

Making it Real: Engaging Traditional Undergraduate Students in the Organizational Behavior Course

Cheryl L. Adkins, Longwood University, Farmville, VA 23909, adkinscl@longwood.edu

Abigail H. O'Connor, Longwood University, Farmville, VA 23909, oconnorah@longwood.edu

ABSTRACT

Organizational behavior (OB) is a multidisciplinary field that does not represent a functional area in organizations. Many of the concepts and theories taught in organizational behavior tend to be abstract and often require higher levels of reasoning. For these reasons, engaging traditional undergraduate students in the organizational behavior course has been an ongoing challenge. This paper describes specific assignments designed to help students see the real-world applications of organizational behavior theories and concepts. With the two-part “Manager Assignment,” the first assignment sets the stage for the student to recognize the real-world applications of OB concepts, followed by the application of OB concepts and theories to real-world problems in the second.

INTRODUCTION

Burke and Moore (2003) noted that despite many calls for graduates with strong people skills, traditional undergraduate students generally do not believe that organizational behavior is relevant. Because they do not see the need to study OB – they see it as something that is common sense – it is difficult to engage students in the OB classroom. Our own experience and other anecdotal findings agree with this.

In this paper, we describe specific assignments designed to help students see the real-world applications of organizational behavior theories and concepts. The assignment is the “Manager Assignment,” a two-part assignment developed to set the stage for the student recognizing the real-world applications of OB concepts with the first assignment, and to come full-circle by applying OB concepts and theories to real-world problems in the second.

The Manager Assignment

Part One: Identifying Managerial Issues

The first part of the manager assignment is assigned on the first day of class, with a due date approximately three weeks into the semester. Students are instructed to interview a practicing manager. For the purposes of the assignment, a manager is defined as anyone who supervises other people.

Two questions are required in the interview. They are: “Describe a typical day at work” and “What is your greatest challenge in managing other people?” The first question is intended to help the students learn about the wide range of duties that the job of manager entails. The second question is the basis for the second part of the manager assignment. Students are also required to develop two to three additional questions for the interview.

Students are instructed to schedule the interview with the manager in advance, and to prepare for the interview as they would for a job interview by doing background research on the employing company if information is publicly available. They are also instructed to keep their interview fairly brief – approximately 20 – 30 minutes.

After they complete their interview, students are required to write a 2-3 page summary of the interview. Their summary should include a brief description of the company, the manager’s name and job title, and a report on the interview. The report should include the answers to both the required questions and those they develop. In their conclusion, they are encouraged to include their reactions to the job and the work setting. A list of the questions they developed for the interview are attached to their summary report.

Written instructions for the first assignment are presented in Appendix A. The assignments are graded using a rubric developed specifically for the assignment, and returned to the students. The grading rubric is presented in Appendix B. The students are instructed to keep the graded assignment until the end of the semester when they must do the second part of the “Manager Assignment.”

Part Two: Applying OB Concepts and Theories

The second part of the manager assignment requires the students to reflect on the manager’s reported greatest challenge in managing other people, and apply a concept or theory learned during the semester to the challenge. Students are instructed to put themselves in the role of a consultant advising the manager and to make recommendations for addressing the manager’s greatest challenge by applying organizational behavior theories or concepts. Please note: they do not submit their reports to the manager they interviewed, this is submitted only as a class assignment.

In this second 2 – 3 page report, they are asked to briefly re-state information about the manager and his/her greatest challenge in managing others. In addition, they are asked to state the theory or concept they recommend applying to the manager's greatest challenge in managing people and to state specifically how they would apply the theory or concept.

One goal of the second part of the assignment is to see how well the students can choose an appropriate theory or concept to fit the manager's greatest challenge and clearly communicate their knowledge of the theory or concept in writing.

The written instructions for the second assignment are presented in Appendix C. The second assignment is graded using the rubric presented in Appendix D.

PRESENTATION

In our presentation, we will describe the assignment and discuss student and faculty reactions to the exercise. We will also discuss the next steps in our project, including developing and administering a questionnaire to measure effectiveness of the assignment and adapting the assignment for other courses.

APPENDIX A

Instructions for Manager Assignment - Part 1

The purpose of your first assignment is to help you become more aware of the issues faced by managers in the world of work, and to be able to better relate course materials to the “real world” of business. This assignment is in two parts. The first part consists of interviewing a practicing manager to gain some perspective on her/his job and what issues she/he faces on a regular basis. The second part will be completed later in the semester after we have covered most of the course material. In this part, you will write a brief paper applying theories of organizational behavior to the issues presented in the manager’s job.

In this part of the assignment, your task is to interview a practicing manager. The manager may work at any level in an organization, from supervisor to CEO. The only restriction is that the manager you interview must supervise other employees. As part of this process you must:

1. Conduct background research on the organization that the manager works for. Sources of background information include (but are not limited to) the company’s website, annual report (often found on the website), and news reports about the company. Prepare for this interview as if you were preparing for a job interview. Knowledge of the company will enable you to ask better questions.
2. Develop a list of questions to ask the manager. Two questions that you must include are:
 - a. Describe a typical day at work.
 - b. What are your biggest challenges in managing other people?

You should add a few other questions of your choice. You might include questions about the manager’s own career, and what career advice she/he would give to a college student.

3. Interview the manager. (Note: Be sure to schedule your interview in advance. Your interview should be fairly brief -- approx. 20-30 minutes).
4. Write a brief report of your interview with the manager (2-3 pages, typed, double-spaced). Your introduction should include a brief description of the company, and the manager’s name and job title. The body of the paper should report on the interview. The conclusion should include your reactions to the interview (for example, would you like a job like this one, were you surprised by what the manager encounters on her/his job). Attach the list of questions that you developed for the interview to the final report.

APPENDIX B

Grading Rubric for Manager Assignment - Part 1

| <u>Factors in Assignment</u> | <u>Maximum points</u> |
|--|------------------------------|
| <i><u>Company research reported in introduction</u></i> | 10 points |
| Is the description of the company complete? | |
| Is information from outside sources paraphrased or enclosed in quotation marks? | |
| Is the source of the information footnoted? | |
| <i><u>Body of report</u></i> | 60 points |
| Does the body of the report provide a complete and clear description of the information gained from the interview? | |
| Are the answers to both of the required questions clearly reported in the body of the report? | |
| <i><u>Reactions to interview</u></i> | 10 points |
| Did the student reflect on the information gained in the interview and write a reaction to the interview? | |
| Is the written reaction well thought-out? | |
| <i><u>Interview questions developed</u></i> | 10 points |
| Were 3-5 additional questions generated? | |
| Were the questions well thought-out? | |
| Is the list of questions attached to the final report? | |
| <i><u>Grammar, spelling, etc.</u></i> | 10 points |
| Is the paper free from errors in grammar, spelling, and punctuation? | |
| Is the paper neat and otherwise nicely presented? | |

APPENDIX C

Instructions for Manager Assignment - Part 2

The first part of the manager assignment required you to interview a practicing manager and to find out his or her greatest challenge in managing other people. The second part of the manager assignment requires you to make recommendations for addressing the manager's greatest challenge by applying organizational behavior theories or concepts. Put yourself in the role of a consultant advising the manager. How would you suggest that the manager address his or her greatest challenge? (Note: you will not be sending your report to the manager you interviewed, you will simply be submitting it as a class assignment.)

Your assignment is to write a 2-3 page report. In your report:

1. Briefly re-state who the manager is and what his/her position is.
2. Briefly re-state the manager's greatest challenge in managing others.
3. State what theory or concept you recommend applying to the manager's greatest challenge in managing people.
4. State specifically how you would apply the theory or concept.

As you write your report, be sure that you provide a thorough description of the theory or concept that you are recommending, and make very specific suggestions as to how to apply it. The goal is to show your knowledge of the theory or concept you choose.

APPENDIX D

Grading Rubric for Manager Assignment - Part 2

Introduction

10 points

Is the introduction well-written?

Is there a brief statement of where the manager works and what his/her job is?

Is the manager's greatest challenge in managing other people presented?

Understanding of Theory or Model Applied

50 points

Does the paper include a clear description of the theory, model or other course material that is being applied?

Does the description reflect an understanding of the theory, model, or other course material that is being applied?

Would a reader have a clear understanding of the theory, model, or other course material from reading the paper (if she was not already familiar with it)?

Application of Course Material to Manager's Challenge

20 points

Was the theory, model, or other course material applied to the manager's greatest challenge?

That is, was there a discussion of how the course material could be applied to the manager's greatest challenge in managing others?

Grammar, Spelling, Etc.

10 points

Is the paper typed and double-spaced with standard one-inch margins?

Is the paper free from errors in grammar and spelling?

Is the paper neatly presented with the pages stapled together?

Are reference sources (if any) properly cited?

Assignment Details

10 points

Is the Manager I assignment attached?

REFERENCES

- [1] Burke, L. A. and Moore, J. E. (2003). A perennial dilemma in OB Education: Engaging the traditional student. Academy of Management Learning and Education, 2: 37-52.