Charting the Development of the Class-as-Organization

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Abstract 2017-179 Room: Wilson

Several scholars have called in recent years for the rethinking of the educational system, suggesting that today's schools fail to prepare young people for the challenges they face in the 21st century (Bellanca, 2011; Dede, 2010; Rotherham & Willingham, 2010). Some of the reasons that led to this call for change are rooted in the unwanted outcomes of traditional, lecture-based teaching methods that over-rely on fixed curriculums and result in feelings of student alienation (Mann, 2001). Meanwhile, the constructivist learning approach, focusing instead on the way students understand the information they learn, is seen as better suited to help students solve today's problems. Followers of this approach treat students not as “blank slates,” but as active participants with points of view that need to be recognized, challenged or engaged. Breaking from traditional approaches in which students simply repeat correct answers, this constructivist approach challenges students to create their own interpretations and solutions to complex problems (Brooks & Brooks, 1999).

One way in which educators apply this constructivist pedagogy is through experiential learning methodologies (Kolb & Kolb, 2012), that have been used in management education settings over the past decades (Kayes, 2002). Experiential learning theory posits that learning happens when the learner constructs resolutions to conflicting modes of adapting to the world. An important application of this theory is the class-as-organization (CAO), which blends the features of an academic course and an organization simultaneously. Students act as employees of an organization created to manage a project. They are organized in functional departments and have the freedom and responsibility for planning and organizing the activities of the class (Cohen, 1976; Sheehan, McDonald, & Spence, 2009; Weil, 1988).

Educators have supported CAO approaches primarily for their ability to help students achieve a series of positive learning outcomes. For example, Sheehan et al. (2009) found that CAO contributes to the development of emotional competency. McDonald, Spence, and Sheehan (2011) have also suggested that the CAO setting can help students achieve holistic horizontal and vertical personal development. Other researchers unveiled how CAO students experience firsthand the many different aspects of complex organizational processes such as leadership, inter-departmental tensions, group work, division of labor and control (Gardner & Larson, 1988). Recently, Armstrong (2011) praised the value of the CAO approach, calling it "one example of experienced-based learning in the classroom that engages students with the skills, attitudes, and knowledge of management" (p. 182).

Given the importance of CAO in management education, scholars have explored and suggested different versions of the class including variations in its structure, role assignments and instructor techniques (Clare, 1976; Josefowitz, 1978; Obert, 1982; Romme, 2003). Most notably, Romme (2003) and Romme and Putzel (2003) suggested a list of principles that would help design an effective CAO such as relying on peer mentoring, creating task interdependencies, having clear standards and facilitating creative tensions. Despite this wealth of existing knowledge on the CAO approach, however, scholars note that “the uptake of innovations such as these has been limited, particularly in full-time management education” (Armstrong, 2011, p. 182). We believe that some of the reasons behind this reluctance can be found in an incomplete understanding of the processes, complexities, and challenges involved in implementing a CAO.

We, therefore, endeavored to research the most significant patterns in communication, behavior, and relationships throughout the development of CAO with the ultimate goal of explicating the process more fully than has yet been accomplished. We approached this research using a case study methodology designed to extract rich details (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). As Creswell (2012) explains, “a case study is an exploration of a ‘bounded system’ or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of
information rich in context” (p. 61). In our case, the bounded system took the form of the Sport Event Management course offered in a large, Northeastern university during the 2016/17 academic year.

In alignment with the constructivist perspective on experiential learning, we attempt to use an interpretive approach (Putnam, 1983) to understand the formation and development of patterns in the elaboration of the CAO. We will utilize a multitude of data sources, including but not limited to messages exchanged by students and instructors on collaboration applications (Slack.com, Wrike.com, HubSpot CRM), personal journals, logbooks, interviews and meeting notes. The data collection is planned to take place throughout the year-long implementation of the CAO, with interviews scheduled with all participants at four distinct times. A researcher that is not connected to the CAO setting will conduct the interviews and aid in interpretation of the data so that the instructor’s involvement in the class does not unduly bias the emergent themes and patterns. The authors will present the final interpretation of the data.

By the end of this 20-minute presentation, participants should: (1) gain a deeper understanding of the characteristics and stages that define the development of a CAO; (2) find out about the challenges instructors face when implementing this approach; (3) achieve insights into how students perceive the CAO setting.