

Title

# Drawing out critical conversations in the management classroom

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Abstract

Arts-based methods are of increasing interest to management educators and this activity can be used to support a community of inquiry in the virtual classroom. The activity commences by asking students to draw (using no words!) a managerial or workplace experience. Students then explain their drawing to a peer. The educator-led debrief focuses on disclosing the subjectivity of experience and then triggering a reflection of the cohort's narratives against management theory. This thirty-minute activity, designed to initiate discussion of challenging aspects of management practice, cultivates social presence in the management classroom and reveals the subjectivity of organizational life.

Keywords

Management education, arts-based learning, community of inquiry

## Introduction

This activity brings an authentic and personal perspective to the discussion of management topics in the virtual classroom. Management literature, particularly of the Western perspective, is traditionally objective and rational (Mirvis, 2014). However, learning can be enhanced when students are prompted to consider their subjective experiences and discuss authentically their experience of organizational life in relation to theoretical perspectives (Waddock and Lozano, 2013). This 30-minute activity tailored for use in the virtual classroom, invites students to draw their experience of a management or work situation and then to discuss their drawing with peers as a precursor to critical discussion on a curriculum topic. This arts-based activity supports the cultivation of social and cognitive presences which are central tenets of the Community of Inquiry framework with its focus on the benefits of collaborative learning. The paper begins by summarizing the theoretical foundations of the activity, then introduces the learning objectives and describes the activity, to conclude the proposed 2020 VMOBTS session is outlined.

## Theoretical Foundation / Teaching Implications

This activity is grounded in community of inquiry assumptions, particularly the constructivist nature of learning and the importance of social and cognitive presences in the online classroom (Garrison, 2007, Garrison et al., 2010). The importance of personal and purposeful relationships amongst students is central to social presence (Garrison, 2016). This arts-based activity encourages students to authentically collaborate with one another as individuals with diverse backgrounds. The establishment of social presence amongst students supports cognitive presence, particularly the ability to explore reflectively and critically as a community (Kilis and Yildirim, 2019, Garrison et al., 2010). In this activity, the sharing of

their drawings and accompanying narratives of a situation and the facilitation of a discussion regarding similarities and differences between students (and against the literature) supports cognitive presence.

The key task in this activity requires students to create and share a drawing. We choose this device given the benefits of arts-based methods in education (see, for example, Wang and Chia (2020), Rundshagen and Raueiser (2020), Dyer and Hurd (2020)). Management education can suffer from lack of creativity, cultivation of empathy and due attention to aesthetics (Katz-Buonincontro, 2014, van der Hoorn and Whitty, 2016). However, there are a growing number of examples of educational gain through arts-based methods. For example, Kempster et al. (2014) describe how the use of puppetry in the management classroom allows students to be creative, see different perspectives, provoke curiosity and promote critical and in-depth dialogue. With similarities to our study, Schyns et al. (2011), ask students to draw images of leadership to provoke discussion in the classroom. Students have also been asked to draw as a form of ‘rich’ feedback on their management education experience (Ward and Shortt, 2013). Within the research community, arts-based methods are appreciated for their ability to enrich reflection and dialogue, build self-other knowledge, and to access multiple ways of knowing which is particularly important in situations where text-based methods may limit expression and understanding (Coemans and Hannes, 2017, van der Hoorn, 2019, Leavy, 2017). The activity presented in this paper is based on research methodology previously used to explore project work (see, Whitty (2010), van der Hoorn and Whitty (2015))

## Learning Objectives

The learning objectives of the activity are:

1. Authentically reflect on a management or work experiences; and

2. Sensitively share similarities and differences in perceptions about the experience with peers; and
3. Equip students to use this process to encourage authenticity in managerial settings (optional)

Objectives #1 and #2 enable a critical discussion of management practice and theory and disclose of the subjectivity of organizational life.

### Exercise Overview

The activity is structured in five parts and is designed as an opening experience to prompt constructive, critical discussion. We allow up to thirty minutes for this opening activity and find it is well-suited for when students do not know one another or their backgrounds. The activity can be undertaken in a range of co-located classrooms – from lecture halls, to group stations. It is explained in this paper in its virtual form.

As project management academics, we often use this activity in units such as team leadership or change management. It is well-suited to these courses as such topics are inherently subjective and contextual and variations in experience are to be expected.

#### **1. Introducing the activity and posing the question**

Explain to students that we have varying perceptions regarding management and work and in management theorizing we traditionally dehumanize practice in preference for an objective view. Even if we all experience the same thing, our perception of the experience can vary greatly. As managers and leaders, being cognizant of subjectivity is important. It can help us reconcile differences in staff behavior and to recognize that rational theorizing in the literature often fails to capture the full experience of that situation.

Then set-up the logistics for the exercise; confirm that all students have access to paper and a pen and remind students that they will need to turn their web camera on as part of the

activity. In a physical classroom, it is useful to have spare pens and paper (A4 size) for those who do not have this required equipment.

For our project management students, we then ask them to select a project that they were involved with and can remember well. The students are invited to close their eyes and bring the project they have selected to mind. Students are then prompted to think back to the start of the project, how did they feel, what was it like being part of that project, then continue reflecting in this way on the experience as it unfolded. We then pose to the students the trigger question and set the task. *“What I want you to do now is to imagine you were having a chat with some friends, and someone asks you ‘what was the experience of being involved with that project like?’, but instead of replying in words, I want you to draw what being involved was like – no words at all on your drawing.’*

Alternative questions could include, ‘what was the experience like of receiving feedback from a manager?’, or ‘what was the experience like of being asked to undertake an activity that was not within your role statement?’ or ‘what was the experience like of being required to work from home?’. The critical part of the syntax is ‘what was the experience like of...’. The selection of the situation should align with your curriculum and the experience-base of your students.

## **2. Students drawing their experience**

With the question posed and instructions stated, students commence drawing their experience. Allow three to five minutes for this (and inform students of the time allowed). Watch for visual cues that students are finished earlier. As students start to draw provide reassurance that this activity is not an evaluation of their drawing skills. Some students will resist drawing should be told that drawing their experience is important for subsequent tasks in the activity. It is also useful to remind students that they must not use words in their

drawing. This is important to prevent reversion to dehumanized and rational business and management ‘scripts’ and helps encourage a personal and authentic disclosure.

While students are drawing, set-up the breakout rooms for the pair and share. If you have a group greater than sixteen students you will likely use the automatic allocation feature, otherwise you can choose to manually pair the students. Two students per breakout room. If you have an uneven number of students a group of three is fine. Give the students a one-minute warning to finish their drawings.

### **3. Students pair and share**

Explain to students that they will now be paired with a peer to share their drawing and provide a narrative for what they have drawn. Suggest to students that they hold their drawing up to their web cam to share it with their peer. They should each take about two-three minutes to share and provide a narrative for their drawing. If students are not familiar with virtual breakout rooms you will need to instruct them on how to respond to the prompt to join the breakout room, and also how to leave the room when finished sharing. Ask for any questions, and then assign the students to the breakout rooms.

Set your timer for six minutes and give students an ‘announce’ at about three minutes to ensure the second member of the pair shares their drawing and narrative. Give a final announcement at six minutes to bring students back to the main room. You may choose to enter a few breakout rooms to gauge the nature of the drawings and narrations being described by the students. This can be useful for facilitating step 4. In our experience, students drawings are metaphoric rather than literal.

#### **4. Sharing as a class**

With all students returning to the main session (remember you can force the return of students to the main room using the close breakout room function in Zoom), ask for volunteers to share their drawing and narrative. Ask each volunteer to share their drawing by providing a narrative. Ensure the focus is not on the quality of the drawing and help the student to draw out the personal/authentic aspects of the experience. Conclude each 'share' with a round of applause for the student. As three or four more students share, link their experiences through highlighting similarities and differences in a non-judgmental way. You can use Zoom's virtual 'thumbs up' emojis to ask students to indicate narratives that they relate to.

#### **5. De-brief**

To de-brief the activity, first, in relation to objective #1 ask the students to consider how their drawings and narratives may have had similarities/differences to the way the topic is addressed in the literature or common parlance. If students do not yet have a good understanding of the theories relating to a topic, ask them to think about their narratives as you begin exploring the topic with them in subsequent activities. In our project management classes students often reflect on how the project management bodies of knowledge posit project management as a very structured, orderly and predictable experience. By comparison these personal and authentic accounts disclosed through their drawings and narratives reveal that project work is often messy, unpredictable and emotionally charged. This activity often provokes the sharing of 'war stories' amongst the students.

Second, in relation to objective #2, ask students to reflect on what it was like to be asked to draw and share their experience. What enabled them to feel safe (or why did they feel unsafe) in sharing their experience? Prompt students to consider how it can become easy to

sustain a rational and dehumanized view of management situations, and that these may cause some people to feel uneasy or excluded because they have a different experience of a situation.

Third, if you are wanting to achieve objective #3, discuss with students how and why this arts-based device enables disclosure of the more personal and authentic facets of organizational life. Prompt students to consider how they might use the activity when addressing situations in management practice. For example, when trying to explore a perspective from a less rational or objective perspective. Recap on the key logistics necessary to undertake the activity.

## Session Description

Participants in this VMOBTS 30-minute session will experience the activity described above as it pertains to a situation likely to have been experienced by all attendees:

- *Sec. 1:* 3 minutes: Rationale for the educational activity and key logistics;
- *Sec. 2:* 12 minutes: Drawing of experience and sharing with partner;
- *Sec. 3:* 5 minutes: Sharing drawings with the broader class;
- *Sec. 4:* 5 minutes: De-brief on activity;
- *Sec. 5:* 5 minutes: Close and questions.

The session will be facilitated through a Zoom room with break-out room and screenshare functionality. Participants will require a web camera, pen and sheet of paper to participate in the session.



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