

From Actor to Architect-- OB in the Classroom

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Implementing team learning to structure organizational behavior classes changed the focus of my teaching role from actor (lecturer) to architect (learning activity designer). Although the role change has been stressful for my students and for me, I believe the outcomes are worthwhile.

After teaching Organizational Behavior (OB) for more than fifteen years, I reached a certain comfort level that others might call a rut. I still believe OB is the most fascinating subject I've ever met, and I keep learning new things about the field from my students, reading and research. However, students don't necessarily always share my enthusiasm for theories of the relationship between individual characteristics, group dynamics, organizational culture and work performance/organizational effectiveness (description provided in case you haven't had an OB course).

Although many of us might prefer to work alone and be judged solely on the basis of our own efforts and outputs, organizations are places where people work together to accomplish things they can't achieve alone. And today's organizations are increasingly rewarding those who have the group skills necessary for successful team work. Students don't develop these skills by listening to lectures, no matter how much I enjoy being the actor in the spotlight. It was time for me to change roles.

Not wanting to re-invent the wheel, I looked about for what others were already doing that I might adopt. My Kennesaw State University colleague, Deborah Roebuck, had met University of Oklahoma's Larry Michaelsen and enthusiastically tried his recommendations for team learning. I read Michaelsen's articles, examined Debby's syllabus and teaching materials, and boldly went where they had gone before.

What is team learning?

Team learning casts the instructor in the role of class architect: defining course content, identifying learning objectives, establishing performance standards, and designing class activities for mastery application of concepts. The role shifts from the expert disseminating information to the designer setting up a structure that enables students to learn. This shift redefines the student role as well (more about that later). Team learning involves the use of the following instructional activity sequence:

- individual study of assigned reading material
- individual RAT—Readiness Assessment Test (multiple choice, scored during the group test)
- group RAT (same questions as individual test, scored immediately)
- instructor feedback in response to remaining questions or instructor's perception of issues on which additional input is needed
- application-oriented group and individual activities, projects, role plays

Team learning also requires students to negotiate team contracts within work groups and then among all class groups to determine the weighing of individual and group scores in course grades (within parameters set by the course architect). Students are now empowered to use individual and group skills in areas that have immediate consequences—their grades.

Differences in outcomes

Among the many changes team learning creates for students are increases in student accountability, involvement, responsibility for their own learning, class attendance, retention, energy level, feedback immediacy, practice in critical thinking skills, and control over their own learning process. The redundancy of individual study time and class time is decreased, as are difficulties of arranging out-of-class meetings for group projects, a particularly important factor for commuter students. Procrastination, which may not be a problem with your students but has been observed among mine, is also decreased. Six RATs during the quarter rather than two midterms and a final put an automatic limit to the amount of procrastination they can survive. Compare these outcomes to the roles traditionally carried by students in predominately lecture classes. Whether these are advantages or not depends on what the student wants to get out of the class. From my point of view, the great benefit of team learning is that it clearly identifies and reinforces *individual* responsibility for learning.

However, as the instructor I'm not yet entirely comfortable with my role changes. I spend much more time on course design and organization, drafting record-keeping systems and maintaining them, and developing application exercises requiring the use of higher-order levels of learning. I am the class and team facilitator, floating among groups and interacting more with individual students and small groups but much less with the whole class. The first time I tried this approach, I went to see Debby, my team learning mentor, half-way through the quarter and confided that I didn't feel I was doing enough. She assured me that very feeling was a sign I was doing it right. Still, after fifteen years and all those beautiful lectures... Maybe I feel more comfortable as an actor than as an architect.

Michaelsen is right that making this kind of change in teaching methods required "a tremendous leap of faith" for both my students and me. I'm grateful for the students who took the leap with me and continue to suspend their doubts and try new ways. I wish the amount of work this approach requires from me was more apparent to my students; some complain that since I lecture very little I'm not "teaching." I wouldn't recommend that a new instructor try this before becoming very comfortable with course material and having a lot of confidence in his/her ability to think on her feet and adapt. Team learning may be especially appropriate and effective for OB because the method enacts so much of the course material. Whether it would translate wholly to other subjects, I'm not sure. What I have learned using team learning is this: students learn far more from what they do than from what I do. •