The problem was not going to be identifying the problem, but rather determining the theory that explained the organizational behavior.

The third assignment would build on the knowledge learned from the previous assignments and would involve them either conducting a critical literature review, a case study, a culture analysis, or some other research project that incorporated organizational theory. Again they would have to determine the appropriate venue and platform for disseminating this information. This assignment would be difficult as the students would have to synthesize and break down the information for their audience or the impact of the message would be less significant.

4. Third Step — Determining Relevant Theory

The completion of the assignments was going to be a monumental task for the students but deciding how to present theory to them in a relevant and meaningful way was not going to be an easy task for me. Previous practice by other faculty and me in the department consisted of their reading scholarly publications and books on organizational theory and culture. Although my colleagues and I found this approach informative, it was definitely not the most creative way to present the material to the students. After much contemplation, I narrowed the list of theories and consolidated the literature on organizational culture to present to the students. I decided that the best way to present this information was to follow their footsteps and use media such as editorials, Op-Eds, LTEs, blogs, and YouTube videos.

4.1 YouTube, Op-ed, and Organizational Theory and Culture

The first YouTube video I showed with the students was from the film, The Pursuit of Happiness. This 2006 American biographical film is based on Chris Gardner's (played by Will Smith) struggle with homelessness. Ultimately Gardner becomes employed by a major stockbrokerage firm after months of a rigorous competitive internship where he challenged the organizational culture. Gardner did not "fit" the demographic profile of the organization which was wealthy, White, and formal, because he was poor, Black, and homeless. Although he did not appear to fit the organizational demographics, intellectually and competitively he was a perfect fit. Prior to securing the internship, Gardner had impressed a senior partner by solving a Rubik's Cube in a very short amount time and he used this same intellect to secure more clients for the firm than any of his peers. My purpose in showing this particular You Tube video was to demonstrate traditional cultural assumptions, values, and norms within an organization and how a person could break the mold and improve an organization's performance. One had to simply understand human behavior and not place cultural limits on it.

I used two Op-Eds from the New York Times, one written by Paul Krugman (2012, February 6) entitled "Things are Not Ok" and the other by David Books (2011, December 26) entitled "Midlife Crisis Economics", to demonstrate that it is possible to have employees who espoused very different and divergent beliefs and the net result being a rich, complex, and layered organization. Krugman, a liberal Democrat, believes that the best way to kick start the economy is to have more governmental spending and stimulus whereas Brooks, a Republican conservative, wants less governmental spending and lower taxes for businesses. Although these two individuals are philosophically polar opposites, they each offer viable solutions to real public policy dilemmas. Within an organization, it is critical to have different opinions and strategies in order to ensure the organization's success. Problem solving requires generating multiple solutions and determining which one is the better fit for the particular problem and not simply having consensus among employees.

In an attempt to understand cultural types, I used another Op-Ed by Brooks entitled "The Crowd Pleaser" (2012, February 6). In this Op-Ed, Brooks describes three cultural types: "tradition-directed", "inner-directed, and "outer-directed". One's personality type is influenced by the era in which they lived. Upon reading this Op-Ed, the students immediately began identifying individuals within their professional and personal lives and classifying them into these categories. The students were amazed to realize that personality types are generationally predisposed.

4.2 Who am I and Let's Blog about It

I felt it was important for the students to understand their own leadership style, conflict mode style, and moral judgment competence. After reviewing the instruments available in each of these areas, I administered the Leadership Orientation Instrument (Bolman & Deal, 1988), the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (Thomas & Kilmann, 2007) and the Moral Judgment Test (Lind, 1999) to the students. The first two instruments are self-scored and the latter required the students and me to compute C-scores which was another learning opportunity for all of us. During the discussion of each of these instruments, the students and I engaged in rich discussions about leadership styles, conflict management styles, and our moral judgment competence. Although I had not thought of using blogging for these discussions, the students on their own began blogging about their particular results on these instruments. In fact, several students asked if they could administer the Leadership Orientation Instrument and the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument to members of their staff. Through this process of self- awareness, the students came to realize that the leadership strategies they implemented in their workplace directly influenced the culture of the organization.

5. Final Step — Evaluating Student Outcomes

The students and I developed rubrics for evaluating the products of the course which correlated directly to the instructions for writing the finished pieces. Although each product (Op-Ed, LTE, blog or other media tool) had specific criteria for evaluation, there were several common criteria. For example, the product had to comply with publisher guidelines. An Op-Ed is generally 800–1000 words while a LTE is 150 words. In the introduction, the author had to get right to the premise of the argument. I shared with the students that words were like gold nuggets so they had to use them wisely and sparingly. I frequently quipped; less is more when writing these kinds of products. A final criterion was that the product had to be accepted for publication. It was important for the students to learn where to reach their audience and the appropriate forum for a particular piece. I equated this process to “planting” their piece. In other words, they had to be intentional about where to submit the piece for publication. The students were encouraged to use their relationships with people to help them get published. I equated this to “building coalitions” which was one of the leadership strategies discussed in the online forums. Since it was their first attempt at getting published, we decided that any forum would be acceptable. For example, the piece could be published in any format in a school or district newsletter, local newspaper, state publications, or professional publications or forums.

6. Conclusions

There are numerous theories that support the use of media as an effective instructional strategy. One only needs to think about the demographics of graduate students in order to provide the justification for using techniques such as those described in this article. Graduate students are first and foremost adult learners and they present faculty with a unique challenge and opportunity. They are a challenge for higher education faculty because they are unwilling to listen to the “sage on the stage” and be inactive learners (Pharr, Arnold, Prince, Davis, Brown, McFadden, & Maahs-Fladung, 2011). As Carlson (2005) asserts, the lecture is still the most preferred method for teaching in higher education as documented by student opinion surveys. Unlike many undergraduate students, graduate students are financially responsible for their education. For perhaps the first time in their lives, they want to see the value of their education and they demand that it be relevant and meaningful to them.

Because my students began the semester fretting about the course being irrelevant and “boring”, I was forced to change immediately and dramatically the way I taught graduate level courses. My only saving grace was that I was humbled enough to solicit the advice of my dispositions and make them more effective in the workplace environment. After the students and I planned the new course, the students began their adventure in observing organizational behavior and categorizing it into relevant theories. I on the other hand, began a literature review that not only gave me the justification to teach this way, but also transformed my understanding of what was really important to graduate students. After reading many articles and books on learning, I was drawn to the principles of andragogy. Andragogy was in direct contrast to what had been the focus of my teacher preparation courses so naturally, it peaked my interest.

Pedagogy focuses on the dissemination of subject matter while andragogy focuses on acquiring critical thinking skills related to the content (Pew, 2007). The student is in control of the knowledge and is active in determining the how performance is assessed. The major premise of andragogy is that the student is mature, intrinsically motivated and should be involved in determining outcome measures and the development of activities of learning (Pew). The andragogical approach is in direct contrast to current practices of teaching and learning in higher education. Faculty determine the learning objectives, the methodology or pedagogy, and student outcomes. Student satisfaction is not the primary focus in course development. Pew argues that if faculty will embrace andragogical approaches, students will become more active and intrinsically motivated learners which is ultimately the goal of higher education.

Along the principles of andragogy, is the concept of “co-creation,” the process where the end-users (in my case, the graduate students) are involved in the development stages of the end-product or service (their education) (Kaminski, 2009). The customer is “valued and adds value to the design process” and has both a “choice and voice” (Kaminski, 2009, p. 5). Although co-creation is not a novel concept in the corporate world, it is one in higher education.

At the end of the semester, the students and I developed and administered a course evaluation as the current one administered by the university did not account for student participation in course design. The students and I were elated that all of the students had managed to get their pieces published. Not surprisingly, the students rated the course high rating and even gave their instructor a high mark. As I read through the student comments, I was struck by the students’ appreciation for being involved in the course design process and for the relevancy of the material to their workplace environment. One student wrote, “This is the first course in my graduate program that totally immersed me in the learning process.” Another student commented that “If all our courses would allow for student participation in the planning process, then maybe, professors would understand what happens in the real world.” These comments made me realize how much I still had to learn about the teaching and learning process and that most importantly, I need my students to be involved in all aspects of the course design and delivery process.

References

Alper D. (Producer) and Maccino G. (Director) (2006). *The Pursuit of Happiness :Motion Picture*, U.S.A.: Columbia Pictures.

Brooks D. (2011, December 26). “Midlife crisis economics”, *The New York Times*, available online at: http://www.nytimes.com.

Brooks D. (2012, February 9). “The crowd pleaser”, *The New York Times*, available online at: http://www.nytimes.com

Carlson A. (2005). “Using problem based learning to teach thermodynamics: The good, the bad, and the ugly”, *the ASEE Annual Conference*, Portland, OR.

Kaminski J. (2009, October). “Editorial: Join the co-creation wave!”, *Online Journal of Nursing*, Vol. 13, No. 3, pp. 1–7, available online at: http://ojni.org/13_3/june.pdf.

Krugman P. (2012, February 6). “Things are not ok”, *The New York Times*, available online at: http://www.nytimes.com.

Pew S. (2007). “Andragogy and pedagogy as foundational theory for student motivation in higher education”, *InSight: A Collection* *of Faculty Scholarship*, Vol. 2, pp. 14–25.

Pharr M., Arnold K., Prince T. G., Davis C., Brown L., McFadden C. and Maahs-Fladung C. (2012). "Creating engaged learning", *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, Vol. 16, No. 2, pp. 80–85.