

# Who's your audience? Expanding I-O teaching to non-I-O students

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The focal article by Kath and colleagues (2020) presents a clear and laudable argument for why and how I-O instructors should be demonstrating best practices of teaching in the classroom. Though they mention the importance of having non-I-O students benefit from I-O classes, implicit in their body of helpful resources and advice is the assumption that instructors will be focused on teaching I-O students (or at least, psychology majors). In our response, we extend the I-O content described in the focal article beyond simply that of informing our teaching practices; instead, the content of what is taught in an I-O course can and should be presented in a way that is applicable to students from all fields and educational backgrounds. Taken a step further, we daresay that an "Introduction to I-O Psychology" course should be a foundational general studies course for all undergraduate students regardless of major.

Too often, I-O instructors seem to be stuck in the idea that they're teaching future I-O graduate students, researchers, consultants, or HR professionals (Weathington et al., 2014; Ones et al., 2017). As a result, I-O content tends to be presented with such an audience in mind: diversity and inclusion is taught from the perspective of test bias and predictive validity in selection, leadership is taught from the perspective of training leaders within organizations, and teamwork is taught from the perspective of managing teams or assessing team performance. However, the reality is that the field of I-O has much to offer to students who are planning to become professional musicians, medical doctors, restaurant managers, or even have no clue what they want to do post-graduation. The popularization of an I-O course for non-psychology students falls in line with SIOP's strategic goals in advancing public knowledge of our field, and we argue is a worthy goal of any I-O

instructor. Kath and colleagues (2020) acknowledge this in their focal article, but their recommendations remain focused on how each of the four content areas (training and development, diversity and inclusion, groups and teams, and leadership) inform best practices in teaching. Following their four-part structure, we demonstrate how each of these content areas not only inform best practices in teaching, but can also themselves be taught as content applicable to any undergraduate student who steps foot in our classroom.

## Training and Development

While the focal article focuses on the application of what we know about effective training programs to teaching in the classroom (e.g., needs assessments, goal-setting, and delivery modems), the same content could be used to provide any undergraduate with the skills to succeed in their college and future careers, regardless of their major. Goal-setting in particular has a demonstrated positive impact on student success (Schunk, 1990; Zimmerman et al., 1992). Not only is it important to create goal-setting opportunities or even assignments within an I-O course, it's just as important to teach goal-setting skills and self-evaluation methods (e.g., SMART goals, BARS) for students to use in their overall academic and professional development. The old maxim of teaching a person to fish holds true here. Rather than teaching about goal-setting for the purposes of future research or to set goals for students in the course you're teaching, goal-setting can and should be taught as a developmental tool for students to apply in their personal and professional lives outside of the confines of a specific I-O classroom.

Even more important is the content knowledge I-O provides on career development, which was not mentioned in the focal article. Career paths have changed notably in the past two decades due to new technology and changing culture; no longer are paths straightforward and linear, careers are increasingly convoluted, unpredictable, and filled with multiple twists and turns throughout a lifetime. Recent theories of career development have begun to both acknowledge and provide

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guidance on how individuals can navigate the complex path of career development (Sullivan & Baruch, 2009; Wang & Wanberg, 2017). Today's students, having watched their parents' or guardians' generation go through a relatively straightforward career path, would be well-served by exposure to and preparation for the unique challenges of modern career development. Moreover, while career services offices exist on most college campuses, many are understaffed or underfunded (Koc & Tsang, 2015) and lack the capabilities to provide students with tools to understand their own career interests, congruence between their interests with careers (e.g., O\*NET interest inventory; Su, 2012), and what to look for in their initial employment search upon graduation. Even interviewing skills could be trained by exposing students to the science of selection and the methods of scoring used for assessments such as structured interviews, assessment centers, and non-cognitive tests. Few are better equipped to prepare students to ace the interview process for their first job than the people who helped develop the science behind how selection should be conducted.

### **Diversity and Inclusion**

Kath and colleagues (2020) present a number of promising strategies to create a classroom more conducive towards including and valuing diverse perspectives. Given the recent anti-racism movement, it's all the more important that everyone is equipped with the understanding of and skill set to engage with a diverse group of people. Diversity and inclusion isn't just meant for a student hoping to become a Chief Diversity Office at a company or school, or for a student intending to work or study abroad. A music major is bound to encounter musicians from all sorts of cultural backgrounds. A computer software engineer will likely be coding with colleagues with whom their only common language is Java or Python. A food server at a Chipotle will have visitors coming in from around the world. It's in these everyday interactions, both personal and professional, where an inclusive atmosphere truly matters.

Any student who's taken an I-O-related course such as Human Resources Management likely has been taught the basics of cross-cultural communication. Most will likely have heard of Hofstede's cultural values (Taras et al., 2010) or the GLOBE cross-cultural leadership study (House et al., 1999). I-O content knowledge such as these provide invaluable training in acknowledging and valuing diverse perspectives, and skills in communicating and leading in a way sensitive to cultural differences. Imagine if everyone in society

not only understood, but also valued different perspectives on hierarchy and power-distance. We contend that a whole host of poorly communicated messages, unintentionally exclusive organizational systems, and homogenous groups and teams could be avoided with the widespread knowledge of diversity and inclusion research from I-O. Certainly, having everyone take an I-O course would not magically solve the deeply rooted racial issues in society - but it would be a step in the right direction.

### **Groups and Teams**

Despite the prevalence of team projects assigned in most classrooms, there's an ironic paucity in instruction on *how* to work in a team. The focal article primarily discusses research-backed methods of improving the team assignment to make it a better experience for students (e.g., separating individual and team grades, making team projects semester-long). We add to this the charge for I-O instructors to incorporate research-backed instruction in how students should work in teams in the first place. For example, the focal article discusses the importance of the team charter in setting expectations and establishing procedures (Mathieu & Rapp, 2009). Likewise, an understanding of stages of group development (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), the punctuated-equilibrium model (Chang et al., 2003), or the importance of individual roles within a team (Driskell et al., 2017) would help any student properly prepare for and plan for a team project whether in class or at work. Moreover, many students are likely to find themselves leading a team at some point in their future, whether it be managing a project implementation team at work, or collating efforts for social justice movements. Such students would benefit from a basic and broad understanding of team processes and how they differ between planning and implementation (Marks et al., 2001), or how to be a "boundary-spanner" that connects the current team to other external teams (Marone, 2010).

One other overlooked area of I-O research on groups and teams involves the type of team. The vast majority of student teams function as project teams, which are created for the sole purpose of a specific project deliverable and disbanded thereafter. With the growth of new technology and new ways of working, research has identified a number of different types of teams such as virtual teams, global or colocated teams, and multi-team systems (e.g., McDonough III et al., 2001; Marks et al., 2005). These teams function differently, with unique processes, expectations, and best

practices. For example, an emergency medical response team would function differently from a top management team of a Fortune 500 company. Students preparing for a career in either field, medical or business strategy, should be given the basic tools of understanding teamwork in their respective scenarios. A 2016 survey by SHRM reported that 83% of HR professionals indicated that teamwork is “extremely important” in hiring entry-level employees (SHRM, 2016). Given that teamwork is so important to any career field, it would follow that I-O instructors should be leading the charge to help prepare students with such an important skill set.

### Leadership

While Kath and colleagues (2020) are certainly not wrong in their explication of how I-O instructors should emulate effective leadership, we would argue that it’s even more important to teach and equip students to *be* effective leaders. A Gallup poll of over 7000 US adults revealed that half of them, at some point in their careers, had quit a job primarily due to having a bad supervisor (Harter & Adkins, 2015). One would think, after over a century of extensive research on what are effective leadership behaviors (e.g., Fleishman et al., 1991; Behrendt et al., 2017), and a staggering number of popular press books on leadership (e.g., Kouzes & Posner, 1977; Collins, 2001), that there would be more good managers out in the world. The unfortunate reality is that we as I-Os have done a poor job of disseminating research-backed strategies for effective leadership to a wider audience. Leadership can, in fact, be taught under the right conditions (Lacerenza et al., 2017; Day et al., 2014), and an undergraduate I-O course is a great place to start.

While the focal article focuses on transformational leadership, an undergraduate unit in leadership would more appropriately focus on (a) exposing students to the vast array of different leadership behaviors, and (b) providing developmental opportunities. Recent research has exposed serious concerns in the validity of transformational leadership as a construct and measure (e.g., van Knippenberg & Sitkin, 2013). Too often, “leader development programs” found in extracurriculars or the occasional unit on management in a non-I-O class teach nothing more than a perfunctory overview of transformational leadership as the ideal form of leadership. Rather, students should be exposed to the variety and complexity of different leader behavior schemas: charismatic, task-oriented, relationship-oriented, ethical, authoritarian, servant, functional, passive, etc.

These behavioral sets overlap and are not mutually exclusive; students can be taught to engage in different behaviors depending on their own innate traits and on the situation at hand. Effective leadership relies on a combination of the leader’s own skill set and individual characteristics, coupled with aspects about the situation, to determine appropriate behaviors or combinations of behaviors (e.g., Zaccaro et al., 2018). It’s like providing students with a toolbelt of different leader behaviors they could use, then helping them identify their personal strengths and weaknesses, and the right time and place to use different behaviors. Secondly, an I-O course could provide developmental challenges, or situations designed to stretch the student to learn by practicing leadership in tough situations, which are critical to teaching leadership (DeRue & Wellman, 2009). Such simulation assignments could be adjusted depending on the student’s career path or interests: a mechanical engineering student might be tasked with planning and forming a construction crew team, while an art history student might be tasked with managing a restoration team for a specific art piece. Especially with recent technological advancements in game-based learning (e.g., Sousa & Rocha, 2019), leadership simulation exercises can be an effective - and entertaining - learning tool in the classroom.

### Concluding Thoughts

Just as the focal article aimed to break down “artificial barriers” to help I-O instructors think about how to incorporate I-O content into the practice of teaching, we hope this response breaks down any barriers that, intentionally or unintentionally, restrict I-O courses to primarily psychology and management students. In our brief and high-level survey of the four topic areas, we only mentioned important I-O content areas that would be relevant to non-I-O students. We encourage readers to think critically and perhaps offer additional guidance in future pieces on specific best practices in how to teach these content areas to non-I-O students. With any luck, the undergraduate I-O introductory course could become like Harvard’s CS50x, an Intro to Computer Science course so popular that the many of its hundreds of students each semester aren’t even computer science majors (Colvin, 2019).

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