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The Shadow Side of Teaching Classroom as Organization

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Abstract

Classroom as organization (CAO) is an approach at the extreme end of an experiential learning intensity continuum (Sleeth & Brown, 1984). While proponents suggest they would never go back to a teacher-centered classroom, CAO has not become widely adopted since its initial description by Cohen (1976). We argue this is, in part, because of shadow elements that may discourage faculty in both initial adoption and persistence in the journey from novice to master. This article reports the authors reflexive process related to the shadow elements they encountered as early adopters of the CAO methodology. The paper begins with a brief background on CAO, followed by a discussion of shadow elements that manifest at the student and faculty levels. We include our recommendations for practice.

Keywords: Classroom as organization, shadow, experiential learning, teaching and learning

The Shadow Side of Teaching Classroom as Organization

Classroom as organization (CAO) is an approach at the extreme end of an experiential learning intensity continuum (Sleeth & Brown, 1984). Essentially, CAO creates a functioning organization; every student is an active participant with responsibilities that reach across the organization and the professor becomes the senior manager. As described by Cohen (1976), the objective of the CAO:

> …is not to simulate an organization, but rather to create genuine organizational issues for students, to put them in the position of an organizational member who must deal with such problems as: how does work get allocated; how does one work with others who bring different expertise to tasks; how does one influence and motivate subordinates, peers and superiors; how does one cope with ambiguity in solving difficult tasks which do not have any obviously correct single answer; how can disagreements among coworkers be resolved; and how will decisions be made. (p. 14)

 While proponents of CAO indicate they would never go back to a teacher-centered classroom, our recent experience in the CAO community suggests it has not become widely adopted since its initial description by Cohen (1976). We argue the answer is, in part, explained by shadow elements that may discourage both initial adoption and persistence in the journey from novice to master. Both authors are early adopters of CAO and this article reports our reflexive process related to shadow elements which we encountered. The paper begins with a brief background on CAO, followed by a discussion of shadow elements that manifest at the student and faculty levels, and our recommendations for practice.

Classroom as Organization

A simple metaphor provides helpful framing: learning to play basketball does not result from memorizing the rules and observing others; you need to play the game. Similarly, learning the nuances of management requires stepping into the reality of organizational life. CAO enables

THE SHADOW SIDE OF TEACHING CAO

a holistic, integrative and developmental experience by turning the classroom into an organization.

One model, XB (eXperiential Based) (Putzel, 2007), is available in textbook format and contains both an organizational framework and course content. The faculty member serves as the senior manager of an organization with four departments, each led by a student Department Head. Department Heads oversee the work of three teams that each occupy a unique role in the organization. Each of the twelve teams receives a role description detailing content teaching responsibilities (e.g., stages of team development, the planning function of managers, etc.), and administrative and task responsibilities (e.g., managing attendance, facilitating class meetings, schedule content presentations, set up a class-wide communication system, etc.). In essence the professor becomes a facilitator and manager, unleashing students to create organizational behavior dynamics and enact leadership in the classroom, thereby accessing a deeper level of learning of both content and soft skills.

CAO is best described as an heutagogy: "the study of self-determined learning … an attempt to challenge some ideas about teaching and learning that still prevail in teacher centered learning" (Hase & Kenyon, 2000). Different models of CAO vary in the degree to which students are responsible for content delivery, classroom facilitation, and assessment of work (e.g., Balke, 1981; Bright et al., 2016; Cohen 1976; Cotton 1976; Goltz, 1992; Lawrence, 1992; McDonald, Spence & Sheehan 2011; Oddou, 1987; Romme, 2003; Sheehan, McDonald & Spence, 2009). Learning emerges from students engaging in Kolb's (1984) learning cycle: doing their role, observing what happens, seeking understanding, and taking responsibility. In addition to content based learning outcomes, CAO increases competency in key managerial skills: getting work done through others; learning from mistakes; taking initiative; giving and receiving

feedback; and managing ambiguous situations. However, in our experience, CAO contains a shadow side.

The alluring promise of CAO, it's "persona", is transformative learning (Mezirow, 1994) and student engagement. However, the shadow side must be acknowledged and integrated to manifest the full potential. We explore the shadow side of CAO drawing reflectively on our lived experiences to go beyond "a purely intellectual critique to one grounded in the more informal, everyday ways of sense making and learning that are the essence of management practice - a critical questioning within practice" (Cunliffe, 2003, p. 36). The reflexive process allows us to stand in our own experience to discuss and learn about both the alluring and the shadow side of CAO, allowing the integration of both into our practice.

Students Unleash Their Whole Selves

CAO's transformative potential contains a shadow related to the student experience. Students must take risks to actively engage in in the socio-emotional domain of learning; they must bring their 'whole selves'. They are forced to abandon the schema of a traditional classroom environment with clear instructions and an emphasis on individual accomplishment. In a CAO learning environment each student has influence and their actions affect the whole organization. It is transformative, but it's not stress free. Although students are initially excited with the empowerment we propose, this quickly gives way to confusion and frustration as the chaordic nature (van Eijnatten, 2004) of CAO unfolds; individuals, and the organization as a whole, need to deal with poor performance, conflict, ineffective communication, etc. As described by Putzel (1992):

> Although they can read what to do, members usually take 3 weeks to get used to not being told what to do, that is, to feeling like managers, not students. They struggle to find out how the organization functions, and they learn that they – or no one – will make [the organization] work. (p. 207)

The shadow side of CAO's capacity to empower students is the reverberating effect, both positive and negative, of unleashing the full force of students' being to act and react. We draw on the experience of having some of the same students in both traditional and CAO classrooms. One high achieving student in a traditional classroom was engaged and produced excellent work. In the CAO classroom this influence blossomed as she extended her leadership, creativity and insight to influence the entire class. Students recognized her leadership and leveraged it to enhance their learning; the outcome was extremely positive. Conversely, another student who similarly delivered quality individual work in the traditional classroom, lacked interpersonal skills. The teacher-centric model facilitated containing this student's presence and enabled the class to generally function well. However, the interdependence of the CAO class required collaboration and self-monitoring skills that he did not yet possess; his frustration reverberated throughout the organization via unskillful verbal and written communications and impacted his peer-evaluated grade. The result was an increased level of interpersonal conflict which ultimately, some of his peers recognized as valuable in developing skill with conflict management. However, it also created considerable stress and work, both for other students and the professor.

We share the experience of Sheldon (a pseudonym) to illustrate the challenge of working with learning disabilities and mental health issues. Sheldon is a highly conscientious and intelligent student whose struggles with anxiety grant him relevant learning accommodations (e.g., extra time on tests and dispensation not to be called on directly in class). Sheldon declined the option to transfer to a section being taught in the traditional format; he thought CAO would be an interesting challenge. The class was indeed challenging for him; he debriefed with the professor frequently, he often left the room in tears, he experienced interpersonal conflict

resulting in a team transfer, and he reported high levels of stress. However, in his final written

reflection, Sheldon assessed the CAO experience as meaningful and transformative.

Furthermore, the majority of his peers named him, in their exit interviews, as the most effective

member of the organization. **Many students, like Sheldon, carry the potential for both high level**

positive engagement along with the potential for creating stress and conflict.

Sheldon's experience has led us to reflect on students' developmental readiness and the

ethical considerations of putting students into ambiguous and emotionally challenging situations

(Dean & Forray, 2016). We know from student feedback that CAO mirrors the work world,

giving students the opportunity to practice these dynamics instead of encountering them for the

first time in a real organizational setting. Many practitioners, particularly those employing the

XB version of CAO (Putzel, 2007), utilize the metaphor of of *throwing students in the deep end*.

We have identified an alternative: accompanying students through the shallow end while giving

them the tools to swim in the deep. In his seminal article, Cohen (1976) addresses the need to

align the CAO design with student readiness:

> Even though there are differences in how each of us "manage" our class, most of the
> faculty who have used the class-as-organization model have moved to a somewhat more
> controlling managerial style than initially preferred. We teach contingency thinking about
> leadership, in which the motivation of subordinates and the nature of the tasks influence
> choice of leadership style, and we have had to practice what we preach. (p. 17)

Reflecting on our experience, we have developed a number of strategies to walk through the

shallow water with students. We communicate the course goals early and reiterate them with

students, especially when they are frustrated, confused or feeling lost. When they question the

methodology we take them back to the course goals showing them how the class format itself

helps fulfill the goals. We introduced a structured reflection paper as the final assignment to

ensure students think about their personal growth in light of the course goals. Finally, we

conduct individual exit interviews with each student using that time to facilitate meaning making by assisting students to reflect on their experience and articulate their learning.

When students encounter the ambiguity of CAO the resulting frustration invites an encounter with their shadow (Jung, 1969/1931). The professor needs to recognize projection of this frustration, onto the professor, the course or classmates, and repression for what they are: fear, anxiety and discomfort nature of the class. This is an ongoing task which is complicated by thc professor's own feelings of vulnerability.

Faculty Vulnerability

The transformative possibilities of CAO are only possible if the faculty member is willing to rethink their role and develop skills not typically emphasized in PhD programs. The professor needs to embrace the stance of a designer, manager, and coach rather than that of a content expert (Bright, Turesky, Putzel, & Stang, 2012; Raab 1997). Academic socialization unwittingly directs us towards emulating a *sage on the stage* (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). We demonstrate teaching competence, from the position of content expert, by maintaining structure and control. Although helpful in decreasing anxiety (Raab, 1997), this approach also unintentionally prevents the deep learning that is possible when students and teachers discover truth together by "working at the edge between knowing and not-knowing" (French & Simpson, 1999, p. 216). Instead of delivering content, CAO faculty design the container for learning and manage organizational behavior (Bright et al., 2012); consequently, they must relinquish the comfort of control and embrace the return to being a novice in the classroom.

The vulnerability of being a novice again first appeared in designing the CAO container; it dawned on us that adopting CAO meant relinquishing our beloved lesson plans. A syllabus developed over five years and fine-tuned to deliver impressive course evaluations had to be

abandoned. Instead we wrestled with organizational design: were the job descriptions too simple or too complex? Were there enough feedback loops between the groups? Was there enough individual accountability? There was a nagging fear that our naivety prevented us from including a simple but critical element of organizational design. Clearly, adopting CAO required us to embrace a learning curve, with attendant ambiguity and chaos, both for ourselves and the students (Raab, 1997; Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005; Tyson & Taylor, 2000). The act of embracing the new growth that CAO requires and relinquishing control puts the professor at the same uncomfortable learning edge that students experience (French & Simpson, 1999). The recommendation here is to acknowledge the fear and find support. For us, this involved regular meetings with each other to debrief. Having a learning partner who is familiar with the journey you are undertaking is useful in processing the anxiety resulting from ambiguity and letting go of control. Failing that, the recommendation is to constantly remind yourself to trust the process and allow yourself to learn from your mistakes. Finding ways to embrace the complexity and risk of the CAO classroom is an act toward creativity and growth which encourages students to have the courage to follow suit.

Vulnerability also exists in the shift from content expert to manager and coach. The CAO classroom invites the professor to manage the overall system and coach others to organize, plan, lead, and control. The professor's expertise contributes to student learning, but not by delivering content because this disempowers them and detracts from the deeper learning that is possible: taking initiative, dealing with failure, building accountability to their peers, and influencing others (Cohen, 1976). We struggled with the balance between being too directive and too laissez-faire, constantly asking ourselves if the issue in front of us was something students could, and should, handle. The role of managing, rather than teaching, required us to acknowledge our own

learning edges related to leadership skills. Teaching CAO requires a willingness to relinquish control, allow students to make mistakes, and tolerate chaos. While the excitement and depth of student learning is real, the fear of chaos and being out of control can be frightening. Our recommendation is to challenge yourself to practice management in the classroom: some students need support, debriefing, and careful instructions to be successful while others thrive in the ambiguity and chaos, taking the opportunity to lead and influence their peers. Rather than designing lectures and classroom activities, focus on building student capacity to do this; the priority becomes acting as a skillful leader, manager and facilitator.

Another salient vulnerability for faculty considering CAO is the likely short-term hit on student evaluations and the impact on tenure. The ambiguity and challenge of CAO produces tension for students which will influence their global evaluation of the experience (e.g., Raab, 1997; Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005). Because CAO departs from the traditional classroom it is unlikely a standardized evaluation will adequately or fairly assess the student experience. How can students assess the CAO teacher, who does not deliver content presentations, on questions such as "The professor was confident and competent with the subject matter" or "The professor made effective use of examples"? We were disheartened by lower course evaluations for our first attempt at CAO and while these improved with subsequent iterations it is clear there is a tacit learning curve that is steep. Both authors created a supplemental evaluation based on the CAO design which helped elucidate the benefits of CAO as well as to evaluate the experience equitably.

The institutional context is an important factor in mitigating the professor's vulnerability in starting CAO. Without institutional support for the CAO model, the professor's vulnerability is magnified which can have career repercussions. Our experience includes a department Chair's

advice to hold off for a year before teaching CAO in the interest of protecting tenure potential. Administrators not familiar with CAO may resist it due to the unusual demands on the students. However, we also can also relate the experience of strong institutional support garnered by one of the authors by her chair, dean and provost before embarking on her first CAO classroom. This meant that administrators had our back; they were prepared for student complaints and supported the premise of our approach to students. The risk of running counter to the institutional values and expectations is great, especially for a new professor. For us, this has also included a conscious effort to build understanding and support in the broader system; colleagues throughout the business school will feel the impact on students and need to be prepared as well. Our experience suggests that obtaining institutional support prior to experimenting with CAO is non-negotiable.

Conclusion

The promise of CAO is alluring and the question emerges: by incorporating the perspective of the shadow can we create a classroom experience that takes advantage of the transformative aspects of CAO while mitigating the negative aspects of the shadow? Acknowledging the shadow for students and faculty inherent in the CAO classroom is foundational. The shadow represents unused potential; it enables growth, fuels creativity and facilitates becoming authentically whole (Jung, 1971/1921). By acknowledging and naming these shadows, we hope to support and encourage more faculty to confront them and harness the potential of CAO; to leverage the golden shadow. With more faculty practicing CAO who have acknowledged the shadow, research and models will be created which have less of a stark shadow for faculty and students.

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60