Working with Toshiba, Lewin and Dewey: a journey into the heart of change

Christine A Eastman (PhD) Institute for Work Based Learning, Middlesex University, London, UK

ABSTRACT

Many have suggested that over the last twenty five years or so the debate over organisational change has been dominated by the issue of power and politics in the form of the Emergent approach consistent with a free-market spirit. However, our work with Toshiba has led us to conclude that the principles of social responsibility and ethical change as championed by Kurt Lewin and John Dewey are emerging as a more amenable and desirable approach to change and appear to be embraced by many in the workforce. Many US observers have argued that such events as the bankruptcy of Enron and the indictment of senior executives from this company and others as well as the recent events in the UK concerning a perceived lack of financial probity in the banking and political milieus have shown that a disregard for ethics in decision making can have deleterious consequences for business and society. We intend to present a case study using Diploma students on a Toshibatec UK sponsored course to illustrate this emerging sensitivity to issues of social responsibility, ethical behaviour and democratic ideas and ideals. We will contend that Lewin's and Dewey's beliefs are indeed still alive and relevant and that these students are embracing such ideas in their push for organisational change at Toshiba.

Keywords: organisational change, power, Lewin, Dewey, Toshiba, ethics

INTRODUCTION

The University of Middlesex and Toshiba have been working together since the end of 2010 to offer a Diploma in Organisational Change as an alternative to staff development through appraisals. Moreover, this was thought to be a way of introducing changes in staff behaviour and performance. The theme of the course was "Facilitating Change" and students were asked to keep a learning log, use a workbook as a basis for working on work-based learning exercises and, finally, write a reflective essay about their learning experience. None of this group of seven – five males, two females – had had formal higher education experience and, indeed, all expressed varying degrees of reservations and anxieties about approaching academic work. Within this highly regarded technological company, the students' roles ranged from technicians to managers. All were selected from the Head of Human Resources as Change Facilitators, people who could effect such needed change as to have a significant impact on the organisation. During one of our preliminary workshops comments such as "people don't say what they need to in front of each other", "gossip is rife" and "there are things that need to be said but aren't" surfaced. Our primary focus during that time was to explore how critical thinking could hone self-awareness in order to enable the students to drive change within their own teams, business sections and across the business. Furthermore, by using the tenets of Lewin and Dewey in order to pursue change in management (guided by the former) and to underpin our own pedagogy (from the latter), we would argue that the students were appearing to hold the kind of ethical framework they needed to design an action plan with short and medium term goals that could effectively influence their respective teams. Lewin and Dewey are timely philosophers to remind us how to engage with others ethically and facilitate change without abandoning our moral responsibility or eschewing such concepts of accountability, community and individuality.

RATIONALE AND METHODOLOGY

If we take as a premise that an organisation's ethics are embedded its culture, then it is not a simple matter of changing the rules to alter behaviour. If there is going to be a behavioural/organisational change, such change must come willingly. In other words, the Emergent approach which privileges self-interest and profit maximisation is not going to work. Individuals and organisations could learn a great deal by turning to Lewin's Organisational Development movement and Dewey's thoughts on what constitutes a healthy, democratic society. As Edgar Schein commented "[Lewin's] seminal work on leadership style and the experiments on planned change which took place in World War II in an effort to change consumer behaviour launched a whole generation of research in group dynamics and the implementation of change programs" (Schein, 1988: 239).

We introduced students to Lewinian theory, in particular, as a filter through which they could examine practice at Toshiba. We also used Dewey's beliefs as a foundation on which to explore business issues together and to engage with work-based learning. Dewey posits the idea that good teaching is about getting students to talk about their experiences, raise questions, discuss topics of interest and engage in conversations. Such focus on participation comes from both a values and pedagogical perspective. He indicates that he would like these values developed in schools (or learning environments), values that will contribute to a healthy and democratic society. In *How We Think* (LW 8: 163) he argues that all education is unavoidably moral to the degree that it motivates students to live and conduct their lives in specific ways. We are not for a moment suggesting any inculcation of morals on our part, but we hold the position that values are implicit in learning and teaching. Lewin suggested that only the permeation of democratic values into all facets of society could prevent extreme social conflict: we listened to and read comments from the students at Toshiba that would appear to resonate with this observation.

Students were given a workbook, information on course expectations and handouts on referencing and other key graduate skills. The workbook contained exercises on action centred leadership, emotional intelligence, change and innovation, appreciative inquiry and how to compile a log book/learning diary. In order to achieve a Diploma in Facilitating Change, students were assessed against the following learning outcomes:

- Explore local and strategic influences and prevailing cultures that impact upon the change process in your area

- Analyse selected change facilitation models that you have used to introduce and facilitate change and provide a rationale for selected approaches

- Appreciate the ethical issues that may arise when leading change

- Reflect upon the processes of becoming a change agent and design an action plan with short and medium term goals that could effectively influence your team

- Select and evidence effective communication strategies you have used for different audiences

- Demonstrate the application of change agent leadership skills and reflect upon the consequent impact upon your practice

- Identify future personal and professional development skills required in relation to facilitating change

Our approach was pragmatic: to help students to work through their assignments by providing them with the tools of critical reflection and inquiry. To this end, we urged them to interrogate the texts we assigned and to comment about such learning experiences in their learning logs.

CASE STUDY AND DISCUSSION

In the collected later works of John Dewey he asks the question, "What can be done to liberate the teachers, to free their personalities and minds from all the petty, economic, social and administrative restrictions which so frequently hem them in and repress them (LW 2: 123). We take this question as our premise when we talk to the employees of organisations. However, we substitute "teachers" for "mechanical engineers", "area managers", "chief executives" and so forth. As long as any of the professionals we teach are viewed as less than creative, talented and committed, their organisations are not allowing them the freedom to reach their potential. Dewey reminds us that sadly a "wooden and perfunctory pedagogue" is often cherished more than the teacher who is characterised by energy, enthusiasm, passion and "emotional and imaginative" perception (LW 10: 267).

Again, if we substitute "teacher" for, in this case, "technician" (or "manager"), we may draw a distinct link between "the system" (the mode in which an organisation arranges itself) and the way more enlightened employees deal with this system.

The students submitted learning logs for formative feedback after our initial meeting in which we stressed the importance of critical thinking in bringing about organisational change. The logs were divided into four columns:

- Date

- Noteworthy feedback/conversations/insights which reflect how change is being perceived

- Your response to/reflections on what you have written and implications for successful change in the future

- How you can relate these reflections to models of change

One student described under Noteworthy feedback that because of work pressure and absences, he was forced to explain to his accounts manager that his team would be taking more time than thought necessary on a customer's job. This appeared a difficult decision to make in the face of company pressure to keep customers satisfied: under Your response to/reflections he noted:

"It definitely pays to be upfront and honest with people even though there could be a poor reaction to the information presented. I think it is better for [the account manager] to find out from within Toshiba that we are struggling rather than from a customer complaining to her. Even now if a complaint does come her way at least she has some explanation to offer rather than contacting me after the event."

This student took a moral stance. In fact, Dewey claims that all learning/education is unavoidably moral to the degree that it motivates students to live and conduct their lives in specific ways. Through the reflective process the student felt that his

integrity would be compromised by anything other than the full truth. The student's words point to the development of a reflective, evidentially based philosophy and practice. As Dewey reminds us, learning needs to focus on the student in learning communities, not in isolation. The student learns best by learning in the context of where he lives (or in this case, works).

Elsewhere this same student describes a situation in which he was forced by time constraints to do a job at which he didn't feel properly trained. The work did not go well and, furthermore, the student was anxious that there would be future health and safety implication. Under Your response to/reflections he wrote:

"I should learn that refusing to do work for the right reasons is not a weakness – it is in fact a sign of strength. I had put myself in a very awkward position until I contacted the salesman to inform him that an outside contractor should complete or certify the work completed. I am now investigating the idea that a small team is set up that is certified to carry out this kind of installation in the future."

Dewey is convinced that learning does not occur unless a student is capable of understanding and applying the sensations felt, impressions experienced, ideas explored and skills taught. Students need to rely on their own experiences and, for want of a better expression, "gut instinct":

"Information is knowledge that is merely acquired and stored up; wisdom is knowledge operating in the direction of powers to the better living of life. Information, merely as information, implies training. In school, amassing information always tends to escape from the ideal of wisdom or good judgment" (LW 8: 163).

Students were encouraged through reflection to discuss their experiences, raise questions, think critically about a situation and begin to link their practice with theory. Through their learning logs they were urged to make that connection between their reflections and observations and models of change.

Another student observed that his colleague was not interested in attending specific meetings that explored changing the culture at Toshiba. This colleague claimed that he was "too busy with issues that needed resolving in the field" and claimed that nothing "worthwhile" could come from these meetings. The student reflected:

"Obviously these meetings will only be successful if we get our colleagues to buy into them and for all [his colleague] knows, he could have a very valuable contribution in this meeting. Unfortunately past meetings where things have not been followed up will always leave a negative feeling and cause a barrier to the changes we want to make."

We discussed with the group Lewin's model of change, in particular, a paper on Lewinian values from the *Journal of Change Management* (Burnes, 2009) which discusses ethics and organisational change. We encouraged students to reflect on ethics, morality and ideology from both the individual and organisational perspective. The student's observation that participation lead to change provoked many interesting responses. A student discussing someone on his team reflected:

"I have explored [his] needs – as an employee he does so much good work then destroys that work with one negative statement. He tries to control his associates and be the dominant person within the group by drawing a line that he does not want [his colleagues] to cross in terms of achievement. His work is excellent [but] his attitude has possibly restricted his process."

He concludes that:

"as [he] is always very resistant to change, his complex needs are never going to be met by Toshiba."

He then links his observations to Lewin's theory:

"As a manager I feel I have given him every opportunity to make changes. He has been unfrozen-moved and refreezed, in Lewin's words. My question is – will the fridge remain cold enough to keep him where he is required to be?"

The student appears genuinely puzzled about how to facilitate change within his colleague. Dewey was convinced that reflection – that crucial pause to consider – was a necessary stage in the development of moral practice. Furthermore, the value of such reflection produces results. In situations in which we don't know what to do, reflection guides us in discovering what to do: learning doesn't occur unless a student is capable of understanding and applying the sensations felt, impressions experienced and ideas explored (EW 5: 95). This student, by using Lewin's "unfreezing" model of change, was grappling with the realities of group dynamics, group decisions and behavioural change. In discussing Dewey, Varner and Peck (2003) acknowledge that his belief that thoughts must be applied and tested to become learned knowledge and that the best reflection requires students "to integrate readings, observations and experiences" (53). Our encouraging these students to use their learning journals to integrate theory with experience has certainly been born out by our own observations of students' developing self awareness.

A learning log extract points to a colleague being out of his depth:

"a strategy of exposing [him] gently to his own weaknesses was employed. He was in effect thawed slowly rather than unfrozen. When the move came it came abruptly and of his own free will rather than by imposition. His refreezing is ongoing [...]Lewin's theories when put into practice do work short term but do they work long term?"

Here we see that although the learning journal appears to be primarily an individual activity, it allows for students to draw upon and engage with the rest of the group. Dewey's fundamental premise of experience and education being a part of life, not segregated from "real life" is echoed in the students' logs. Students integrate theory into experience and practice again and again because they are focussed on bringing about organisational change:

"The enemies of the esthetic are neither the practical nor the intellectual. They are the humdrum; slackness of loose ends; submission to convention in practice and intellectual procedure. Rigid abstinence, coerced submission, tightness on one side and dissipation, incoherence and aimless indulgence on the other, are deviations in opposite directions from the unity of experience." (LW 10:47).

Again, although Dewey is referring particularly to poor teaching, his words underscore what our students appear to be rejecting as poor practice and an environment that – at times – shows the fissures of conflict, apathy and resistance to positive change – "the slackness of loose ends". This rejection of loose ends, working actively to root it out rather than simply identifying it, lends credence to our own observation of democratic ideas and ideals in the logs. In fact Dewey calls all educational practice "a kind of social engineering" (LW 5:20) and argues that the true reflective practitioner, the one who is intellectually curious, engaged in critical examination and developing a range of experiences for enquiry, is working towards an understanding of the insights learned in the application of theory and research to understand better the institutional ethos under which he/she works (LW10: 274-5).

As education is permeated with moral choices, accountability is key. A student comments on the obfuscatory nature of emails which allow employees to "pass the buck", ignore each other: *not* work for the common good of the company:

"Just to prove a point that we love an email in this company [....]I email X with our registration details. X emails Y who then asks us to email Z. X emails Z and we get something back saying we need to contact someone else called A [....] I think this proves (the point) that we spend too much time writing and not enough time acting on issues or talking. I call it Slippery Shoulders Syndrome. I have replied to that email – it's no longer my problem – next! When in fact the issue is still outstanding. Email has become the default method of communication in the workplace (Howe 2007). Some circumstances clearly warrant face-to-face communication. In fact, Howe says emails can be one of the worse ways to communicate. Our senior management team are masters at ignoring you or acknowledging that you even exist! People sit about ten yards apart in the same office and email each other. The evidence suggests that our company needs to become more self-aware and to learn from our daily activities."

Students highlight this lack of accountability throughout their writing. If we link school pedagogy to work pedagogy (or even family pedagogy) we see that it is healthy for people to discuss their experiences, raise questions, engage in conversations and receive feedback from each other. From a values perspective, Dewey issues a warning on ignoring accountability or indeed culpability within the workplace:

"For unless the agencies which form the mind and morals of the community can prevent the operation of those forces which are always making for a division of interests, class and sectional ideas and feelings will become dominant and our democracy will fall to pieces" (MW 10:203).

It is obvious that Dewey promotes democratic societies. Implicitly, he emphasises such present day values as clear communication, strong responsibility and the development of individuals to the utmost of their potential. The students/employees at Toshibatec all wrestled with the question of where the company was and what development they desired and were prepared to work for. They recognised that, in each doing their own work, they were contributing to the enrichment of their own lives in the company and of the company itself. They eschewed low expectations for high ideals.

CONCLUSION

Buried deeply within a student's learning log was a brief retelling of an incident in which his colleague collected an award for ten years' service. On the face of it, this was a positive event and the writer reflected that the award ceremony, coupled by the colleague's seemingly positive aspect, bode well for relations within his team. However, this bright mood evaporated as the honoured colleague proceeded to denigrate his team and the company at large. The writer cited Lewin's observation that change was less about achieving a particular objective and more about individuals and groups learning about themselves and being prepared, if necessary, to change their behaviour. In the spirit of Lewin's ideas on organisational change and Dewey's on sustaining and redefining a democratic society, he wrote that he was committed to exposing this colleague "to his own negativity in order to start his learning process". If learning needs to focus on the student in learning communities, here we have the heart of the matter: learning truly in action, not in isolation. He finished with these brave words, "There is value in this not only to help him at work but also personally. I won't give up." Neither Lewin nor Dewey ever underestimated how difficult the process of change was to effect. These students remind us of the work we have ahead and its importance for them, their organisation and for organisational change at large.

REFERENCES

Burnes, B (2009) Reflections: Ethics and Organisational Change – Time for a Return to Lewinian Values. *Journal of Change Management*. Vol 9. No. 4. 359 – 81.

All references to John Dewey are from the following:

Dewey, J (1972, 1982, 1989). *The Early Works of John Dewey* 1882-1898: *The Middle Words of John Dewey* 1899 - 1924; and *The Later Works of John Dewey* 1925-1953. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.

Schein, E H (1988) *Organizational Psychology*. 3rd edition. Englewood Cliff, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.

Varner, D & S Peck (2003) "Learning from Learning Journals: the benefits and challenges of using learning journal assignment." *Journal of Management Education*. 27 (1) 52 – 57.