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Picturing change: Using visual art to explore organizational change and students' learning

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This paper explores the use of an art form in a post-graduate course on organizational change. It describes the use of visual art in teaching organizational change, and assesses its efficacy in terms of how it developed students' understanding of organizational change as well as how it developed the students' ideas about their own learning. The three students in the class all reported that these effects could indeed be observed. The paper is presented as a modest case study that confirms the current literature affirming the positive role of the arts in subject understanding and in general educational development.

Keywords: art, change, learning

Introduction

'It looks more like a pot or a painting than a hypothesis.'

Susan Krieger (1991)

This paper analyses an effort to use visual media to help students explore the topic of organizational change. A second purpose was to expand the students' understanding of themselves with particular reference to changes in their lives to date. A third purpose was to explore students' understanding of their own learning processes. The implicit theoretical assumption was that success in these purposes would be mutually reinforcing.

The use of the arts in management is becoming a more widely established practice: "The MFA is the new MBA" (Pink, 2004: 21). The use of the arts in management learning is not new (Gibb, 2004; Fairfield & London, 2003; Mallinger & Rossy, 2003; Nissley, 2002). Management is understood variously (and contested) as an art, craft, science, and social practice (Huff & Jenkins, 2002). The idea of organizational aesthetics (Gagliardi, 1992; Strati, 2000), as well as the use of the arts in organizational research, has developed considerably in the last decade (Humphreys, Brown, & Hatch, 2003; Zietsma, 2002). The value of this approach rests on the use of metaphor as a cognitive and heuristic device to help researchers see phenomena differently and recognize distinctions hitherto inconceivable (Cornelissen, 2004; Morgan, 1980; Tsoukas, 1991). The use of the arts is not only expected to assist in the learning of a specific aspect of management such as leadership (Adler, 2006); if self-knowledge is essential to effective teaching (Palmer, 1998), and if all education is self-education (Hirst, 1974), clearly a process that expands students' self-awareness will be educationally valuable.

The course in which this exploration took place is a postgraduate course in advanced change management. There were two male students (one Chinese and one German) and

one female New Zealand student. All three are in their twenties. The processes described in this paper were part of many others in the semester-long paper that included drama, sculpture, poetry and music. We used a standard international textbook adapted to the Australasian market, and all the materials and literature with respect to the art forms were supplied by the lecturer and three interested colleagues who were specialists in their field. In the art form discussed in this paper, the course coordinator was assisted by a colleague (Mike) who is a professional illustrator and lecturer in the University's College of Creative Arts.

The metaphor of seeing for analysing and understanding is, for good or ill, pervasive. Corbett (2003) argues that organization scholars have been bewitched and enslaved by a single epistemological organ – the eye. The first chapter of textbook presented a range of 'perspectives' on change. The textbook approach was expanded by the course coordinator asking students' questions that drew attention to the metaphor of seeing: "What is your perspective?", "What is your point of view?", "How do you see it?", "What is your vision?", "Let's develop a scenario". Students were also invited to consider how theory can be explained through pictures, the difference between a model and an illustration, and how pictures help us understand organisational change.

This paper is structured around students' responses to three specific questions: How has designing a cover for a textbook on organizational change helped you understand or developed your concept of organizational change? How has using a visual medium as a basis for a personal life story contributed to your understanding of yourself? How has presenting a personal life story in a visual way altered or developed your ideas about learning? Structuring the activities (and this paper) around subject matter, self and learning rests on the logic that the subject matter is change, the major feature of students' lives at this stage is change, and of course, the most basic definition of learning will include some idea of change.

Designing a cover for a textbook on organizational change

The students were presented with the covers of various textbooks and asked to analyse them. [These will be available at the conference.] The discussion exposed a variety of implicit values. For example, one cover was illustrated with a chameleon, to which a student objected because "the chameleon just pretends to change, but it is only a superficial change. In the inside it is still the same animal". The metaphor was considered inadequate, even misleading.

After discussing examples of textbook covers, the students moved onto designing their own, under the guidance of Mike. [Examples will be available at the conference.] They completed their covers at home and the following week brought them to class for discussion. Assessment centred on evidence of understanding organisational change. Artistic talent was irrelevant.

Designing a book cover brought the function of metaphor more forcibly to the fore.

While I was thinking about a metaphor that would match organizational change I realized how many views I could have on an organization. It can be seen as a building, something that is structured and stable. But it also seemed useful to see it as an organism that is characterized by constant change. I chose the puzzle with the infinite tiles because it gives

enough space for various aspects that can be relevant. Like a puzzle, an organization can be structured, can be rearranged. A flexible organization should be able to restructure itself according to the environment that surrounds it. This can be seen as a game that is played by just (why 'just'?) more than one (manager?), like a puzzle as well.

Also noteworthy was the role of one medium in reinforcing the use of another, in one instance provoking a reconsideration of theory:

In the process of designing my own cover I went over a large amount of the reading I had done into metaphor and change and different ways of illustrating change. I think that because of the task being visual in nature that I took more time to ensure my understanding of the context and what I was wanting to illustrate.

I also feel that by illustrating this in a visual way that my thought processes were being challenged considerably more. I think that I spent more time considering the different aspects of change management.

The process also seemed to allow students to access a meta-view, something many students struggle with, even at post-graduate level:

I tried to understand what other textbook covers mean in terms of change management. From those textbook covers, I am able to guess what is supposed to be in the book, what kind of perspective the book is adopting, what metaphor the book is using to represent that perspective. When I was designing my textbook cover, I had to think very carefully about what other people are going to understand from my cover.

The artistic or aesthetic task of designing a textbook cover entailed the cognitive task of searching for a visual metaphor for organizational change. Although the objective was a specific tangible outcome, the students' self-reports vindicate the claims of Cornelissen, Morgan, and Tsoukas cited above. The students developed a web of connections that not only expanded their understanding of organizational claims, but appeared to improve their absorptive capacity for further readings in the field.

Using a graph for a personal life story

The students were asked to visualise their experience of change, and use their capacity to "picture things" to express their understanding of change. The task was to draw their life story as a simple graph of change and then illustrate it.



A basic graph for a life story

They then developed the illustration at home and brought it back to class for discussion in the group with the help of Mike. [Examples will be presented at the conference.]

The visual life story showed me where I for myself set my highlights in my personal life. Usually I do not think about these turning points that much, so it was very interesting to realize how much they are settled in my consciousness though. It gave me an idea about what kind of events made the most impact in my life, or at least what I assume did.

Raising consciousness in the sense of remembering is one thing, but it is possible to go further and realise different aspects of oneself:

I've never thought of myself as a visual or graphic thinker before. By being required to think in this manner to explain anything, let alone my life story, was very challenging.

One may also consider presentations of the self and the impact of different media of expression:

I wanted my story to be as accurate as possible, not a trait I would have thought I was usually overly concerned with, by the way, and this led me to trying to depict both up and down emotion simultaneously. I find it interesting that when I look at my life story chart I feel that my drawing was extremely ordered, with bold strong lines and definite turning points. I think that if you had asked me to explain my story verbally you wouldn't have received such a definite story or such extremes. Drawing this story has led me to reconsider the way I look at my life and how I interpret change in that context.

Comparisons were even more revealing. One student bifurcated the central line (the first time I had seen this in many years): *This branching was a result of my struggling with the constraints I felt were inherent with using a single line to represent something as complex as life and the emotions associated with change in one's life.* Another student refused to use a central line, presenting rather a kind of 90-degree two-line graph, saying that one could not choose a middle point above which there existed good and below bad, because such a perception would in itself be changeable. Another student used the centre line as catalyst for reflection: *[P]erceptions have everything to do with change. The centre line on my illustration of life is not a zero line because there is no such thing called zero life. The centre line represents the core of self, this core of self does not change along with our lives... what really changes is/are our perceptions towards lives.* Indeed, at another point this student had stated, *When I was trying to draw my life on a piece of paper, I tried very hard to think about what I was thinking at that time. As a result, the whole process does not only give me a life trend, but also it shows my point of view has changed during my life so far.* This student later explicitly linked this insight to the importance of perceptions in organizational change.

As with designing textbook covers, implicit learning was embedded in the task. Much management theorising is conducted with aid of two-dimensional models, graphs, matrices and similar devices, many of which do not withstand close scrutiny. In this exercise then, not only were students dealing with the explicit problems of developing simple representations of complex processes, they also had to confront fundamental assumptions about the nature of reductive modelling and the ethics involved (Tuft, 1997). They were later asked to apply their critical faculty templates modelling organizational change.

How has presenting a personal life story in a visual way altered or developed your ideas about learning?

Being able to make links between theories in a textbook and one's own life helps one to engage with the material. However, as one of the many management mantras has it, it is learning to learn that is a core competency. An important element here is awareness of one's own learning styles: *I learnt a lot about the others students' lives and I still remember most of the facts because they were so visual and accessible. Learning is easy when it is less abstract and more visual for me.* Another student also realised the value of the visual for learning. The student wrote that at the beginning of the course, *I could hardly understand if personal change has anything to do with organizations, but that after using visual medium, it is very interesting that I found some links between those two.*

Another student went from the rather straightforward value of visual comparisons to a more subtle appreciation theory, form and interpretation:

By comparing the different charts I think that I was more willing to explore the idea that there are many differing perspectives on change and that not one way is the best or right way to view personal change. This then lead to me considering that if this is the case for personal change then what parallels are there for organisational change. I think that I am more open to different perspectives of change and more able to interpret differing theories even when presented in different forms.

Conclusion

Research has revealed many factors that contribute to effective learning – it is an individual and social activity and certainly not only cognitive. There is wide consensus that the effectiveness of teaching and learning is enhanced by employing a range of learning activities so that students can learn and participate in different ways. Ideally, teaching and learning activities include intellectual, physical, haptic, kinetic, vocal, auditory and visual dimensions. It would make sense then that one might explore the arts in any educational practice (Green, 1995; Eisner, 2002).

This paper presents a few limited aspects of a larger project in using the arts in management education. The exercise reinforces the current literature affirming the positive role of the arts in subject understanding and in general educational development. Of course, it can only hint at the value of art in developing students' theories of learning. One would draw only modest conclusions from the responses of three students in a single course. There are also many practical questions to be pursued, such as the role of gender, mother-tongue, ethnicity, prior familiarity with the art form, among others. Notwithstanding its limitations, this paper will hopefully entice others into exploring the value of the arts in education.

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