

**Breaking the Ice With a Guttled Rooster:
Discussion Management and the Dignity of Work**

**Dave O'Connell
St. Ambrose University**

Abstract

Based on an experience in an MBA Human Resource Management classroom, this paper raises questions about professor self-management in the business classroom, and offers reflections on how we might signal and frame the meaning and value of work. Starting from the position that the classroom is in itself a form of organization, and building on Kolb's experiential learning model, the intent is to promote reflection in the reader, and conversation in a conference setting, around the value of work, and how we might honor, or dishonor Christ in our own behaviors, as we manage classroom discussion. We may debate the meaning of work, but how do we actually signal this meaning to students as we conduct ourselves in the classroom? This paper seeks to promote discussion on this topic.

Breaking the Ice With a Gutted Rooster:
Discussion Management and the Dignity of Work

17th Annual Christian Business Faculty Association Conference
October 17-20, 2001
Olivet Nazarene University
Bourbonnais, Illinois

Dave O'Connell
St. Ambrose University
518 West Locust Street
Davenport, IA 52803
doconnel@sau.edu

Abstract

Based on an experience in an MBA Human Resource Management classroom, this paper raises questions about professor self-management in the business classroom, and offers reflections on how we might signal and frame the meaning and value of work. Starting from the position that the classroom is in itself a form of organization, and building on Kolb's experiential learning model, the intent is to promote reflection in the reader, and conversation in a conference setting, around the value of work, and how we might honor, or dishonor Christ in our own behaviors, as we manage classroom discussion. We may debate the meaning of work, but how do we actually signal this meaning to students as we conduct ourselves in the classroom? This paper seeks to promote discussion on this topic.

Gutting Roosters: Cause for Reflection

The Scene

It was the first day of MBA 685--Human Resources Management. As always, there was a certain air of exploration, as students probably wondered about the prof--new to them and the university. And the prof wondered about them. Who were they, and what did the semester hold? He hoped to engage the students in discussion of work, right in the first session. The intent was to get them involved immediately in active exploration and reflection, and to surface their implicit theories of effective job design. Then, from their implicit theories of work I would build toward a presentation of the Job Characteristics Model (Hackman & Oldham, 1980). This job design model consists in three parts--core job characteristics, critical psychological states, and work outcomes. When jobs have skill variety, task identity and task significance, the work will be experienced as meaningful to the worker. When appropriate levels of autonomy are included, the worker experiences responsibility for work outcomes. When job feedback is given, the worker will experience knowledge of the actual results of the work. The model proposes that these three states--meaningfulness, responsibility for outcomes, and knowledge of work results, will lead to four work outcomes: high internal work motivation, high quality work performance, high satisfaction with the work, and low absenteeism and turnover.

In order to break the ice, the students were asked to introduce themselves. For half of the class the introduction included a description of the best job they ever had, and for the other half of the class it included a description of the worst job they ever had. As they spoke, I wrote the best jobs in one list, and the worst jobs in another on the board at

the front of the room. Then we processed the list, evoking common elements that made for good (and bad) jobs. My focus in the discussion was drawn to the bad jobs. As some of them were described, I laughed, and then proceeded to refer to some of the "worst" jobs multiple times in the ensuing several minutes. In my mind, one of the worst of the worst jobs was reported by the student who had gutted roosters on a farm.

We chuckled and grinned as that job and others came up in conversation. After class I mentioned in passing to a colleague this idea: "If you are ever having a bad day, just think; you could be gutting roosters for a living." But later that day I thought about the class and my words with the colleague, and mentioned to my wife that even the most menial of jobs, like gutting roosters, could be done well or poorly. Within a day or so, back at the university, I encountered that same colleague as he was getting into an elevator. He turned to me, and with no preface said something like this: "You know, gutting roosters can be honorable work." I said "I agree". And it all struck me. How frivolous I was in my earlier comments to him, and with students in the classroom.

All of this occurred around the time that the Academy of Management conference theme proclaimed "We don't deserve the title *professor* until we know what we are willing to profess." And what, by my own comments and conduct, was I professing? I purposed to write out these thoughts. Then, in my next class meeting, I read the following to my students at the beginning of the session:

There are lessons for us all in a class like this, if we will learn them. Some say, in fact, that one of the biggest challenges for us in the workplace is not to develop formal training and development programs, but to learn how to learn from our experience. Otherwise you end up with 1 year of experience 20 times instead of 20 years of experience.

A key tool to garner learning is the act of reflection. It is taking an idea and holding it up for inspection. It is turning it, or more accurately, walking around it

in your mind. It is walking around it, looking for insights, searching for hooks into your experience. It is walking around it in your heart.

We talked about “best jobs” and “worst jobs”.

“It was a good ice-breaker,” I thought after class last week.

A good way to map the terrain of organizational experience in the class.

A good way to do a bit of inductive work—Challenge, variety, autonomy emerged as dimensions that make for “best job” sort of work.

But the conversation in the classes, and the way I facilitated them, caused me to reflect. I said to one of my fellow professors: “If you’re ever having a bad day teaching, just think; you could be gutting roosters.”

And I reflect on the job of drilling holes, testing drill bits.

And I reflect on the job of packing Lunchable containers.

And I reflect on the job of translating the technical documents of urology.

And I reflect on my own attitudes—

A quick laugh.

A snappy reply.

Not, perhaps, that a bit of fun is bad. In fact, I hope the classroom will be fun, at least at times. You can learn important lessons *and* have fun!

But I reflected.

I said to my wife one morning, by the end of the week, in the morning before leaving for work, something like “Gutting roosters can be honorable work. Any work done carefully and with excellence is honorable work. It might be dirty work, or messy work, but it can be honorable work.”

I thought of the many tasks and jobs I have done for pay during the years:

Delivering papers.

Dragging brush.

Raking leaves.

Raking a beach.

Cleaning toilets.

Punching holes in metal plates, with cables attached to my wrists, jerking my undertrained hands from the danger of the punch press.

Vacuuming, sweeping, and driving a truck.

Splitting wood.

Walking a beat as a night watchman in a too-dark office building.

Wrapping bottles.

Stacking pallets.

Stocking shelves.
Driving a fork lift.
Punching holes in computer cards.
Tending guests in the Jail on Wheels traveling crime prevention exhibit.

Then, a professor I had joked with a day earlier, looked up as he was about to get into the elevator, and said “Gutting chickens is an honorable profession.” It took me aback. It was almost verbatim what I said to my wife in the morning. “You’re right,” I said. “It is.”

Then later, we talked. “The class exercise was good. It accomplished some goals. But I hope I do not, ever, foster any sort of elitism in the classroom. I hope I do not foster any sort of managerial bias against the jobs and tasks that are difficult to make really interesting, or motivating, or fancy, or particularly clean.”

Cleanliness of the work, on important dimensions, comes from the dignity of the person doing it. A simple, or messy, or boring job done well is still done well. The person doing it well, with a smile on his or her face (as much as possible), shows grace and character.

So, if it is gutting roosters, or castrating hogs, or drilling holes, or working the line at a food plant, it is our job to make those jobs as much as they can be. But above all, we should live with grace and treat all, ourselves and others—doing any sort of job—with the utmost respect.

That, as a professor, is what I want to profess.

The Lessons for Self Conduct in the Classroom

At this point I have shared a brief glimpse into the cause for reflection in the "guttled rooster" classroom discussion. Here, I present three pedagogical viewpoints which might serve to highlight the importance of classroom process, not simply course content, in teaching students while attempting to actively live a Christian faith. This groundwork involves a brief discussion of an experiential learning model, the perspective of the classroom as an organization, and discussion management.

Experiential Learning

Twenty-five years ago there was debate over the value of classroom experiences as fodder for real education in the management classroom. (Bowen, Lewicki, Hall & Hall, 1997). However, experiential learning is much more widely accepted in management education at this point in time. One model that promotes the use of experience in the classroom (and beyond) as part of a learning strategy, has been presented by Kolb (1984). A version of the model is presented in Figure 1. Kolb proposes that learning takes place in four steps. First, the learner has a concrete experience. Then the (active) learner reflects on that experience, in a sense, observing what he or she experienced. The learner also develops principles or abstractions as a result of the reflection, and develops hypotheses. Finally, the hypotheses are tested in action, or active experimentation. The learner is constantly cycling through experience, reflection, abstraction, and experimentation.

Classroom as an Organization

An active learning model is useful in considering the ways in which practicing managers draw lessons from their experience. Indeed, one of the challenges of management development lies in helping practicing managers leverage real learning from their experience (Seibert, 1996). However, if we also consider that the classroom itself is an organization, in which the collective goals have to do with learning and growth, then experience in that venue is part of the learning. What transpires in the classroom behaviorally is undeniably part of student experience. Etzioni, quoted in Scott (1992), defined organizations as "social units (or human groupings) deliberately constructed and

reconstructed to seek specific goals". Certainly classes should be constructed to achieve learning goals. Some have experimented with very actively structuring pedagogy to simulate formal organizations, with student teams acting as work groups, team leaders as representatives of the groups, and the instructor as a manager, who administers the course at least partly through the team leaders. However, no matter what style of teaching is employed, the fact remains that the class is in fact a type of organization (Cohen, 1975).

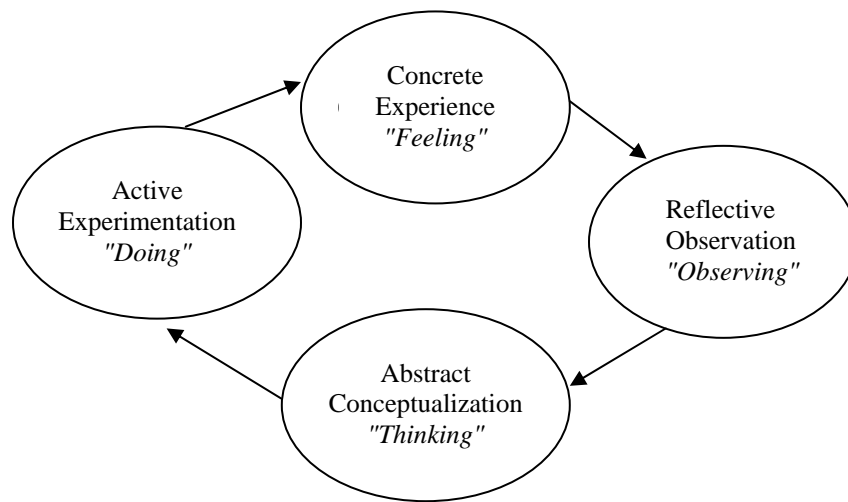


Figure 1. An experiential model of learning. Adapted from Osland, Kolb, & Rubin (2001). Organizational Behavior: An Experiential Approach. Upper Saddle River, NJ. Prentice Hall.

In considering the experiential learning model, and the perspective that the class is an organization, it follows that students have the opportunity to use their experience of the classroom organization to foster learning. What happens in the classroom, and how it happens, can become grist for reflection, abstraction, and experimentation.

Discussion Management

The first day of class is a time when performance expectations and behavioral norms can be initially established in a class. In the first day of class, students may have a number of underlying questions, such as "Will you really try to help students?" "Are you easily rattled?" and "Are you a person as well as a teacher?" (McKeachie, 1994).

Discussion is a way of encouraging students to give voice to their experience, judgments, beliefs, and conclusions. It is a way to surface and test hypotheses. It is a way in which the students can learn from one another and from the teacher. In fact, if learning is such a dynamic process, then a "communal dialogue" is essential (Meyers and Jones, 1993).

Professors have, by virtue of formal power, the opportunity to control and direct classroom interaction in many ways. At the same time, if students are learning, not just content, but lessons about your own behavior in the classroom organization, perhaps we should attend carefully to the way we behave, and not just what we "teach".

Scriptural Connections

As noted by Ward (1998), work is literally a godly activity. Also, Smith and Wheeler (1999) point to the possibility of viewing God as performing white collar, blue-collar and "gray-collar" work. In fact, Smith & Wheeler propose that "the process of our labor reveals a further purpose of work. If our work is completed with a good attitude, graciously and energetically, we give a testimony of the grace and provision of God in our lives (p. 131)." The scripture points to our approach to work, rather than the simply the kind of work we pursue. We are exhorted to work heartily, as unto

the Lord (Col. 3:23), and to show Christ's light in the world around us (Mt. 5:16). In the first century context, in which "employment" might have differed substantially from the context of much of today's work, slaves were admonished to obey masters, rendering service with good will, as to the Lord (Eph 6: 5-7). In balance, masters were instructed to "do the same things to them," and to "give up threatening", since both masters and slaves have a Master in heaven.

In a modern context, we might consider that attempting to design work which is meaningful and productive is one element of giving up threatening, treating individuals as worthy of attention and engagement in the work at hand. So the objective, content focus of the opening classroom discussion might communicate a managerial approach that is honoring to the individual and of service to the organization. And such a model could apply to work of many kinds--blue collar or white.

The rub comes, from a pedagogical viewpoint, if I am teaching content about the value of meaningful work, and the importance of designing to that end, while I am demeaning through my discussion management the work which was done by students. Some of the issues and scriptural connections are summarized in Table 1.

Even though the jobs, in my opening classroom discussion, were offered as "worst jobs" and would probably rank low on a formal scoring according to the Job Characteristics Survey (Hackman and Oldham, 1980), I could have very well signaled that dirty work, or unpleasant work, was to be shunned. If I make fun of jobs, and perhaps people doing them, is my speech seasoned with salt, and gracious (Col. 4: 6)? Do I control my desire to respond in a witty, rapid-fire way, or do I give in and comment for amusement at times when less would be more, and wiser (Prov. 29:20)? And even if

the words might be received as witty or funny, are they more foolishness than wisdom? Do my words bespeak or belie integrity on the topics of valuing people and their work (Prov. 19:1)? All the more important, what do I communicate about eternal values and the conduct of work, through words and action, to a very heterodox university classroom?

Table 1 Subject Matter and Professor in Classroom Role

Type of Teaching	Example	Scriptural Angle
Subject matter facts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How the dimensions of the Job Characteristics Model facilitate meaningful and motivated work outcomes for individuals. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Matthew 5:16--show Christ's light in work ➤ Colossians 3:23--work heartily, as unto the Lord ➤ Ephesians 6:9--masters, don't threaten
Professor in classroom role	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ How I exemplify the management principles taught in the session. ➤ How I model Christian behavior in signaling value of work well done. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Matthew 5:16--show His light in word and affect ➤ Proverbs 19:1--model words of integrity...not foolishness ➤ Colossians 4:6--model gracious speech ➤ Proverbs 29:20--not hasty with words

Caveats, Limitations and Further Questions

My bias is that the classroom is in fact an organization, and to a greater or lesser extent, a learning community. However, this view is probably shared by others in varying degrees. For instance, would there be the same cause for reflection and concern by a professor in a "pure lecture" format, in which student voice is minimized and the receipt of specific information is the major mode of interaction in the classroom?

Perhaps the level of engagement with the life space of students would mitigate the degree to which the professor-as-model becomes important.

As noted by one reviewer of this paper, professors obviously also model attitudes about a number of topics in the classroom beyond the "meaning of work". For instance, I have been made uncomfortable by one professor's advice to students that they should always follow the highest salary offer as their career progresses. What does that signal about the place of money in our student's lives? What is the line between career and Mammon? On another occasion a professor was called to task for his views on compensation. Holding to a purely free-market view of compensation he completely denied the possibility that a just wage might include consideration beyond those of pure supply and demand curves.

By sharing the "guttred rooster" experience, and these reflections on the learning of students, I hope to promote dialogue about personal action of professors in the classroom.

References

- Bowen, D. D., Lewicki, R. J. , Hall, D. T., & Hall, F. S. (Eds.). (1997). Experiences in management and organizational behavior (4th ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Cohen, A. R. (1975). Beyond simulation: Treating the classroom as an organization. The Teaching of Organizational Behavior: A Journal of Teaching Theory and Technique, 1(3).
- Hackman, J. R. & Oldham, G.R. (1980). Work redesign. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co.
- Kolb, D. (1984). Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- McKeachie, W. J. (1994). Teaching tips: Strategies, research, and theory for college and university teachers (9th edition). Lexington, MA: D. C. Heath and Company.
- Meyers, C., & Jones, T. B. (1993). Promoting active learning: Strategies for the college classroom. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Osland, J., Kolb, D., & Rubin, I. (2001). Organizational behavior: An experiential approach Seventh Edition. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice hall.
- Scott, W. R. (1992). Organizations: Rational, natural, and open systems (3rd edition). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Seibert, K. W. (1996). Experience is the best teacher, if you can learn from it: Real-time reflection and development. In D. T. Hall and Associates (Eds.), The Career is

Dead, Long Live the Career: A Relational Approach to Careers (pp. 246-269) . San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Smith, G. & Wheeler, B. G. (1999). The nature and purpose of work and productivity. Journal of Biblical Integration in Business, Fall 1999, 126-141.

Ward, M. D. (1998). Serving a working God through our work: A response to Robert Huie's 'Image-bearing Apprentices of a work God?'. Journal of Biblical Integration in Business, Fall, 1998, 30-33.