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PUTTING EXPERIENCE BACK INTO EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING:
A DEMONSTRATION

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a demonstration on how experiential learning methodology is a core method of learning within the phenomenological-existential tradition. Further the demonstration implies that learning about organizations through this method requires to view them as socially constructed realities instead of purely objective phenomena. The paper also suggests possible content changes in organizational subjects which might result from these new perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

How do people understand their world? How do individuals get to know how to behave in everyday life, and how to relate to the situation at hand? These questions have been at the core of a large amount of the sociological and the philosophical literature for many years, the answers to which have been on competing grounds, depending on the assumptions and traditions being followed.

Based on a subjective-objective continuum, as suggested by Burrell and Morgan (l979), to Morgan and Smircich (1980)L[7]J presented an analysis of some of these views, and a summary of the accompanying assumptions on ontology and human nature. Here they indicate that under extreme subjectivism, reality is a projection of human imagination and humans are intentional beings directing their psychic energy and experience in ways that constitute the world in a meaningful, intentional form. The extreme objective view, on the other hand, considers reality as a concrete, external structure, and human beings as product of the external forces in the environment to which they are exposed. Some less extreme views fall between these but, in general, the subjectivist perspective will pose reality as a product of social interactions and interpretations, while the objectivist perspective will pose reality to exist independently of the individuals interpreting and acting on it.

Within this objective-subjective framework "understanding" could then be considered the basic cognitive process and, as such, explained either in terms of "knowledge" or in terms of "meaning". Here knowledge is expressed as the incorporation by the individual of external stimuli; these stimuli existing separate from the individual, and constituting a finite reality. Meaning, however, might be defined as the product of socially negotiated and consensually acceptable perspectives. Under this latter view, reality is a social construction (Berger and Luckmann, [2] 1966) created by shared meanings, at a particular point in time under a particular circumstance, out of all the infinite ways in which that reality could have been socially defined.

Knowledge in the sense used here is understanding of the social world as if it were a <u>thing</u> rather than the product of human activity. A world that individuals apprehend and process as personal mental representations on an individualistic account of what is "out there", the "out there" having a strong enough existence of its own to be internalized in a similar (although not necessarily identical)

manner, through the mental processes of many different individuals.

Meaning, different from knowledge, is a symbolic construction; the result of individuals' creative activities that, consciously or unconsciously, bring about a shared reality. This reality only exist as long as it is sustained by the enactors of the situation, through their actions and interpretations. Similar perceptions arise here from enacting and sharing rather than from the absorption of any external (to the participants) objective reality. In other words, under this view reality is selectively perceived, rearranged cognitively, and negotiated interpersonally (Weick,[8] 1979).

A resolution of these issues is far from occurring. However, the implications that follow from either of these views impact explanations of human behavior in everyday life and, more important for those in the management "world", they impact the way we understand organizations and the behaviors of those within them. The objectivist approach, based on a positivist- functionalist paradigm (Burrel and Morgan,[3] 1979) presumes that most of the world, social or otherwise, is outside of the direct influence of the individual. The person, the recipient of a factual situation, has to adapt in order to survive, and does it by acquiring a better knowledge of what that situation is. It is a deterministic view of the social world, where the individual has very little influence over her or his fate. The subjectivist, on the other hand, shows a social world very much defined by those who interact in it, implicitly or explicitly, fashioning this world in a manner that makes sense to them. Here the individual is a co-participant in the making of his or her own fate.

Yet, it should be stressed that regardless of the view followed, individuals attempt to develop conceptions about the world in a symbolic manner; symbolic constructs which indicate conceptions of "reality" because it is argued that humans cannot understand the world directly through external events but rather through essentially subjective processes (Morgan,[5] 1980). Therefore, understanding the "world-out-there" for the objectivist, or the "shared meanings" for the subjectivist, is still an individually-mediated process, "realized" through conceptualizations which are derived from symbolic activities.

<u>Implications for Experiential Learning</u>

The above arguments bring us to another very important matter: that of methodology for understanding the world. This is not an issue that can be separated from either ontology (the essence of that which is to be understood) or epistemology (the grounds for understanding), and is, therefore, based on assumptions on both.

Experiential learning, as a methodology, is based on the phenomenological-existential tradition which stresses human participation in the act of understanding. However, this philosophy is not independent of a particular view of the social world that is to be known. Rather than separating oneself from that which

is to be known in order to attain objectivity (as would be the norm for positivism) learning by participation marks a transition from the interpretation of knowledge as objectification, to understanding it as union with the subject matter, and entering into cooperation with it.

This implies understanding organizations as socially constructed "worlds" which are interpreted by their participants through multiple realities, and which are constantly enacted by shared meanings. Unfortunately, experiential learning has seldom focused this perspective in business administration. Traditional business education has stressed an objective reality existing in the world "out there", separate from the interpretations of the participants. The organization world has been considered as "real" as the world of physical objects, and learning by "experiencing" mostly meant apprehending that objective world the "right way".

For example, I have often read about experiential exercises which aim at disproving that there is such a thing as a "common sense" knowledge in management. These exercises usually ask the students to answer a series of questions which relate to various well known management issues and show, after collecting the answers, that there is such a range of given responses to each single issue that "common sense" wouldn't make sense. This is followed by teaching the "right" answer to the situation. The point that is missing is that the "common sense" answers came from different views about the organizational world, and that those views when shared are the ones that enact the "real" behavior in the organization.

By teaching the "right" organizational practices sense-making and enacting is not eliminated; rather, additional elements are added to other multiple influence of this process. Furthermore, if there really are "right" organizational practices (contingency theories included), and if we really are effective teachers, how come we are still dealing with the same organizational problems we have been dealing for years? How come the accumulation of research has not provided too many satisfactory answers to these problems? One answer, perhaps, is that the nature of the organizational world <u>is not</u> the one we have taken for granted most of the time: an objective reality in the world "out there". Therefore, the demonstration will aim to:

(1) Show alternative views of the organization world and the implications for teaching methodologies.

(2) Discuss experiential learning exercises which will focus in organizations as shared meanings rather than objective realities.

Examples of these exercises are:

A. - New approaches with traditional exercises:

(a) NASA Exercise. - The exercise is run in the usual manner, but rather than determining how close or distant are the decisions from the "experts" results, the discussion would focus on the sense-making process of the group according to the way they ranked the items.

B. - New exercises:

(a) Demystification Exercise.- The exercise focus on the taken-for-granted
views of organizations. Participants are asked to design an organization and explain the rationale for their designs. Afterwards, the exercise is debriefed emphasizing on how many organizational "oughts" are organizational myths.

(b) Metaphors and Symbolism. -This exercise requires that the participants
describe organizations using metaphors. The discussion aims to discover how these metaphors would affect the way in which the individual would act as a manager, and the symbolism which will be implicit in his/her managerial approach.

<u>Where Do We Go From Here</u>?

Most of this paper has advanced the notion that organizations are socially constructed realities, a concept which follows the philosophical traditions on which experiential learning is based. However, adopting this view will also prompt a considerable change in the content of many business courses. This shift, most likely, will be from "regulative management" to "appreciative management" (Gadalla and Cooper,[4] 1978) where, among many other differences, management becomes a process focused on maintaining balance in a field of relationships of which organization is integral part, instead of the traditional process focused on goal attainment. Teaching organizational subjects might become a facilitation process to create systems that are able to learn from their own experience, and modify their structure and design to reflect what they have learned (Morgan and Ramirez,[6] 1983); or as Bateson [1] (1972) indicated, teaching under these assumptions would be to create a basis for "learning to learn". Experiential learning is an appropriate methodology under this new approach to organizations; more so than it has been under the conventional assumptions of organizations as objective realities. In other words, the optimist message is that experiential learning is already there. We only have to <u>discover</u> it now.

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