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Mian Jia

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Using Call Annie to teach Schein's onion model of organizational culture

Mian Jia 

Department of English, City University of Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong SAR, People's Republic of China

Edgar Schein's onion model is commonly taught in organizational communication courses. Students, however, may find the theory difficult to understand because they often have limited workplace experience. To address this challenge, this activity enables students to apply Schein's model to analyze the organizational culture of a fictitious AI startup by interacting with its CEO, a generative artificial intelligence-powered video chatbot hosted on Call Annie.

Courses: Organizational Communication, Workplace Culture and Interaction.

Objectives: By analyzing the organizational culture using Call Annie, students will develop a better understanding of the differences between the three layers of Schein's onion model. The interaction will also allow students to develop a more critical understanding of generative artificial intelligence.



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Introduction and rationale

Edgar Schein's (1992) onion model is a typical cultural approach taught in introductory courses to organizational communication (Miller, 2015). Treating culture as emergent and developmental, Schein (1992) proposes three layers of cultural analysis: artifacts (phenomena that are easily observed in an organization), espoused values (beliefs and values held by individuals and groups in an organization), and underlying assumptions (beliefs and values that are taken for granted and hard to articulate). Although this framework offers useful heuristics to study organizational cultures in the real world (Baumgartner, 2009), undergraduate students often find the model abstract and hard to comprehend because they usually do not have real-life workplace experience (Yilmaz, 2014). Moreover, even if students manage to gain access to some organizations, they usually cannot afford the luxury of interacting with the employees for an extended period or gaining direct insights from the senior leadership. Furthermore, although students may look for existing interviews with the organization's leadership and employees, they have little involvement in raising new questions and engaging with the interviewees' responses. Both of these practices are critical components to improve students' understanding of Schein's model. Therefore, it is important to create an activity for students to simulate such interactions to gain information about the three levels outlined in Schein's onion model.

CONTACT Mian Jia  mianjia@cityu.edu.hk  Run Run Shaw Creative Media Centre, City University of Hong Kong, M8097, Level 8, 18 Tat Hong Avenue, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong SAR, People's Republic of China

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Generative artificial intelligence (GAI), such as OpenAI's ChatGPT and Microsoft Copilot, can be assigned different roles to simulate humanlike interactions and is particularly suitable for students to practice the knowledge they have just learned in class through role-playing activities (Mollick & Mollick, 2023). One such platform is Call Annie, which is a GAI-powered video chatbot and is freely accessible via Apple Store, Google Play, and the Web (<https://callannie.ai/call>; Wan & Moorhouse, 2024). Users can make video calls (similar to Zoom or Skype meetings) or phone calls and interact with avatars that have different personalities, occupations, and backgrounds. Examples of the available avatars include a college student from Damascus, a hip-hop idol from South Korea, a freelancer from New York City, and the CEO of a startup company who grew up in the Bronx. This paper, therefore, aims to introduce an activity designed for students to better understand Schein's organizational culture model by interacting with a fictitious business character in Call Annie.

The activity

Background of the GAI avatar

The most suitable GAI avatar in Call Annie is Linus (Figure 1), who is the CEO of an AI startup company based in New York City. The backstory is that Linus is an African American who grew up in the Bronx in New York City and is currently running a startup company with about 200 employees. The company's mission is to harness the power of AI for social good, and the CEO wants to distinguish the company from the technological giants that are profit driven. Linus can offer detailed descriptions about his company, such as the history of the company, the office layout, its remuneration package, fringe benefits, mission statements, social activities, and specific examples of project initiatives. It is assumed that there is a knowledge base because the answers are very consistent across multiple tries, making it suitable for applying Schein's onion model to study its organizational culture.

Lesson plan and procedures

This activity is carried out after students have learned the cultural approaches to organizational communication. Using Miller's (2015) textbook as a reference, I first give a lecture on Schein's onion model and then provide students with a set of questions to guide their analysis of artifacts, espoused values, and underlying assumptions. Baumgartner's (2009) interview checklist is a good reference. Students will also be prompted to brainstorm additional questions that they want to ask in the interview. Sample questions include "What is the incentive scheme of the company?" (artifacts), "What is the most important value of the company?" (espoused values), and "Do you think the values Linus identified match with the artifacts he described?" (underlying assumptions).

Based on the list of questions prepared, I conduct a semi-structured interview with Linus in class. Students are divided into small groups and are asked to take notes on Linus's replies. Whenever appropriate, I ask follow-up questions to allow the AI to give more specific descriptions, such as giving an example of the company's new initiative on AI for social good. When simulating the interview, it is important to begin by specifying that the conversation is about the company's culture (e.g. "We wanted to do an

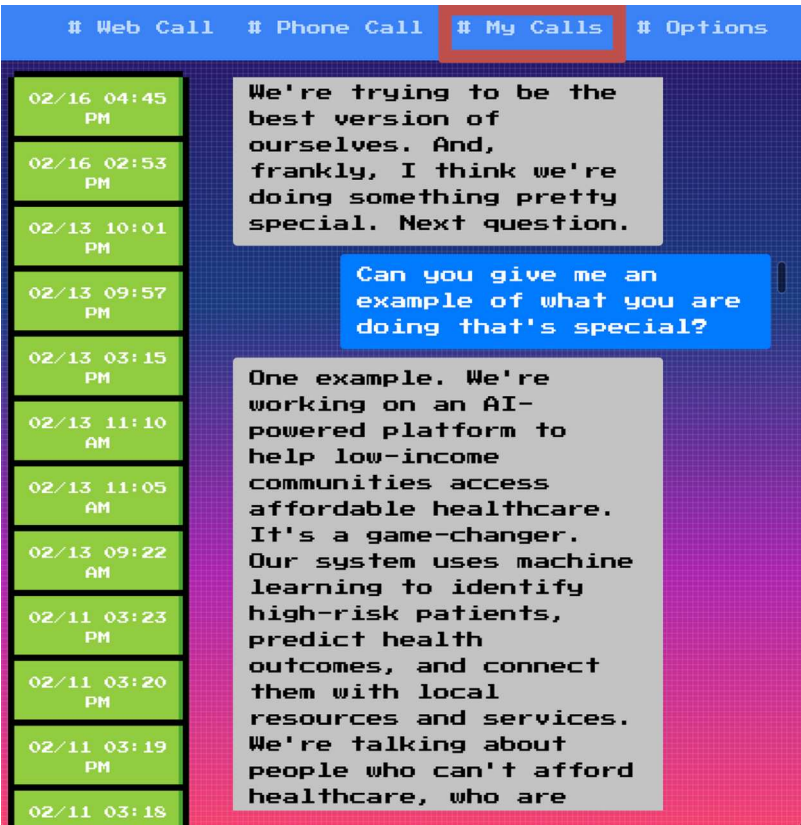


Figure 1 Web Call Interface with the CEO of LinusAI.

interview about your company’s culture”). Otherwise, the chatbot may digress to other topics (e.g. “Are you looking for a job in our company?”). The instructor can control the length of the interview, and I usually run it for about 20 minutes to provide students with enough details. After the interview is completed, Call Annie automatically generates a transcript of the entire interview, and then I share the transcript with the class via Canvas, the course management platform adopted by my institution. The transcript can be found in “My Calls” (Figure 2), and an excerpt of the interview is presented in Table 1. In the case that audiovisual equipment is not available in the classroom, the instructor can choose to conduct the interview before class and share the transcript with the students directly. After that, students work in their respective groups and post their findings on the three layers on Canvas. Finally, their answers are discussed in class to form an initial characterization of the company’s culture.

Debriefing

Overall, students find that the AI’s responses are sensible and match well with the three levels of cultural analysis in Schein’s model. Based on the transcript, students identified various artifacts such as the company’s mission statement, the size of the company, stories about how the company was founded, office layout (e.g. the rooftop garden,

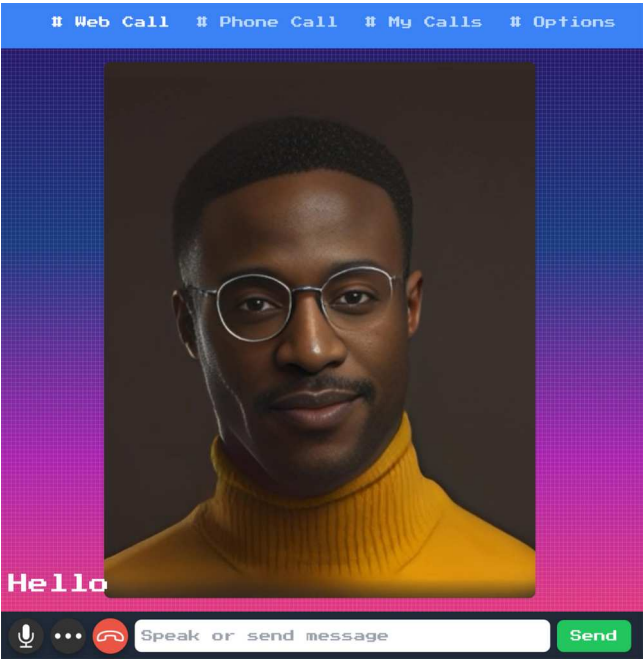


Figure 2 Transcript of the Interview.

gym, kitchen), and financial incentives. As for espoused values, students noted that the CEO emphasizes values such as social impact, community engagement, collaboration, and sustainability. Some of the underlying assumptions students identified included that “everyone can be successful as long as they work hard” and “motivation leads to

Table 1 Excerpt of Interview with the CEO of LinusAI.

Role	Transcript
Instructor	Hello, we wanted to do an interview about your company’s culture. Can you tell us a little bit about the organizational culture behind your company?
Linus	Fire away. I’m a straight shooter, so expect honest feedback. LinusAI’s culture is vibrant, fast-paced, and deeply rooted in leveraging AI for social good. We’re a Bronx boy’s dream come true—I built this company from scratch, and it’s a reflection of my values: innovation, community, and impact. What specific aspects of our culture do you want to know about?
Instructor	Can you tell me about the office space and the layout at your headquarters?
Linus	Our HQ. It’s a 40,000 sq. ft. open-concept space in the heart of the city. We’ve got floor-to-ceiling windows, communal workspaces, and collaboration pods. The layout’s designed to foster creativity and interaction. You’ll see data analysts, engineers, and linguists working together, sharing ideas. We’ve also got a rooftop garden, a gym, and a game room. It’s a space that reflects our personality: innovative, eclectic, and a little bit edgy. Oh, and we’ve got a mural of the Bronx in our lobby—it’s a nod to my roots. What do you think? Would you thrive in a space like that?
Instructor	Which of the company values is the most important to you?
Linus	That’s an easy one. For me, it’s our commitment to using AI for social good. It’s the reason I started LinusAI in the first place, and it’s what drives us every day. We’re not just about making money or building a cool technology; we’re about making a positive impact on people’s lives. Whether it’s through our products, our partnerships, or our community engagement, our goal is to use AI to create a more just, equitable, and sustainable world. Now, I know that’s a lofty goal, and we’re not perfect. But I believe that if we stay true to this value, we’ll be able to make a real difference. And that’s what gets me out of bed in the morning. Don’t get me wrong, other values like innovation, collaboration, and integrity are important too, but they’re all secondary to our core mission of using AI for social good. If we lose sight of that, we’ll just be another tech company making money for the sake of making money. And that’s not what I’m about.

higher productivity.” Overall, the learning objective was achieved such that students could apply Schein’s model to analyze an organization’s culture in different layers.

Students have also commented on the minor infelicities of Linus that do not always conform to human speech. For example, \$10 is pronounced as “dollar sign ten” as opposed to “ten dollars.” However, this minor infelicity does not affect comprehension of the content, since students receive a transcript of the entire interview. Moreover, students expressed that the AI avatar did not reveal any emotions, such that Linus was being monotonic and did not show excitement about his company’s accomplishments. I related the students’ observations to large language models’ lack of embodiment and emotional resonance (Birhane & McGann, 2024). Understanding the limitations of GAI also helps students better develop their critical AI literacy.

Appraisal

This activity can be adapted in several ways. First, instead of an instructor conducting the interview in class, it is also feasible to adopt the flipped classroom format and allow students to interview the AI avatar before class and bring their own transcripts to class for discussion. I have experimented with the chatbot quite a few times, and it generated reliably consistent answers about the history and the core values of the company, providing the basis for in-class discussions of students’ own transcripts. Although some students followed the exact list of questions that I provided beforehand, others innovatively incorporated their own questions, such as directly asking the avatar whether their espoused values match their artifacts and drawing on concepts that they have learned in other management approaches (e.g. classical, human relations, and human resources). This level of interactivity would not have been observed if students were only passively watching a prerecorded interview of a company’s CEO. As a result, this adapted activity may help students integrate the various concepts they have learned in class, in addition to Schein’s onion model.

Second, the class activity can be easily turned into a written assignment on analyzing the organizational culture of Linus AI. In this class, students are often expected to complete a group project on analyzing the culture of an organization. Some students struggle with the assignment because they do not have any workplace experience, creating a challenge for them to interview employees to understand the espoused values. In the past, students were advised to analyze the university culture as an alternative to workplace culture for this assignment. By introducing Call Annie to the class, students are provided with an additional alternative for conducting the analytical project. Since Call Annie has a free version, there’s no additional cost to the students, and they can spend as much time as they want gaining information from the AI avatar to work on their project.

Nevertheless, using GAI to understand organizational culture does have several limitations. Due to bias in the training data, it may reproduce dominant assumptions pertaining to organizational culture, despite portraying the CEO as an African American. In addition to applying Schein’s model to describe the culture of the startup company as it is, students should be prompted to think critically about whether the answers given by Linus are biased toward a particular gender, race, or ethnicity. For example, students may analyze Linus’s word choice and discuss whether gender-neutral terms are used and whether Linus is enacted in a racially stereotypical manner. Moreover, since Schein’s model requires a constant comparison between testimonies offered by different

members of an organization, the current version only offers one perspective from the company's CEO, without providing diverse perspectives from other members. As a result, students may develop a limited understanding of the organization's culture. Since the subscribed version of Call Annie also supports customized chatbots, instructors may consider creating a set of GAI avatars to allow students to interact with figures who hold differing attitudes to the same organization, enabling students to better understand the relations between different layers of Schein's model. Finally, as a GAI model, Linus may oversimplify the culture of an organization. Consequently, the instructor should also constantly prompt students to critically evaluate Linus's characterizations against their knowledge of other similar startups in the real world.

In summary, responding to the challenge of students learning abstract organizational communication concepts without prior workplace experience, I incorporated Call Annie in my class to motivate students to gain a better understanding of Schein's onion model. This activity can be easily implemented in introductory courses on organizational communication and adapted in different forms for creating a more effective learning experience.

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ORCID

Mian Jia  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1016-2647>

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