Journal of Management Education

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What Do We Teach in Organizational Behavior? An Analysis of MBA Syllabi

Kenneth G. Brown[1], Steven D. Charlier[2], Sara L. Rynes[1], and Andrew Hosmanek[1]

Abstract

This study examines the syllabi of 241 required organizational behavior (OB) related classes in full-time U.S. MBA programs. Syllabi were coded for information about course title, topics, readings, cases, teaching methods, and learning assessment methods. Results revealed that the most frequent topics listed across courses are leadership and groups or teams. There was considerable diversity in assigned books, readings, and cases, with only a small number of books (2), readings (15), or cases (5) assigned in 10 or more courses within our sample. Assessment of student learning was conducted via (in order of importance for final student grades) testing, individual writing, class participation, group writing, group presentation, and individual presentation. Private, ranked MBA programs were more likely to offer more than one OB-related course, usually management plus leadership, or OB plus leadership. Implications of these findings for OB teaching are discussed, along with suggestions for future research.

Keywords

field of OB, organizational behavior, MBA programs, cases, readings, grading

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Organizational behavior (OB) scholars have long been distinguished by their enthusiastic interest in teaching OB as well as conducting research about it. In 1974, OB instructors at Stanford and the University of California–Berkeley (including prominent researchers such as Hal Leavitt, Raymond Miles, and George Strauss) organized the first OB Teaching Conference with attendees from 15 prominent universities. At the end of this conference, each attendee contributed $3.00 to launch a quarterly newsletter on the teaching of OB. The inaugural issue of this newsletter, originally called *Exchange*, was distributed in January 1975 (Bradford, 1975). Under the leadership of Craig Lundberg, *Exchange* soon became *The Organizational Behavior Teaching Review*, which in turn became the *Journal of Management Education* in 1991 (Gallos, 1994). Also from this first conference emerged the Organizational Behavior Teaching Society (OBTS), whose current mission is "to enhance the quality and promote the importance of teaching and learning across the management disciplines with a focus on the dynamics within and at the interface of individuals, groups, organizations, and cultures" (http://www.obts.org/content/mission-obts).

The first two issues discussed at the first OB teaching conference were the following: (1) "What is OB?" and (2) "How does your school teach OB?" With respect to the first question, there was

> clear agreement that the field had moved beyond traditional personnel, testing, and union-management relations, but less agreement on what it has moved *to* . . . it was clear that the problems (with field definition) were myriad and agreement scarce— the only conclusion was that it certainly verified the need for this conference. (Bradford, 1975, pp. 2-3)

The second question—how OB was taught among the various schools— also generated animated discussion. Attendees discovered that a relatively common pattern had emerged at most of their schools: "Initially an almost totally cognitive course, then a strong swing toward experiential but now a movement back with the attempt to find some middle ground" (Bradford, 1975, p. 3). Subsequent discussion of the "experiential versus cognitive" theme led to a general consensus that "the 'debate' was a bit of a straw man in that either extreme wasn't very viable" (p. 4). Beyond these general patterns, however, attendees concluded that it would be "nearly impossible" to agree on a single course of OB instruction, even within a single school, "given the many different topics and teaching materials available in organization behavior plus the range in orientation among the faculty" (p. 4).

The questions of "what is OB?" and "how is it taught?" are still relevant today. Twenty years after the first OBTS conference, Blood (1994) argued

that OB was still a poorly defined field: "The field's definition is indistinct . . . OB has suffered from a surfeit of dynamic quality and has resisted most of the normal academic and societal forces that create static quality. No orthodoxy has emerged" (pp. 212-213). Miner (2006) later corroborated this notion:

> A lack of consensus appears to exist in the field of organizational behavior, and as a result, the field's limited amount of hard knowledge is often bemoaned. The evidence is there, but the consensus of knowledgeable scholars . . . is often out of reach because conflicting values block the way. Testimony to this effect is not hard to find. (p. 37)

Lundberg (1994) made similar arguments with respect to OB's teaching methods: "the inventory of OB instructional methods has become almost bewilderingly large" (p. 221). The debate over whether the goal of OB should be to impart knowledge or skills also persists (see, e.g., Bailey & Ford, 1996; Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). Moreover, there are disagreements as to whether the presumed diversity of content and methods in OB is an advantage (see, e.g., Cannella & Paetzold, 1994; Lundberg, 1994) or a disadvantage (Blood, 1994; Glick, Miller, & Cardinal, 2007; Pfeffer, 1993).

Given the long-standing nature of these debates, it is interesting that there have been no large-scale empirical investigations of either the content domain of OB courses or the methods and materials used to teach them. Instead, the presumed lack of field definition and pedagogy has been taken for granted or anecdotally discussed rather than empirically investigated.

The present study seeks to remedy this deficiency. Specifically, we examined the syllabi of 241 MBA OB-related courses, all of which were required as part of their program curricula.[1] Syllabi are a valuable source of data in that they are substantially more detailed in terms of course content and teaching methods than merely looking at program websites or course descriptions, as has been done in several other studies to determine whether there are more, or fewer, OB-related courses than would be expected or desirable (e.g., Navarro, 2008; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). In addition, syllabi are regarded as one of the most important ways of documenting the scholarship of teaching and learning (Albers, 2003; Grunert O'Brien, Millis, & Cohen, 2008), as well as one of the most crucial documents for enabling students to organize the component parts of a course into a conceptual whole (Matejke & Kurke, 1994). Thus, syllabi are useful artifacts for assessing the content of courses and the way they are taught.

We address five specific research questions about required OB-related MBA courses:

Research Question 1: What are the most common topics listed?
Research Question 2: What are the most common reading materials (e.g., textbooks, cases, and other readings)?
Research Question 3: How prevalent are various teaching methods as described in the syllabus (e.g., lectures, cases, role playing)?
Research Question 4: How is student learning assessed?
Research Question 5: Are there subcategories of courses within the overall OB genre, and if so, how do they differ from one another?

Additionally, to the extent that there are course clusters, we examine the extent to which they differ on the basis of topics, reading materials, teaching methods, student assessments, and institutional (e.g., public vs. private, top-ranked or not) or instructor (e.g., educational credentials, publication record) characteristics.

Method

Sample

The data collection process began with a review of the 2007 database of AACSB-accredited schools. From these, we selected only MBA programs that were U.S.-based and full-time ($N = 378$).[2] The first two authors gathered programmatic information through university-hosted websites and identified the number of overall required courses and the number of required OB-related courses for each program.

In deciding whether a course was OB related or not, we were guided by the Academy of Management's (AOM) OB domain statement: "Organizational behavior is devoted to understanding individuals and groups within an organizational context. The field focuses on attributes, processes, behaviors, and outcomes within and between individual, interpersonal, group, and organizational levels of analysis" (Organizational Behavior Division, 2011), as well as the mission statement of the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*: "The *Journal of Organizational Behavior* . . . will focus on research and theory in all topics associated with organizational behavior within and across individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis" (Ashkanasy, 2008, p. 1). It is important to note that the decision about whether or not a course represented "OB" was not based on title alone but rather on the accompanying course descriptions. Interrater agreement with respect to whether or not a

course represented OB was 85%, and all discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

Based this analysis, 393 required courses appeared to cover materials in the domain of OB across all 378 full-time programs.[3] Of the 393 required OB courses, we were able to collect 250 syllabi (64%), although 9 syllabi were eventually discarded,[4] leaving a final sample of 241 syllabi. The final set of 241 syllabi came from 211 different institutions; thus, the data set represented 56% of the total population of AACSB-accredited full-time programs in the United States at the time of data collection. Roughly half of the syllabi were downloaded from university websites and the rest obtained by way of personal e-mails or phone calls to the instructor. Syllabi were drawn from the 2007-2008 academic year.

Variables

Institutional Variables. We coded three institution-level variables to see if they were associated with OB course characteristics. The first was university or college *funding source* ("1" = private, "0" = public). Second, the *number of MBA rankings* was measured by examining 2008 rankings of four publications: *Business Week, Forbes, US News and World Report*, and *Financial Times.* Scores ranged from "0" for programs that were not ranked in any of these periodicals to "4" for schools ranked in all of them. Third, we coded whether a program was *doctoral granting* or not ("1" = yes, "0" = no).

Instructor Characteristics. We recorded whether or not the instructor had a PhD ("1" = yes, "0" = no) and whether he or she was an adjunct instructor ("1" = yes, "0" = no). We also coded whether or not the course was team-taught ("1" = yes, "0" = no). For courses that were team-taught, if any of the listed instructors had a PhD, that variable was coded as a "1" (yes). Finally, the ProQuest database was searched to capture the number of scholarly publications for each instructor (*instructor publications*; range = 0-81). For courses that were team-taught, the individual with the highest number of publications among all the listed instructors was selected.

Course Title. The *course title* was recorded exactly as it appeared on the syllabus.

Course content was coded based on the 32 topic areas covered by the domain statement of the OB Division of the Academy of Management and the topics listed for the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*. The fourth author designed a search algorithm to determine whether or not each of the 32 different topic headings was present in each syllabus's list of topics. For

each topic heading, multiple variations of the relevant word(s) were searched (e.g., lead, leader, leading, and leadership were used for the topic of leadership).

Required Books. Lynch and Bogen (1997) indicate that textbooks are "intrinsically important to the constitution and maintenance of a discipline" (p. 482). Similarly, Apple (2001) argues that textbooks are important educational and cultural artifacts that embody "the visions of legitimate knowledge" (p. 282) of a discipline. As such, we captured the titles of textbooks and other assigned books (e.g., popular press or trade books) in our data set. In addition, the first and fourth authors independently coded each book as *academic discipline based, academic skills based*, or *practitioner trade*. Coders agreed on codes in 75% of the cases. Discrepancies were resolved via discussion.

Cases. Teaching with cases generally represents a different philosophy toward teaching and reflects different learning objectives than teaching with textbooks (Ellet, 2007; Greiner, Bhambri, & Cummings, 2003) As such, all cases that were associated with each syllabus were captured and coded. We also recorded the publisher of each case (e.g., Harvard Business School, Stanford Graduate School of Business).

Articles. We also recorded and coded all other articles or readings (including book chapters) that appeared on the syllabus. The importing of these largely objective coding decisions (cases, chapters, and other readings) was conducted by the second author with help from two research assistants. Classification of articles was done by the second author and a research assistant, based on the type of publication from which the article emanated. "Academic" articles came from scholarly journals (e.g., *Academy of Management Journal, Journal of Applied Psychology*), "bridge" articles came from publications that are largely written by academics but intended for a practitioner audience (e.g., *Harvard Business Review, Academy of Management Executive*), and "practitioner" articles were generally written by and for practitioners and include mass media (e.g., *Fortune, BusinessWeek, Wall Street Journal*). Agreement between the two coders on categorization of the articles was 98%, with discrepancies resolved via discussion.

Teaching Methods. We used the narrative portions of the syllabus (e.g., course overviews, descriptions, objectives, and methodology sections) to analyze how instructors describe their teaching philosophy and, more specifically, which techniques would be employed in the course. An automated search of the text from these sections was conducted for the inclusion of certain key

terms related to teaching, including "case," "discussion," "exercise" or "activity," "lecture," "presentation," and "simulation." Derivatives of these keywords were also included in the search terms (e.g., "case" and "cases"). An inspection of "hits" was conducted to ensure that the use of these terms aligned with a general description of how the course would be structured and taught. Syllabi were coded as "1" for each category of terms if it included at least one mention of the teaching method, and "0" if the term was not found.

Assessments of Learning. Given that "assessment is the single-most important gauge of learning that drives the educational process" (Cullen & Harris, 2009, p. 115), we also coded the ways in which student learning was assessed. Separate data points were created for the percentage of overall grade allocated to each of the following assessment methods: in-class participation, examinations, individual or group writing assignments, and individual or group presentations.

Analyses

We used content analysis (Shapiro & Markoff, 1997; Weber, 1990) to analyze the data. Initially, we created a spreadsheet containing institutional and instructor features associated with each syllabus (e.g., whether the MBA program was ranked in a variety of business press rankings; whether the instructor had a PhD). Then, to reap the reliability benefits of computerized text analysis (Duriau, Reger, & Pfarrer, 2007) at the level of the individual syllabus, we imported all syllabi into NVivo9 qualitative analysis software to aid us in word search, counting, and coding. Data were subsequently exported into IBM SPSS Version 19 and Microsoft Excel for further descriptive and correlational analyses.

Results

Basic descriptive statistics for institutional and instructor characteristics are presented in Table 1. In terms of institutional characteristics, 30% of represented schools were privately funded. The average number of publications in which a school's graduate business program was ranked was 0.8 (again, as stated in the "Institutional Variables" portion of the Method section, the possible range for this statistic was 0-4). Forty-three percent of the programs were in schools that also had PhD programs. In terms of instructor characteristics, the vast majority of courses were taught by a single instructor (95%) with a PhD (97%) who was not an adjunct (96%). The average number of instructor publications was 9.51.

Table 1. Institutional and Instructor Characteristics (*N* = 241).

Variable	Mean	SD
Institutional		
Private	0.30	0.46
MBA rankings	0.80	1.46
PhD program	0.43	0.50
Instructor		
Instructor PhD	0.97	0.18
Instructor adjunct	0.04	0.20
Instructional team	0.05	0.21
Instructor publications	9.51	11.61

Note. MBA rankings = number of times program was ranked in the Top 50 among four sources; Instructor publications = number of peer review papers up to 2008.

Research Question 1 asked about the most common topics addressed in OB-related courses. The percentage of courses listing each of the 32 OB content areas is shown in Table 2. As the table indicates, only three topics—leadership, teams or groups, and motivation—were taught in more than 50% of all courses. Another five topics—power or politics, change or change management, climate or culture, decision making, and conflict—were taught in more than 40% of courses. Seven topics that represent common areas of OB research were represented in fewer than 10% of courses—fairness or justice, identity or identification, absenteeism or turnover or withdrawal, citizenship or prosocial behavior, demographics or demography, deviance or antisocial behavior or aggression, and social exchange. Admittedly, some of these terms are perhaps too narrow to be captured in a course syllabus, but three of these terms address major criteria examined in OB research (withdrawal, citizenship, and deviance).

Research Question 2 asked about assigned reading materials. Analyses showed that 84% of courses used material from books, although only 30% assigned an entire book. Across all courses, 251 different books were assigned, either in whole or in part. Table 3 shows that only two books were used in more than 10 courses within our sample: Robbins and Judge's (2007) *Essentials of Organizational Behavior* (a disciplinary book) and Whetten and Cameron's (2007)[5] *Developing Managerial Skills* (a skills-based book). Books used in more than five courses were Bazerman (2008; disciplinary), Ancona, Kochan, Scully, Van Maanen, and Westly (2005; disciplinary), Kouzes and Posner (2007; trade), and Pfeffer and Sutton (2006; trade). Of books assigned in at least four courses, three (Bazerman, 2008; Fisher & Ury, 1991; Gladwell, 2005) were always assigned in the form of excerpts rather

Table 2. Most Frequently Listed Topics in OB-Related MBA Courses (*N* = 241).

Topic	Frequency	%
Leadership or leader(s) or lead(ing)	176	73.0
Team(s) or teamwork or group	174	72.2
Motivation	135	56.0
Power or politics or politicking	118	49.0
Change or change management	112	46.5
Climate(s) or culture(s)	108	44.8
Decision making	106	44.0
Conflict	99	41.1
Communication	86	35.7
Performance	81	33.6
Ethics	73	30.3
(Job/work) design/redesign/crafting/ characteristics	65	27.0
Diversity	53	22.0
Perception	53	22.0
Personality	49	20.3
Values	44	18.3
Emotion(s), affect, mood(s)	36	14.9
Stress	35	14.5
Rewards or incentives	32	13.3
Learning	29	12.0
Creativity or creative or innovation	25	10.4
Feedback	22	9.1
Goal(s) or goal setting	18	7.5
Network(s)	13	5.4
Trust	11	4.6
Fairness or justice	7	2.9
Identity or identification	3	1.2
Absenteeism or turnover or withdrawal	1	0.4
Citizenship behavior or prosocial	1	0.4
Demographics or demography	1	0.4
Deviance or antisocial behavior or aggression	1	0.4
Social exchange	0	0.0

Note. OB = organizational behavior. Topics drawn from OB Division domain statement and *Journal of Organizational Behavior* lists.

than the entire book. While more courses used disciplinary books (i.e., traditional textbooks) than other types of books, the presence of skill-based and trade books in Table 3 suggests fundamental variability in the type of

Table 3. Books Listed in Five or More OB-Related MBA Courses (*N* = 177).

Author/year/title	Total frequency	Book	Excerpt	Category
Robbins and Judge (2007). *Essentials of Organizational Behavior*	16	16	0	Disciplinary
Whetten and Cameron (2007). *Developing Management Skills*	16	14	2	Skills based
Bazerman (2008). *Judgment in Managerial Decision Making*	9	0	9	Disciplinary
Ancona et al. (2005). *Managing for the Future: Organizational Behavior and Processes*	7	7	0	Disciplinary
Kouzes and Posner (2007). *The Leadership Challenge*	7	5	2	Trade
Pfeffer and Sutton (2006). *Hard Facts, Dangerous Half-Truths, and Total Nonsense*	6	3	3	Trade
Fisher and Ury (1991). *Getting to Yes*	5	0	5	Trade
Greenberg (2005). *Managing Behavior in Organizations*	5	5	0	Disciplinary
Kinicki and Kreitner (2008). *Organizational Behavior*	5	5	0	Disciplinary
McShane and Von Glinow (2008). *Organizational Behavior: Emerging Realities*	5	5	0	Disciplinary
Osland et al. (2007). *The Organizational Behavior Reader*	5	5	0	Disciplinary
Robbins (2005). *Essentials of Organizational Behavior*	5	5	0	Disciplinary

Note. OB = organizational behavior. The total frequency of readings is lower than the full sample *N* because some syllabi did not list readings. The Book/Excerpt distinction represents the number of syllabi where the entire book was assigned (book) or only sections of the book (excerpt). "Total" is the sum of those two figures.

readings assigned across OB-related courses and, by extension, continued diversity of opinion over whether OB should be taught as a field of knowledge or a set of skills.

Only 70% (*n* = 177) of syllabi included information about assigned readings (some syllabi mentioned that readings would be posted on the course website, whereas others did not mention them at all). Where readings were listed, the average number of assigned readings was 9.3 from bridge publications, 5.0

from practitioner publications, and 1.5 from academic publications. As shown in Table 4, by far the most frequently assigned article (found in 42 courses) was Kerr's (1995) "On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B." After that, there was considerable diversity in choices, with 15 articles being assigned in 10 or more courses. Table 4 also indicates that the *Harvard Business Review* (*HBR*) is by far the most frequent source of assigned articles (88 separate articles in total within the list of frequently used readings, and 20 of the top 24 individual articles). Another 17 articles (3 of the top 24) came from the *Academy of Management Executive* (*AME*), with no other publication accounting for more than three articles that appeared in at least three syllabi. Consistent with the analysis of covered topics in Table 2, six of the most frequently assigned articles addressed leadership or leading in some way, while five addressed motivation (including pay and rewards).

There was large variation in cases used, with 315 different cases being assigned in the 87 syllabi that reported case usage. When assigned, the average number of cases per course was 4.6. As shown in Table 5, only five cases were used in 10 or more courses: Carter Racing (decision making), Erik Peterson (managing your boss), Heidi Roizen (networking), JetBlue Airways: Starting from Scratch (selection/culture), and Rob Parson at Morgan Stanley (difficult promotion decision). Once again, however, there was a high level of consistency in publishers, with 38 of the 47 cases (80.5%) assigned in three or more courses being published by Harvard Business School Press. The second-most frequent publisher was Stanford, with three cases. Overall, case use suggests considerable variability, with some courses using no cases at all and others relying on them extensively.

Research Question 3 asked about teaching methods mentioned in syllabi course descriptions. The most frequently mentioned methods were cases (88.3% of all syllabi), discussion (81.2%), exercises or activities (66.7%), presentations (57.5%), lectures (39.2%), and simulations (7.9%). Of course, it should be kept in mind that the percentage of syllabi mentioning particular methods cannot be assumed to reflect the proportion of time spent using each method. Other methodologies, such as observation or instructor surveys, would be needed to answer this question. These results do indicate that cases and discussion are mentioned in the vast majority of syllabi and mentioned more frequently than any other teaching-related term.

Research Question 4 asked about methods of student assessment. The most heavily used method of assessing student learning was testing, which averaged 33.8% of the total grade across all courses. This was followed, in order of magnitude, by individual writing assignments (27.3%), in-class participation (14.6%), group writing assignments (12. 9%), group presentations (7.0%), peer assessments (1.5%), and individual presentations (1.2%).

Table 4. Most Frequently Assigned Articles in MBA-Level OB-Related Courses (*N* = 177).

Author/year/title of article	Frequency	Publication
Kerr (1995). On the Folly of Rewarding A, While Hoping for B	42	*AME*
Goleman (1998). What Makes a Leader?	17	*HBR*
Kotter (1995). Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail	16	*HBR*
Kotter (2001). What Leaders Really Do	16	*HBR*
Cialdini (2001). Harnessing the Science of Persuasion	14	*HBR*
Hammond et al. (1998). The Hidden Traps in Decision Making	13	*HBR*
Nicholson (2003). How to Motivate Your Problem People	13	*HBR*
Pfeffer and Veiga (1999). Putting People First for Organizational Success	13	*AME*
Eisenhardt et al. (1997). How Management Teams Can Have a Good Fight	12	*HBR*
Gabarro and Kotter (2005). Managing Your Boss	12	*HBR*
Collins (2001). Level 5 Leadership	11	*HBR*
Goleman (2000). Leadership that Gets Results	11	*HBR*
Herzberg (2003). One More Time: How Do You Motivate Employees?	11	*HBR*
Pfeffer (1998). Six Dangerous Myths About Pay	11	*HBR*
Katzenbach and Smith (1993/2005). The Discipline of Teams	10	*HBR*
Drucker (2005). Managing Oneself	9	*HBR*
Latham (2004). The Motivational Benefits of Goal-Setting	9	*AME*
Chatman and Cha (2003). Leading by Leveraging Culture	8	*CMR*
Conger (1998). The Necessary Art of Persuasion	8	*HBR*
Garvin and Roberto (2001). What You Don't Know About Making Decisions	8	*HBR*
Kim and Mauborgne (2003). Fair Process: Managing in the Knowledge Economy	8	*HBR*
O'Reilly (1989). Corporations, Culture, and Commitment	8	*HBR*
Pfeffer and Sutton (2005). Evidence-Based Management	8	*HBR*
Uzzi and Dunlap (2005). How to Build Your Network	8	*HBR*

Note. OB = organizational behavior; *AME = Academy of Management Executive; CMR = California Management Review; HBR = Harvard Business Review.*

Table 5. Most Frequently Assigned Cases in MBA-Level Organizational OB-Related Courses (*N* = 177).

Title of case study	Frequency	Publisher
Carter Racing	12	Delta
Erik Peterson	11	Harvard
Heidi Roizen	10	Harvard
Jet Blue Airways	10	Harvard
Rob Parson at Morgan Stanley	10	Harvard
SG Cowen: New Recruits	9	Harvard
The Team That Wasn't	8	Harvard
Donna Dubinsky and Apple Computer	7	Harvard
Henry Tam	7	Harvard
SAS Institute	7	Stanford
Southwest Airlines	7	Stanford
Microsoft: Competing on Talent	6	Harvard
Mount Everest	6	Harvard
Charlotte Beers at Ogilvy & Mather	5	Harvard
Harrah's Entertainment, Inc.	5	Harvard
IDEO	5	Harvard
Meg Whitman at eBay	5	Harvard
Merck	5	Harvard
Taran Swan at Nickelodeon Latin America	5	Harvard
Why Should My Conscience Bother Me?	5	Book

Note. OB = organizational behavior; Delta = Delta Leadership; Harvard = Harvard Business School; Stanford = Stanford Graduate School of Business; Book = in Heilbroner et al. (1972).

Research Question 5 asked whether there were identifiable subgroups of relatively homogeneous courses. To test for this possibility, we grouped courses based on their titles.[6] Across the 241 syllabi, there were 151 unique course titles. However, all but 19 syllabi contained one of the following identifiers somewhere in the title: OB (*n* = 59), leadership (*n* = 62), management (*n* = 63), and mixed (*n* = 38). The "mixed" category consisted of titles combining two of the first three categories: leadership and management (*n* = 15), OB and management (*n* = 12), or OB and leadership (*n* = 11).

Analyses of relationships among course title, institutional characteristics, and instructor characteristics revealed a trend for private, top-ranked schools to offer more than one OB-related course. Specifically, only 24% of unranked programs had two required courses as compared with 56% of ranked programs, and only 21% of public schools had two courses as opposed to 26% of private ones. In addition, leadership courses were more likely to be found in private institutions than were the other three course titles: only 17% of the

Table 6. Course Content: Topics Listed in the Four Major Categories of OB-Related Courses.

Content area	Chi-square	Cramer's V	OB (n = 59)	Ldrshp (n = 62)	Mgmt (n = 63)	Mix (n = 38)
Leader, leadership	6.42	0.16	42 (71%)	51 (83%)	41 (65%)	30 (79%)
Teams, teamwork, group	6.47	0.16	46 (78%)	38 (61%)	46 (73%)	31 (82%)
Motivation	23.26*	0.31	43 (73%)	20 (32%)	39 (62%)	24 (63%)
Power, politic	9.44	0.20	35 (59%)	21 (34%)	30 (48%)	21 (55%)
Change	6.00	0.16	24 (41%)	27 (43%)	30 (48%)	24 (63%)
Climate, culture	18.84*	0.28	33 (56%)	15 (24%)	35 (56%)	14 (22%)
Decision making	11.31*	0.22	32 (54%)	17 (27%)	33 (52%)	16 (42%)
Conflict	11.78*	0.22	34 (58%)	19 (31%)	22 (35%)	18 (47%)
Communication	1.16	0.07	22 (37%)	21 (34%)	20 (32%)	15 (39%)
Performance	10.67*	0.21	20 (34%)	13 (21%)	26 (41%)	18 (47%)
Ethics	5.08	0.14	16 (37%)	14 (23%)	25 (40%)	13 (34%)
Job/work, redesign/char	3.47	0.12	15 (35%)	12 (19%)	21 (33%)	11 (29%)
Diversity	9.90*	0.20	19 (32%)	9 (14%)	17 (27%)	7 (18%)
Perception	21.28*	0.30	23 (39%)	3 (5%)	16 (25%)	7 (18%)
Personality	19.03*	0.28	21 (36%)	4 (6%)	9 (14%)	11 (29%)
Values	6.28	0.18	13 (22%)	6 (10%)	13 (21%)	10 (26%)

Note. OB = organizational behavior; Ldrshp = leadership; Mgmt = management; Mix = mixed.
* $p < .05$.

OB courses were in private institutions, 25% of management courses, and 37% of mixed, as compared with 45% of leadership courses (recall that overall, only 30% of all syllabi came from private schools).

One reviewer pointed out that MBA courses often differ in credit hours, and it would be useful to know whether courses differ in this regard. As a post hoc analysis, we examined whether courses varied in length. We converted all course lengths to semester-equivalents (with 3 credits representing a 16-week course with approximately 40 contact hours). On average, Leadership courses were offered as fewer semester credit hours ($M = 2.3$) than OB ($M = 2.8$), Management ($M = 2.8$), or Mixed ($M = 2.96$) courses.

Table 6 shows differences in topic coverage across these four major course categories for the 16 most frequently covered topics. A number of content areas showed statistically significantly different coverage ($p < .05$) across course types, with leadership courses generally standing out as being different from the rest. For example, leadership courses were less than half as

likely to cover the topic of motivation (32%) than the other three course types ($M = 66\%$). Similarly, leadership and mixed courses were significantly less likely (24% and 22%, respectively) than management or OB (both 56%) to include organizational climate or culture as topic areas. Leadership courses were also less likely to list decision making (27%) than were OB courses (54%), management courses (52%), and mixed courses (42%). A similar pattern was found for the listing of conflict; only 31% of leadership courses noted this topic, as compared with 58% of OB and 47% of mixed courses. Other areas where leadership courses provided significantly less coverage than some or all of the other course categories include performance, diversity, perception, personality, learning, and creativity.

One interpretation of these findings is that relative to other OB courses, leadership courses are "deficient" in content. However, it is also possible that certain topics are not covered in some leadership courses because leadership is disproportionately likely to be a "second" OB course, especially in private and ranked programs, that is offered for 1 or 2 credit hours. These findings led us to conduct further analyses to determine whether there were content differences in "sole" versus "secondary" leadership courses.

Results showed clear differences in content coverage for sole-versus-secondary leadership courses; specifically, when leadership was the only OB course, it was far more likely to include a broader range of content topics. For example, 29% of sole leadership courses covered "change" as a topic, as compared with only 15% of secondary leadership courses. Similar figures for other content areas were as follows: conflict (26% vs. 5%), motivation (26% vs. 6%), power/politics (23% vs. 11%), and teams/teamwork (37% vs. 24%; all differences statistically significant at $p < .05$). Thus, the smaller number of topics in leadership courses overall appears to be due, at least in part, to an attempt to avoid content redundancy when leadership is offered as a second OB course.

A final difference between leadership courses and the others pertained to assessments of student learning. In general, leadership courses were more likely to assess students via individual writing assignments (53% of leadership courses based 30% or more of the final grade on writing assignments, as compared with 40% of management courses, 25% of OB courses, and 21% of mixed). On the other hand, they were less likely to assess students via tests: only 31% of leadership courses based 30% or more of the final grade on examinations, as compared with 75% of OB, 63% of mixed, and 57% of management courses.

Given these observed differences, we conducted a post hoc examination of descriptions of the writing assignments in leadership courses ($n = 49$) versus those in OB courses ($n = 38$) to discern whether there were any notable

differences in content. Specifically, two authors independently coded whether each writing assignment focused primarily on (a) displaying knowledge (e.g., article summaries, case analyses), (b) self-assessment or reflection (e.g., reflections on work experience, leadership self-assessment), or (c) both. Perfect agreement was obtained on 97% of syllabi, and disagreements were resolved by a third author. Results suggested that writing assignments in leadership courses were considerably more likely to focus on self-assessment or reflection than on content knowledge, while the reverse was true in OB courses. Specifically, 77.5% of writing assignments in leadership classes involved personal analysis (51.0%) or both personal analysis and content knowledge (26.5%). Comparable figures for OB courses were 15.8% focused on personal reflection and 23.7% on both personal reflection and content knowledge; 60.5% were focused on content knowledge alone. Taken together, our results suggest that writing assignments are likely to focus on self-assessment and reflection in leadership courses, while the primary focus in OB classes is centered on content knowledge. However, even within OB courses, a sizable minority (39.5%) of writing assignments contain an element of self-reflection.

Discussion

Our primary objectives for the present article were to assess what topics are being taught in OB classes, what reading materials and pedagogical methods are mentioned, and how student learning is assessed, using OB syllabi from AACSB-accredited MBA programs. A secondary objective was to determine whether there are clusters of similar OB-related courses across programs, and whether the number and type of OB courses differ by instructor and/or institutional characteristics.

In terms of content, we found that the most frequently listed topics in OB syllabi are leadership, groups or teams, and motivation. Between 30% and 50% of syllabi also specify coverage of power and politics, change or change management, climate or culture, decision making, conflict, communication, performance, and ethics. On the other hand, we found that several important OB *research* topics (e.g., turnover, absenteeism, citizenship, abusive supervision, prosocial, and antisocial behavior) were barely represented among topic headings ($n \leq 3$ for each heading). Although the absence of syllabi topic headings does not unambiguously prove that these topics are not discussed in OB classes, other studies have also suggested that there are considerable gaps between research findings and what is taught in MBA classrooms (L. A. Burke & Rau, 2010; Charlier, Brown, & Rynes, 2011; Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007) or included in MBA textbooks (e.g., Stambaugh & Trank, 2010).[7] In

addition, some of the underemphasized topics (antisocial behavior and abusive supervision), particularly in leadership courses (e.g., power and politics, conflict), as well as the rational, unemotional portrayal of managers in Harvard cases (Ross, 1998; Swiercz & Ross, 2003) suggest that OB-related courses may be overly "positive" in their presentation of management, as some critics of MBA education have alleged (e.g., Mintzberg, 2005; Tengblad, 2012). Another common criticism of MBA programs is that they are focused more on knowing (cognitive learning) than either doing (skill-based learning) or being (self-awareness and values-based learning; e.g., Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010; Khurana, 2007; Mintzberg, 2005; Navarro, 2008; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009, 2011). Our results regarding how students are graded in OB-related courses (i.e., primarily by testing) are consistent with these critiques. On the other hand, our results also suggest that when leadership courses are included in the curriculum, evaluation methods shift toward doing- and being-types of assessments, particularly self-reflective writing assignments and experiential methods. Increased emphasis on doing- and being-types of activities in leadership courses has also been suggested by in-depth case studies from elite programs such as Harvard, Stanford, and INSEAD (e.g., Benjamin & O'Reilly, 2011; Datar et al., 2010; Petriglieri, Wood, & Petriglieri, 2011).

Another notable result concerns the overwhelming dominance of Harvard Business School as the leading source of course materials in terms of both readings and cases. While this dominance is certainly good news for Harvard Business School Press, it is worth asking whether cases and readings generated by Harvard cover the full terrain of the current business environment, or the full variety of ways of thinking about organizations. For example, in her dissertation, Ross (1998) found pervasive biases in 36 best-selling Harvard cases in favor of rationalistic, executive-centric, instrumentalist, and objectivist values and perspectives (see also Swiercz & Ross, 2003). Applying Ross's methodology to Chinese-developed business cases, Liang and Wang (2004) showed that these same biases have been transferred into Chinese cases. They conclude that

> despite repeated calls for a more holistic approach to management education, overemphasis on the rational framework persists. We identify five patterns common to both U.S. and Chinese cases; namely, rationalistic frameworks, undersocialized protagonists, strategy-driven organizations, managers-as-analysts, and naïve and biased politics. (Liang & Wang, 2004, p. 397)

In short, if Harvard's dominance continues into the future, we may well see a continuation of the overemphasis on cognitive approaches over skills- and

values-based alternatives. Although Liang and Wang's (2004) study raises the possibility that alternative sources of course materials might also display similar biases, we found it interesting that the three syllabi that included "uses and abuses of authority" (i.e., abusive supervision) in their syllabi were all from ranked schools on the west coast. In any event, OB instructors should be aware of these current biases in course materials and design appropriate enhancements or supplements to provide a more holistic and balanced portrayal.

Recommendations

Based on these findings, we offer a few recommendations for OB scholars and teachers. First, as mentioned above, we believe it would be valuable to broaden the sources of readings and cases in OB-related courses. The current dominance of Harvard probably has a lot to do not only with its stellar reputation and status but also with the fact that Harvard Business School Press has invested considerable resources into marketing and making it easy to purchase and package their materials into course packs. Although they have a considerable head start in this latter domain, other schools—Stanford, Cranfield, Ross (Michigan), Ivey (Western Ontario), Darden (Virginia)—also offer cases and other resources (e.g., Stanford's Leadership in Focus video series, which focuses on emotional and experiential themes and can be used (for free!) by registered faculty; see www.leadershipinfocus.net).

Second, our analysis suggests that at the present time, the cyclical "dance" between knowledge/content and experience/reflection referred to in the opening paragraphs is currently in a predominantly "knowing/content" phase. Certainly, content knowledge is important, and experiential and reflective activities are likely to be more effective in the long run if they are wedded to evidence-based content (Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007). In addition, the research base of business schools is one of their key competitive advantages over other forms of knowledge purveyors, such as consultants and corporate universities (Abrahamson & Eisenman, 2001; Carey, 2012; Hitt, 1998). Still, since a "content-only" education is far less likely to be transferred to the workplace than an education in which students also receive practice in "doing" and reflecting on the reasons for (and implications of) their actions, supplementing content with these other forms of instruction is highly desirable. One way to do this would be to do more "flipping" of the classroom. That is, instructors could make students accountable for reading the content ahead of time and then use class time for experiential or reflective exercises (Noer, 2012). A second option would be to lobby hard for at least two courses related to OB, since second courses (usually leadership) are more likely to

include such activities, and our findings suggest that having two courses is already "best practice" in the most highly ranked MBA programs (see also Datar et al., 2010).

Third, we believe that some core research advances in OB, specifically those related to organizational citizenship behavior, abusive supervision, and counterproductive behavior, may be underrepresented in OB-related courses relative to what is known in published research. While we cannot say with certainty whether these topics are brought up in class, major advances in conceptualizing the range of individual outcomes that managers should understand and might be able to partially control should receive prominent mention in syllabi. One criticism of OB and related textbooks in general is that they tend to be organized around independent variables, functional areas, or topics, rather than *problems* managers face or differential *outcomes* of applying different practices (e.g., Latham, 2011; Pearce, 2009).

Our final recommendation deals with creating syllabi that will more effectively aid learning. As mentioned in the introduction, syllabi are the first documents that students see about a course. As such, they may make a large "first impression" on students' enthusiasm and eagerness for the course material. As an artifact that reflects the values and efforts of both the institution and instructor, we believe that great care and attention should be placed on helping students understand the "who, what, why, and when" of course structure and purpose. Unfortunately, we found enormous variability in the syllabi we collected: some were very professional with logos, full contact information, course rationale, and clear details about how the course would unfold, while others contained little more than the instructor name and a general introductory paragraph similar to what might be found on a program website. A post hoc analysis on syllabus length suggested that differences were systematic. Ranked programs typically had longer syllabi ($M = 9.08$, $SD = 5.69$ pages) than unranked programs ($M = 7.63$, $SD = 4.72$, $t[239] = 1.97$, $p = .05$). We cannot help but wonder what message is being sent to students when such an important document provides little information.

Limitations and Future Research

As with all research, the present study has limitations. An obvious limitation is that we use only one type of source material (syllabi) to examine what is taught and how. This leaves open the question of how courses are actually taught, as we cannot be certain that what is written is consistent with how professors actually teach, either in terms of content coverage or teaching methods. Faculty may be using a department or college-wide syllabus that is not consistent with what they prefer to teach, or faculty may believe that

syllabi are meaningless artifacts created only to follow institutional rules. However, the extensive variability in syllabi wording and content, as well as the general level of professional autonomy provided to management faculty, leads us to believe that syllabi usually reflect the teaching faculty members' values, attitudes, and beliefs.

Whatever the true situation, at least one theory points toward possible disconnects between syllabi contents and actual teaching efforts by the instructor. Specifically, Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior suggests situations under which greater (or lesser) attitude-behavior consistency is found. This theory, and supporting evidence (Armitage & Connor, 2001), indicates that higher attitude-to-behavior consistency is more likely to occur when beliefs supporting the attitude and behavior are in place, including perceived subjective norms (what faculty members believe others in their department will approve) and perceived behavioral control (the degree to which faculty members believe they can alter their behaviors). To operationalize this theory to the study of syllabus research, one could examine espoused and actual teaching practice in the context of department teaching norms and faculty self-efficacy. Work in this vein would begin to illuminate why faculty do not always "practice what they preach" in syllabi and related statements of teaching philosophy.

Additionally, future research could examine how faculty present (or perhaps more accurately, "sell") OB to students in the classroom, as well as the extent to which students "buy" the arguments and information transmitted in class. A great example of this type of research from a related area (i.e., "selling" organizational change) can be found in Sonenshein (2010). Adopting this research approach to the study of OB would be very important research, particularly given the low ratings that students have given to OB courses in past AACSB surveys (see Rynes & Trank, 1999; Rynes, Trank, Lawson, & Ilies, 2003).

Another clear limitation of our study is that it is based only on U.S. MBA programs. Therefore, it would be very useful to replicate this study in other major regions such as Europe, Asia, Australia–New Zealand, and South America, particularly given the very rapid spread of business schools in these regions (Bradshaw, 2011; Walsh, 2011). To date, there have been few studies of whether the topics, texts, articles, and cases used in North American business schools are similar to those used elsewhere. To the extent that different materials are found to be used, examinations of both manifest and latent content should be conducted in order to determine whether the underlying topics, assumptions, or philosophies are nevertheless similar across regions as was done in Liang and Wang's (2004) study of business cases in China.

Relatedly, future research could examine the incremental outcomes of adding leadership courses to either OB or management courses in terms of graduates' knowledge and skill bases. Although there is evidence that leadership development programs often provide both statistically and practically significant outcomes for managers in ongoing organizations (e.g., Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996; M. J. Burke & Day, 1986; Collins & Holton, 2004), similar research is just emerging for leadership courses in MBA programs (see the 2011 special issue of *Academy of Management Learning and Education*; DeRue, Podolny, & Sitkin, 2011). Clearly, future research on outcomes of leadership and other OB-related skills is needed.

Acknowledgments

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. We use the term *OB-related* because many courses whose content is primarily OB (as determined by analysis of the topics taught) are not titled "Organizational Behavior." Rather, many are called Management, Leadership, or some combination of Management, Leadership, and OB. The term *OB-related* allows us to differentiate the larger set of courses ($n = 241$) from those explicitly called "OB" ($n = 59$).
2. AACSB International provided data from the accreditation databases for 2006-2007, the last complete year before we began collecting data. The vast majority of the schools for which AACSB had data were based in the United States ($n = 258$, 87%), which is indicative of its historical focus on U.S. programs. The international schools in their database were considerably larger on average, and likely not generally representative of programs in their own countries. For example, average full-time faculty size for U.S.-based programs was 61 ($SD = 35$) versus an average size of 92 for the international programs ($SD = 39$). Because our data set would have been heavily driven by U.S. programs in any case, and because

the accredited international programs were likely to be unrepresentative of their own countries, we narrowed our focus to full-time U.S. programs.

3. Because some schools have multiple syllabi, the statistical assumption about independence among observations, relevant to some of our analyses, is violated. However, avoiding this problem entirely would require either discarding data from programs with more than one OB course or adopting an analytical technique (such as HLM) that accommodates nested data. Unfortunately, such techniques are not appropriate in this context because most schools are represented by a single data point.

4. Five syllabi were discarded because we discovered they were electives rather than required courses and the other four were discarded because, on further discussion, we decided that the course content did not have sufficient fit within the OB domain.

5. Some instructors used earlier versions of these books; we have included those earlier books in the count for the latest edition except in the case of Robbins (2005) and Robbins and Judge (2007), which were deemed sufficiently different to warrant separate entries.

6. Prior to grouping on course titles, we made multiple attempts to find empirically derived clusters based on content analyses of course descriptions, pedagogical terminology, evaluation methods, and content coverage, but no meaningfully interpretable clusters emerged from these methods.

7. However, it is worth noting that a recent study (Charlier et al., 2011), using an extensive data set of MBA syllabi, found that OB syllabi had more mentions of evidence-based management or research findings than any other syllabi in management-related areas.

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