CREATING LEARNING ORGANIZATIONS
ODKM 715 – Fall 2020
GEORGE MASON UNIVERSITY
SYLLABUS

Professor: Con Kenney
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Class Location: GMU Zoom

Class Time: Fridays, 9/25, 10/23, & 12/4 (5 – 10PM)
Saturdays, 8/22 (9AM – 6PM), 9/12, 10/10, 11/7 & 11/21 (9AM – 2PM)

Office: Arlington Campus, TBD
Office hours (on Zoom or by phone): Friday class days from 3 to 5 PM or by appointment
Telephone: 703-725-9074

OVERVIEW

The rapidly changing world that we live and work in requires considerable flexibility in our thinking, conceptualizing, and sensemaking processes. A primary objective of this course is to help each person see beyond long-established worldviews to explore and recognize alternative worldviews. The intention is not to change anyone’s values. Instead, it is to expand horizons and to help ‘take off the blinders’ of unexamined assumptions. The course draws upon conceptual and experiential resources to increase competencies to participate and negotiate meaning in a wider range of organizational and relational settings, to explore how theories are used, and to discern appropriate contexts for theory application. This process is fundamental to the kind of learning that Wenger (1998) describes as changing “who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong, to negotiate meaning” (p. 226).

The course content will include exploration into topics such as multiple levels of learning (single loop, double loop, and triple loop), tacit and explicit knowledge, multiple ways of knowing, sensemaking and enacting of organizational life, communities of practice, collaborative creativity, reflective learning, multiculturalism, and contextual relevancy as they relate to organizations. To bring these concepts to life, double-loop learning will be practiced and there will be an attempt to engage in triple-loop learning. Romme and van Witteloostuijn (1999) suggest that while double loop learning “involves reframing … [and] learning to see things in new ways,” triple loop learning requires “developing new processes or methodologies for arriving at such re-framings” (p. 439). In triple-loop learning not only are norms questioned but embedded assumptions of how we think and learn are reexamined. William Isaacs (1993) suggests that this approach “is the learning that permits insight into the nature of paradigm itself, not merely an assessment of which paradigm is superior.”

This course offers a theoretical and conceptual foundation that will inform and guide the pragmatic work of creating, facilitating, and supporting learning organizations. Because of the dynamic and discontinuous nature of most contemporary organizations, many traditional learning techniques for intervention are inadequate. The alternative that this course offers is providing exposure to an array of theoretical, conceptual, and metaphorical perspectives. Through an interpretive approach to reading the literature and organizational practice, to expressing yourself verbally and in writing, to hearing each other, and to paying attention to the learning context, you will learn new ways of seeing and thinking about organizations that are grounded in collective wisdom.
LEARNING OUTCOMES

- To develop an increased understanding of organizational theory and organizational analysis
- To develop an increased understanding of and become better able to communicate across paradigms, cultures, and communities of practice
- To increase your capacity to design and present professional quality organizational analyses to others
- To improve your competency working effectively in teams
- To improve your competency designing and implementing learning aids for peers
- To improve your competency making clear and concise oral presentations

LEARNING PROCESS

My intention in the course is to jointly create with you a shared learning space where the mutuality of learning among all of us as participants is explored, integrating informational and theoretical learning with experiential learning. I use this approach because it is the most effective form of adult learning (Kolb, 1984) and because it is congruent with the course content. David Kolb in his classic book, *Experiential Learning*, says, “Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 38).

This approach shifts my role as the professor from being primarily a one-way purveyor of information to becoming partially a facilitator who creates a receptive space and offers varied stimuli for learning. While there will be lectures and much emphasis on the reading assignments, each class will actively involve you and allow you to generate your own data about key concepts. The essence of organizational learning is embedded in the concept of learning that is grounded in experience with a focus on the ongoing processes of the learning, more than on the outcomes. Because conversations are a fundamental medium for shared experiences and potentially a primary mode of learning, we will be attentive throughout the semester to the kinds of conversations that facilitate or impede learning in organizations.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS AND EVALUATION

Course requirements include a combination of reading of texts, a comprehensive analysis of an organization in a major paper, team preparation and a team presentation based on a case study of NASA, team member contribution, and effort and participation in all course activities. Part of the role of each student in the course is to be an active creator – not a passive recipient – of learning. Because this role involves shared leadership in the learning process, it is especially important to complete assigned readings prior to class and to come to class fully prepared. **Attendance and full participation in all team and class meetings are essential.** Moreover, in the Executive program, the entire course is covered within the actual hours of 3 full weekends (even though it will be spread over 3 months because you will be taking 3 courses simultaneously). Therefore, if you miss one class, you have missed a considerable amount of the semester class time.

READINGS

*Please note that the GMU bookstore does not plan to sell textbooks in-store for the first two weeks of the semester to comply with social distancing requirements. Therefore I recommend that you procure your books online from the bookstore or elsewhere prior to the start of the fall semester.*

(Please do not use the Executive Edition of this book or any edition earlier than the Second Edition, 1997. If you choose to use any full length edition of the book other than the 2006 edition (such as the 1997 edition), you will need to identify any page, chapter, or content differences among the editions and find the missing content on your own.)

**Additional Readings** include book chapters and articles and will be available in Blackboard.


Basic Books, 128-167. (Optional)


** Sources available through GMU e-journal links as well as through e-reserves. Optional – indicates related readings to supplement learning though not required.

**ASSIGNMENTS**

**CASE PRESENTATION/TEAM PROJECT ON NASA** – Your team project focuses on NASA during one of three periods in the agency’s existence. The first period runs until 1980, the second until 2000, and the third until the present day. I recommend you focus on extraordinary events such as the Challenger or Columbia accidents to examine NASA for two reasons. The first reason is that an extraordinary event can expose aspects of an organization that are rarely visible to outsiders and are often taken for granted and not questioned by insiders. The second reason is that there is an immense public information base on these extraordinary events. Your teams need to gather and sift through evidence to inform your case analysis and connect that evidence to organizational metaphors and theories as you develop a deeper understanding of the agency. The NASA Challenger Case and the on-line Report on the Columbia Case offer you an opportunity to explore and analyze these organizational examples, and you can use newspaper, news magazine, journal articles, and other media to inform your analysis of these events. You will be working on these case studies as a team project with a small randomly-assigned team of 5 or 6 people. Your team will choose a theme and give your team presentation on November 7th.

The supporting materials for the Challenger case are in the Arlington library and the Johnson Center Library on the Fairfax campus. They are on reserve on seven-day check-out. They include many reports, letters, documents, charts, etc. from the actual case and three hours of videotapes. The availability of this kind of material from an actual organization is unusual and accessible only because NASA is a public agency. The resources are extremely valuable as sources for learning related to the course content. The content quality of the videotapes and overall information is superb. In addition to the case material in the library, each person (preferably in your teams – for more learning and for more fun) will need to view the video or DVD, *Apollo 13*.

Team presentations will be no more than 45 minutes long including at least 10 minutes for interaction with the whole class for questions and answers. Each team must ensure that their presentations are completed within 45 minutes and keep track of the time, as I will not allow any extra time. We will determine the members of your team are on August 22nd and a paragraph describing the topic of your team’s presentation is due at the beginning of class on September 12th. I will read these paragraphs quickly and give you feedback to facilitate your team planning, and I will also schedule a check-in conference call with each team the week of October 12th. The presentation grade will be based on the depth of the content and insight, creativity and engagement of the other students and the effective use of course readings to support your analyses. I recommend you review the Morgan metaphors to help you frame your presentations; we will be devoting a major part of our class time to discussing these metaphors, and each of you will be employing them in your PRAEs. Your NASA team presentation is an opportunity to practice using the metaphors to strengthen your organizational analysis and theorizing.

**TEAM MEMBER EVALUATION** – After all team presentations are completed, you will be evaluating both your own contributions and those of your teammates in your team project as a portion of your grade for the course. No one will see your evaluations except for you and me. The evaluations are due by midnight on November 9th.
TEAM-LEAD CLASS DISCUSSION OF ASSIGNED READING – Each team will be responsible for leading the class discussion for an assigned reading. During our first meeting we will assign the readings and dates. Focus on making concise, substantial, and thoughtful comments that grow out of your reading of the assigned reading and your thoughts and reflections on the concepts in the reading, and possible applications of relevant ideas. Consistent with the essence of learning, your contributions need to attend less to agreement or disagreement with the texts or other people’s statements and to attend more to respectful inquiry into each other’s ideas and exploration of your own earlier assumptions. Each individual or team will prepare a single page learning aid and email it to me 8 hours before the class discussion time. Each team must ensure that their presentations are completed within 30 minutes and keep track of the time, as I will not allow any extra time. Your grade will be based on the incisiveness of the questions in the learning aid and effectiveness in facilitating learning for everyone in the room.

PERSONAL REFLECTION APPLICATION ESSAY – The PRAE for ODKM 715 will be drawn from an organizational change or some other notable organizational process that you are currently experiencing or experienced in the recent past. This PRAE will be somewhat different from the ones you write in the Group Dynamics & Team Learning class because you will focus on an experience outside of the school context and view the dynamics and change efforts in your organization through the lens of multiple organizational metaphors and other theories covered in readings and class.

As in all PRAEs, you will describe your concrete experience in the organization and your reflections on the experience. Your reflections will include your personal reflections as well as those of at least 3 other people in the organization, whom you will interview formally or with whom you talk informally about the effort. A formal interview guide has the advantage of providing more consistent information across the people you talk to, but I recognize that it may be easier to talk to peers and/or superiors in a less structured way. Regardless of how you collect information from other people about their perceptions, you should develop a list of questions you hope to cover. These questions should be open-ended but not vague. In addition to asking yourself questions, also develop your reflections into a narrative form. Try to understand and speculate about the behavior and reflections of others based upon your interviews, observations, and insights.

As you take an analytical perspective in the PRAE, draw extensively on Morgan’s book and select at least two of his organizational metaphors and three metaphors total that you choose as informative lens through which to describe the organization to develop your analysis. It is also necessary to draw on most of the other readings for ODKM 715 in your PRAE. You may cite a few additional outside reference sources that you think are particularly relevant, but you are not required to bring in sources outside of those assigned for this course. Finally, in your active experimentation section of the PRAE, describe what you have learned and how your learning will guide or is already guiding your behavior in new and different ways. It is critical to be both specific and comprehensive in this part of the paper.

The PRAE should be between 12 and 14 pages, double-spaced, 11-12 font in Microsoft Word format only, and is Due to me by email by midnight on December 6th. Please refer to the section below, “A Note on the Quality of Standard for your Work,” for further guidance in preparation of this paper. I will also give more specific guidelines for writing the PRAE in the early weeks of the semester. If the paper varies significantly in length from this recommendation, lacks a personal metaphor as well as 2 metaphors from Morgan, or does not incorporate many of the course readings, your grade will be negatively influenced. I will grant one extension at the request of a student, whom I expect to propose and meet a new due date, up to two weeks before the end of the semester. Students choosing this option will decrease by one letter grade their grades for this assignment.

EFFORT AND APPROACH USED – Missing class is strongly discouraged. If you miss more than one
class, I strongly suggest that you take the course a different semester. Attendance is part of your effort and approach grade.

As the professor, I will complete this part of the evaluation after the final class based on observations and interactions relevant to the course over the semester. My criteria will include attendance and full participation in each class, your emphasis on inquiry more than advocacy in class conversations, the importance of using differing kinds of participation, and your efforts to practice specific behaviors that are less well developed for you. For example, speaking in class will need to be carefully self-monitored in ways that support the mutuality of learning by all class members. While speaking in class is important, the amount of speaking time needs to be balanced with the need for others to have air-time, the quality of listening, efforts to build on the contributions of others and on the substance and content of the readings, asking questions of each other and of me, reflection, thoughtfulness of comments, and other contributions made to the creation of a mutual learning space. I keep notes on my observations in each class that I use for grading at the end of the semester.

**A Note on the Format and Quality of Standard for Your Work** – In addition to specific criteria listed for each project & assignment, the quality of all work for this class will also be evaluated on the basis of:

- Scope and thoroughness
- Richness of observation and expression
- Depth of reflection, insight, and understanding
- Demonstration of your personal learning
- Demonstration of effort and intentionality to learn
- Demonstration that you are stretching yourself beyond previous experiences and underlying assumptions

While writing is not the only way that these various areas can be expressed, demonstrating strong writing skills is an important part of any quality, highly regarded graduate program. Writing is an iterative process that usually requires a number of drafts before submission. Allowing enough time to revise multiple drafts of your paper is essential. It is important that written work clearly expresses your ideas, as that is a critical component of professional life and professional work.

For all written assignments, please submit an electronic copy. The Word document should be double-space, 11-12 font, Microsoft Word format. For all written assignments, please do include a title page with your name, title of the paper, date, name of the assignment, course name & number, and include page numbers on all pages. You must include your last name in the filename. Also, always include a bibliography listing any sources (including the assigned class readings) that you use other than your own ideas. For all citations, footnotes, and bibliographies, please use the most recent version of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association.

All assignments have due dates, and I expect to receive them on time. If you require an extension, please consult with me prior to the Due Date. If you do not get an extension approved prior to the due date of any assignment or if the length of any paper varies significantly from the length specified for the assignment, your grade will be negatively affected. Extensions on Due Dates will be given only upon exceptional circumstances.

**GMU Writing** : I encourage you to contact the GMU Writing Center if you need to improve the quality of your writing. The website link is – [http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/](http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/). Information about services at the Arlington Campus Writing Center is below:

- **Location**: Van Metre 212
- **Phone**: (703) 993-4491
Check with the Writing Center for hours as they recently extended their hours.

**Special Needs of Students:** If you are a student with a disability and you need academic accommodations, please see me and contact the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at 703 993-2474. Arrange all academic accommodations through the DRC.

**PLAGIARISM:** Accurately citing all resources that contribute to your work is mandatory. The official policy of the university regarding plagiarism, that must be followed, is:

**Plagiarism:** All work must be your own. Inappropriate use of the work of others without attribution is plagiarism and a George Mason University Honor Code violation punishable by expulsion from the University. All students should familiarize themselves with this honor code provision. (To guard against plagiarism and to treat students equitably, written work may be checked against existing published materials or digital databases available through various plagiarism detection services. Accordingly materials submitted to all courses must be available in electronic format.

The profession of scholarship and the intellectual life of a university as well as the field of public policy inquiry depend fundamentally on a foundation of trust. Thus, any act of plagiarism strikes at the heart of the meaning of the university and the purpose of the Schar School of Policy. It constitutes a serious breach of professional ethics and it is unacceptable.

Plagiarism is the use of another’s words or ideas presented as one’s own. It includes, among other things, the use of specific words, ideas, or frameworks that are the product of another’s work. Honesty and thoroughness in citing sources is essential to professional accountability and personal responsibility. Appropriate citation is necessary so that arguments, evidence, and claims can be critically examined. Plagiarism is wrong because of the injustice it does to the person whose ideas are stolen, and it is wrong because it constitutes lying to one’s professional colleagues. From a prudential perspective, it is shortsighted and self-defeating, and it can ruin a professional career.

The faculty of the Schar School of Policy takes plagiarism seriously and has adopted a zero tolerance policy. Any plagiarized assignment will receive an automatic grade of “F.” This may lead to failure for the course, resulting in dismissal from the University. This dismissal will be noted on the student’s transcript. For foreign students who are on a university-sponsored visa (e.g. F-1, J-1 or J-2), dismissal also results in the revocation of their visa.

To help enforce the Schar School policy on plagiarism, all written work submitted in partial fulfillment of course or degree requirements must be available in electronic form so I can compare it with electronic databases, as well as submit it to commercial services to which the School subscribes. Faculty may at any time submit student’s work without prior permission from the student. Thus, I require all of your written work be submitted electronically. The Schar school policy on plagiarism is supplementary to the George Mason University Honor Code; it is not intended to replace it or substitute for it.

**ODKM Plagiarism Policy** – In addition to above, you must cite any time that you reuse your own work, indicating all previous uses you have made of the same work in this or any other class.
Course Assignments and Evaluation:

- Team Presentation of NASA Case Studies – 20%
- Team Member Evaluation – 10%
- Individual or Team Assigned Reading - 15%
- Personal Reflection Application Essay (PRAE) – 40%
- Effort and approach (throughout the semester) – 15%

CLASS SESSIONS, TOPICS, READINGS and DUE DATES

CLASS 1 – Saturday, August 22, 2020

Read Prior To Class
Syllabus (come to the 1st class prepared with any questions about the syllabus)
Morgan, Preface, chapters 1, 10, 11 (in that order)

Topics
Overview of the Course/Course objectives and expectations
Review Course Syllabus – come prepared with comments or questions
Expanding our perceptions of organizations
Metaphorical approaches to understanding organizations
Levels of Learning & Underlying Assumptions
Organizing through conversations: Inquiry as distinct from Advocacy

CLASS 2 – Saturday, September 12, 2020 – Team Topics Description Due (Please email me)

Read Prior to Class
Morgan, chapters 2, & 3
Challenger Case Study materials
Jacobs & Heracleous, “…Reflective Dialogue as an enabler of strategic innovation”
Graham, Haidt, and Nosek, “Liberals and Conservatives …”

Topics
Creating collaborative teams
Conversation & Reflective Dialogue for strategic organizational benefit
Conversation & Reflective Dialogue to stimulate new Knowledge Creation
Organizations as Machines & as Organisms
CLASS 3 – Friday, September 25, 2020

Read Prior to Class
Morgan book, chapters 4 & 5
Argyris, “Teaching Smart People How to Learn”

Topics
Brains as metaphors for organizational learning
Organizations as Cultures
NASA as an organization
 Vaughn’s ideas on “Lessons Learned” from Challenger
Sensemaking and Enactment in organizations

CLASS 4 – Saturday, October 10, 2020

Read Prior to Class
Morgan book, chapters 6 & 7
Isaacs Article (“Taking Flight …”)
Argyris Article, “Good Communication That Blocks Learning …”
Schon, chapter 5 (“The Structure of …”) (Optional)
Scharmer, “Uncovering the Blind Spot of Leadership”

Topics
Sensemaking and Enactment in complex and emergent organizations
Organizations as Political Systems
Implications of politics for the OD professional
Power differentials in organizations
Organizations as Psychic Prisons
Defensive routines in organizations
Learning as a Reflective Practitioner

CLASS 5–Friday, October 23, 2020

Read Prior to Class
Morgan book, chapters 8 & 9
Weick, “Organizing and failure of imagination”
Heifetz, “A Survival Guide …”

Topics
Organizations as Flux and Transformation
Organizations as instruments of Domination

CLASS 6 – Saturday, November 7, 2020

Topics
NASA Team Presentations and Team Evaluations
CLASS 7 – Saturday, November 21, 2020

Review Prior to Class
Morgan book, chapters 2 to 9

Topics
Employing Organizational Metaphors in your work
Transformative organizations/Imaging organizations

CLASS 8 – Friday, December 4, 2020

Read Prior to Class
Sackmann, “Culture and Subcultures: …”
Belenky, et al., chapters 6 (“Procedural Knowledge …” selection) (Optional)

Topics
The Edge of Chaos
Differences as sources of learning
Facilitating conflict that promotes learning
Organizational learning as Inquiry and Listening, as distinct from Advocacy
Ways of knowing – separate, connected, constructed
Sources of information that shape perceptions
Engaging in intentional conversation as an agent of change
Bringing it together
Implications for future work
Course closure
Course evaluations