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Development of the Learners' Management Philosophy
in a Critical Management Studies Course

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Abstract: *Study examined the pivotal factors of a CMS course, which shaped the learners' development. The findings suggest that the educator is only one aspect of the learning process and that the ability of the learner to use experience to bridge to new critical concepts and the role of discussions are important.*

Background

Cunningham (2000) suggests that the field of adult education is divided into those educators who practice in civil society and those who locate their practice in the economic sector. Educational institutions and corporations currently spend $2.2 trillion on an annual worldwide basis for education in the economic sector. I am proposing that as critical educators we need to think about how we can bring civil society into the economic sector in a powerful and meaningful way. Critical Management Studies (CMS) is a sub-discipline of management education. CMS applies a socio-political lens to the discussion of management. This lens looks at historical, social, and power issues using a variety of frameworks, including critical theory, feminism, and poststructuralism, to name a few (Fournier & Grey, 2000).

One gap in the research regarding the use of critical education in the economic sector is the impact these courses have on the adult learner (Elliott, 2003). The consideration of adult learners and the learning process in incorporating a critical view of management and organizations is important. Management and organizational life has grown to encompass almost all areas of life (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). As we engage in rampant consumerism to fuel the global economy, the gap between the haves and have-nots is growing wider and quality of life from the personal to the ecological is rapidly diminishing (Korten, 2000). This study addressed two questions: how CMS courses affect the adult learner's management philosophy and what factors in a CMS course contribute to the development of the adult learner's management philosophy. The findings from the second question are the focus of this paper.

Using a qualitative design to understand the various interactions with the course process, two educational sites were selected; a master's in management course in the United Kingdom and a Ph.D. seminar in accounting in the United States. The agenda for both courses was a CMS focus, critiquing capitalism and management. Multiple methods of data collection included semi-structured interviews with learners and instructors, class observations, and course documentation. The constant comparative method was used for data analysis.

Findings

The analysis began by determining the beginning management philosophy of the learners and ascertaining any change in their philosophy over the semester. My analysis revealed that participants either experienced an affirmation of their original philosophy (either mainstream or critical) or experienced a movement from a mainstream management philosophy to a critical management philosophy. Six of the eleven participants began the class with a mainstream management philosophy. Four of these six learners had their philosophy "affirmed" while two participants experienced a shift to a critical management philosophy. The other five participants started the class ascribing to at least some aspects of a critical management philosophy and the impact of the class was to affirm and clarify their philosophy. These findings indicated that

learners enter CMS classrooms with different orientations. Both courses were highly critical, even anti-capitalist in nature, yet the course simultaneously reinforced different, even opposing, orientations (Monaghan, 2004).

The research question that is the focus of this paper asked what factors in a CMS course contributed to the development of the learners' management philosophy. Learning dynamics are the interactions that occur between learner, course content, and process. This study determined that two primary factors influenced these interactions and the learning occurring in these courses. First was the learner's disposition to link prior experience to course material. Second was the process of the interactions that occurred between the learner and others, including the instructors.

A pivotal factor was the participants' employment of prior experiences as a guide to the validity and usefulness of the course content. The ways in which they linked their experiences shaped their management philosophy. All of the participants whose mainstream management philosophy was affirmed had strong experiences or beliefs that outweighed any new knowledge presented in the course. These participants felt that the information they received from the course content did not change their beliefs. As Lucy pointed out "my views are determined by my upbringing, my experiences, and my education -- more than just one module course." They viewed the course as providing information. They deemed the information important only as it applied to their grades in this required course. Their experience of the course content was this it presented only the extremes. Heather strongly felt that in the CMS course "managers were portrayed as monsters." This perception of the course content only served to affirm their belief. Trent contended that, "it's not capitalism that is the problem, its human nature." The participants viewed the questions posed by the course as leaving them with only two choices – you are either a capitalist or an anti-capitalist. Viewing the choices that way, the course content affirmed their original mainstream management philosophy.

Daniel and John also had prior educational and life experiences that were very different from the course content presented. In spite of this, they were able to build bridges from their experiences that allowed them to integrate the past into their new knowledge and move to a critical management philosophy. Daniel thought the course content helped him "to see kind of how management fits into the real world." When discussing the minimum wage issues he linked the content to his prior experience as a missionary, "I have been out and experienced that situation a little bit, to see people's lives that were struggling day by day just to have enough food to eat….I don't think I'd really thought about the implications on a wider scale. I'd seen implications on a personal scale but not the ricochet effect that I was talking about that has implications in all realms of society." In essence, what happened that was dissimilar from the mainstream participants was that they developed a link that had not been there before. Through the course content, they acquired a new way of thinking about their experiences that moved them to a critical management philosophy.

Those participants who experienced the course as an affirmation of their beginning critical management philosophy reported prior experiences that formed a basis of a management philosophy that was already aligned with the course content. For instance, one participant shared her experience of risking her job to report illegal activities to the FBI. The intersection of the participant's past educational and life experiences and the course content was instrumental in affirming their critical management philosophy. It spanned a number of different levels; including gaining a new perspective that could help them with their anticipated real-world problems, as well as helping them to find out more about who they were as individuals. In many cases, it provided them with a language to articulate their prior experiences. David was using

Foucault's theories to critique the division of land in Alaska between the natives and the Federal government. He illustrates this personal interaction as he explained the experience of writing his final course paper: "You start with [a theory] and then you go back into [what] I guess you call background stuff that you know: …I ended up writing about the Alaskan native situations, [and while writing] you're dredging up a lot. I found it very difficult to divorce – [my] own viewpoint away from that type of work."

In looking at this factor of prior experience that contributed to the development of the participants' management philosophy, these examples demonstrate that not only did the participants begin the courses with different management philosophies, but they also began at different places in respect to their prior exposure to thinking about ideas in a critical manner. Those who had an ending mainstream management philosophy felt, in spite of the course content, that their experiences justified or served as explanations about why capitalism was a good system and needed little criticism. However, some participants who began with a mainstream management philosophy moved to a critical management philosophy. They did this because they were able to view the course content in a manner that allowed them to enlarge their educational and life experiences and integrate a more critical perspective into their management philosophy. Those with a critical management philosophy that was affirmed by the content experienced a validation of their experiences and acquired a language to articulate their philosophy.

A second pivotal factor was the role of the process. Within this factor, there were two important interactions between the learners and others. These interactions are designated as (a) the role of the instructor, and (b) the role of discussions. In all classroom situations, there is an interaction between the learner and the instructor. All the participants shared Sharon's assessment of the instructor as someone who has "got that expert power." The instructor was seen as the expert on the subject, and an important figure in their learning. Sharon, whose mainstream management philosophy was affirmed, described the instructor as someone who had valuable knowledge explaining, "he is the lecturer and I thought, well, maybe he's got a point there. We look up to him and say, 'he knows what he is talking about, obviously; he's the lecturer' so that gave me another perspective on it." The significant element of the instructor for those whose management philosophy was affirmed was the expert knowledge they supplied. Sharon valued the instructor's ability to "let me explore my own views whereas the other modules don't really ask for your opinion as much as this one does." Heather's prior experience was that "neither criticism nor discussion was allowed in management courses." Unlike the other participants, those who maintained their mainstream management philosophy did not need to develop their voices; the dominant view of management had already given them a voice.

For participants who moved to a critical management philosophy the role of the instructor was more than that of an expert, his ability to invite the learners to think for themselves was equally important. Daniel felt that the instructor's course design invited the learners "to think, it's invited us to have our own opinions and give our views on certain issues which are not just applicable in terms of management, they're applicable in terms of ourselves, our own lives." It was indispensable to these participants that not only were their opinions valued but that what they were learning about was relevant to their lives. They valued the development of the learner voice as an important byproduct of the interaction with the instructor and, therefore, of their learning experience.

The participants whose critical management philosophy was affirmed valued the encouragement to develop their own voices as an imperative element of the course. When

Edward was comparing the CMS module to his other modules he said, "in this module, we were asked to think, we were asked to develop ideas, opinions, which we cannot find in any sources or any other places, the only way is to think about it." These participants also viewed the instructor as the expert. In addition, they valued the instructor's ability to encourage them to articulate their own critical views. This interaction with the instructor was instrumental in affirming their critical management philosophy. They experienced this class as a space where their voice was sought and valued. Those participants who ended the course with a critical management philosophy valued the freedom to develop their own opinions and voices more than the others did because this course provided a legitimate space for them to be critical of management and capitalism.

These examples demonstrate that it was the relationship occurring between the instructor as expert and the learners' ability to develop their own views and beliefs that shaped their management philosophy. Even those students, who came into the course with a critical management philosophy, viewed the instructor as the expert on the majority of the course content presented. It was from this position of expert power that the instructor pushed the learners to develop and articulate their views on the materials and concepts.

The role of discussions was also important in the participants' development. John used the term "collective learning" to describe a learning dynamic that involved discussions, both inside and outside of the classroom. The participants viewed these discussions as places where, as Daniel pointed out, they could experience "an opening in my mind that not everyone thinks the same way." Both participants who moved toward a critical management philosophy and all but one of the participants whose critical management philosophy was affirmed noted the dynamics of collective learning that occurred during the discussions. However, only two participants who experienced the course as an affirmation of their mainstream management philosophy described the discussions and then only in passing as "fun." Trent mentioned, "they are really starting to get into it." For these participants, the discussion and course content was seen not as avenues to reconsider their current stances but as spaces to rearticulate their mainstream viewpoints.

In comparison, John and Daniel, who moved to a critical management philosophy, saw the discussions as instrumental to their learning. Daniel said, "I just think discussing that with other people in my group and just seeing sometimes the differences in opinion, that that's "just the way it is" or people who share the same opinion, "that's terrible"….I think people's reactions were the greatest thing, an opening in my mind that not everyone thinks in the same way." This realization gave him permission to look at management and capitalism in a different way and in the process develop a more critical way of looking at the world. As he endeavored to understand management in the light of the discussions in the course, it moved him to a critical management philosophy.

Those participants who experienced an affirmation of their critical management philosophy valued the discussion as the most significant interaction that influenced their learning. The discussions, both the small group discussions with the instructor and the class discussions, opened the participants to different opinions. Edward pointed out, "when you have a discussion with a person face to face, you can understand something more about his attitudes. I think experiences are important and these are experiences that I will remember in the future." Other participants viewed the discussions as a tool for moving from the lectures to practice. Gary explained, "the encouragement of conversations in the class… just helps you learn, basically, helps you think, helps you put what is happening in the lecture into practice and that's quite difficult."

At the same time that the participants from the university in the U.K. were explaining the importance of many different views in a discussion, they were also well aware that in actuality only a handful of students had participated in these discussions in the classroom. Five out of the eight U.K. participants felt that this disconnect was important enough for them to point it out to me in the interview. Edward, a student from Turkey, informed me that "I don't know if you know this or not, but everybody is not talking in class. Some of the people feel comfortable to talk among others. And I don't know if you noticed or not, but…mostly the natives are talking in the class."

Most of the participants including the native speakers discussed the dynamic that restricted participation of the majority of the learners. The participants gave me this information even though it contradicted their other comments about the importance of discussions to their learning. Based on my notes from three class observations I found that indeed there were only a handful of students engaged in the discussion each week. Most of these students were native English speakers. On average native speakers engaged in the class discussions for 78% of the time although they represented only 45% of the class membership. For two group discussions, the native speakers monopolized the discussions.

If the discussions are an important factor in the development of the learner's management philosophy then this brings up two questions. What learning is occurring with those who are not actively engaged in the discussions? In a CMS course where one of the premises of CMS is to bring unheard voices into the forefront (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992), what implications does this contradiction have on the learner's ability to learn about critical management ideas?

Discussion and Significance

The outcomes from a CMS course derive from the intersection of course content, course process, the instructor, and the learners' prior experience and identity. Educational researchers have placed the educator at the center of the consciousness-raising activity in a critical educational setting (Ellsworth, 1989). The findings of this study suggest, however, that the educator is only one aspect of the learning process that facilitates the development of the learner's worldview or philosophy. The interaction of the learner's educational and life experiences with the course content is important in understanding the development of the learner's management philosophy. It affected how much they were willing to consider the critical point of view presented in the course content as well as how willing they were to engage in the class beyond fulfilling the requirements for a grade, and applying the information to their personal life situations.

Within traditional academic settings, the assumption is that the professor controls and shapes the environment more than the learners do (Ellsworth, 1989; Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998). It has also been suggested that the objective of critical management education is to equip learners to form their own judgments and make their own connections to real-life issues (Cavanaugh & Prasad, 1996). This objective stresses the need to provide learners with different critical perspectives but the assumption here is that the educator seeks only to supply new information without having any bias of their own about what change they hope will occur in the learners' management philosophy. In this case, there is no emancipatory element or focus on how the learner might facilitate a more democratic management practice in the real world. In other words, there was little attention paid to translating theories into concrete action. It is important to move the practice of management and management education away from the prescriptive models that give the illusion that there are ready-made formulas that can solve complex problems.

The findings of the study suggest that the learners viewed the instructor as an expert. This study supports previous findings that the positionality of the educator, including the perception of "expert" is a primary component that accounts for the learning that occurs (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 1998). The instructors' positionality in this study was white and male. This had an effect on the learners' perception that the instructors were the "experts."

It is sometimes assumed that self-reflexivity in a critical management course will lead to the learners broadening or changing their perspective (Caproni & Arias, 1997). However, this study found that self-reflexivity and critical course content are not sufficient to move a learner's management philosophy from a mainstream to a critical philosophy. Self-reflexivity did not move those students with a mainstream management philosophy and strong mainstream experiences to a critical management philosophy; it only served to affirm their original philosophy.

In all educational settings, the factors that affect the learning process are complex and interlocking. As critical management educators, we need to be aware of and use learners' experiences to build bridges between the critical content and the learners. We need to provide a space for the learners, especially those who enter our classrooms with a critical orientation, to develop and express their voices. Finally, regardless of the disruptive consequences that may occur for the educator and/or learners, we need to step out to articulate and even intentionally disrupt the power relations in CMS classrooms.

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