Engaging Virtual Learners: Moving Classroom as Organization Online

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The global shift toward online learning and remote work necessitated the transition of a highly experiential course to a virtual environment, challenging the assumption that Classroom-as-Organization (CAO), a teaching methodology designed to foster student engagement, skill development and deep learning, is limited to face-to-face (F2F) delivery. This article explores the process of adapting CAO's interactive and immersive elements for online platforms, addressing both the challenges and opportunities presented by this transition. By reviewing the CAO literature, which predominantly focuses on F2F applications, we reflect on the complexities of translating such a dynamic pedagogy to online learning and propose potential avenues for future research on the effectiveness of CAO in virtual settings.

Keywords: Classroom as Organization (CAO), online teaching, experiential learning, online experiential learning

INTRODUCTION

This article addresses the key issue of translating a highly experiential face-to-face (F2F) teaching approach, Classroom-as-organization (CAO), to an online format, and relates theory to our practical experience of making that transition. We begin with a brief description of CAO basics, and then discuss issues related to the transition from F2F to online.

The essence of CAO is the creation of a student-run organization where the educator determines: organizational structure, team responsibilities, reporting relationships, feedback systems and deliverables (See Appendix 1 for an overview of CAO design considerations and Appendix 2 for an overview of CAO models in the literature). These parameters facilitate interdependence, interaction, and feedback. The educator quickly hands over significant control and responsibility so that learners create, experience, and respond to emergent organizational dynamics while they teach, evaluate, manage, and provide feedback to one another. The classroom becomes a learning laboratory.

CAO is used in a wide variety of settings and institutions, and has involved a broad range of students, from high school to university programs. It typically is presented as a course in management and/or organizational behavior or an associated field, though CAO has also been used in strategy, operations, or

other course topics. While this article describes experiences with four-year university undergraduate students, it is anticipated that there will be connections to implementing online CAOs with other types of students in various circumstances and settings.

CAO assumes learning is most effective when students leverage their own experience and construct knowledge rather than function as passive recipients. The highly relational environment of a CAO necessitates consistent interaction among learners in their teams, and/or as a whole organization, which raises concerns around transitioning from F2F to online. Reflecting on our online CAO format, we found that four attributes were essential: synchronous sessions, onboarding structures, establishing norms and processes, and a bias toward early action.

A roadmap for translating the CAO method to an online environment is necessary for two reasons. First, there are no published models for an online CAO. This may be in part because the CAO teaching methodology emerged before the internet era (see Cohen, 1976; Clare, 1976) when organizational practice and learning took place predominantly in F2F settings. Today, most organizations employ some element of virtual operations, albeit in varying degrees of success (Purvanova, 2014). The growth of online learning (Seaman et al., 2018) and the fundamental shift in education resulting from Covid-19 (Govindarajan & Srivastava, 2020; Zimmerman, 2020) underpin the second reason this translation is necessary: a growing demand for high-quality online learning experiences and the resources for educators to create them. Any shift from F2F delivery to online requires careful attention to the course design and structure (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; Chiasson et al., 2015; Gloria & Uttal, 2020). Given the high level of teams and interdependence in a CAO classroom the literature on successful virtual teams is particularly relevant (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Costa et al., 2021; Kilcullen et al., 2021). Gibson and Cohen (2003), building on the broader literature base, suggest three enabling conditions that set virtual teams up for success:

- Shared Understanding - Effective virtual teams have developed a collective mindset about where they are headed, how they will get there, the resources they will employ to achieve their goals and how each team member can contribute.
- Integration - Effective virtual teams have norms and processes that facilitate communication and collaboration; these are structures that support and generate shared understanding.
- Mutual Trust - Effective virtual teams make it safe for people to take risks.

We discuss, in turn, how we operationalized these three enabling conditions by employing synchronous sessions, creating onboarding structures, paying attention to norms and processes, and designing a bias towards early action.

SYNCHRONOUS SESSIONS

We felt there was a need for synchronous sessions to enable the level of engagement and student interaction necessary for a successful online CAO. CAO courses depend on students' ability to collaborate, challenge each other's ideas, and hold one another accountable. Giving feedback, which is at the core of these interpersonal and group dynamics, requires a level of relationship and trust that is difficult to build asynchronously. Real time communication builds relationships, further personalizes asynchronous online spaces, and allows group development at the whole class and sub-group levels. A regular pattern of class meeting times occurred synchronously for the entirety of the semester using Zoom. Students also met synchronously outside of class and engaged in asynchronous discussions, all contributing to the remote CAO experience.

ONBOARDING STRUCTURES

We focused on specific onboarding practices for building trust and relationships. First, we established a baseline technology competence. A powerful element of CAO is that students confront ambiguous organizational situations requiring the application of course theories and concepts, which is naturally facilitated in the F2F classroom. We found the shift to an online context required special attention to ensure the mediating role of technology is generative rather than adding to the ambiguity built into CAO. Students

are much less familiar with high-engagement online experiences, particularly those that move beyond dyadic interactions. As such, we felt it was important to explicitly upskill students in how to effectively engage in synchronous online group sessions.

Students are tech-savvy but may not understand how to leverage technology to create generative organizational dynamics. For this reason, we trained students to participate in and create high-engagement activities and spent time teaching how technology can be used to support this intention. Students were asked to research best practices of virtual teams and meet in their groups to agree on which practices they recommend we adopt. In our first synchronous meeting, we shared best practices and decided on new norms to support high-performing virtual team learning as a group. For example, the students agreed on having their video cameras on at all times to encourage engagement and hold one another accountable. During this discussion students learned how to use breakout rooms, pass host privileges, share the screen, show a video, raise their hands, use emojis, etc. They experienced that an online environment can be highly engaging and learned the tools to support high engagement in synchronous sessions throughout the rest of the semester.

NORMS AND PROCESSES

After onboarding we established norms and processes for the teams and how their work contributed to the larger organization: setting and disseminating team-goals, tracking individual and team accomplishments, and evaluating the organization's status as a whole. In F2F classes, these processes are facilitated by students' interactions in the classroom, such as walking across the room to get a status report from another team. We found these informal connections are reduced significantly in an online CAO and additional communication structures within and between teams were required to build integration and shared understanding. In one instance, this involved assigning a team the responsibility to monitor and improve how members communicated with one another. We used technology to support this integration, as a platform for engaging and interactive synchronous meetings and enabling individuals and sub-teams to effectively accomplish and track activities. For example, the group managing and teaching communications skills decided that all students should learn and use Trello, a free project management application. In addition to being student controlled, Trello provided functionality beyond our learning management system that allowed streamlining of assignments, deadlines, shared documents, and verbal announcements. A revelation swept over the students when someone suggested standardizing goal setting and tracking by using Trello across the organization. They suddenly saw that Project Management software was more than something they needed to recall on a test; it added value to their team communication and organizational effectiveness.

At first, establishing these norms and processes felt uncomfortable because it involved being more prescriptive than in a F2F CAO, but the increased structure enabled trust to emerge. We found shared norms and processes coupled with regular feedback and communication structures increased student comfort and skill in the virtual world and resulted in students innovating in ways we could not have anticipated. For example, one class moved the various spreadsheets employed by each team into a google folder. They created a distributed system to transparently track and share work progress by linking multiple Google sheets to create a master grading document. The system wasn't perfect at first and required adjustments, but it did allow them, in real-time, to see which tasks had been accomplished and to know where they stood in the overall evaluation/grade distribution. It also triggered feedback at many levels. The efficacy of this communication structure relied on meaningful data being collected and entered regularly which informed the organization of efficiencies and opportunities for growth.

BIAS TOWARDS EARLY ACTION

While students must actively engage for CAO to be successful, the virtual environment can unwittingly perpetuate passivity, so it is important to encourage and reward early action to counter this dynamic. One author encouraged early action in the first weeks by coaching students to implement a quantitative peer evaluation system by the third week. Another author altered the grading structure by implementing weekly

assignments starting in the second week. Encouraging strict grade reductions for late work also privileges action. These adaptations alert students to the importance of action early on when they quickly see a negative effect on their grade for non-action. Regardless of what, when, or how well students act, the goal is to provoke action. These small wins build self-efficacy. The inevitable mistakes lay the foundation for learning, trust, shared understanding and integration to emerge. Both outcomes provide information for reflection, reframing and planning future action.

CONNECTING OUR PRACTICE TO HIGH-PERFORMING VIRTUAL TEAMS

The literature on high-performing virtual teams is helpful in making sense of our experience. In their seminal work Gibson and Cohen (2003) suggest three enabling conditions for virtual team success: shared understanding, integration, and mutual trust. Further, they identify synchronous team meetings as a critical factor in generating these enabling conditions. Gibson and Cohen (2003) suggest that in virtual teams, "formation activities are potentially more critical than in collocated teams because they provide common ground needed to bridge differences and develop basic operating structure" (p. 406). Consistent with these insights, much of our practice described above focused on developing social presence and productive norms.

More recently, Handke et al. (2020) suggest that team performance and satisfaction may result from perceived virtuality, a two-dimensional measure of: 1) how close team members feel to each other, and 2) the quality of their information exchange. The importance of both process and relationship are also evident in the themes Kilcullen et al. (2021) identified related to virtual team success, which include: 1) establishing norms to increase engagement, clarify expectations, and ensure participation, 2) check-ins to monitor performance and promote feedback, 3) training in virtual teaming, and 4) systems like charters, feedback processes, and team building exercises. In summary, the literature on virtual teams connects with our deliberate use of synchronous class sessions, careful attention to onboarding structures, and emphasis on generative norms. These preliminary connections between our online CAO and the literature on virtual teams serve as an invitation for further research.

FUTURE RESEARCH

While there is a substantial body of literature for virtual teams, online learning and experiential learning, a paucity of research exists in the nexus of these fields. In this section, we draw on these areas to identify future avenues of research into effective online CAO courses.

Costa et al. (2021) suggested areas for future research on virtual teams that apply to an online CAO. First, how does the perceived virtuality of CAO teams impact their efficacy? The collective experience of distance by virtual team members is much more than simple measures of time spent communicating online. Second, given the presence of technologically mediated relationships, Costa (2021) asks "[h]ow do the shared representations about technology and technology-mediated relationships influence power relations and informal networks of power?" (Costa, 2021, p. 621). Further research on power relationships and how technology affects power may inform the online CAO structure.

Third, the "attitudes and beliefs towards virtuality" (p. 621) can influence the efficacy of an online CAO. Students' expectations, perceptions of and choices concerning online learning is an interesting area for future exploration related to an online CAO (e.g., Smart & Cappel, 2006; Ali, et al., 2004). For example, why do students choose an online version of a CAO course? Is there a clash between students' perceptions of online learning in general and the requirements of an explicitly experiential online class? Further, are students more skilled with online engagement in a post-pandemic world? What are the benefits or costs to work-life balance (or the student analog to this concept) in relation to online classes? The questions posed by Gloria and Uttal (2020) are also relevant: how does the use of F2F time change when moving online? How are class activities restructured to convey information? How does instructor presence change? How are learning objectives and assessments recrafted and transformed? How does the learning management system support the learning experience and what is needed to augment it?

Kilcullen et al. (2001) identified three levels of analysis for virtual teams that provide a useful framework for future research of online CAO's: organization, team and individual. Researchers might identify topics relevant to each level of analysis such as organizational onboarding practices, strategies for developing team norms or training individual leaders. Alternatively, topics can be explored using all three levels. For example, researchers might explore: the application of technological tools to strengthen the CAO experience; specific tools that mirror what happens in real organizations; whether certain tools are more helpful than others (e.g., Slack or project management tools such as Trello); how can team norms ensure these tools are leveraged to maximize efficiency and effectiveness; and what tools can improve team and personal effectiveness (e.g., such as Scrum or the Getting Things Done framework). Detailing a list of technological tools, practices, and frameworks, and their potential use in such a classroom, as well as how they are currently being used in business, would support those creating their own online CAOs.

CONCLUSION

CAO is a powerful approach to experiential learning and has been the subject of academic research for approximately fifty years. Recent changes in higher education have prompted experiments with how CAO can be delivered online. We described the practices we implemented and how they align with the literature on virtual teams: synchronous meetings; onboard students to thrive in the online environment; creating norms, processes, and structures that connect people and create alignment; and encourage early action to facilitate learning. Future research spurred by this article will continue to explore the application and extension of what we know about virtual team efficacy, online learning, and experiential learning as they relate to the practice of online CAO's. Virtual learning continues to flourish and therefore, finding ways to support a highly experiential learning methodology such as CAO in a virtual environment has potential for significant benefit.

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APPENDIX 1 – AN OVERVIEW OF DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

Given the complexity of CAO designs it is typical for educators adopting this approach for the first time to draw on an existing model from the literature. The benefit of this strategy includes the knowledge that someone has had success with that particular CAO design. However, whether you are designing your own CAO, or implementing an existing design from the literature, there are important considerations for educators. The first group of considerations address whether CAO is a good fit:

- The educator's teaching philosophy and competencies
- Institutional context
- The basic parameters of class size, student level, required or elective course, and mode of delivery
- The combination of cognitive and affective learning objectives in the course

Once it is determined that CAO is a good fit, another set of considerations relate to specific design elements of the CAO:

- The organizational design
- Team descriptions
- Peer teaching
- Peer assessment
- Structures for assessing students
- Student end of semester evaluation

For a detailed discussion of each of these design elements please consult Chapter 3 in: Thomas, Chappell, & Bright (2020). *Classroom as Organization*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

APPENDIX 2 – OVERVIEW OF CAO MODELS IN THE LITERATURE

There are four primary contributions in the early CAO literature: Bradford & LeDuc (1975), Cotton (1975), Cohen (1976), and Clare (1976). All four pioneers were experimenting with different strategies for teaching an applied subject. Each model went beyond using experiential activities and made the classroom a living organization. Their articles describe how their CAO functioned, the elements that were successful and the difficulties they encountered. These are not empirical articles as the authors' primary intention was to share their designs to encourage more creative implementation of CAO. Of the four original CAO designs, three focused on small groups where students completed team level assignments that are related to the content of the class (Bradford & LeDuc, 1975; Cohen, 1976; Clare, 1976). In contrast, Cotton (1975) created a functioning hierarchical organization with a defined output.

Over the next few decades, CAO methodologies proliferated by building on the ideas put forth by these first four authors. Each article on CAO demonstrates how an author created an organization by integrating the broad topic of the course with specific organizational concepts in order to allow students to live within and learn from certain organizational realities. In a myriad of ways, they adopted the perspective of manager and consultant to view the classroom as an opportunity to create organizational dynamics that matched their learning objectives. While there are many nuances, a few categories emerge that are helpful in understanding the CAO literature: the interdependent organization versus leadered group design (Andre, 2011), the external versus internal focus of a CAO, various adaptations, and finally, broad common elements.

For a complete discussion of each of these themes in the CAO literature, please consult Chapter 2 in: Thomas, Chappell, & Bright (2020). *Classroom as Organization*. Edward Elgar Publishing.