Recent Developments in the Theory of Learning and the Identity of the Manager

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Abstract: One view of the manager is as a 'practical' scientist. In contrast to this image, many managers do not see themselves in this light and are uncomfortable with the notion that to be successful they should act in purely a mechanistic 'scientific' way. Alternative to this view is to see the manager as a 'reflective practitioner', but this is only one of a number of metaphors that might be used.

This paper introduces the metaphor of the manager as a 'practical author' and puts the way language is used within social contexts centre stage. The paper does not dismiss or undervalue the concept of the reflective practitioner but rather, offers an additional image thought to be useful to managers when considering how they might act. Three examples of how a manager might be developed using these ideas are given. Social constructivist accounts of Managerial Activity. Management Learning and Organisational Development.

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Introduction

One task for contemporary management is to make the process of organisational learning more explicit, so that it can lead to new practices and to improved products and services. Boje (1994) argues that this can be achieved, by making learning a natural part of everyday organisational activity - so that organisations become in fact 'learning organisations', whether we label them in this way or not. Some writers have even argued that the ability to manage and facilitate learning, to develop strategy and to orchestrate change is a crucial organisational competence. This paper develops new ideas on management learning and suggests that it is such an important activity that it cannot be left to a 'training' or personnel department and argues instead that it is the responsibility of all who manage. The view we take is that effective learning should be the concern to everyone in an organisation, and be a primary role of management. We begin by reviewing current management learning theory and suggests that it needs to be considered rather differently from current traditional academic approaches which are often linked to experiential models of learning exemplified by Kolb's learning cycle (1984). We build on this critique by developing a model of learning that stresses the social and conversational aspects of the learning processes, and by so doing we give managers a new role and identify, one that explicitly promotes and facilitates learning. The metaphor we use in this paper for the manager is not that of scientist or reflective practitioner but of someone who creates their own meaning and identity from situations - that of a 'practical author'

How do Adults Learn?

One of the major complaints made by managers of traditional academic methods of teaching and learning is that they emphasise the transfer of information and that these alone, are of little use in developing the skills and knowledge needed to manage in the work place. Indeed, when managers are asked 'What did they learn from traditional programmes', they often have difficulty in relating to many practical lessons at all.

What managers are able to articulate takes the form of such things as the fact that they have become more tolerant and are able to see a problem from different points of view. These skills and knowledge are important for managers to develop and represent 'competencies', at least as important as the academic knowledge developed on courses. People appear to learn these competencies naturally and with a degree of ease, one reason for this is that the subject matter has meaning to them and is of particular relevance. This 'process of natural learning' is not without its problems. Whilst some people learn naturally, others require help which can lead to them becoming unreflective and uncritical about the way in which they work and unaware

of the alternative possibilities available. For managers this problem is exacerbated by the fact that they are often moving from one task to another with little time to stop and think ((Mintzberg, 1973; Kotter, 1982). In this environment learning and development can often be seen as something over which the individual has little control, (Holman, et. al.1997).

It is because of exactly this that the Experiential Learning School sought to build on the idea that learning is most effective when it is grounded in everyday life - when it is directed and controlled by the learner, when it has an obvious meaning for them and when it is rooted in their work and based within an equal partnership. Essential to the principal of experiential learning are practices that encourage reflection on action taken or experienced. These reflective practices can include such things as using theory to illuminate practice or developing models of behaviour, keeping diaries to record situations for subsequent review and analysis or simply exchanging and analysing stories. Using such methods Experiential Learning Theory has enabled practitioners to remove a great deal of the traditional approaches to learning whilst at the same time not denigrating the important insights that academic theories can bring to the learning process.

In management education one of the most influential models of experiential learning has been 'Kolb's theory of experiential learning' (Kolb 1984). Kolb suggests that effective learning can be represented as a cycle consisting of four relatively independent stages (see figure 1).

Figure 1.
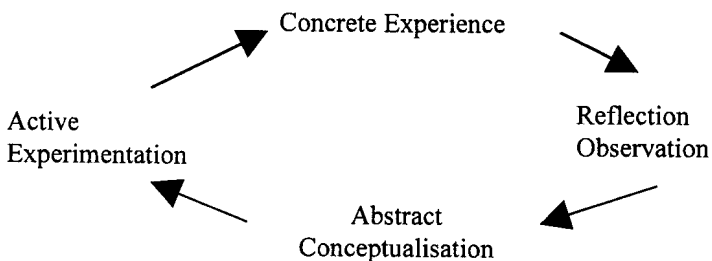
In this model managers learn effectively when their *concrete experiences* are transformed via a process of *reflective observation*. The learner is also required to adopt different critical perspectives towards their experiences. These reflections result in an *abstract conceptualisation* of the problem or situation which takes the form of a plan or theory. The learner then tests this abstract conceptualisation at a stage he calls *active experimentation* - thus producing a new concrete experience.

In addition Kolb also suggests that the manager should proceed through the process in a systematic way rather as a 'practical scientist', i. e. the manager observes what has happened, deduces or inducts theory from these observations and then tests them. Furthermore, as the manager becomes more skilled at using this learning process he will become more autonomous as a learner and less reliant on others and in so doing develop the 'meta skill' of learning how to learn.

Problems with Experiential Learning

Whilst it is possible to agree with Kolb, we believe the model has a number of limitations. These relate to three main factors, the process of learning, the image of the learner and the learning process. Taking each in turn

The Process of Learning

We take the view that Kolb, in his theory of learning, over emphasises the individual and portrays the learner as someone isolated from their fellow beings. Whilst we feel that it is important for learners to be self-directed, we also feel that the social processes involved in learning should not be ignored. Social processes in our view are involved at all stages of the learning cycle. The means by which the world is experienced can only be developed through social contacts and actions and experiences are normally shaped through contact with others. For example, an individual's experience of time management will be conditioned by their cultural understandings of punctuality (Hall 1965) as well as by improved organisational arrangements and procedures. Consequently, if we wish to change behaviour it is important to have an understanding not just about how to manage time, but also how a person's thinking and actions may have been shaped by the social and cultural context in which they were formed. Later in the cycle, Kolb portrays reflection as a purely internal process, yet reflection can be both internal (e.g. thinking to one's self) and external (e.g. a discussion and argument with others - being challenged by and accepting the views of other people). It is therefore important for individuals to listen to the views of others (from colleagues or textbooks), in a sense of borrowing their experience, so that understanding is reached in a way which is socially appropriate and empathetic. As regards 'abstract conceptualisation' it ought to be noted that abstract theoretical knowledge is one of the ways in which the world can be conceptualised. Other forms of knowledge such as those that exist in stories or arguments are equally valid. Moreover, the way such abstractions are formulated is not the individual and personal exercise it is made out to be. Nearly all academic

theories are the product of discussion and debate and where stories are concerned they are nearly always created and re-created with the help of others when knowledge is used. It is important to recognise that it is not simply imported wholesale but is used for a purpose. New knowledge can be used as a medium to enable a new and different perspective to be an organisational problem to be taken, particularly when it stimulates new actions or debates. Testing can also be a part of the action that knowledge stimulates. In summary then, we are arguing that to see simply learning as an individual process has failed to acknowledge the influence of others. What Kolb has done is to have take the person away from the very process by which they are both learning and are trying to effect as managers. By emphasising the social aspects of learning we seek to restore the place of the individual back within the social context, and in particular the social relationships and networks in which they work and learn.

Learning does not take place in stages

A separate problem with Kolb's learning cycle that we have alluded to, is in the way that it separates learning into distinct and discrete stages and suggests that these must be followed in a sequence if learning is to be effective. The model (Figure 1) shows that the learning cycle splits action (concrete experience and active experimentation) from thinking (reflective observation and abstract conceptualisation). This separation infers that a person cannot think and act at the same time, and that if reflection is the social process we argue it is, then clearly this process will most likely take place within action rather than simply following it. Reflection, we believe, is incorporated into human activity just as emotions are linked with thoughts and words. In the same way it, we feel, is difficult to argue for the separation of the two action stages and the two thinking stages. Where exactly does active experimentation begin and experience end? Kolb in one sense creates a special class of thinking by his separation out of a reflective stage. This process in his schema occurs without content, through abstractions. Abstract thought is both a medium and an outcome of reflection. Overall we feel it is untenable to consider the stages of the learning cycle as distinct entities, and if the stages are not in fact distinct then individuals may find them difficult to follow in a prescribed order. Our own experience suggests that effective learning can occur without following the learning cycle as prescribed. This does not argue that the learning cycle is unimportant and that its stages are not a useful heuristic device in indicating aspects of learning, however partial.

Learning is an ongoing social activity

Learning, in our view, should be seen as part of ongoing social activity. The different aspects of learning identified by Kolb thinking, reflecting and acting, should not be viewed as separate opposing processes but rather as part of the same process. In the same way, the process should not be seen as an individual activity but one where thinking, acting and reflecting all take place and have their meaning located in the social world which itself has a specific context. Even when we think alone our thoughts have a social character. This type of thinking and reflecting then is quasi-social and the implications are that learning ought to be firmly located in the social world, seen in the context of the relationships individuals have with others. It also suggests that the way in which individuals interact with each other, primarily through dialogue and conversation, is a primary importance medium through which higher order learning can take place. The way in which language is used both in conversation with others and intimately with ourselves has a significant influence on what we learn. Thus, at its heart, learning is social and at one level, can be considered as having a conversational basis.

The Manager as a Practical Author

As has already been discussed the image of a manager as viewed by Kolb is that of a practical scientist; a person who formulates a theory and then tests this out in action. We know for example from other research (Spender 1988) that one of the key skills of a successful managers is in their ability to read situations in order to reach and find the subtext behind situations or actions. By developing this competence, managers become able to diagnose situations using a quite different approach so that they can evaluate a problem or situation critically and arrive at preliminary judgements. Whilst this competence undoubtedly gives some managers an advantage over others, management is not only about reading a situation understanding it from different perspectives like a scientist. (This still holds even if theories are treated more as tools for thought as opposed to objective truths). In research by Thorpe and Pavlica, (1996), the whole image of the 'manager as scientist' has been shown to be open to question by managers themselves. The concept of scientist to those interviewed had a narrow specialist focus, and suggested someone with poor interpersonal skills - someone unconcerned with leading and managing others. They found that managers often used the metaphor of the scientist to describe someone who was *not* a manager, individuals like operators or technicians.

Rather than simply reading situations from different perspectives then, management is also about generating intelligible formulation of issues and situations,

that have become for others a chaotic welter of impressions, contradictions and confusion. If this line of argument is followed an important task of management is the restoration and recreation of order and clarity a situation and the re-establishment a routine flow of activity. It is in this context, (Shotter, 1993) suggests that managers are *authors* creating sense in what is for some senseless confusion. The manager acting as *author* is able to offer a more determined account of what would otherwise pass as the vague impressions in which some people may think about contested objects or issues. It is this active reframing of the complexities and dilemmas faced in management practice rather than simply a passive acceptance of them that seems of critical importance. This reframing process is achieved through a variety of agents, for example, the use of metaphors, the telling of stories (Boje, 1994) or through exercises in cognitive mapping as we will go on to illustrate. Through such processes of creating an appropriate, and often original formulation of conditions, the manager has the opportunity to create:

- a landscape of enabling-constraints relevant for a range of next possible actions.
- a network of 'moral positions' or 'commitments' (understood as the rights and duties of the players in that landscape).
- a persuasive argument for this landscape amongst those who must work in it.

If this argument is accepted, then it follows that this situation cannot be achieved by he manager alone, as what is needed is for them to give intelligible formulations to *shared* feelings. The manager must therefore think of themselves as acting *with* others. This focus and concern on joint action complements the concerns of writers such as Eden et. al. (1983) who point out that problems are often not individual problems that can be solved through the application of rational solutions but instead situated

'within organisations that are social entities where problems are to do not with objectivities and organisational goals but subjectivities and negotiated orientations. Problems and decision-making are predominantly set within politics, interpersonal considerations, idiosyncratic values and personal perspectives'. (Eden et. al., 1983 p.10).

The task a manager is required to perform is not only an individual formulation of a description of the situation, but instead, is the generation of a formulation of the situation through conversation and debate with others. As a consequence, this is a shift from knowledge acquired by 'finding out' to knowledge acquired by 'making and creating'. A process which requires a special kind of knowing; a knowing that is prepared and able take into account the kind of social situation within which it is

known - a knowledge from within. The manager who can achieve this, is no longer an autonomous scientist standing outside a situation and looking in but an author acting and knowing from within a given situation.

The Manager as a Practical Author of Learning

If conversations are central to both the process of learning and the process of management, then questions to ask are what kind of conversations promote learning? and what are the means whereby managers become authors of their own and others' learning?

The notion of a manager as an 'author of learning' is similar to the notion of the manager as a teacher. However, whilst it can be useful to think of managers as teachers, there are difficulties associated with the analogy. Firstly teaching is often associated with the formal designation of roles in a particular context. Teaching often occurs at specified times (i.e. during the teaching or training session) - a concept in this paper we are attempting to move away from. Learning on the other hand, can be thought of as occurring during everyday activities as well as in the more formal classroom or training sessions. Secondly, teaching is often seen viewed as the transmission of information by an expert to a student or learner. It is often the case that in many organisations, particularly those with professional or technical staff, the manager knows little more, about the job role and its content than those they manage. Even when managing non-professional, non-technical staff, the manager needs to be aware that employees often make use of tacit and informal knowledge to complete their work. By its very nature this knowledge may be hidden from management, yet it is an essential ingredient in maintaining an efficient work process. There is realisation that greater knowledge does not necessarily coincide with greater authority and if this is the case, then learning needs to be seen less about imparting knowledge from an authoritative teacher to a less knowledgeable learner and more about facilitating or acting as a catalyst to the learner.

Viewing the manager as an author of learning in the way we have developed, connect a whole range of interrelated activities in the task of trying to promote learning (their own and others) in 'natural' settings (i. e. non-formal settings). Before we outline just how this might be achieved in practice it should perhaps be noted that a particular emphasis of all activities is an attempt to relate the activity closely with the everyday experience of the individual, the experiences of the group in which the individual works and formal knowledge exists which is pertinent to the issue under review, as well as relating all three things to the development of the individual and their work/organisational task. By focusing on these areas the manager will, we argue, have a much better opportunity to create for themselves this landscape of

enabling-constraints within which the learning can have a far greater meaning to those participating in the process than would otherwise be the case. It is also perhaps important to point out that these activities should not be seen as solely the responsibility of managers but rather a process in which all employees can participate and become skilled.

Examples of Activities that can Promote Learning

There are a whole range of activities and devices that can be used to bring organisational members together to promote learning and a better understanding of the purpose (the how and the why) of their activities. Their aim being to modify an individuals beliefs or 'theories in use' so that action taken with reference to such inner touchstones become more effective and appropriate. The activities should be designed to help individuals to become more conscious of what they know, how their ideas are formed and consequently how they might be changed.

The learning value of group approaches we illustrate have of course always been recognised by management educators and developers who use them, but often the specific learning processes that underpin their use have been of secondary importance. For example, in the field of operational research, group methods in order to explore difficult problems, with associated mapping methodologies has long been advocated. (Checkland, 1981, Eden and Jones, 1984). The quality improvement school within the discipline of operations management have long advocated group approaches in such fields as value analysis, problem solving, quality circles and within TQM programmes, productivity action teams.

Outlined below are three approaches used by authors that represent processes and for thinking and learning.

Cognitive Maps used in Strategy Formulation

Different mapping techniques such as spider diagrams, Buzan charts and cognitive maps, have been developed to aid situational understanding. All are ways which allow ideas, views and perspectives to be marshalled, analysed and debated. One of those, cognitive mapping has been used extensively in strategy formulation.

Eden et al (1983) have shown how personal construct theory can be used for exploring difficult problems with other people. Eden and Jones (1984) describe a method called *dominoes*, in which play, messing around and having fun are encouraged. In *dominoes*, constructs derived from previous interviews are written on cards. Managers are then asked to put them together to produce a construct system in

the form of a pictorial map. They are asked why they have chosen that arrangement and why they see the problem in that way. It is their comments and the ensuing discussion which prove useful as managers are able to explore one anothers understanding of a problem.

A more sophisticated extension of dominoes is the process called 'cognitive mapping' (Eden, 1988). Based on personal construct theory, cognitive maps are another way of representing the relationships between constructs, and one of its most successful applications has been in the support of strategy formulation.

However, what is important in cognitive mapping is not just the map and its subsequent analysis, but the process by which it was formed and the actions that are taken from discussions based around it. A balance between content and process is therefore essential in cognitive mapping in order to yield maximum benefit. A focus on content allows a complex organisational issue to be displayed as each individual group member sees it. The process enables those taking part to challenge the views and perspectives of others, and it is often the realisation of difference between individuals and the ensuing discussion which proves most useful (Ackerman and Belton, 1994).

Opportunities to change, alter or justify the map are offered. Through this debate the ambiguities and quandaries that emerge are reconciled and shared understandings of the key issues are built up. Bringing people together in this way in a non-threatening environment can inject fun, urgency and passion into an area often seen as dry and analytical. Eden (1988) claims that through this process learning, change and strategy can be successfully linked. Maps can be created individually and integrated to form a 'composite' map although, if done collectively, it is essential that there is a degree of openness and trust between people.

Although manual systems can be used for recording parts of the process advances in computer software technology have enabled constructs to be captured relatively easily during discussion that are displayed on a screen. The use of computers also allows a variety of analysis to take place enabling focus on the group's attention on particular aspects of an issue and its resolution.

Action Learning

In action learning a developmental process is created that is both experiential and participative. Individuals are encouraged through the act of working together to reflect on problem areas in the organisations in which they work. They attempt, not only to analyse and solve problems, but also to implement change. Their colleagues in the groups, (called a 'set') aided by a facilitator to help the process, provide challenge and feedback to the ideas and approaches considered. It is by this process

that many managerial problem solving skills are identified, developed and evaluated. In many ways the learning process shares some of the characteristics of Action Research, in that managers learn collaboratively contracting, diagnosing and developing action plans jointly with 'set' support and often working with organisational members in order to bring about change. Action learning then, supports the process of organisational change whilst at the same time helping the individuals involved learn from the process. Revans (1971), a life long promoter of this type of process, believes that such development contributes greatly to effective management, which he characterises as when organisational learning is greater or equal to the rate of organisational change.

What is important in the method is that managers learn to solve their problems or surround their difficulties by working with a group of other experienced managers drawn from either inside or outside the organisation. Typically these might be non-experts in the particular problem area, but experienced practitioners in their own right. The value of 'set' work as is argued by its protagonists cannot be overstated in the learning process as it is thought essential that the understanding of the problem and their approach as to how change might be complemented, is seen to be drawn from colleagues' current 'theories-in-use', rather than simply provided by an expert or drawn from the literature.

This type of management development experience based on Action Learning enables participants to work on problems in their organisational context (an environment) the 'set' which models the openness required for organisational change. Specifically, they work with the perspective, cognitive style and 'weltanschaung' of their fellow 'set' members and have the opportunity to reflect on their own views, values and styles as a prelude to change.

The value of this approach is rooted in the nature of management. As managers often find information difficult to collect, and when they do, difficult to analyse, an important managerial skill is judgement. As Spender (1988) points out, judgement differs from analysis in that analysis implies 'finding the answer hidden in the data', whereas judgement often requires practice and experience on which to base their judgement, and mechanisms such as Action Learning 'sets' provide a valuable means of making good this deficiency.

As most managers achieve their aims through the contribution and by the persuasion of others, the sets positively help managers create increased certainty around situations in the way they provide a safe environment to try out ideas and to negotiate and communicate with other set members, as they do they rehearse their arguments and they learn.

This social constructionist approach to management and management learning has been argued (Thorpe, et. al., 1997) as being a missing aspect of action learning -

its underpinning theory being normally attributed solely to Kolb where set members are helped to reflect on action taken.

Managers need to ask themselves 'what am I arguing for?' or 'what am I aiming to achieve by persuading others to my view? By asking this kind of question the manager changes the focus of learning from one of internal reflection to one of an external action based critique - one that still connects with the past (i.e. reflective) but one that would encourage managers to be more aware of the arguments they use, on what these are based and how appropriate they are in current circumstances. Managers often see themselves as being locked into the problematics of situations where they have a past, present and future (Usher, 1992) and they often need to have opportunities to break free, in order to reconsider their position and begin to argue for a different course of action - sets provide an opportunity for this to happen.

Story Telling, Metaphors

These methods also explicitly adopt a social constructionist perspective of organisations and management. Morgan (1986, p. 131), a strong advocate of the use of metaphors in management, suggests that organisational reality 'exists as much in the heads and minds of its members as it does in a set of rules and regulations. As such as with the use of cognitive maps in strategy, there is a recognition that this reality is continually in the making, emerging (Mintzberg, 1979), reformulating and being created (Pettigrew, 1979).

The importance of examining the recent history of an organisation (the metaphor or biography) has been argued by a number of authors as being particularly useful (Salama, 1992, Pedlar, 1992). Several writers have gone further by advocating the advantages of a group approach to its development (Simpson, 1996, Burgoyne, 1994). Uncovering biographies in a group allows, according to Steyaert and Bowen, (1994), the opportunity to hear different voices on the same history at the same time.

In a typical exercise members of a group would be invited to examine the recent history of their organisation.

In one recent use of this technique (Simpson and Thorpe, 1995) participant managers were asked to work with a series of metaphors which included viewing the organisation as a parent and visually drawing the organisation as it appeared to them now and contrasting this image with a description of the same 'person' ten years hence. In addition the group were asked to construct a biography of the organisation over the last ten years through their recollections of key events or through stories which were illustrative of the period and individuals were asked to present a personal view of the organisations mission which they then shared with the group. A final exercise involved drafting a character reference for the organisation.

The outcome of research activities such as this is often a rich series of insights which can be shared and debated. An important feature of the approach is a recognition that although the process of organisational learning takes place through the agency of individual members, learning at the individual level is insufficient and for a change in organisational behaviour to take place there must be a collective dimension to the learning. As Dixon (1994) argues, there requires to be a shift in 'collective meaning structures' - the norms, strategies and assumptions held by organisational members and the mechanisms and structures that help people communicate ideas, negotiate and resolve the dilemmas that naturally arise as alternative perspectives emerge.

So when individuals considered the organisation as parent it was characterised as authoritarian, having high expectations, not understanding its children's needs and putting pressure on them to achieve and generally being rather unforgiving.

Represented as a drawing most groups drew the organisation as having grown 'top heavy'. The person depicted wore smart suits, was characterised as a man, was 'yuppie' in character with mobile telephone and leather briefcase and in some respects schizophrenic. The character references showed the organisation to be conservative and reactive as opposed radical and forward looking.

The metaphors confirmed these views and provided the vehicle for a discussion and debate as to the priorities for success of the organisation and how certain characteristics illuminated by the exercise could support or be developed to meet these priorities.

Conclusions

Learning we believe should be considered as a process of argumentation in which thinking, reflecting, experiencing and action are different aspects of the same process. It is the opportunities individual and groups have for practical reasons argument themselves with others and it is this that forms the real basis of learning, particularly in management where ethics, morals, culture and context play an increasingly important role.

Through such joint action we believe managers need to increasingly consider themselves not as scientists, but as practical authors continually offering subordinates and colleagues intelligible formulations of the problems diverted to the shared feelings and ideas that exists among all the organisational members. Viewed in this way, managers achieve legitimately with their subordinates through collaboration and negotiation. If they do not, and maintain an autocratic style, their power position may lead to their own destruction (Gergen, 1992).

By implication then, if an organisation wishes to become an effective learning organisation then it must focus on the following issues. It must create a corporate culture with which learning and development is seen as a 'natural' way of working - a way of promoting this might well be by improved methods of collaboration, participation, mutual support and help which represent an important context for individuals self-realisation and responsibility. In addition management's skills must extend to a new range of personal and interpersonal skills such as the ability to engage in critical and constructive discussions, give and receive feedback, work in teams and so on.

So is this all just about words and hot air? We suggest not.

This paper has sought to develop rather than dismiss the contribution of Kolb and the value of the learning cycle. We have attempted to suggest the way learning is perceived and understood by highlighting the mode it over emphasises the individual in the process and fails to give greater prominence to groups, the social aspects and context typologies of learning, such as those proposed by Burgoyne and Stuart (1977) where they delineate Learning Philosophy, Learning Strategy and Learning Tactics and Methods.

The implications for the environment in which the kind of learning we advocate needs to take place extends to the role of academic educators, the infrastructural arrangements for students and the design of the curriculum - these are the subjects of another paper.

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