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'If I want to feel my feelings, I'll see a bloody shrink': Learning from the shadow side of experiential learning

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Abstract

This paper discusses the value of learning from a psychodynamic approach to experiential learning. This approach is used to help students experience and understand the emotional and relational complexity of leading and managing within organizations. From this perspective, experiential learning means engaging with emotions and with embedded relations of power, to unsettle expectations of how organizations work. Here we consider the professor's role, which is to help students work with and through the emotional dynamics generated in work relationships, even when those dynamics are difficult to bear and the overriding impulse is to avoid or defend against them. In this way, students are being supported to better understand how organizations are emotional places, *not* how individuals within organizations can 'manage' emotion.

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Introduction

The aim of our paper is to demonstrate both the value and the difficulty of learning from the shadow side of experiential learning. Organizations, including Business Schools, are complicated, emotional and highly politicised places in which contradiction and complexity are as frequent as rational plans and procedures. Our view is that a psychodynamic approach to experiential learning offers one way in which the emotional complexity of leading and managing within organizations can be experienced and understood. 'Shadow' is a common psychodynamic metaphor. Here it refers to the relationship between emotion and learning, to those aspects of the emotional experience of learning that are noticeable, but that are often avoided or ignored. This shadow can be difficult to feel and to accept, yet we argue that it is an important aspect in engaging with the emotional complexity of experiential learning and how this can inform management and leadership thinking and practice.

In this paper we provide the reader with a first-person description of an episode from a week-long experiential learning module on leading and managing, designed for Masters' students and conducted by the first author. The module is a popular offering and is regularly over-subscribed with students who have heard it is 'different'. When that difference is experienced, anxiety takes hold and learning can be resisted. Uncomfortable feelings within this group were given voice by one student who told the professor to 'fuck off….if I want to feel my feelings I'll see a bloody shrink'. The roles of professor/ leader and students/ followers are foregrounded by the outburst. The professor must withstand the emotional force of the attack, whilst also creating an environment in which it can be examined and understood in the service of learning.

Managing and leading: the module

The programme we speak of here is a five-day (8 hours per day, 40 hours in total) intensive module on managing and leading. It is an elective module for MSc students who come from a wide variety of business programmes. Since 2015, I (first author) have run the course 6 times with classes of 30 students aged from mid 20s to mid 40s from a variety of international countries[2]. The gender breakdown has averaged 55% male 45% female over the 6 iterations of the course. Prior to the module I have not met nor taught any of the students who participate in the course. All of the students who participate have had some experience of management and leadership. They sign up for this module because they have been assured by their peers that it is worth taking and/or because it is popular and difficult to get in to.

Outlining the nature and purpose of the module is important. Students need to know that the approach will not suit everyone, especially those looking for prescriptions to become 'better' leaders. Some students may experience 'crucible moments' which 'test, shape, and reveal something about how people see themselves—who they are, what they are capable of, and who they want to be' (Byrne, Crossan, & Seijts, 2018: 276; Taylor, 2018); others may find the experience entirely disappointing or bewildering. Throughout the week, students are invited to participate in a series of experiential exercises designed to explore the unconscious and emotional complexities of organizational life. For example, they are asked to reflect on photographs they have taken that represent how they feel about managing and leading (Warren, 2002). Some students become uncomfortable as others associate to their

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[2]Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, China, Chile, Croatia, Denmark, England, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, India, Ireland, Japan, New Zealand, Malta, Pakistan, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Scotland, South Africa, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, The Netherlands, Ukraine, USA, Wales.

photograph, seeing connections other than those intended by the photographer. The role of the professor is to help students reflect on such exercises both individually and collectively; and to assist them in engaging with the uncomfortable and at times unwanted feelings generated by them.

Psychodynamic perspectives on experiential learning

Psychodynamic approaches to experiential learning engage directly with underlying emotions and implicit power structures that are created in the classroom. The theoretical roots of this approach come from psychodynamic theories of group relations (Long, 2004; Stein, 2004), which emphasise unconscious processes and behaviours, as well as their impact on implicit and explicit structures. These are expressed through individual and collective anxieties and defences; through habits and attachments to particular ways of feeling, thinking and acting; through attempts to avoid and control conflict and difference; and through cover stories that mask difficult feelings (French, 1997; Gould, Ebers, & McVicker Clinchy, 1999; Hirschhorn & Young, 1991). The aim of psychodynamic experiential learning is to help students to notice and to interpret emotional and political dynamics in organizations through noticing and interpreting them in the Business School classroom (Trehan, 2016). The specific contribution in this paper is to reflect on the professor's role and experience in creating effective peer-to-peer learning.

Two key assumptions are integral to a psychodynamic approach (Vince, 2016). First, the ability to engage with emotions and power relations in the classroom depends on the professor's willingness to hold students in the moment, to generate 'here and now' experience from which they can *feel* their reflections on leading and managing as a

prerequisite to understanding them. This involves maintaining a learning environment in which students' emotional responses to what is happening here and now can be kept available for reflection rather than lost in students' desire to move away from emotion as quickly as possible. In practical terms, this means that the professor helps students to engage with a general problem for managers and leaders, which is that they often work in task-obsessed, overly rational and conflict-averse environments (sometimes of their own making).

Second, reflection on here and now power relations (e.g. differences of gender, class, race, culture apparent in the classroom; or broader tensions and dynamics that have developed in the course group) bring to the surface a tension at the heart of organizations that management students need to know about (Reynolds & Trehan, 2001). Managers are absorbed in the power relations they are seeking to transform at the same time as they are capable of unsettling established relations of power. Without this insight, managers might believe, for example: that their behaviour and actions are assisted by a defined range of management skills and capabilities rather than also restricted by them. We reproduce the power relations around us at the same time as we attempt to challenge or change them. In practical terms, this means that the professor helps students to develop an understanding of how (often unconscious) behaviour creates implicit structures, and how these structures consequently come to limit behaviour.

The advantage of this approach is that it reveals the ongoing relationship between the creative and the self-destructive aspects of leading, managing and organizing. Complicated feelings, defensive responses, and the structures they generate 'work to ruin the very institutional policies meant to contain them' (Britzman, 1999: 322). However, these feelings and responses also underpin managers' abilities to be creative in the service of both individual

and organizational learning. For the professor, the approach requires the capacity to think under emotional fire; to withstand the projection of students' hatred and anxiety; to learn from one's own feelings as well as those of others; and to reframe what is happening into nuanced interpretations offering insight for students. Staying in the midst of this discomfort and commenting on its value rather than fleeing from distress is a core feature of the delivery of a psychodynamic approach to experiential learning.

Situating the psychodynamic perspective

The thinking behind the module described in this paper connects with scholars (Daloz Parks, 2005; Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz, Grashow, & Linsky, 2009; Heifetz & Martin, 2002) and experiential practitioners (Klimoski, 2005; A. Y. Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Scandura, 2016; Sutherland & Jelinek, 2015) who work with the 'here and now' dynamics as they arise in the learning encounter. From this perspective, the classroom is viewed as a reflexive learning environment in which students are invited to surface, reflect on, and adapt to the changing dynamics of the learning encounter. We concur with these scholars that individuals defend their identities by drawing an invisible boundary or 'Sensitive Line' (Whetten & Cameron, 2016) when they encounter new information that is inconsistent with their self-esteem or existing self-knowledge. Researchers have determined that groups and organizations seek to maintain self-esteem by acting conservatively, when organizational learning may require challenges to group or organizational identity (Brown & Starkey, 2000).

Where we differ from such scholars is that we work from psychodynamic theories of group relations. From this perspective, the structure of an experiential learning event itself might well become the focus of an attack – because there is 'hatred of having to learn by experience

at all, and lack of faith in the worth of such kind of learning' (Bion, 1961: 89). The role of the professor is to give voice to the unconscious dynamics of the group (whether destructive, creative or both), to bring those dynamics into view, and to help participants 'manage themselves in role so they become less a captive of group and organizational processes' (Miller, 1990:170).

A psychodynamic approach to experiential learning creates a resilient container for strong emotions that are often avoided, with a view to helping students reflect in the 'here and now', on how and why emotional defenses are an important aspect of organizational life. This is a key distinction, because psychodynamic experiential learning is not about pushing students over their boundaries, it is about helping students recognize how they use and construct them to manage the many uncomfortable emotions generated in organizational contexts. For example, when I (first author) do not live up to students' expectations, they can become angry and frustrated. These emotions emerge in their organizational lives, when they are disappointed in their leaders and when their followers become disappointed in them. They are part of both leadership and learning, whether they are felt or not. Such emotions, and the way they are masked by defenses such as sarcasm or passive aggression, are integral to working within a leadership role in complex organizations. The art is to experience them first in an educational context where reflection on them is possible.

Anxiety and experiential learning

The module evokes anxiety. When we talk about anxiety in this context we are referring to 'the expectation of a danger' (Salecl, 2004). We do not know that bad things are going to happen, but we expect them none-the-less. Both individually and collectively, this can make

people in experiential learning groups reticent, defensive or evasive about taking the risk to participate in ways that support their learning. From the students' perspective, anxiety emerges as soon as the course design and content are felt to be different from other modules. Anxiety can deflect productive activity into defensive behaviour, and become a 'powerful inhibitor of learning' (French, 1997:484).

A key aspect of my role as professor is to contain the anxieties expressed by participants. With sufficient containment, anxiety is channelled within the group as a creative source of insight and learning. Containment refers to the responsibility that professors have to both hold students in the here and now in ways that can promote reflection; and to create a safe and effective 'container' (i.e. an overall design or structure) for learning. Such designs are deliberately aimed at helping students to engage with their emotional experience of learning, as well as how this can translate back into their organizational experience and management practice.

Learning and the willingness to act in a leadership role are threatened by unbounded anxiety and the individual and social defenses it generates. My role is to facilitate a 'bounded but flexible' space that facilitates students' 'ability to hold more and more of experience' (French, 1997:486). In practice, this means not reacting to demands for answers; interpreting[3] the dynamics of the group (drawing attention to what is happening and not happening); unpacking projection (the way in which disowned feelings are dumped onto others); and transference (something from the past being reproduced in the present).

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[3] 'Interpretation is the process of explaining raw data through digestible understandings and narratives. Most situations have multiple possible interpretations' (Heifetz, Linsky, & Grashow, 2009).

As the professor and leader of the module, I (first author) also wrestle with anxiety. Each module is different (this is the only time these students and I will meet in this configuration) and my professional authority is always under siege because 'the fantasy of literal loss of control is always present' (French, 1997:489). And so it should be, because this is a key part of students' learning about leadership. I am deliberately using my role to reconstruct the emotional dynamics of leadership/ followership behaviour. The issue for me is how to engage with my own feelings to illustrate how ubiquitous defenses are in leadership roles, relations and experience. Such feelings are deliberately shown to be normal and indeed, to be an important element in leadership practice.

Meeting the shadow side of experiential learning

In this module, the group consensus is that I had not lived up to expectations. The intensity of emotion that builds up in a group can be released violently and, during an end-of-day reflection, one student told me to 'fuck off' and shouted 'If I want to feel my feelings, I'll see a bloody shrink'. This was a personal response, but a psychodynamic perspective also recognises that the student was, at least in part, articulating the frustration of the whole group. The students viewed themselves as dependent on me and imagined I would lead them out of confusion and into understanding. The understanding of leadership that students bring into the module is a traditional one. They believe that a leader's role is to act directly on a situation (in this case to make them knowledgeable about leadership). The understanding of leadership that this module actually promotes is also that it is important to discern how to enable others to act (Heifetz, 1994). Leadership is collective engagement in the context of complex issues, unsettling emotions and established power relations.

My role is to work with the strong emotions in the room as data about what had been happening. Despite the attack, I stayed with the confusion and tried to help students see how the task and the strong emotions generated were interlinked. I worked hard to tolerate disowned, aggressive and unwanted feelings as defensive behaviour took hold. I felt the power and the pain of the attack, and I resonated with the assault (I felt brutalised and hurt). I tried to think about what lay beneath the anger of the students (e.g. not being given what they wanted, or fears of working in a new and uncomfortable way). I struggled to stay physically and emotionally present with the students (I wanted to flee the room). As a representation of leadership in the group, it is important that I withstand such attacks, to show the students that it is possible to tolerate disappointment and anger as part of a leadership role.

A moment of such strong emotion involves intense negotiations, especially because my role became the focus of students' anger and frustration with learning. I needed to withstand students' projections and not to outwardly react. It is important to feel and to think about the emotional force of the attack; to offer an interpretation to the group about the attack's significance to the subject of study. In this way, the professor remains continuously aware of modelling an approach to working with emotion in organizations, one that helps to dispel the myth that emotion can be 'managed out' of organizational life (Fineman, 2003; Ouweneel, Le Blanc, Schaufeli, & van Wijhe, 2012). The student's attack was unwanted and uncomfortable, but it also represented the emotional experience of learning about leadership. If we ignore the feelings that arise in context, then we will overlook a key part of the organizational conditions in which both leading and learning take place.

Discussion and Conclusion

At its simplest and most direct, the idea behind this module and this paper is that it is important to feel leadership before we can know it. Learning from the shadow side of experiential learning means embracing strong emotions, which contest and unsettle ideas about how organizations work. This is difficult because managers and leaders are embedded in the power relations they are seeking to transform, at the same time as being capable of unsettling them. Psychodynamic approaches to experiential learning engage with shadows as and when they appear, with underlying emotions and implicit power structures that are created in the classroom.

Our role as educators is to help students work with and through the emotional dynamics generated in work relationships, even when those dynamics are difficult to bear and the overriding impulse is to avoid or defend against them. When students experience this module as different, they have strong emotional reactions. This is really the point. Students are invited to 'feel' individually and collectively so that they can better understand how organizations are emotional places, *not* how individuals within organizations can 'manage' emotion (Vince, 2016). They have to discover how strategies and actions are subverted by unacknowledged emotions, and how individuals and groups internalize and enact organizational dynamics in ways that limit their potential and their desire to act. The shadow side of experiential learning holds out the invitation to actively engage with the unmanageable, the unwanted and the emotional as opportunities to 'experience the self [as] not only inevitable but in some sense desirable' (Driver, 2010).

The inter-connected dynamics outlined above are what makes psychodynamic experiential learning powerful as an approach to leadership education. Ignoring the shadow aspects of experiential learning reinforces a traditional view of organizations as rational places in which

positive emotion promotes productivity and negative emotion derails capability. From a psychodynamic perspective negative and positive emotions are considered equally representative of experience. The learning that emerges from the shadow side of experiential learning helps us to recognise the complexity at the heart of working relationships and to contest the ideal organisation 'as appropriately structured, and emotion free spaces, where the right decisions are made for the right reasons by the right people, in a reliable and predictable manner' (Kersten, 2001).

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