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## Experiential learning exercise: Designing a pirate community using the cultural web

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Justin O'Brien<sup>A</sup>

A *Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK*

William Lanham-New<sup>B</sup>

B *MSc Management Programme Director, Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK*

Chris Mahon<sup>C</sup>

C *Director of MBA Programmes, Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK*

Erivan White<sup>D</sup>

D *Senior Lecturer and Foundation Programme Director, Surrey Business School, University of Surrey, UK*

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### Abstract

The purpose of this experiential learning design article is threefold: firstly, to provide an opportunity for icebreaking or community building using a team-based activity, secondly, to apply Johnson and Scholes' cultural web framework in a performative, open space learning context of the historic pirate culture, and finally, to connect the learning experience to job hunting, specifically helping students assess their fit with potential employers.

This group exercise requires participants to use and integrate a variety of concepts from marketing and strategy, and then subsequently reflect on their performance with an after-action review. The exercise is likely to be most appropriate for advanced undergraduate and master's classes, however, it has also been used successfully for community engagement on a foundation year. It would appear to be particularly useful for professional development, management, leadership, and organisational modules where a lean-in, experiential-oriented pedagogy is deployed.

**Keywords:** Community building; cultural web; employer cultural fit; experiential learning; group working; icebreaking; performance presentation; pirate code; team building.

### Introduction

First show the 'Be More Pirate' YouTube video short from Sam Coniff Allende (2018b) that presents a provocative, alternative perspective to piracy. Then introduce students to the Johnson and Scholes (2011) cultural web model. Share thick pens and large sheets of paper with students whilst briefing them to create their own pirate ship culture (synthesising historic pirate organisation ideas with the cultural web). They are then invited to pitch in plenary their newly created community to attract new recruits, drawn

from the wider class audience. The groups are encouraged to use images, music, and other performative elements to project the essence of their community. On completion of each group presentation, new shipmates vote with their feet by physically moving to the dock (tabletops) of their preferred Jolly Roger gang. To debrief, the instructor facilitates an after-action review discussion to elucidate and critically assess the appeal or lack of each of the crews' propositions. In conclusion, it draws links to employability and how applicants might seek to evaluate their own cultural fit with potential employers.

This exercise might be used as a more general ice-breaking, team-building activity on a diverse range of business and management programmes, but also have application in other disciplines that require students to work effectively in groups or teams.

### Theoretical foundation

This dynamic learning environment concept draws on the disciplines of marketing, positioning theory and competitor analysis, and strategy in applying Johnson and Scholes' (2011) cultural web alongside the mission, values, and goals (MVG) framework. Pedagogically, it is inspired by Monk et al.'s (2011) open-space learning concept that encourages group collaboration through creative puzzling and the use of more interactive, collaborative movement in the classroom.

### Learning objectives

After completing the exercise and reflection, students will be able to:

- Critique their ability (both group and individual) to apply multiple concepts simultaneously whilst working under time pressure
- Design and perform a compelling and distinctive community concept
- Reflect on their pitch and particularly communications skills
- Assess their team's and other competitor groups' outputs, giving feedback
- Reflect on the applicability of the cultural web framework to help assess their own fit with potential employers

### Assumed prior learning

From the marketing discipline, ideally, students have covered positioning and basic competitor analysis, and from strategy, students are aware of the missions, values, and goals framework and Johnson and Scholes' cultural web. To prepare effectively before the timetabled session for the shorter version of the workshop, students should be invited to watch the 'Be More Pirate' video on YouTube and familiarise themselves with the cultural web model (both links below). If 90 or 120 minutes are available, this activity can be undertaken at the outset of the in-person session.

### Instructions for running the exercise

Ideally, five groups of three to six students should be able to gather standing (or sit if any participants cannot) around a discussion desk or wall space, slightly separated from other groups. Instructors should be prepared to adapt to the environment to make reasonable adjustments for participants with mobility or other special needs. Where possible, arranging or having the tables and chairs moved to the outside of the space, creating a clear, flat central space is perfect.

The following equipment is required to run this exercise:

- Large sheets of paper (A0 or a flip chart pad), with one sheet plus spares for each group to create a symbolically meaningful flag or banner for the pirate community they are designing
- Adhesive (spray glue or sticky tack) to allow pirate flags to be displayed on either the walls or, if unavailable, use tabletops.
- A range of thick, working, marker pens, at least three colour choices per group.

### Step by step guidance

Instructors should:

1. **[5 mins]** Remind students of the assumed prior learning (MVG, competitor analysis, positioning, cultural web (see Appendix 3).
2. Discreetly ask if anyone has any mobility issues that could require adjustment.
3. Explain that this task affords an opportunity to engage in experiential learning, applying their theoretical knowledge in an unconventional, creative context.
4. Seek to create a safe space and engender trust within the group by emphasising that there is no right answer, no one is a prize-winning artist, and the over-arching goal is to achieve reflective learning.
5. Explain that students should role-play being on board a pirate ship coming into port looking to pitch for new recruits. Pick out some salient highlights from Appendices 1 and 2 if prior engagement with 'Be More Pirate' was limited.
6. Outline the key roles required from each group; graphic designer, narrator/presenter, timekeeper, creatives, crew and [emphasis] a spy or two.
7. **[25 mins]** Explain that the group has two tasks and 25 minutes. Firstly, to draw and populate a cultural web-based summary of their desired Pirate community, and secondly, to create and perform (singing, dancing, acting and other creative styles are encouraged) their own jolly roger flag (or symbols) that represents their distinctive culture, forming the centrepiece of their two-minute (maximum) plenary presentation.
8. Check that everyone has a clear understanding of their instructions.
9. Ask students to now move swiftly into groups of three to six, locating their own working space whilst grabbing two sheets of paper and three marker pens per group.
10. After 12 minutes, instruct groups to stop populating their cultural web, if they have not already, and now focus on creating their jolly roger flag as a symbolically rich banner under which they would be prepared to sail (belong to).
11. After 24 minutes, give groups a one-minute warning to be prepared to share their pirate community concept in strictly two minutes or less.

12. **[10 mins]** With high levels of facilitator energy, invite each of the five groups to make their pitch, moving swiftly between groups. Passover quickly any groups who failed to prepare a presenter and come back to them later, highlighting a clear failure to organise the group effectively.
  13. Thank the groups for strong presentations and some interesting ideas, pick out a couple of particularly memorable moments if time permits. Tell students to leave their flags where they are (as a visible point of assembly) and move everyone together into the central space. Theatrically inform the shipmates that their own vessel has been hit by a cannonball and is sinking fast. Then invite students to consider which other community they would like to join by imitating slow 'swimming' safely towards their new flag/pirate community. (Note: overexuberant flailing arms can be a health and safety issue.) They have just sixty seconds to decide and move. When individuals are taking too much time, sound the "shark attack" alarm to motivate any laggards.
  14. **[10 mins]** Invite participants to explain their choices. Summarise general themes by way of a 30-second wrap.
  15. **[5 mins]** Invite more individual reflection on the exercise with the provocation: What did you learn?
  16. Conclude by connecting this abstract activity to the two-way matching process used by employees and employers during the recruitment process.
  17. Thank the crew members for their creative pirating. Arrgh!
- (c) Offer additional time (or a reflective assignment) for the separate groups to discuss their performance relative to the competition, highlighting strengths and weaknesses and 'better next time' suggestions for both the design and their implicit team/group processes. Consider integrating employability extension tasks from Appendix 4.

## Debriefing

### Discussion questions

Students often focussed on familiar media portrayals of pirate stories, especially Cap'n Jack from *Pirates of the Caribbean*, Captain Hook, and Long John Silver. This can open a discussion that considers how fictional accounts can override historical veracity.

Communities were often seen as: friendly, vegan, vegetarian, zombie, pacifist, non-sea faring, and monsters but NOT pinstriped or board room. Why did this comparison not surface among business students?

Equality/fairness and consideration of the diversity of pirate communities, including gender and race, often come up as issues. What would all-female pirate crews do differently?

### Tips for instructors

- Identify at least one strong feedback element for each crew, and then focus on the positives from stronger propositions, looking to identify generalisable, powerful good practices (e.g. competitor analysis, democratic contributions).
- Bring icebreaking energy to the room by dressing as a pirate and/or providing a treasure chest of inspirational props.
- Non-native English speakers can struggle to comprehend the cultural web model quickly, be agile to facilitate understanding here.
- If disruptive students find the playfulness too challenging, offer them the option to sit out the exercise.
- Conclude by celebrating everyone's success.

Find wider curriculum links to other student ideas that typically surfaced:

- Communities defined by what they are *not*.
- Organisational structure (pirate democracy)
- Leadership style (dual, separated leadership roles for checks and balance)

## Variations

Where more time is available for the activity (a typical 60 min. UK seminar timing has been used here to offer a concentrated format), it is possible to consider the following adaptations:

- (a) The preparation activity can be summarised and presented by way of a longer introduction.
- (b) A time slot may be allocated prior to the main task to allow the team to gel, by asking the group to design a call sound, signature gesture or move, and name initially. This has been shown to help feed the thematic creativity of the subsequent activities.

- Perks (life insurance, square meals, alcohol rations)
- Pay and bonus (clear and equitable link between pirate leaders and crew)
- Risk (compensation for injuries)

## Conclusion

This creative exercise has been found to be very positively received by a variety of student groups in our business school. Students note that time passes quickly, and they enjoy the temporally pressured challenge they faced. Its practical, team-based focus is creative and entertaining, whilst simultaneously providing students with the opportunity to synthesise and create (high-order educational goals of Bloom's taxonomy) via social learning using a number of theoretical ideas and frameworks in a highly participative exercise. The inbuilt reflectivity is powerful, and linking this to the important topic of careers and finding the right job and organisational fit help to deliver a powerful beyond-university learning payload that is often appreciated.

## References

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## Appendices

### Appendix 1: Sam Allende Coniff's key insights on pirate culture

Fair play regardless of status or colour was a concept held dear by golden age pirates, many of whom had been treated badly whilst serving in the Royal or Merchant Navy. This included equal access to fresh provisions and liquor.

Dual governance shared between the Quartermaster and Captain to protect against the abuse of power.

Universal suffrage (one-pirate, one-vote) applied to all crew members, an idea that was more than 200 years ahead of its time.

Health care and compensation was provided to pirates who sustained injuries (Allende Coniff, 2018a).

### Appendix 2: Pirate code highlights

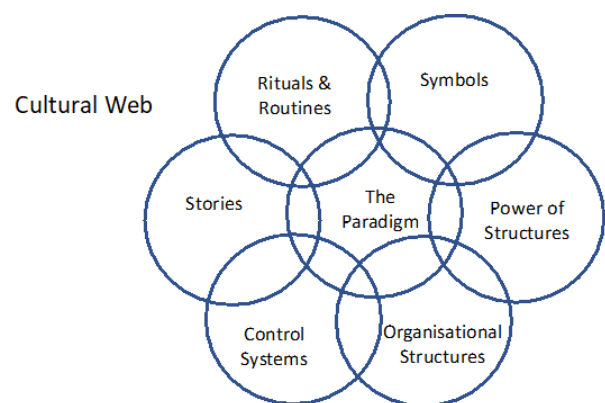
Lights out curfew at 8 O'clock, later drinking had to take place on open deck.

No gambling or fighting on board the ship. Quarrels were ended on land by pistol and sword, until first blood is drawn. Theft resulted in either marooning or the slitting of nose and ears.

Desertion of ship or workstation in battle was punishable by death or marooning.

Black Beard used powerful branding (e.g. setting light to his beard) to intimidate Spanish galleon ships into submission without a fight (Allende Coniff, 2018a).

### Appendix 3: Cultural web template (Johnson and Scholes)



(Johnson, Whittington, Scholes, Angwin, and Regnér, 2011)

### Appendix 4: Follow on discussion questions / activities / assignments

1. Critically assess how organisations you know use rituals and routines, stories, and symbols to portray their culture.
2. Create a cultural web for your current employer or university. Critically assess any strengths and weaknesses that are identified from this analysis.
3. From your own work experience, or from wider business reading, identify three memorable organisational stories or myths and discuss how they might influence a new joiner.

4. Envision an ideal working culture by creating your own perfect cultural web. Critically evaluate how three/five aspirational employers match up to this.
5. With reference to the cultural web, in your experience in education and/or the workplace, where have you seen cultural shortcomings? If you were setting up a new team or organisation, what would be your biggest leadership challenges?
6. What techniques do successful leaders use to maintain and enhance an organisational culture?

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