

# Activities for Engagement in an Industrial/Organizational Psychology Course

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Industrial/Organizational (I/O) psychology is an applied course; by incorporating activities into the course, students can more readily see how we apply psychological science to organizations. Students learn about a job in which they are interested and see practitioners apply the class concepts (e.g., performance appraisals). Furthermore, many students indicate that the applied activities we have conducted in class have helped them in jobs and graduate school by providing a practical application of their knowledge on which to build. Here I discuss a series of activities that I use in my I/O course, including activities focusing on (a) motivation, (b) analyzing the job of a psychology professor (including criterion-development, performance appraisal, predictors), and (c) constructing a final exam. Following these examples, we provide an annotated bibliography for I/O instructors hoping to encourage active participation by their students.

## Motivation

We cover theories of motivation at the beginning of our I/O course. I introduce this topic first because I believe it is important for students to learn about motivation at the beginning of the semester so that they can apply those principles in order to be more productive during the semester. In the motivation unit, students apply behavioral and Valence-Instrumentality-Expectancy (VIE) theories of motivation to a problem behavior that they have. For example, many students note that they procrastinate studying or working on class projects, want to decrease smoking behaviors, or want to start preparing for tests such as the GRE. It is vital that the student pick specific and observable behaviors for this activity to be successful.

Once each student selects a problem behavior, the students use these motivation theories in order to explain their own behaviors and to develop intervention plans to improve their behavior over the course of the semester. Although it is an ongoing project throughout the semester, students typically embrace it, seeing the practical applications of

changing a problem behavior. The instructor might ask the students to explain their problem behaviors and the intervention procedures that the students have adopted to make sure that the student understands the motivational theory and has a specific, observable problem behavior.

Once an intervention plan is in place, the students track their behaviors before the intervention and then track their behaviors while the intervention is in place. Students can present data at the end of the semester on how their behaviors have changed (or not changed) and how the theories we discussed in class can explain those changes. The instructor should not grade the projects based on whether or not the intervention worked, but instead on the correct understanding and application of the motivation theories.

## Applying Concepts to the Job of a Psychology Professor

For a portion of class activities, we attempt to create some continuity by having students use “psychology professor” as a job they investigate throughout the semester. Using this job throughout the semester with diverse activities serves several purposes. First, the students are familiar with the job of “professor.” Second, they have access to people who perform this job. Third, we believe it gives students perspectives about psychology professors that they did not have before because students only see the teaching portion of a faculty member’s job. We divided applied activities into units throughout the semester. Below, we provide a brief description of some of these activities.

First, students learn about conducting a job analysis, which is paramount to any other I/O intervention. One cannot select an employee before he or she knows details about the job for which he or she is hiring. Our students collect information about the job of a psychology professor by collecting visiting O\*Net (<http://online.onetcenter.org/>, a Website and search engine where visitors can learn the detailed descriptions of different jobs), obtaining

curriculum vitae from two faculty members, and interviewing a faculty member. Students use the concepts from class to construct a job analysis based on this information, and the job analysis then serves as the basis for other activities.

After completing a job analysis, students select several criteria they believe are important to performing the tasks of a psychology professor. These criteria could include teaching skills, written communication skills, and knowledge of psychology, among many others. Using these criteria, the job analysis, and information from class, students then construct an evaluation system for faculty members. Students construct two evaluation forms — one is a student evaluation form that focuses only on the teaching component and a second is an evaluation system for the entire job of a faculty member. Students learn to apply concepts about defining and measuring criteria to this assignment, and it illustrates how difficult it is to construct a valid evaluation system.

After discussing prediction and selection in class, students then use the information that they composed to devise a system to select a fictitious new professor for our department. We typically share a generic faculty-hiring process so that students can understand how we currently make these decisions. Students design their selection systems and defend their choices based on class content. In this activity, students also describe how they would use different statistical decision-making processes in order to make their selection decision from a pool of candidates.

Therefore, throughout the semester, students are applying concepts from the textbook to a job with which they are familiar and for which a selection decision would affect their own major. Students report that these activities are much more difficult than they originally thought, but that these activities are also valuable.

### **Cumulative Final**

For the I/O course, we assign a cumulative final with a spin: students construct a final and then provide the answers for that final. We introduce students to Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001) and the ways we can use the taxonomy to construct questions for an exam. The assignment is for students to develop questions covering each reading, while also covering the different levels of the taxonomy across the test. We typically have given the assignment just focusing on knowledge, comprehension, and analysis questions. This is a very complex assignment and by limiting the "level" of questions to three, it is much more

manageable for the instructor to grade. We give students parameters for the number of multiple-choice, short-answer, fill-in-the-blank, and essay questions they can use. Students then provide a key to the final. We have assigned this final as an individual assignment; however, it could be a group assignment as well.

This is a very difficult assignment for students. They have to understand how to sample material for an exam, how to write test questions, and how to address different levels of knowledge. These skills are essential to the training in I/O psychology.

### **Conclusion**

In our experience, engaging activities help increase student learning outcomes, especially in applied courses. Therefore, we have taken the approach of incorporating an activity theme throughout our I/O course. However, instructors can easily use components of these activities to illustrate different concepts in the class. Below are other applications suitable for engaging students in an I/O course that have some support in the literature. We have included two types of applications – activities for general course structure and content specific course activities.

### **Reference**

Anderson, L. W., & Krathwohl, D. R. (Eds.) (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York: Longman.

### **Activities for General Course Structure**

#### ***Supplemental Materials***

The Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology [SIOP], Division 14 of the American Psychological Association, has produced modules for teaching I/O psychology in an introductory course as well as activities for different concepts covered in an I/O course. The information includes PowerPoint slides and supplemental materials, including activities, for topics such as workplace diversity, judgment and decision making, and training in organizations. The Education and Training Committee of SIOP constructed the materials.

Education and Training Committee of the Society for Industrial and Organizational Psychology (2002). *An instructor's guide for introducing industrial-organizational psychology*. Retrieved from <http://www.siop.org/Instruct/inGuide.aspx>.

### **Evaluation of Materials**

This article describes using the SIOP learning modules to help communicate I/O topics to students. Four instructors presented four modules in lecture format during 10 class sessions in an Introductory Psychology course. Instructors selected which module they would present in class. Students completed questionnaires measuring student knowledge, reactions, and intentions before the class period where the instructor presented the module and the same questionnaires two days after the lecture at the beginning of the next class. Results showed that student knowledge increased and more students were interested in I/O courses.

- Maynard, D. C., Bachiochi, P. D., & Luna, A. C. An evaluation of industrial/organizational psychology teaching modules for use in introductory psychology. *Teaching of Psychology, 29*, 39-43.

### **Team-based Learning**

This article describes a team-based learning approach that helps students develop communication and social skills in a classroom environment. The technique used in this article consists of a preparation phase, an application phase, and an assessment phase. Once students completed a readiness assessment for each topic in the textbook, the application phase began where the student completed problems for which they had to apply what they had learned. During the assessment phase, students worked on the larger group project where they turned in a company portfolio describing how they dealt with each topic in the textbook. Students reported the technique to be useful for learning the material.

- Haberyan, A. (2007) Team-based learning in an industrial/organizational psychology course. *North American Journal of Psychology, 9*, 143-152.

### **Business Simulation**

This article describes using business simulation software to make real life business decisions in an I/O course. The simulation required students to serve on boards of a soda company. Student teams decided where they wanted to spend advertising money. At the end of the simulation, the computer calculated net worth and the team with the highest net worth won the competition. Students completed an assessment of management knowledge before and after the assessment. Students answered more questions correctly at the conclusion of the simulation. Students reported further understanding of management and executive interactions in the business setting.

- Bizer, G. Y. (2009). A business-game demonstration for the undergraduate industrial/organizational course. *Teaching of Psychology, 32*, 187-189.

### **Virtual Course**

The article describes three different iterations of a virtual I/O psychology course. The online, discussion-based course uses lectures, discussion, and other activities. In the article, the author describes how the course has developed, the evaluation of the course, the benefits of such a course, and the challenges. The author focuses on the benefit of experiential learning in this virtual course and highlights that students learn about the “organization of the future” (p. 205) while at the same time learning I/O psychology concepts.

- Hantula, D. A. (1998). The virtual industrial/organizational psychology class: Learning and teaching in cyberspace in three iterations. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers, 30*, 205-216.

### **Colloquium**

The authors describe a colloquium as an end-of-course project for students who have participated in an I/O internship. The students wrote integrative papers reflecting on their internship experiences, and faculty members approved each paper. Students then participated in a colloquium where they gave a 45 minute presentation and fielded questions for another 15 minutes. In the presentations, the students described how they obtained their internships, the work they performed, how their education prepared them, how the internship experience supplemented the coursework, and a self-critique. Students completed a survey at the end of the course, and rated the experience. The students indicated that the colloquium helped them integrate their coursework and applied experiences.

- Hays-Thomas, R., & Kass, S. J. (2003). Integrating classroom knowledge and application: The industrial/organizational psychology internship presentation. *Teaching of Psychology, 30*, 69-70.

### **Student Portfolio**

This article describes a portfolio activity devised to increase student’s awareness of their career goals. The portfolio exercise included 6 parts. Students assessed their own personalities, skills, and work experiences; selected jobs they found interesting; compiled resumes and cover letters as if they were applying to their jobs of interest; and interviewed job incumbents in their professions of interest. After the project was complete, students revised their goals and

interests in a reflective statement. Over half the class found the entire project useful, and most students reported that the occupational interview was the most helpful.

- Larkin, J. E., Harvey, A. & Bechtel, K. M. (2002) Facilitating students career development in psychology courses: A portfolio project, *Teaching of Psychology*, 29, 207-210.

### ***Incorporating Applied Projects***

This article describes how to incorporate applied projects for I/O psychology students into coursework. The authors include discussions of suitable projects for master's-level students, the benefits of service learning in general and consulting projects in particular, how instructors can help meet the requests of the client while teaching I/O content, and the issues of serving as both a supervisor of a placement and as an instructor.

- Schneider, S., Piotrowski, C., & Kass, S.J. (2007). Training masters students through consulting experiences: Benefits and pitfalls. *Organization development journal*, 25, 47-55.

### ***Fantasy Organizations***

This article describes a classroom technique that can incorporate multiple I/O topics. The instructor allowed students to form small groups and chose a fantasy organization that they would use throughout the course of the semester. Students had a great deal of flexibility in choosing the type of organization they wanted to use. After each lecture, the groups reviewed a list of questions that involved how they could apply the day's topic in their fantasy organization. Students had positive reports about the exercise and expressed that the exercise facilitated their understanding and interest in the concepts that were covered.

- Wann, D. L. (1994). Developing fantasy organizations in industrial/organizational psychology courses. *Teaching of Psychology*, 21, 177-179.

## **Content-Specific Course Activities**

### ***Personality***

This article describes a group exercise for instructors to use in courses, such as I/O psychology, that discuss the importance of personality tests. The author first discussed the problems with giving personality tests to students, including a) the myth that personality tests are common sense, b) the cognitive biases that often lead people to accept vague or incorrect personality information as accurate, and c) the problems with common personality testing instruments. The activity

addressed these issues, provided students with information about their own personalities, allowed students to compare their results to those of their peers, and provided a guide for discussing the relationships between personality and organizational issues. The author also provided recommendations for how to debrief the students following the activity.

- Anderson, M. H. (2008). Discovering your personality: A group exercise in personal sensemaking. *Journal of Management Education*, 5, 651-676.

### ***Interviews***

The authors describe a technique to help students learn the differences among interview methods in employee selection. Students volunteered to act the parts of the interviewer and job candidate. The instructor provided students with examples of questions typical of either structured or unstructured interviews. The interviewer asked the job candidate questions from either the set of structured or unstructured questions. The rest of the class observed the interview and rated the quality of the questions. The demonstration showed students the variability in unstructured interview questions compared to structured questions. Students reported favorable changes in reaction and learning (as measured using a pretest-posttest evaluation).

- Bartels, L. K., Nordstrom, C. R. & Koski, J. A. (2006). A structured interview demonstration. *Teaching of Psychology*, 33, 55-57.

### ***Business Ethics***

This article describes an activity used to teach about ethical behavior in the business environment. For the activity, the author used a series of employee behaviors that people might consider unethical, including taking office supplies home, using an office copy machine to make personal copies, and charging inappropriate items on the company credit card. During the activity, students read instructions that indicated they should take the perspective of either a company president or an employee and rate the acceptability of the behaviors. In groups in which students received the same instructions, students calculated the mean scores for each of the ethical scenarios. The groups then compared the mean ethical score for each scenario. The differences between how ethically the two groups viewed the behavior highlighted how different perspectives affect the evaluation of an ethical dilemma. Students reported that the activity was highly interesting and a good use of class time and that future classes should incorporate the activity.

- Carkenord, D. M. (1996). A group exercise to explore employee ethics in business. *Teaching of psychology*, 23, 100-102. doi: 10.1207/s15328023top2302\_6

Tomlinson (2009) describes an ethics module to use at the beginning of undergraduate organizational courses in either business or psychology. The author developed the activity in order to address several limitations with the current training in business ethics. For example, the teaching of ethics often implies that only immoral people engage in unethical behavior, the data do not support this claim. The author addresses ethics from an *interactionist* perspective (i.e., both individual and situational characteristics influence ethical behavior) and serves to address two primary issues: a) how future managers can deter their employees from engaging in unethical behavior and b) how future managers can guard against engaging in unethical behavior themselves. The author describes the interactionist perspective of the activity, the teaching format with different case scenarios, and ways to evaluate student learning during this activity.

- Tomlinson, E. C. (2009). Teaching the interactionist model of ethics: Two brief case studies. *Journal of Management Education*, 33, 142-165.

### **Performance Appraisals**

This article describes a project where the instructor undergoes a job appraisal conducted by the students. Groups of students selected scales that they thought would be useful for evaluating a faculty position. Then students individually appraise the job of the class instructor, and the groups average their scores. The groups wrote a summary of their findings and provided specific recommendations to help the instructor improve his or her performance. Students reported that the project is a useful teaching exercise.

- Kottke, J. L. (1984). Assessing instructor performance: A classroom project for an industrial/organizational psychology class. *Teaching of Psychology*, 11, 231-232.

### **Job Analysis**

The author describes a job analysis exercise in which students were required to choose an actual employed person and to use any method that they have learned about to obtain any necessary information about the person's job. In addition, students selected criteria on which people in that specific position should be evaluated, proposed ways to select people for that position, devised a training program for new employees, and decided how they should recruit people into that position. Students reported that this exercise was a positive experience,

and self-report evidence suggested that the goals of the project were met. Additionally, students reported that this project was quite challenging.

- Kottke, J. L. (1988). A job analysis exercise for an undergraduate industrial psychology class. *Teaching of Psychology*, 15, 41-42.

### **Sexual Harassment**

This article describes an activity to identify cases of sexual harassment. The authors explained why sexual harassment is often difficult to define and identify. For the activity, the instructor gave the students six ambiguous scenarios and asked students to determine if sexual harassment was present. During the activity, students also referred to different policy statements regarding sexual harassment (e.g., EEOC's Guidelines on Discrimination Because of Sex). Students then engaged in small group discussions about each of the scenarios before participating in a full classroom discussion. The instructor directed discussion so that students identified why they made each determination and how they reached to those decisions. The authors' evaluation of the class activity showed favorable student perceptions and learning evaluations.

- Madson, L., & Shoda, J. (2002). Identifying sexual harassment: A classroom activity. *Teaching of Psychology*, 29, 304-307.

### **Group Performance**

The authors describe an activity to use during discussions of group behavior and evaluation. After forming groups of approximately 5 students, the instructor randomly assigned each student to the role of either leader or member) and asked the students to develop a key for a short multiple-choice quiz that they recently completed. The article describes the leader and member selection, the instructions to the group members, group feedback, and debriefing of the activity. After the activity was complete, students rated the activity as effective and relevant to the course goals.

- Mathis, R.D. & Tanner, Z. (1999) An exercise to introduce students to group leadership. *Teaching of Psychology*, 26, 288-290.

### **Job Satisfaction**

The author describes an active learning project in which students contacted organizations and collected data about job satisfaction. Students read a chapter in a textbook describing job satisfaction, morale, and factors that affect job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. They then created an operational definition of job satisfaction and constructed a 5-6 item job satisfaction survey. Students then entered

organizations in the community and administered their surveys. They then compiled a summary of the data and presented it to the organization and class. In addition to the hands on learning of the course, students reported that this project gave the students skills that helped them gain future employment.

- Millard, R. J. (1983). A morale survey project as a group activity in an industrial/organizational course. *Teaching of Psychology, 10*, 110-112.

### **Motivation**

This article suggested a new method in teaching the VIE theory of motivation to students. Students completed a questionnaire that measured their motivation in the course. The questionnaire asked the students to make judgments on how attractive they found different course grades (first-level outcomes) as well as on 8 second-level outcomes (e.g. strong letter of recommendation, limited social life, fatigue). Next, students indicated their perceived relationship between the second-level outcomes and the first-level outcome. Third, students recorded formulas on a worksheet provided by the instructor and indicated what amount of effort would likely lead to different degrees of the first-level outcomes. Students reported positive evaluations of this method and reported that they understood the concepts of the theory better than the previously used lecture method.

- Rice, R. W., & Neider, L. L. (1979). A classroom motivation scale illustrating the VIE theory of motivation. *Teaching of Psychology, 6*, 94-97.

### **Aging**

This chapter described why I/O psychology courses should incorporate research on aging as well as ways for instructors to accomplish this task. Unlike in previous generations, one's career in adulthood is no longer viewed as stable and uniform; careers through adulthood are dynamic and composed of more alternatives and changes than in generations past. Therefore, I/O psychology courses should address particular issues related to aging in

the organization. For example, I/O psychology instructors can address issues such as social policy and law, downsizing and layoffs, job training, and retirement options in light of different ages in the workplace. The authors included a literature review of relevant topics, and described how an instructor can incorporate this literature into the course. In addition, the chapter included course activities and Web exercises to illustrate some of these issues.

- Sterns, H. L., Begovic, A., & Sotnak, D. L. (2003). Incorporating aging into industrial/organizational psychology courses. S. K. Whitbourne & J. C. Cavanaugh (Eds.). *Integrating aging topics into psychology: A practical guide for teaching* (pp. 185-199). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

## **Conclusion**

Because I/O psychology is an applied course, it is important to have engaging activities that give the students experience on how to apply information to an organization. We have provided instructors with some of our own methods that have been successful for teaching I/O psychology as well as some reported in the literature. If teachers find any of the provided activities appealing, we highly encourage them to read the full article and/or contact the authors, as the authors usually have further recommendations on how to make the activity successful. Also, we encourage members of the instructional community to continue to collect data on novel activities and to share their findings in relevant journals. Providing students with excellent education in I/O psychology helps further the application of psychology in organizations.