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Critical Management Studies Courses:
Impact on the Adult Learners' Management Philosophy?

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Abstract: This paper presents the findings of a study examining the development of the adult learners' management philosophy in a critical management course. This study found that these courses could impact a learners' management philosophy in multiple ways within the same course.

Background

Adult education addresses many issues from a critical perspective both in content and in pedagogy. It has been suggested that adult educators are divided over the question of whether to locate their practice in civil society or the workplace (Cunningham, 2000). Currently $2.2 trillion is spent worldwide on management and workplace learning. Perhaps the time has come to bridge this divide and consider the possibilities of creating a civil society within the workplace. Critical Management Studies (CMS) is beginning to build this bridge within the field of management. CMS aims to critically scrutinize managerial discourse and practice, thereby opening a dialogue about power and privilege inherent in the system of capitalism (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). The principle assumptions of capitalism center around a business model whose purpose is to maximize shareholder wealth. CMS explores the question of whose interests are served and whose interests should be served in the area of work and capitalism and its impact on the individual and society (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992). The purpose of this dialogue is to enable learners to reflect critically on the underlying assumptions and values of society, and capitalism in particular, which ultimately influences their lives in significant ways. It influences their identity, their quality of life, health, how they allocate their time, as well as family and intimate relationships. Therefore, CMS has the potential to reach adult learners in a very personal way and its use can extend well beyond the borders of the business school.

The issues of power and privilege are part of every educational agenda whether acknowledged or not (Tisdell, Hanley, & Taylor, 2000). These issues are also part of the process for learners when they encounter a dialogue critiquing capitalism. To date the literature addressing the importance of CMS to management education has focused primarily on the need for critical content and/or critical pedagogy (Reynolds, 1999). Empirical studies of the learning process embedded in CMS have not been undertaken. Elliott (2003) explicitly acknowledges this gap: "Knowledge, and awareness of management education's impact on management practitioners, remains taken from the viewpoint of educators. This reveals an 'ex-cathedra' approach in which educators are expert, including expert about how practitioners respond to management education" (p. 418). The problem addressed in this research sought to correct this lack of attention to the learning process occurring in CMS classrooms and its impact on the development of the adult learners' management philosophy.

I used a qualitative approach with case studies of two CMS classrooms. One classroom was a master's level class in a Management program in the United Kingdom while the other was a PhD seminar on Critical Accounting in the United States. During the last three weeks of each class, I conducted interviews with the learners and observed classes. Eleven learners participated in this study. The questions guiding the data collection and analysis included: How do CMS courses affect the adult learners' management philosophy? What factors in a CMS course contribute to the development of the learners' management philosophy? This paper will discuss the findings and implications from the first research question.

Findings

I began by categorizing the participants as having one of two management philosophies. It is important to recognize that in actuality the participants started and ended up along a continuum; even those who fell at the critical end of the continuum accepted some of the tenets of capitalism. The first category represents someone who supports a mainstream management philosophy. This meant that they view capitalism as a good thing in almost all respects, and believe that the most important objective of business is to "maximize shareholder wealth." Those who support a critical management philosophy recognize that capitalism is not necessarily the best system especially when it focuses exclusively on profits. They regard the manager's role to be one where the manager uses their power to affect an individual or organizational situation by valuing other things (employees and the environment, for instance) higher than or at least equal to the profit motive.

In the analysis of the change in a learner's management philosophy, I established that there were four possible directions that the learner could move. Two of the directions represented an affirmation of their original philosophy: mainstream management philosophy affirmed and critical management philosophy affirmed. The other possible directions that a learner could move were to a critical management philosophy or to a mainstream management philosophy. My analysis revealed that participants either were affirmed in their original philosophy or that there was a movement from a mainstream management philosophy to a critical management philosophy. While I looked for movement from a critical to a mainstream management philosophy, none of the participants moved in that direction.

Looking across all of the participants, six of the eleven participants began the class with mainstream management philosophies. Over the course of the semester, four of these learners felt that their philosophy was "affirmed" while two participants moved to a critical management philosophy. The other five participants began the class with a critical management philosophy and felt that the class affirmed and clarified their philosophy. These are important findings because it indicates that the learners enter the class with different orientations. Yet, the course simultaneously reinforced these different, even opposing orientations at the same time. This occurred even though each of the courses was highly critical, even anti-capitalist, in nature.

Mainstream Management Philosophy Affirmed

Trent, Lucy, Heather, and Sharon were all U.K. participants who began the course supporting a mainstream management philosophy. Trent characterized himself as an "ardent capitalist" and felt that the course, "actually reinforced everything I thought already." He elaborated saying, "I really think capitalism is a very good system. I think it's human nature that's the problem. It's not the system that's the problem."

Lucy's views about management and organizations were,

I really had admiration for the person who took a Seattle coffee company or something and built it up …they became a success from nothing…. I have more admiration for that person than criticism…I still struggle to sympathize with people who feel they can achieve a lot by smashing up Starbucks and McDonalds. I guess I sort of understand the criticisms of exploiting other countries' workers and monopolies and squeezing out competition. But I still have the admiration, so whether this module has changed my view, I don't know. [In terms of] ethical decision making…if I had the chance to make a Starbucks equivalent out of something small, I probably would.

This course affirmed her mainstream management philosophy because as she pointed out, "I think this module has helped to…put words to my thoughts and to find reasons to support what maybe I already felt."

Heather considered herself part of mainstream management. She explained that, "if you study, for example, management, your goal is to be a manager and earn a high salary…if you earn a high salary you are not supposed to be anti-capitalist and I don't consider myself anti-capitalist."

Sharon also supported a mainstream management philosophy stressing the need "to look at things from the business side of things." However, she appeared to be the most conflicted about what she had learned. This conflict was most in evidence when she talked about moving outside of the private sector for her own career: "In terms of my ethical view, it's made me think twice about working for a multinational company." Later on, she elaborated that "I can actually do the job which I have an interest in…the arts and community arts. So, I could build upon that and I could still use my management experience, my social work experience, my social policy experience."

While these students engaged with the course material in critical ways, at the end of the course, their management philosophy still supported a mainstream agenda in management and business. For these participants, the benefit of the course was that it provided a vehicle that forced them to look at their beliefs and worldview about business and management and helped them to articulate those beliefs and even to develop knowledge and language that could be useful with those who were criticizing management and their beliefs.

Moving to a Critical Management Philosophy

John and Daniel, two U.K. participants began the course supporting a mainstream management philosophy. Yet, they both moved toward a more critical view of management and business by the end of the course. John told me, "Before I took this course, I would have thought that effort does mean something at the end of the day, it's productivity. I guess I was a capitalist at best." By the end of the course, however, his stance was that "obviously, you do need to make a profit to survive, to keep your workforce there, but it's not the be all and end all, so you would take other things into consideration."

Daniel's view of the impact of the course was that it affected him,

Quite a lot…I think it has definitely made me see that there is more to business than management and making profit. Obviously, that is an important aspect of it…however, you [would] think a responsibility that each of us has, whether we are the manager or the employee, [is that] we have opportunities to influence situations.

The course helped them to expand their management philosophy beyond the mainstream management agenda. In moving to a critical management philosophy, they both felt that there were other things that needed to be considered that were at least as important as "maximizing shareholder profit" and that managers had a responsibility to consider these other issues. In these two cases, unlike those whose management philosophy was affirmed, the course and critical reflection resulted in a change in their previous management philosophy.

Critical Management Philosophy Affirmed

Two of the U.K. participants and all three of the U.S. participants began the semester supporting a critical management philosophy. All of these participants told stories about prior work experiences where they acted from an ethical or critical stance resulting in choices that reflected a decision to place a higher value on something other than profits. In fact, their actions resulted in less profits. These participants thought that this course affirmed their beliefs. Gary worked as

the head butcher in a supermarket. One of the situations he had to deal with was management's directive to throw away extra meat, which was sent by mistake to the supermarket, in order to avoid selling it at a loss. According to Gary,

> In the end, I reduced it. I was like 'if you want to throw it away, you throw it away, I'm reducing it.' So I did. I sold it and I said to the manager, 'Well, if you have got any problems, call me in…until *you* stop this happening, I'll do whatever I want' and they were like, 'We're your managers.' 'Yeah, but I'm the butcher.' This kind of power struggle [was going on].

He indicated that before the course he did not believe that "profits should rule." This CMS course provided him with arguments and ways to articulate his prior beliefs. He further explained, "I was kind of argumentative in the first place and what this [master's program] has been saying to me so far is that…profit rules. I believed profit shouldn't rule so, this course has confirmed more what I think."

Ed related the story of his family's business and a decision they made to continue to pay their employees and have them continue working even though the economy had significantly curtailed their sales.

> That is not a kind of business decision [you make] if you are a professional. You don't [make these kind of decisions] because that means you are giving money from your pocket but they made that decision in order to not cause any loss of jobs. I think that was an ethical decision, because they didn't want people to lose their jobs.

Ed said that he would still make the same decision today. He pointed out "to me, maybe that comes from my family… money is not everything. If that many people, two hundred or two hundred and forty would lose their jobs, it will affect us." The course did affirm his view that ethical considerations are important and at the same time provided him with "some important ideas." He reported,

> I think this course explains that we need to bear in mind that there are ethical worries besides the business stuff…. the course is telling us that it is important to think not only in a business style but also in some ethical ways.

A U.S. participant, Ann's story represented a refusal to go against the rules: "She [the mayor] wanted some money moved or something done that we couldn't do, it was against the rules. And he [her immediate supervisor] came to us to get it done and we said, "No." The result was that her immediate supervisor, who was also a friend, was fired for Ann's ethical stance. While Ann's husband worries that she had "given up her religion" as she has moved further along the critical management continuum, Ann feels that the course has helped to "make me more liberal," and that she has "expanded myself."

Rosemary, another U.S. participant, was working for a utility company when "he [head of utility company] helped one of his right hand men from the navy steal those contracts out from under our company…to set up his own company and take them and leave." She ended up going to the FBI to report this unethical behavior. This course reinforced her views and "made me see how important it is just to sit back and examine things and I think I would continue to do that and not get so locked up in the day to day stuff."

David, the third U.S. participant shared a story that centered on a situation where he chose to tell the outside auditors "what was really going on." The result was that the company started with a pre-audit profit of $11 million "and when the audit came in, it was [closer to] a two and a half million dollar loss." With respect to the effect of the course, he said "I can't say that it

has clarified ethics any, if anything, it has made them a little bit more complicated, at least I realize that they are more complicated."

These participants experienced the course as "giving them some important ideas" that affirmed their already critical perspective and in some cases helped them to articulate their beliefs more clearly. Similar to those students who found that their mainstream management philosophy was affirmed, these students expressed an affirmation of their critical management philosophy.

Discussion and Significance

A conclusion of this study is that CMS courses can impact a learner's management philosophy in multiple ways within the same course. The adult education and higher education literature both recognize that learners and educators enter a critical course invested in some position in relationship to the critical agenda (Ellsworth, 1989; Tisdell et al., 2000). The implicit assumption, however, especially in the critical management education area, has been that the instructor brings a critical perspective while the learners bring a more mainstream management philosophy (Reynolds, 1999). As this study points out, some learners enter the educational setting with a critical management philosophy. They may or may not have been able to articulate their critical perspectives in the language of the critical theorists but they were well aware of the power relationships that existed and the flaws in the system of capitalism and management. Transformational learning as characterized by such adult educators as Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1990) postulates that critical learning results in dramatic and fundamental changes in our worldviews or philosophies of society and our role in it. Mezirow (1990) contends that through critical awareness adults will chose "more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives" (p. 14) as the superior perspective. However, the findings of this study revealed that change is not likely to occur in a CMS course. According to this study, only two of eleven participants experienced a change in their management philosophy. For the other nine participants, whether they began with a mainstream management philosophy or a critical management philosophy the impact of the course was to affirm their beginning philosophies. If the purpose of education is to change the behavior, attitude, or beliefs of learners than these classes had little impact. If the purpose is to engage the learners to think critically about their underlying values and assumptions around the issue of capitalism, then the classes had a major impact on how the participants viewed themselves. Most of the participants did not change their management philosophy but instead found that the course "affirmed," "reinforced," or added "clarity" to their original worldviews. Only two participants experienced the course as changing their management philosophy. What is important is that five of the participants entered the course with a critical perspective and the course affirmed their philosophy and in some cases, gave them a language to articulate it.

The findings of this study suggests that a CMS course impacts learners in multiple ways in terms of the way that they view management and their philosophical orientation to it. It was possible that the learners could move in one of four directions. The one direction that was not present among the participants was a movement toward a mainstream management philosophy. Prior experiences appear to be the key that prevented the participants from moving from a critical management philosophy toward a more mainstream management philosophy. All of the participants with a critical management philosophy related experiences where they made an ethical decision in a business context. In all cases, their choice was to choose less profit in favor of some other value. Against their personal experiences, a mainstream management philosophy, even one with an ethical stance, did not accurately reflect their values.

It is important as a critical educator to realize that learners do not enter our classrooms as blank slates nor do they only begin from a mainstream perspective (Ellsworth, 1989). For those learners who have an unarticulated critical perspective or who have never encountered a situation where someone else has a similar critical perspective, CMS courses can validate their perspective and help them to bring voice to their own worldviews. For those who might begin from a mainstream perspective there is the possibility that they will choose to move toward a more critical management philosophy. Nevertheless, the bottom line is that a learner's management philosophy is affected and developed using critical management studies in the adult education classroom.

As adult educators, this means that we are not necessarily the experts or the only one interested in exploring a critical worldview of management or society. It also means that there is a wealth of experience that the learners bring to the table that can be used to build bridges from prior experiences to the course content. Finally, the implications are that we as educators have an opportunity to open up the spaces of power and privilege for learners who have experienced and view the world from a critical perspective. We can provide a space for learners who have entered the educational setting with a critical philosophy to further articulate their own voices. While this study looked specifically at the development of a learner's management philosophy, it has applications in the development of a learner's worldview using a critical perspective whether the context is management education, continuing professional education or any other type of adult education.

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