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BUSINESS LEADERSHIP EDUCATION: A VIRTUAL STORYTELLERS EXERCISE

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ABSTRACT

Online courses are becoming popular in business education and require creative strategies to maintain students' engagement and facilitate contextual and complex understanding of class concepts and theories. In this paper, we are proposing an exercise for online undergraduate Organizational Behavior courses to motivate students and enhance their understanding of class concepts through the use of storytelling. In this exercise, students work in teams to narrate stories that describe with rich detail different concepts and theories pertaining to team management in general and virtual team management in particular. The results suggest that students develop a higher level of critical thinking in virtual team management by storytelling and develop strong relations with other members of their virtual teams.

Key concepts: storytelling, online education, organizational behavior, virtual teams.

INTRODUCTION

The demand for online courses is experiencing an impressive growth in business education (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Questions have been raised regarding the effectiveness of online courses in comparison with the delivery of these same courses in the classroom. Online students report lower levels of overall satisfaction with online courses and with the mode of instruction used in online courses. They rate their professors lower than in classroom settings, and express lower levels of interest in the subject matter when delivered online (Katha, 2006).

In this paper, a semester-long exercise, called the Storytellers Exercise is introduced in an Organizational Behavior (OB) course. Its purpose is to improve complex and contextual understanding of OB concepts and theories, enhancing recollection of class materials, and motivating and engaging students through a creative and fun activity. The Storytellers Exercise was designed to generate highly interactive virtual team experiences for students in online OB courses and to foster learning through active and systematic reflection on OB concepts and their own experiences using storytelling.

This paper is structured in three parts. In the first part, we review recent literature to discuss the potential of storytelling as a teaching tool. Then, we describe the Storytellers Exercise and its key elements. Finally, we share some results of the exercise and their implications for student virtual team learning and engagement.

STORYTELLING

Storytelling is a powerful communication tool. In organizations, leaders use stories to convey their passion for their vision and inspire their followers (Guber, 2007). Stories help the transformational leader align their followers' understanding of the complexities and dangers in the status quo and convey the importance of their vision to advance that state of the organization for the better (Conger, 1999). In TED Talks, for example, the power of storytelling is demonstrated in the worldwide popularity of their presentations, which captivate a worldwide audience in the discussion of concepts that are often technical and complex through the narration of stories. In addition to being a communication tool, storytelling can also be used, by integrating stories, to make sense of events and construct experiences (Gephart, 1991; Morgan & Dennehy, 2004), helping individuals manage their tacit knowledge and make it explicit (Ambrosini & Bowman, 2001). Shamir and Eilam (2005), for instance, explain the value of stories in the development of the authentic leader, who uses the narration of a personal story in making sense of who they are. Authentic leaders evaluate the importance of their different values and how those drive their behaviors throughout their lives by exploring and telling their personal story.

In education, storytelling is frequently used to attract students' interest to the theories and concepts discussed in class, often as a hook for the introduction of new class material. Using stories facilitates students' recollection of class concepts and enhances students' understanding of the complexity of these materials (Down & King, 1999; Harbin & Humphrey, 2010). Through the details of the story, students build a more coherent understanding of the complexities of a phenomenon. A frequent example of the use of narratives for this purpose in the Organizational Behavior field is the use of the NASA Challenger disaster as a typical example of groupthink. This dramatic story helps students develop a richer understanding of the different symptoms of this negative team dynamic. Thus, stories are selected, prepared, and shared by the professor to build the interest and enhance the understanding of students.

While professors' narratives can certainly be very powerful educational tools, research in management education has also started to realize the potential benefits of using students' stories as an educational tool. As the storyteller takes both an active role (as a narrator) as well as an analytical role, storytelling fulfills two of the most important aspects of Kolb's (1984, p. 31) learning cycle: "In the process of learning one moves in varying degrees from actor to observer and from specific involvement to general analytic detachment." When students tell their own stories, they develop a stronger relational integration of theories and contextualize the concepts they learn (Barone, 1992; Morgan & Dennehy, 2004; Rosile, 2006). Students can use narratives to make sense of personal or professional experiences, to bring meaning to class theories and concepts, and also to make the analysis more fun and memorable (Morgan & Dennehy, 2004). In the Storytellers Exercise, students create fictional stories to describe team dynamics and propose ways to effectively manage these dynamics.

THE STORYTELLERS EXERCISE

The Storytellers Exercise is a narrating exercise in which students collaborate within their virtual teams in writing stories on one or multiple OB theories and concepts. This exercise requires that students demonstrate both critical thinking and creativity, improves their

understanding and recollection of the concepts studied, and motivates greater involvement and enjoyment from students. Stories can be designed to include any concepts within the field of OB. In our course, an initial story focused on groupthink, an important negative dynamic that affects decision-making quality in groups with high levels of cohesion. A second story focused on the challenges faced by virtual teams.

Story 1: A Story Of Groupthink

In the first exercise, students were asked to create a story descriptive of a Groupthink dynamic (see Appendix A). The dynamics involved in Groupthink were discussed by Janis (1974) as a faulty decision-making process that occurs when team members censor their own ideas to avoid disagreeing with the group. The result is a deterioration of the team's ability to reason and analyze alternatives effectively. Groupthink dynamics can be recognized through a list of eight symptoms, which are introduced to students prior to the delivery of the assignment: illusions of invulnerability, collective rationalization of threats, belief in the inherent morality of the group, stereotyped perceptions of individuals external to the group, direct pressure on those that disagree, self-censorship of own disagreements, emergence of self-appointed mind-guards that protect the team from members that threaten the team's cohesiveness, and a false sense of unanimity.

In the assignment, students are instructed to provide rich detail of the groupthink phenomenon in the story (fictional or real) of a team that undergoes this dynamic, and to identify each of groupthink's symptoms explicitly. Below we have included an excerpt of a groupthink story provided by a team in our OB course. In this excerpt, the team discusses potential causes for self-censorship and uses class material to suggest alternative team dynamics to address their problems of groupthink.

Joe decided to nip this one in the bud. He called a meeting and let everyone voice their opinions. During the meeting, Joe noticed that no one else was speaking up and giving their opinion unless it was to agree with his. He understood why everyone was acting like this. He figured that was because they were young, inexperienced, and in a new situation they were probably afraid to speak up. Immediately, he realized he had to fix this quickly. Joe thought about what he should do for a while and decided the best way to solve this problem was for him to state the task at hand and let everyone else in the group say what they think before he gave his thoughts on it. Once he took care of the self-censorship problem, the quality of the work sky rocketed and new great ideas that Joe would have never come up with showed up.

In their story, students used one of the suggestions to prevent the influence of a strong leader in members' self-censorship to empower subordinates. After the manager decided to open space for his employees to speak before sharing his opinions, followers were more willing to express their ideas when they did not know already the opinion of their leader.

Story 2: Incomplete Story Of A Virtual Team

The second story of the Storytellers Exercise is used as a wrap-up assignment at the end of the semester. Teams receive the incomplete story of a virtual team in a business setting that includes only the introduction and the conclusion. Teams are expected to write the body of the story (see Appendices B and C). Student teams in online courses can be considered virtual teams because they work from different locations and, due to their different schedules, often also with

temporal boundaries (Martins et al., 2004). Given their direct experience, students can draw comparisons between their experiences as a virtual team and those they narrate as a group.

In their stories, teams are instructed to select five concepts or theories presented in their OB course throughout the semester and to use those within their story to identify specific challenges faced by the virtual team. A fundamental challenge often brought up by students is the issue of communication barriers. These often emerge because of geographical dispersion, but are often also due to temporal barriers that slow the pace of communication (when members of the same group are located in different time zones or work at different times of the day), and to relational barriers (if they belong to different social networks or cultural contexts that have different sets of expectations and knowledge bases; Hertel, Konradt, & Orlikowski, 2004; Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). The mentioned barriers prevent communication among team members and this communication tends to be mainly task-oriented.

Managing a virtual team effectively requires overcoming these communication barriers and considering problems with technology, member coordination, and motivation (Hertel, Konradt, & Orlikowski, 2004; Yoo & Alavi, 2004). These are problems that are not unfamiliar for students. Problems with their Internet connection or their lack of familiarity with the virtual interface are common reasons why students fail to participate in a particular assignment. They also face the challenge to work with individuals that cannot meet face-to-face and oftentimes have conflicting schedules that do not allow team meetings in real time. Student communication often starts being task-oriented with little or no mention to other members' participations. This little level of interaction and mutual feedback is likely to result in low levels of trust and collaboration among team members. The following is an excerpt of a team's story that describes this challenge and provides an effective solution to improve communication among team members:

It turned out that members were feeling a little out of touch and couldn't really relate to each other because they did not have much quality interaction. The bimonthly teleconference meeting was just what they needed to keep in touch with each other but kept the team from building cohesiveness. At the end of their 3rd meeting, Susan suggested that they should add an extra 10 minutes either before or after each meeting, once a month so they could have a few minutes just to socialize. Since then, the progress reports, emails, and memos became more frequent and rich in detail. All the team needed was a little more quality interaction.

In the previous excerpt of their story, the students recognize the importance of team socialization and informal exchange to increase members' motivation. The effective management of virtual teams certainly involves strategies to improve mutual interaction, the establishment of common goals, and fostering the development of mutual trust, motivation, and shared understandings of the work and their context. By designing interdependent tasks, providing a context for members to get acquainted with each other, fostering members goal and role clarity, and empowering team members, virtual teams are likely to develop a stronger team identity (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004), a shared understanding of their work and their context (Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005), improve their motivation and cohesion and develop higher levels of trust in each other (Campion, Medsker, & Higgs, 1993; Hertel, Konradt, & Orlikowski, 2004; Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004).

Below we are including additional quotes that refer to OB topics, not specific to virtual teams, also brought up by teams in their stories, demonstrating that the exercise is not necessarily limited to being used in online formats of OB courses.

Cultural Barriers for Communication.

Martin, one of Bill's team members, is originally from England. When he heard about the upcoming teleconference, he became very eager to participate. He thought that everyone seemed very nice and capable during the virtual team meeting. The goal of the project was to develop ways to increase the market share of "Rainbow Rubbers." ... Martin presented his idea at the second teleconference. He found it strange that most of the team stared at him, mouths ajar. ... Bill looked at the other team members in a moment of silence, and it finally clicked. Everybody burst out laughing – Martin looking confused. It turned out Martin meant "rubber" as an eraser while the team interpreted it as contraception. People in England do not use the word "rubber" to mean a condom, but an eraser. After this confusion, the team apologized to Martin and began to help him develop new ideas for the project.

Expectancy Theory of Motivation.

Soon after the meeting, the group chatted through emails discussing how unfair they thought it was to have to complete another project to get their bonuses. As they figured it, they should have gotten a bonus a long time ago. They had worked so hard to earn the extra bonus after all. Bill and Susan discussed them trying to back out of the project, or to find a way to be excluded from it. They both were having a hard time with being part of a virtual team and finding time for their other work responsibilities. When Martin got wind of their idea to quit the group, he tells them, "I've been hoping all along that the first project was going to be the last one, but all I can think of is losing my job because they'll think I don't want to put forth the extra effort of being part of this group. Now that I have worked in two successful projects, my supervisor expects me to continue! At first I started believing that if I worked this much harder I will be paid more and have her respect, now I feel that won't happen no matter how much more I do. I guess the bonus will be that much bigger if we complete this one! Here we go again!"

Attribution Biases.

For the past couple of weeks the team had been doing a great job sending information to each other and keeping each other updated on what was going on. Even though Bill thought that Susan had been doing a good job of implementing strategies, ideas and editing, he now noticed that Susan had started slacking off, by not participating in emails. He and Martin had also recently caught many mistakes in Susan's final documents. He began to attribute her poor performance to her lack of interest in the project, and a lack of effort because she must have rushed through material. He also had noticed that Martin was participating in each conference and was implementing great ideas. Soon Bill begins to think Martin's great ideas must be due to his great concern for the project. So, Bill calls Susan and says, "I have been noticing you have not been participating enough through our daily email discussions, and I have been seeing a lot of errors in the editing. Could this be contributed to lack of interest and effort?" "As a leader in this group I am concerned about you." Susan replies, "I am being over-loaded with work, and Martin sends me his documents late which causes me to spend a lot of time trying to edit part after part, and rushing to turn them in before the deadlines. However, when Martin does turn them in to me on time I take the extra time going through the documents and make sure they're right." After Bill sent emails to both Martin and Susan, the editing and participation problems were fixed and the team was back on track.

Grading Stories

Group portion of the grade. Student teams are graded based on their adequate application of class concepts and theories, on the extent to which they demonstrate an in-depth understanding of these concepts through the detail in their stories, and on the effectiveness of their strategy to manage these challenges (a sample grading criteria for this exercise is provided in Appendix D). This grading fosters students alternating in their writing their role as actor-narrator with the role of an analyst, who evaluates ways in which the team can find effective solutions to their problems. Clear expectations of the grading that will be used facilitates that students prepare thoroughly before they start writing their story.

Individual portion of the grade. Preventing the emergence of social loafing is a frequent concern for most faculty members when designing group assignments. In the case of distance education, the concern that some students will avoid participating in their team's narrative is stronger because the faculty has less exposure to the contributions of each student. Two alternative strategies are proposed here to prevent the emergence of social loafing by evaluating the individual contributions of all members within the group. The individual part of the grade encourages students to become intellectually involved in their discussion and collaborate in creating knowledge within their team (Oioia, 1993). Faculty who use this exercise may find one or the other more effective depending on the design of their course.

In some courses in which students typically have asynchronous discussions, the faculty may have direct access to their teams' online discussions. In these cases, discussions can be used to grade individual contributions. While many faculty use frequency of postings as a means to evaluate individual contributions towards a discussion, we propose that not only participation be evaluated but also the quality of students' contributions. With this criterion, we attend to the demonstration of theory understanding, the introduction of new perspectives into the discussion, and the use of good follow ups that build on previous postings. For instance, in a discussion that involves Goal Setting Theory, a posting in which the student contradicts a colleague's previous statement explaining the theory from a different angle, would score in four of these sections: it would add to the number of participations of that student, it would be a good follow-up (FU), show understanding of the theory (UN), and also add new perspectives to the discussion (NP). That way, such a good contribution would receive a higher grade than a posting in which the student briefly expresses agreement with what another student posted earlier, so frequent in this type of discussions. A methodic approach can reduce the time devoted to grading significantly, using the identification number assigned to each student's posting by the online discussion tool (see Figure 2 for an example of a form for tracking students' contributions). Not only this method importantly helps reduce the time devoted to grading but it also becomes a very useful tool when students request detailed feedback for their individual grade.

In other courses, the professor has no access to the discussions or no time to evaluate individual postings. In these cases, the best approach to evaluate individual contributions to a discussion is through the use of peer evaluations. Peer evaluations also allow the instructor to explore aspects of the team dynamic, which makes these evaluations an additional tool for online education. Typically, students would be evaluated on the following criteria: (1) participating in planning the story with the team; (2) contributing to discussions frequently; (3) demonstrating

adequate preparation in their postings; (4) carrying on a fair workload in the narration of the stories; (5) posting on time; (6) being supportive of others in the team; (7) encouraging and welcoming others' ideas and approaches in the team; (8) demonstrating active listening and being receptive of others' feedback; (9) managing conflict effectively (avoiding defensiveness). The average of peer evaluations for each of the criteria listed above is a very valuable feedback for OB students on their effectiveness working in virtual teams.

RESULTS

In our online OB course, 20 undergraduate students worked in teams of four in the two stories described above. Students were directed to hold their virtual conversations to collectively write their stories through online forums in WebCT. Individual contributions to these conversations were rated based on the frequency and critical thinking of these contributions. Three aspects of critical thinking were considered in the analysis of students' postings: their appropriate use of class concepts, demonstration of informed understanding of the assigned theories and concepts, and the effective management of the dynamics discussed.

We compared the different aspects of students' participation and quality of their contributions to an initial team discussion that involved discussion of questions related to theory (not part of the Storytellers Exercise) with the outcomes of students' contributions to the second Storytellers Exercise. T-tests were used to evaluate the impact of the repeated use of this exercise on the volume and quality of students' work. While t-tests showed no increase in student participation, a significant improvement was found in overall students' critical thinking from the first to the second story (see Table 3; $t = 2.51$, $v = 19$, $p < 0.01$).

STUDENT QUALITY AND PARTICIPATION CHANGES THROUGH STORYTELLERS EXERCISE					
	Initial discussion		Last discussion		t-test (p-value)
	Average	St. Dev.	Average	St. Dev.	
Quality	4.15	3.54	6.25	2.49	2.51 ($p < .001$)
Participation	4.05	1.50	4.1	1.25	0.16 (p not sign)

Additionally, discussions in both stories demonstrate high levels of involvement and commitment from students. Comments such as the following are descriptive of the tone in these discussions:

"hi ladies! Alrighty are you ready for another exciting group discussion!?"

"Hello everyone, Lets all get started early so we can do a great job again. Lets start by picking which elements would fit our team best so we can put together a good story."

"Very cool, I love it! I will put in together in a document & post it for final comments."

Frequent expressions of excitement were positive feedback for other students and seemed to increase their motivation as well as their levels of creativity. Student engagement was also highly contagious for the instructor, contributing to her motivation and enjoyment.

CONCLUSION

Virtual discussion is typically a challenge for online courses. The Storytellers Exercise is an activity that enhances student motivation and quality of participation in online discussions. Students experience the challenges of virtual team management, learn to use management practices to increase their motivation and performance, and actively reflect on their experience through storytelling to aid team's problem solving when experiencing difficulties. Although online courses typically lack rich and personal interaction between students, this exercise generates a fun and interactive context for students to learn through deep analysis of team dynamics and effective management of challenges to these dynamics.

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APPENDIX A

Guidelines For Storytellers Exercise 1

A Story Of Groupthink

This week, the discussion will be devoted to storytelling. Each team needs to narrate a unique (fictional or real) Groupthink story. You are the storytellers, the case writers. This story should fit the characteristics of the Groupthink dynamic (make sure to differentiate it from other flawed decision-making dynamics). All stories must be original and creative (creativity would be valued in this assignment), and result from the work of all team members (all members should contribute to the story).

Guidelines

1. Make sure you introduce the characters of the story and describe the action in detail, to give the reader a clear understanding of the dynamics you are describing.
2. Clearly describe the symptoms of the Groupthink:

- Illusions of invulnerability
- Collective rationalization of threats
- Belief in the inherent morality of the group
- Stereotyped perceptions of individuals external to the group
- Direct pressure on those that disagree
- Self-censorship of own disagreements
- Emergence of self-appointed mind-guards that protect the team from members that threaten the team's cohesiveness
- False sense of unanimity

APPENDIX B

Guidelines For Storytellers Exercise 2

A Virtual Team Story

In the story at the end of these guidelines, a virtual team is introduced. The story tells us just a little about them, but from your experience this semester as a virtual team and our knowledge of the material of this class, we can certainly anticipate potential problems that they might have encountered and discuss effective ways in which these problems might have been managed.

Each team in the class is assigned the narration of this team's story by completing the missing middle part. In the story, students will need to:

1. Discuss five problems encountered by the virtual team that are explained by five different theories or concepts in the field of OB (5 points for each topic). The following is a list of the broad areas of the field of OB that you may want to explore further before you begin to narrate your story.

Personality traits
 Perception biases
 Motivation theories
 Barriers to communication
 Group formation
 Team synergy
 Virtual teams
 Power and influence tactics
 Emotional intelligence
 Leadership
 Conflict management

2. Provide a rich, detailed, and explicit discussion of each of the concepts selected for the story (10 points for each topic).
3. Propose effective ways to manage each of the challenges faced (5 points for each topic).

APPENDIX C

A Virtual Team's Incomplete Story

Bill opened the door and walked upstairs, thinking about the project Mr. White was assigning to him and the rest of the team. It certainly sounded challenging and he would have to learn how to learn how to work with a completely new technology for the project. Bill wondered about the rest of the team. He did not know any of them personally. In fact, he was just about to have his first meeting with them through a teleconference. Bill knocked the door and quickly fixed his tie before entering the conference room.

Mr. White was sitting on one side of the large table in the middle of the room. In front of the table, there was a large screen, where a young-looking woman was looking at them with a smile. "Hi, I'm Susan", she said. Bill and the other teammates introduced themselves as well. He felt very self-conscious, as this was his first teleconference. The other teammates looked very young as well; no more than a couple of years after college. Bill could not help thinking that the company had selected him for his years of experience, probably expecting him to take a leadership role in the team.

(Middle Part Of The Story: To Be Completed)

Susan and Bill had their first face-to-face meeting three years later, in Chicago. During lunch at the cafeteria, Susan remembered: "Boy that was a hard project!" Bill agreed. Technical

difficulties ended up being nothing compared to the interpersonal issues the team had to deal with. “Remember the day Martin copied all of us that email for his girlfriend?” Both laughed remembering the anecdote. They agreed that, after all, it had been a great learning experience for them. After a couple of more inside jokes, they closed the matter; they had other projects to discuss.

APPENDIX D

Grading Forms

Group Contributions to Team Discussion		
Theories/Concepts Used	Out of	Grade Feedback
Theory/Concept 1:		
Fits the description in the story	5	
Thorough understanding	10	
Effectively managed	5	
Theory/Concept 2:		
Fits the description in the story	5	
Thorough understanding	10	
Effectively managed	5	
Theory/Concept 3:		
Fits the description in the story	5	
Thorough understanding	10	
Effectively managed	5	
Theory/Concept 4:		
Fits the description in the story	5	
Thorough understanding	10	
Effectively managed	5	
Theory/Concept 5:		
Fits the description in the story	5	
Thorough understanding	10	
Effectively managed	5	
TOTAL GRADE	100	

Individual Contributions to Team Discussion						
Student name	<i>Quality</i>			<i>Participation</i>	<i>Errors</i>	<i>Total</i>
Group 1	FU	UN	NP			
Group 2	FU	UN	NP			
Group 3	FU	UN	NP			
Group 4	FU	UN	NP			