Guiding Principles for a Reflexive Approach to Teaching Organisation Studies

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss a reflexive teaching approach, which may make the field of Organisation Studies more permeable to alternative views and thus more responsive to the complexities of processes unfolding in organisations in the context of a rapidly changing world. We contend that reflection on lived experience complements perspectives that focus on the managerial point of view with other perspectives constitutive of the totality of experience inside work organisations. The combination of reflexive teaching and Experience-Based Learning (EBL) creates an effective approach to develop in students the ability to critically reflect upon, and challenge dominant perspectives and practices in the field of Organisation Studies.

Guiding Principles for a Reflexive Approach to Teaching Organisation Studies

Interdisciplinary fields such as Organisation Studies are potentially flexible, dynamic and synergistic. However, they can 'freeze'[1], when certain disciplinary perspectives or paradigms become dominant over others[2] (Thompson & McHugh 2002; Hinings 2002). Paradigmatic freezes considerably impoverish the experience of management undergraduates, as they may lead to reductionist views of organisational phenomena, and prescriptive mechanistic theories of how work organisations *should* function and how they *should* be managed (Thompson & McHugh 2002:7).

Based on our own experience as Organisation Studies lecturers at the University of Western Sydney, Australia, we put forward in this paper a set of guidelines for a reflexive teaching approach which can be an effective antidote for paradigmatic freezes. Drawing from the social constructivist epistemology, this approach rejects conventional conceptualisations of organisations as 'rational', static entities, and the traditional emphasis on 'the managerial perspective' as the key point of reference in organisational settings. Instead, it encourages a conceptualisation of organisations as complex, dynamic entities, constantly (and actively) transformed by human beings; it sees human behaviour in organisations as fluid, complex, and often contradictory. A reflexive teaching approach involves the use of Experience Based Learning (EBL) techniques, which engage the *whole* person and stimulate reflection on experience, whilst opening up the learner to new experiences (Boone 1985; Kolb 1984). Reflection on lived experience and acknowledgement of multiple representations or perspectives can make the field of Organisation Studies more permeable and epistemologically rich, allowing a fuller, more rewarding experience for undergraduate students. It also supports a 'deep approach' to learning, in the sense that it encourages in students a felt need to engage in learning tasks 'more appropriately and meaningfully' (Biggs 2004:16).

The three core guiding principles we propose are the following: a) Organisation Studies lecturers should *always be open to* multi-dimensional perspectives; b) they should always endeavour to *instil in their students the 'sociological imagination',* and c) they should design activities that enable the translation of reflexivity into action. In the following sections, we explore these three principles, and then discuss EBL as an effective method to operationalise them.

These guiding principles have the potential to develop in students the ability to reflect critically upon, and challenge dominant management perspectives and practices, rather than merely reinforcing the concerns of established power groups in organisations (Thompson and McHugh 2002:15; Hinings 2002). They also provide students with the necessary tools to interpret the multiple perspectives and world-views of the complex world they live in.

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[1] *The metaphor of 'frozen' disciplinary fields emerged in a conversation between Fernanda Duarte and Bob Hodge (Professor of Humanities at the University of Western Sydney), and is used here with Professor Hodge's permission.*

[2] *For example, behavioural psychology provides the dominant analytic frameworks in Organisation Studies undergraduate textbooks (eg: Greenberg 1999; Robbins and Barnwell 2002; McShane and Travaglione 2003)*

Welcoming Multi-Dimensional Perspectives

In a textbook widely used in our undergraduate management courses, organisational theorists Stephen Robbins and Neil Barnwell (2002:25) write:

> *We study organisations from the point of view of their management. We take a sympathetic view of the manager's task, not in the sense that managers deserve sympathy, but in the sense that managers in the current environment face a difficult task.*

Whilst our approach does not altogether dismiss the managerial perspective, it complements it with other perspectives constitutive of the totality of human experience inside organisations. It recommends a broader, analytic perspective of work organisations, which takes into account *both* the managerial and the employees' perspectives.

Openness to other 'ways of seeing' is a quintessential condition for the development of a reflexive approach to teaching. As previously pointed out, human behaviour in work organisational settings is fluid, complex, and often contradictory, and cannot be explained by one single theoretical perspective or 'one best model'. Therefore, it is important for teaching staff to realize the importance of exposing the students' to 'multi-dimensional' perspectives in the early stages of courses (Thompson and McHugh 2002:16).

The interdisciplinary nature of the field of Organisation Studies does entail the use of multi-dimensional perspectives. However, this is generally limited to perspectives that are close to individual academic fields of research, rather than a more ambitious eclectic offering of alternative views to account more comprehensively for the complexity of organisational phenomena. Reflexive teaching engenders a conscious effort to put aside prejudices and biases against less conventional perspectives, and be prepared to consider the multiplicity of schools of thought that can be relevant to explain what happens in work organisations. Theoretical eclecticism enables teachers to incorporate critical perspectives that will considerably enrich the students' understanding of organisational phenomena by adding different perspectives to conventional managerial perspectives. It will enhance students' critical and analytical skills by encouraging them to reflect on how different perspectives may contribute for a more in-depth and holistic grasp of organisational phenomena. For example, a *psychological perspective* will explain organisational stress in terms of individuals' personality traits; a *sociological frame* will enhance the understanding of this phenomenon by situating it within a particular historical period characterized by managerial reforms, 'downsizing', 'outsourcing' and the uncertainty which these practices produce amongst employees (Mahony 2003); a *semiotic perspective* will analyse symbols and rituals of organisational culture to foster a deeper understanding of corporate image and processes of corporate identity formation in organisational settings (Christensen & Askegaard 2001); a critical perspective will go beyond unilateral characterizations of the manager as the single, legitimate source of authority in organisational settings, tackling the negative effects of the misuse of managerial power and control, and bringing into the discussion notions such as worker's subjectivity and resistance to power (O'Doherty & Willmott 2000/2001); a post-structuralist analysis will reveal the crucial role played by language and the link between language and power in organisational settings, which is a refreshing change from uncritical approaches that insist on the objective reality of organisational phenomena.

An effective method to foster an appreciation of different analytical perspectives in Organisation Studies is the use of commercial film, in that this technique enables a more concrete application of different perspectives to a given organisational phenomenon. As noted by Philips (1995:634), commercial films provide rich narratives of 'detailed and plausible life worlds' that are 'complex, ambiguous, unique, and subject to the situational logic, interpretation, resistance, and invention that characterize real Organisations' (see also Foreman & Thatchenkery 1996). One suitable example is the Australian film The Bank, directed by Robert Connoly. This film has been used successfully in one of our subjects that focuses on organisational power and politics, to teach students how to interpret elements of the film's narrative through the utilization of different theoretical perspectives. Hence, the ideas of sociologist Max Weber can be used to theorise the fictitious bank 'Centabank' as a large, complex, hierarchised bureaucracy; the study of psychologists Davis & Kraus (1997) on the Machiavellian personality can be used to make sense of the manipulative behaviour of the ruthless CEO 'Simon', and elements of post-structuralist theorist Michel Foucault can be used to understand the instances of resistance to power observed in the film's narrative.

Activating the 'Sociological Imagination'

In the late 1950s, C.Wright Mills made a case for developing a sociological imagination as an epistemological device to understand the complexities of social phenomena. He had the inextricable link between history and biography when he wrote: 'The sociological imagination enables us to grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society. That is its task and its promise' (1959 [1973]:12).

The sociological imagination requires us to 'think ourselves away' from the generally taken-for-granted routines of our day-to-day, and to look at them anew – through more analytical lenses. It appears that this conceptual framework seems to have been largely ignored in management studies – perhaps undermined by the reductionism of mechanistic theories of work organisations and positivistic prescriptions for 'effective management'. Reflexive teaching requires the rekindling of the *sociological imagination* in order to contemplate 'from afar' the meanings of organisational experience, and how organisational phenomena affect society as a whole. In this sense, the sociological imagination operates as a 'wide-angle lens' (Klonsky, J and Strenski, E 1994:11), as it allows students to place organisational phenomena and processes within a larger (and no doubt, far more interesting) picture. This will considerably broaden the students' horizons and enhance their understanding of the complex dynamic of Organisational processes. Through the lens of the sociological imagination, students will be able to go beyond the simplistic perception of employees in organisations as free, autonomous agents, towards a more critical appraisal of employees as products of particular socio-historical and political contexts; of work organisations as deeply embedded in broader socio-historical, economic and political contexts. As commented by Collins (2000:37), 'in order to understand management, organisation and organisations, we must be prepared to "exit the factory gate", so we might locate work organisations within the context of wider society'.

Rekindling the sociological imagination can be accomplished through class discussions specifically designed to train students in establishing connections between specific organisational phenomena and the broader contexts that shape these phenomena. For example, students can be given the following scenario to analyze:

Robert is a 45 year old middle-level manager of a well established financial firm in Sydney. A few days ago he came home with devastated news: the CEO called a special meeting to advise that the firm, "Mark-Up Inc", will be restructured in the next six months, and one of the consequences will be massive 'downsizing' of middle-level managerial positions. Robert is most likely to lose his job, as he has only joined "Mark-Up Inc" two years ago, and according to the CEO, only managers who have been working in the firm for more than five years will be retained.

Activity:

Divide the class in small groups (of no more than four students), tell them to discuss the above scenario for 5 minutes and then address the following questions:

1) What is your understanding of concepts such as *restructuring* and *downsizing*?

2) What are the events and processes taking place in the external environment of business firms which are creating the need for them to *restructure* and *downsize*?

3) Using Robert's story, explain the link postulated by C.Wright Mills between history and biography.

4) Would you be able to provide a similar example derived from your own experience and observation?

The above activity has been specifically designed to encourage Organisation Studies students to analyze organisational events that affect people's lives (i.e., Robert's job loss) as products of broader socio-economic and historical forces (i.e., globalization; increased competition; re-engineering of organisations to remain competitive in the global market).

Translating Reflexivity Into Action

It is our view that openness to multi-dimensional perspectives and the sociological imagination will contribute to foster *reflexivity*, or the assumption that an individual is a self-conscious and self-questioning being, and thus 'capable of formulating and reflecting on his or her means and ends of action' (Lash 1993: 202). Reflexivity is a highly desirable element in teaching Organisation Studies, as it enables students to 'experience the relativism and the pluralism of different points of view' (Besozzi (1999:321), thus having a more critical analysis of established organisational practices. As students learn to engage in reflexive thought, they will be more discerning and more likely to challenge prevailing interpretations of management practice, learning to appreciate the infinitely complex and ambiguous nature of phenomena unfolding in workplaces. Most importantly, students may be led to realise that, as future managers, they will have an obligation to ensure that their decisions and actions are ethical and equitable.

Reflexivity is, nevertheless, more than just an individual examining her or his experience in organisational settings or assessing different theoretical perspectives. For a reflexive teaching approach to be successful, *reflexivity* must be linked to *action*. Indeed, as observed by Cunliffe and Jong (2002), reflexivity 'should be embedded in lived experience and embrace the recognition that we construct our social world as we interact with those around us'.

So, whilst students might have their own theories about gender discrimination in the workplace and the causes of this phenomenon, they must be prepared to use their theoretical knowledge in the future to combat those damaging practices. In other words, they must be prepared to convert theory into *praxis*.

This purposive action arises from theoretical reflexivity in which human beings can engage in, in order to alter the material and social world they live in; to make it a better place to live in.

One way of training students to translate reflexivity into action is to encourage small group discussions on hypothetical or real-life scenarios that involve difficult ethical dilemmas. Following are examples of discussion questions that have been used in our courses: What would you do if your boss asked you to engage in unethical behaviour to save the company's reputation? What would you do if you saw the senior manager in your company shredding all existing copies of an incriminating report? What would you do if you saw the managing director of your company sexually harassing a female work colleague? To what extent should companies that engage in activities which can potentially deplete resources or damage the environment think about future generations? Are profits and social responsibility mutually exclusive categories? If you were a manager of a culturally diverse company, how would you ensure that your practices were non-discriminatory?

Experience Based Learning activities are also an effective means to encourage management students to translate reflexivity into practice.

Experience-Based Learning (EBL)

EBL is not a model with prescribed rules and strategies, but a paradigmatic view of planning, teaching and learning which: a) involves the learner as a whole (intellect, feelings and senses); b) recognizes and uses the learner's relevant life experiences to make the learning more meaningful, and c) makes use of reflexivity to gain deeper understanding (Andresen et al 2000). In short, through EBL students become active learners of new experience.

Embracing an EBL methodology to teaching Organisation Studies denotes that it will be taught by means of a less structured, experiential planning model, where learning is based on the facilitation by the teacher of students' past experience. She or he will act as a facilitator, encouraging students to express and be open to different points of view – to instil the sociological imagination in them. To apply this method more successfully, we recommend that teachers themselves are prepared to accept and engage with a wide range of emotions and to adopt a more critical approach in order to understand the complex operation of power relations in the classroom. Successful facilitators are required to situate individual experience in the social context of collective thought, whilst taking into account the psychological needs of individuals.

EBL can be accomplished through activities that stimulate the application of the theories examined to 'real-life' phenomena – the translation of thought into action. These activities may include class and group discussions on management issues, role-play exercises, the use of drama, games, case-study analysis, self-directed projects and reflective journals. For example, we ask students to role play:

1) a person who primarily believes that businesses are the main agents of wealth creation for a healthy economy, and this benefits society as a whole;
2) a person who primarily believes that businesses are required to operate within the legal framework;
3) a person who primarily believes that business operators behave ethically and according to a moral consciousness that goes beyond simply obeying the law and is in line with social values;
4) a person who primarily believes that business operators participate in their social environments, are proactive in relation to social issues and make social and philanthropic contributions in order to be good citizens.

Each of the players receives instruction and examples of some rather provocative phrases they might like to use. For example, Person 1 is asked to commence the discussion by stating 'I think business' main responsibility to society is to make a profit for their shareholders, which increases taxes paid and, in turn, creates jobs'. Person 2, 3 and 4 are asked to respond using their own perspectives. The discussion this role play exercise generates in class leads to theoretical exploration of four dimensions of social responsibility of businesses: the economic dimension, the legal dimension, the ethical dimension and the discretionary dimension. The discussion hopefully exemplifies that these dimensions are inherently linked and need to be seen in relation to one another (Fitzgerald and Hamilton, 2006). It will engender critical awareness of different perspectives to understand the various dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation, and reflection upon the importance of ethical behaviour.

The main idea of this EBL activity is that students reflect on gained experience through role play *prior* to being introduced to theoretical concepts, so that when theory is introduced there is a clear reference to lived experience. This is different from the traditional lecture/tutorial configuration. Generally, during lectures, information on theory is given (often with little or no interaction), and applications of theory are explored in tutorials that follow lectures. In the application of the EBL model to reflexive teaching, experience is created by exercises, and information of this lived experience is shared amongst the learning actors. The facilitator plays a pivotal role, guiding learning by linking students' experiences and theory, by using multi-dimensional perspectives and by placing it firmly within a broader societal context.

In EBL, the facilitator needs to be able to work both with individual experience and translate that experience through a social context of collective thought, whilst applying a code of ethics, engaging inert students and taking psychological needs of individuals into account. Reflexive teaching methods within an EBL model require highly skilled facilitators, who can demonstrate high levels of social action, facilitation of critical reflection and collective thought. This highlights the need for more debate on pedagogy education and training of university lecturers and adjunct staff.

Conclusion

In this paper we have proposed a basic framework for a reflexive teaching approach which, we believe, can significantly enhance the teaching and learning of Organisation Studies subjects, and be an efficient antidote against paradigmatic 'freezes'.

The three proposed guiding principles in this approach are: openness to different perspectives and paradigms; activation of the 'sociological imagination', and reflexivity as an emancipatory activity which can lead to positive social change.

This reflexive teaching approach has the potential to foster among students a practical consideration of social transformations – social transformations that can humanise the experience of people in work organisations. Through the utilization of EBL methods, reflexive teaching engenders the possibility of *praxis* and, as Thompson & McHugh (2002:19) remind us, it is in *praxis* that theory becomes an 'emancipatory guide' that will empower students to be positive agents of change when they are 'out there in the real world'.

Reflexive teaching thus offers the potential to create 'reflexive managers' who will be able to make informed choices in their organisations and to act more effectively to make workplace practices more ethical and equitable.

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