Introduction

Since courses in organizational development (OD) that comprise part of an MBA program of study are requirements or electives, students’ motivation for enrolling in an OD class is often triggered by extrinsic drivers. Further, most textbooks and articles on teaching OD are geared toward educating OD specialists and practitioners. Consequently, teaching individuals who do not plan to be OD practitioners is a particular challenge. The teaching challenge is amplified since most MBA students either aspire to or hold positions as managers and, as such, can and do become key players in OD interventions. Thus, OD instructors in MBA programs face two challenges. The first is enlivening course material and specialized content in a way that strikes a balance among the rigor of academe, the tenets of a particular discipline and the learning needs of a specific student population. This balancing act is not unlike the dilemma that OD practitioners face in the field when working with secondary or tertiary client populations. The motivation and buy-in of a primary client rarely telegraphs to other parties who, subsequently, have a low or no vested interest in the OD process outcome. The second challenge is actually an opportunity in disguise—educating potential end-users of OD processes and interventions. This article explores two approaches to teaching organizational development at two universities to MBA students who are current or future corporate players but do not intend to become OD specialists.

Teaching as Action Research Challenges. The first approach, developed by the first author, focuses on an MBA program course in Organizational Design and Development. The evening class met for twelve 3-hour sessions at an off-campus location. Challenges in teaching this course included the following: (a) it is a required course, (b) the text for the course had been pre-selected, (c) the text was aimed at OD practitioners, and (d) no useful student data were available to assist in planning the course. The instructor for the course had joined the faculty recently as a visiting professor after 20 years consulting in OD and training. Absent student data that could help focus course content, the instructor deliberately prepared a general syllabus with the intention of revising it based on data from the students. In addition, the instructor elected to focus the first class session on defining OD and the OD action research model (French & Bell, 1999) to achieve several ends: (a) create a common OD language, (b) introduce students to basic OD methodology and (c) gather student data to determine the focus of subsequent class sessions. Drawing on corporate training and OD consulting experience, the instructor introduced students to Kolb’s learning style theory (Kolb, 1984) to promote experiential learning, to assist adult learners in gaining insight into their individual learning styles and to provide a conceptual framework for writing assignments for the course.

The first class session began with formal introductions and a brief overview of the course by the instructor, who also informed the class that the syllabus was flexible and, in the spirit of organizational development and change, could and would be modified to better meet their learning needs. An icebreaker exercise promoted interaction and dialogue among the students. A brief written survey was then administered to the class to gather the following data: demographics, reasons for taking the course, learning expectations, career aspirations, exposure to OD and OD interventions on the job, their current definition of organizational development and finally,

Abstract

Courses in organizational development (OD) that comprise part of an MBA program are requirements or electives. Students’ motivation for enrolling in such classes is triggered by extrinsic drivers. Many textbooks and articles on teaching OD focus on training OD specialists and practitioners. OD instructors in MBA programs face two challenges. The first is enlivening course material and specialized content in a way that strikes a balance among the rigors of academe, the tenets of a particular discipline and students’ learning needs. This balancing act is similar to the dilemma that OD practitioners face in the field when working with secondary or tertiary clients. The second challenge is an opportunity in disguise—educating potential end-users of OD processes and interventions. This article explores two approaches to teaching organizational development at two universities to MBA students who are current or future corporate players but do not intend to become OD specialists.

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their intentions or desires to become OD specialists.

A preliminary data analysis conducted during a class break revealed the following: (a) none of the 16 students were planning on becoming OD specialists, (b) all were pursuing an MBA to advance their careers, (c) four were currently in management positions, (d) all were seeking to move up or into management, and (e) none had an accurate working definition of OD. The results were fed back to the class members who validated the comments. The instructor interpreted the data and identified implications for the class design and approach, proposing a redesign of the syllabus to better meet their expectations while addressing the university’s requirements for credit hours along with the College of Business and Economics’ curriculum requirements and competency criteria. The competency criteria focused on students’ acquisition of specialized business knowledge and demonstration of critical thinking, as well as effective writing and verbal communication skills. These competencies were linked to the students’ evaluation process that consisted of Personal Application Assignments, ½-hour group presentations and class participation.

The remainder of the first class session focused on developing a common OD language and understanding the role of power and politics in change efforts. Students explored and unpacked various definitions of OD. They went on to identify and clarify the goals of OD, the role of organizational culture and its impact on organizational change initiatives.

Two-pronged approach. The new approach to the course consisted of focusing on OD from a manager’s perspective; that is, what a working manager would need was to know about OD in order to be effective on the job and act as a change agent when appropriate (Schon, 1983) as well as how to effectively select and work with an OD consultant. This two-pronged approach provided appropriate coverage of course content in a fashion relevant to the students’ expressed learning needs and in keeping with curriculum requirements.

The syllabus was restructured to approach course content from the perspective of a new manager as well as the issues, challenges and opportunities related to planned change in the work place. This focus promoted the students’ professional development and helped them understand the antecedents of organizational change from the intrapersonal, interpersonal, role responsibility and organizational perspectives. For example, in the OD consulting world, organizational power and politics impact the “go” or “no-go” status of OD interventions (Greiner & Schein, 1988). So although organizational experience supports the fact that politics and power are primary factors influencing OD interventions, the text (French & Bell, 1999) used in the course addressed power and politics near the end of the book in Chapter 16. Re-ordering the sequence in which the text content would be covered more accurately reflected the real-time issues and factors that impact successful OD outcomes. This change not only offered students a more relevant view of OD, but also prompted students to reflect on their own power-bases, political behaviors and ways to develop professionally. For example, to better appreciate the impact of power and politics on organizational change, students were asked to analyze their power relationships and that of their bosses in order to both understand their current levels of influence within their organizations and to better appreciate the degree of power and influence that bosses have or may need to acquire in order to effectively manage organizational change.

To further enhance their development as reflective practitioners, Personal Application Assignments (PAAs), which are structured around Kolb’s learning styles (Kolb, 1988), guided the students’ reflective process. The PAAs were designed to ground the students’ application of OD concepts and theories in their own experience. Students identified a concrete experience and in essence developed their own “mini-case study.” They then reflected on their experience and applied relevant concepts from the course. Finally, they develop action steps to change the outcomes described in their concrete experience and promote their professional development. Through this process, students demonstrated their ability to apply appropriately newly acquired knowledge of OD concepts and theories to their work situations, thus developing not only their analytic skills but their writing skills as well. Power and politics were the focus of the students’ first PAA as a means of linking the students’ reflective process to better understand their own power bases and to invite inquiry into professional development opportunities in this area.

Subsequent sessions focused on continuing to acquaint students with OD values, terminology, processes and interventions. Since the data collected from the students at the beginning of the course revealed that none of the students had an accurate working definition of OD, the instructor urged the class to regularly review their working definitions of OD, its goals, organizational culture and action research. Revisiting these definitions simultaneously developed the students’ OD language and established a solid foundation upon which other OD theories and concepts could be meaningfully explored.
Several weeks into the class, after students had opportunities to become more acquainted with each other through class discussion, group exercises and informal interaction during breaks, they formed working groups. The working groups selected both a unit of analysis and an OD intervention to research in more depth and make a 1½-hour presentation to their classmates on their topic. In conjunction with the instructor, the students built an outline of key points that should be covered in the presentations. These included defining the topic and the unit of analysis; describing an historical context to understand the factors that influenced the development of the topic; identifying major contributors to the topic; relating how the topic applied to the workplace; and providing specific examples of how the topic is applied within organizations. These key points addressed curriculum-related issues by insuring coverage of salient OD theory and practices. In addition, they met the students’ learning needs by insuring that the topics were grounded in current organizational practices. The key points served as the basis for both the group presentation and the eight-page executive summary of the students’ research. Through the group presentation project, students and instructor together set the agenda for the course, determined the topics to be covered, and developed the criteria for grading. This collaborative approach to structuring the group project to meet curriculum requirements and students’ learning needs was a purposeful design to mirror OD values and practices in the classroom setting.

Finally, throughout the course the instructor used actual consulting experiences to highlight OD successes and failures. These cases were from the consulting experiences of the instructor and other OD professionals. The instructor’s consulting cases were modified to preserve client confidentiality and provided students with an insider’s view of the OD process. Raw data, drafts of thematic analyses and actual data feedback presentations were included, along with commentary from the instructor regarding behind-the-scenes dynamics that impacted decisions and influenced outcomes. These cases helped to reinforce OD concepts, raise questions about alternative approaches, possible outcomes and the reality of tough organizational decisions.

Approximately two months after the semester ended, students from this class completed a follow-up survey on their experience in the Organizational Design and Development course. Twelve out of sixteen students responded to a survey that was administered via e-mail. In response to a question regarding teaching methods used in the class, respondents agreed that the PAAs, class discussion/exercises, case studies and lectures proved the most beneficial, while reading assignments were viewed, as one respondent put it, “. . . necessary to introduce the topic—but the real learning for me came from discussions and lectures.” This comment underscored the instructor’s initial concerns about being unable to find and use a textbook more appropriate to non-OD practitioners. Another student commented, “I believe that the class exercises and class discussion were the most useful. It provided an opportunity to hear what other people were experiencing in their organizations. Also, having someone who was an actual OD practitioner as the professor provided a very valuable resource.” The sentiment in this response supports the instructor’s assumption that grounding OD subject matter in real organizational experiences creates relevant examples to which working MBA students can relate.

Student responses to the question “As a non-OD practitioner, what was the most important thing you took away from the class that you think you would use on the job to help create/facilitate positive change in the workplace?” mirrored the range of their unique learning needs and professional development goals. For example, one student’s response to this question was “I think feedback is important. I don’t think that managers or co-workers provide the feedback that is necessary.” Yet another responded by saying, “The most important thing for me was that it just changed the way I view the entire organization that I work for. It has helped me to become a more strategic thinker and has given me a better understanding of why some of the things are done the way they are [in my organization].” Still another commented, “I can facilitate change by expressing my opinions/observations in the proper forum. . . I can encourage others to work as a team, not as individual islands, with separate agendas.” In general, the responses reflected the respondents’ appreciation for and willingness to undertake some type of role-related action on the job in order to effect change.

Teaching Organizational Development to Consumers

The second approach described in this paper parallels the first in several respects, although it differs in some essential aspects. The course, Organizational Development, is a management elective in a part-time MBA program in which most of the students work full-time, many of them as managers. The instructor, the second author of this paper, had not previously taught the course. The instructor, a full-time academic, occasionally works as an OD consultant to non-profit organizations.

The search for an appropriate textbook was not fruitful. Available
texts (e.g., French and Bell, 1999; Harvey and Brown, 2000) seemed to be designed for training future OD practitioners rather than managers who might some day use their services. Here, too, the instructor prepared a general syllabus with the intention of revising it after polling students about their interests and learning needs. Thirteen students registered for the course, many of them managers in the automobile industry.

The first class meeting included a general overview of Organizational Development and an introductory exercise. Students formed pairs and interviewed one another, asking the following questions: Why did you register for the course? What do you know about organizational development? What do you wish to learn in this course? Students then introduced their partners to the rest of the class and later handed in their notes so that the faculty member could analyze the answers and report the results to the class the following week. Most of the students registered for the course because they needed an elective and the time fit their schedules. Only three indicated a particular interest in the field itself. Most knew little or nothing about Organizational Development. While this might seem a bleak motivational picture, their responses to the third question, “What do you wish to learn in this course?” indicated curiosity about anything that would make them better managers and leaders. Responses included, “How does organizational development affect or relate to my job?” “Why don’t people deal well with change?” “How can I be prepared to react to an organization that is continually changing?”

Educating Managers about OD. Based on these responses, this course, like the course described earlier, focused on exploring OD from the perspective of managers who need to understand how to bring about organizational change and, when appropriate, effectively choose and cooperate with OD consultants. Among the topics explored early in the semester were various OD concepts and practices, including Action Research, Team Building, Socio-technical Systems theory, and Dialogue. Because there was no textbook, one journal article was assigned and a practical, user-friendly approach was taken for each of these topics. Full-text articles were available in the databases to which the University subscribes and links to them were inserted in the course’s web site. For example, for Action Research, the instructor assigned an article about an Action Research project that she had conducted (Hazcn, 1994). Students interviewed her about the project, process, and publication. Students applied the knowledge about team building to their own teams in the class. With the topic of Socio-technical Systems, a guest speaker suggested a summary article (Pasmore, 1995) and presented highlights of the theory to illuminate his history with the founding of and more than ten years as an engineering manager at Saturn Corporation.

Encouraging Reflective Managers. Many of the students had been introduced to Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (Osland, Kolb & Rubin, 2001; Kolb, 1988) in the core management course and were familiar with the format of the Personal Application Assignment. Two such assignments, explained earlier in this paper, were required in the OD course, one at mid-term and one at the end of the semester. These assignments served to anchor the course content firmly in students’ experiences as managers. Students were encouraged to reflect on the meaning of an experience related to the practice of management and organizational change and use concepts from the course to understand the experience more fully. They planned action steps to integrate new learning and skills into their managerial practice.

Students worked in four self-selected teams. In the last month of the course, each team was assigned to conduct a class period on one OD-related topic of particular interest to them. They were required to conduct library research on the subject, assign one reading to the class, present a lecture summarizing their findings, lead a class discussion or experiential exercise, and answer class members’ questions, all in an interesting and creative manner. The topics included multicultural cross-functional teams, conflict resolution, corporate responsibility and the community, and survey feedback.

Short surveys were conducted not only during week one of the course but also at weeks 10 and 16. At week 10, the questions were “What have you learned in the class so far?” “What is working? What is not working?” and “What else would you like to see?” This was preceded, in week 9, by an in-class survey asking the same questions. At the 15-minute break, the instructor entered the responses in a Word document and categorized them. The second half of the class meeting consisted of a discussion of the responses and negotiation for changes in the course. Two modifications were made: students found the assigned articles too academic and not easily applied to their work. They wanted, instead, to examine more information about learning styles and personality typologies. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Model (Osland, et al., 2001) and Jung’s personality typology were explored. Further, they asked for and received wider latitude in the length of their team presentations, from the full 2 1/4-hour class period to a range from 1 1/2 to 2 1/4 hours.

For week 16, the last meeting of the class, students wrote a short paper.
summarizing their major learning during the term. One student wrote, "I especially liked how the professor asked our opinion about how the class was going and for suggestions on what we thought should be changed." Another commented, "I think it is important to assess a class and make necessary corrective action steps to get back on a track that the students are interested in. I have never been in a class before that the instructor asked for feedback from the students and, more importantly, using good judgment, changed things to better fit the students' needs."

Again, the students and instructor jointly resolved the direction of the course, chose the scope and range of the topics, and assessed the efficacy of their process at predetermined points. These practices, too, are consistent with the values and exemplify the practices of Organizational Development.

Discussion
We believe that congruence among the subject matter, the pedagogy, and the interactions among students and instructor directly affects the efficacy of a course. When these three elements are consistent with one another, students not only learn about the subject matter but also have the opportunity to learn how they can use it in their work lives. For example, the data collection during the first class meeting of both courses not only allowed the instructors to know more about the learning needs of the students but also enabled the students to have a first-hand experience of the start of the action learning process. In another instance, students applied their knowledge about team building to their team interactions in class.

Additionally, students were able to perceive some of the fruits of this data collection throughout the term, as the syllabus for each course was developed through such interactions with students and modified based on student comments at planned intervals through the semester. Student feedback demonstrates the positive impact of this approach. Kolb's (1984) model of Experiential Learning informed the course in a number of ways. In this model, Kolb described four modes of learning, two ways that we take in information and two ways that we transform information. We apprehend through "unique, individual, direct experience and comprehend through the mediating process of abstract conceptualization. We transform information through intention or reflective observation and extension or active experimentation." (p. 43)

Students learned through writing Personal Application Assignments to reflect on their personal experiences at work and apply the course concepts to formulate an action plan for change. They learned, as well, to apply course concepts in and to their classes, through following the action research model (French & Bell, 1999) and applying it to the course syllabus and class interactions. They also engaged in dialogue with the instructors about the content and structure of the courses. When, in dialogue, we name our experiences and are heard and responded to, we are reflecting on that experience and at the same time actively changing the context in which it occurs (Hazen, 1994).

Students took the opportunities presented in the courses to speak about their interests, experiences of learning and not learning, and how well their needs were being met. Instructors not only provided these opportunities but also responded to students' needs by modifying the courses' content and structure. Both students and instructors experienced the reality of changing the organization of the courses through the application of organizational development technology.

We believe that recognizing MBA students, as both potential change agents in their managerial roles and consumers of OD services should shape the methods we use to teach OD to non-OD specialists. By approaching OD with a practical, real-time approach that mirrors students' managerial and organizational experiences, educators can enhance the impact of OD in several ways.

First, it de-mystifies OD. It links OD concepts, underlying values and principles to managerial effectiveness and role responsibilities, making OD an integrated part of managerial life. When OD is linked to the role of a manager, students have a more direct connection between classroom learning and their professional development opportunities as reflective practitioners of management and consumers of organizational development services. Thus, planned change may be more likely to be embraced by individuals who have been exposed to this more relevant, "user-friendly" OD.

Second, it raises awareness about the range, scope, and implications of OD interventions. Managers who are more informed consumers of OD are more likely to appropriately self-diagnose their organizational issues and in doing so are more likely to consider appropriate interventions. When these more informed OD consumers work with consultants, it is likely that both the scouting and diagnostic feedback validation processes will be abbreviated (Nielsen, 1984).

Third, taking a more practical approach in teaching OD to future OD consumers and internal change agents also helps establish realistic expectations for OD interventions in terms of time frames and outcomes. This awareness can
promote the appropriate use of OD interventions and increase the likelihood of successfully completing OD interventions that might otherwise be altered on the fly or abandoned altogether because of poor planning and unrealistic deliverables.

Finally, as faculty modify their approach to teaching OD in the class with students as part of the curriculum design, the instructors serve as role models who can promote MBA students’ professional development as reflective practitioners. By altering their approach to the conventional classroom power structure, instructors who apply OD concepts and principles to their course design provide learning opportunities for students to exercise their influence in a safe environment. Instructors can demonstrate effective negotiation skills, model alternative uses of power and influence, and promote co-inquiry and active listening. They use a range of decision-making methods. They present a glimpse into the use of qualitative and quantitative data analysis and teach students how to validate feedback. (Nielsen, 1984).

In addition to the benefits that MBA students realize from this approach, faculty profit as well. For instructors with limited consulting experience or opportunities, this teaching mode offers an arena in which to apply OD concepts and methods, thus creating opportunities to sharpen skills and hone insights into the practical application of OD in the workplace.

Accessing student data and using those data without delay to shape a current course design breaks the familiar student-to-instructor feedback cycle that typically occurs only at the end of semester. Often data from these end-of-semester post-mortems become the fuel for modifying or redesigning the course for the next class of MBA students, whose learning needs may be quite different. With the approach suggested here, instructors create the opportunity to use student data in a prospective rather than retrospective way.

In conclusion, we believe that MBA students who know the rationale behind the action research model and who experience key OD interventions in action in the classroom are likely to be better consumers of OD services and better partners with OD consultants. When instructors set the stage and create the experience of OD in action, ground that experience in students’ organizational lives, and educate students about the theories and concepts of OD, students then have a unique opportunity to learn not just content and process but about themselves and their organizational roles. They can become more aware of the opportunities and challenges that they will face and the choices they can make that will affect their organizations and work. Thus, developing MBA students as OD reflective practitioners enhances both the individual and the field of organizational development. As one student in the Organizational Design and Development course put it, “The most important thing I took away from class is that without management involvement and their buy-in, change is impossible. I feel that by communicating better with my manager, both the positive and the negative, I can create the environment that can facilitate change at my workplace.”

References


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