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Unpacking Organizational Behavior Concepts Through a Place-Based Learning Exercise

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Abstract. This article describes a place-based learning activity designed to foster engagement and deepen understanding of topics in an undergraduate Organizational Behavior (OB) course. Specifically, the activity involves a site visit to the place of a local organization (which may be actively operating or historic) where interacting with the physical space prompts consideration and deepened understanding of key OB concepts (e.g., leadership, team dynamics). During the site visit, students observe and interact with the visual artifacts and physical space of the place, connecting available information to OB concepts. Following the site visit, students analyze their experience and present their findings, constructing a coherent narrative of the organization's practices and employee experience. Suggestions for variations demonstrate that this activity can be implemented across institutional contexts and is adaptable in the face of various constraints.

Keywords: place-based learning, experiential learning, organizational behavior.

Organizational behavior (OB) instructors often struggle to make abstract theory engaging and relevant for students with limited work experience (Mozahem & Ghanem, 2018; Mullane, 2019). As Triviño (2025, p. 257) notes, OB students "often struggle to reconcile idealistic social concepts with organizational realities," which can hinder understanding and interest. Yet, many students later recognize OB as among their most valuable lessons after gaining workplace experience (see Cleveland, 2015). Therefore, instructors increasingly supplement traditional approaches with experiential learning to build engagement, relevance, and understanding (Kolb, 2014). One form of experiential learning that may be particularly useful for fostering engagement and understanding of OB topics is place-based learning (PBL).

1. Theoretical Framing

PBL (Sobel, 2005) promotes active learning as students experience and interact with the physical surroundings of a significant location or "place" (Yemini et al., 2023). The primary mechanism by which learning occurs in PBL is a concept

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called *sense of place*. Defined as the "complex cognitive, affective, and evaluative relationships people develop with social and ecological communities" (Ardoin, 2006, p. 118), this concept refers to the understanding of a place (including all phenomena existing within its boundaries) that arises from one's experience of and engagement with the physical environment. PBL asserts that physical locations are imbued with rich information about phenomena that can only be communicated via immersive experience: as learners perceive and have emotional reactions to a place, they deepen their understanding of a topic beyond what may be gained from traditional classroom learning methods (Yemini et al., 2023). Inside the place, they observe, process, and interact with both the physical space and one another to see, and importantly, to *feel* how the topics they are studying are tangibly represented in the place. During this experience, students collectively create shared understanding of topics or phenomena through their social interactions within the place (Mooney & Cockburn, 2024).

Although PBL has traditionally been implemented in disciplines such as ecology and the arts, it has more recently been applied in Management education (see Goodlad & Leonard, 2018 and Mooney & Cockburn, 2024 for examples in leadership and entrepreneurship). PBL's emphasis on engaging with meaningful, information-rich places also has strong potential for OB application. Organizations are embedded within physical, historical, and societal contexts that shape organizational practices and experiences (Rowlinson & Proctor, 1999). An organization's artifacts, physical spaces, spatial structure, and narratives present within the organization's locale thus carry unique symbolic information about the organization and its members (Schein, 2010). As such, visiting the physical place of an organization can help enhance understanding of how abstract OB concepts manifest in real organizations through provision of key contextual information that may be absorbed via physical, not only cognitive, experience. Thus, engaging with a place that contains and contextualizes these artifacts and narratives (e.g., a historical site, an operating facility) may offer a promising avenue for enhancing student understanding of otherwise abstract OB topics.

Beyond sense of place, experiential learning may be facilitated by sensemaking processes grounded in storytelling (Boje, 1991). More explicitly, organizations rely on narratives to communicate organizational strategies, practices, and norms (Taylor et al., 2002). We suggest that, by immersing themselves in an organizational site, students can construct meaning from their interpretation of organizational symbols and cues, allowing them to interpret a coherent narrative of the organization based on their observations and experience of the place (e.g., Weick, 1995). Moreover, through orally sharing this interpretation of the organization's narrative, understanding of OB concepts should be reinforced for both the presenters and listeners (Boje, 1991; Taylor et al., 2002).

2. Application

Building on these ideas, I developed an assignment intended to enhance student understanding and engagement through PBL and subsequent storytelling. As a class, we visited a museum at the historic site of a local manufacturing organization that provides an immersive, visual learning experience with organizational artifacts[1] (e.g., machinery, products made or used, archival photographs and documents, descriptive text) contextualized within the historic factory building. At its height, the organization was internationally renowned for its industrial innovation and craftsmanship and remains a point of pride for the local community, having played an important role in the city's industrial history. The exhibit presents the organization's history through several thematic areas (e.g., people, product, company, and technology) and displays artifacts that provide insight into a range of OB topics, including organizational culture, leadership, motivation, and team dynamics. Through the site visit, students engaged directly with the physical and historical context of the organization, allowing them to experience sense of place while observing how OB concepts are represented in practice.

Following the site visit, students worked in teams to synthesize their observations and present insights related to several OB concepts. In doing so, students were required to interpret and organize their observations and experiences into a coherent narrative of the organization, reinforcing learning through sensemaking grounded in storytelling. This shared experience provided the class with a common reference point that could be revisited in subsequent class periods to reinforce learning material and make connections to new topics. Additionally, formal and informal reactions from students indicated a high level of engagement.

3. Learning Objectives

After completing the activity and exercise, students will be able to:
1. Observe and identify OB concepts (e.g., workplace attitudes, team dynamics, employee motivation, organizational culture, conflict management, power, leadership) in a real-world organizational context via *sense of place*.

1. The assignment described herein is intended to deepen student understanding of and engagement with OB topics broadly. We use the term *artifacts* throughout the paper to refer to the historic, physical objects used to tell stories and communicate information within museums/exhibits rather than to reflect an overemphasis on organizational culture at the expense of other topics included in the assignment (e.g., leadership, employee motivation, workplace attitudes).

2. Analyze organizational practices and experiences by connecting artifacts and observations from the site visit to relevant OB concepts.
3. Synthesize observations into a coherent narrative that communicates how OB concepts are reflected in the organization's practices and employee experience.

4. Learning Exercise and Activity Overview

This exercise involves a visit to the site of a workplace (past or present) to facilitate student learning. During the site visit, students collectively observe and interact with the physical space and the visual artifacts present, identifying representations of OB concepts. Following the visit, students share their observations and analyze their experiences in teams to help crystallize their understanding of OB concepts, then present a coherent narrative of the organization. Learning is assessed via team presentations during which students describe the aspects of the place that represent OB concepts. As PBL has, at its core, an emphasis on *collective* experiential learning, team presentations allow students to continue exploring OB concepts together in small groups and, later, the larger class. Drawing on the sense of place they experienced at the site visit, students sharpen their understanding as they listen to and watch others share their insights. Moreover, students learn from one another as they process the organizational narratives their peers have constructed. The instructor then facilitates synthesis of learning across teams in a debrief discussion.

5. Materials and Setup

Instructors should choose 1) a local physical space or structure outside the classroom that 2) is or was a place of work and 3) contains enough organizational cues, artifacts, or information for students to observe and analyze specified OB concepts. Options include publicly accessible areas of working organizations or on-site museums, exhibits, or other venues that showcase an organization. To boost student interest and engagement in the site visit, we recommend choosing an option that is historical or significant to the local community where students live and learn. Your local historical society, community-based organizations, or The American Alliance of Museums are a few resources that may provide lists of potential options in/near your community (see Appendix A for examples of potential sites). Finally, arranging the visit around the course's midpoint is recommended to give students time to familiarize themselves with focal OB concepts and build cohesion with classmates, which may facilitate richer or more comfortable team interactions (see Table 1 for a suggested timeline).

As presented, this exercise requires students to work in teams both at the site visit and for the final presentation. Team size will depend on the time available for team presentations and total number of students enrolled in the course. For