



Shifting Focus from Teaching to Learning: Learning Leadership from Improvising Jazz Bands

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Abstract

Management education has been under debate for over a decade (French & Grey, 1996; Wankel & DeFilippi, 2002). There is, among other things, unclarity of the extent to which management theories and the practice of management are related. One solution that has often been suggested is to use experiential learning techniques in which the learners are expected to solve real-life problems that they experience first hand. Theories are introduced inductively from the experiences with the help of the teachers facilitation.

The jazz improvisation metaphor has become an established perspective in organizational behavior and leadership studies (see e.g. Hatch, 1999; Weick & Roberts 1993; Weick, 1998). Many of these studies have focused on the balance between structure (e.g. the notes to a song) and freedom (e.g. free improvisation). One of the main conclusions has been that freedom and loose organizational structures are the leaders main means of creating an environment in which creative performance can take place (Hatch, 1999). While there exists some research on this type of leadership, it is far from clear how this type of leadership behaviour could be taught to students of management.

This paper presents empirical evidence of the use of a live improvising jazz band in the management education classroom. Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory is utilised to study the relationship between individual preference for learning style on the one hand, and the level of perceived learning effectiveness on the other hand. Learning effectiveness is based on Kirkpatrick's learning evaluation theory. Results indicate that active learners appreciate this type of experiential learning method. Furthermore, this method appears to be preferred by all types of learners compared to more traditional forms of learning and teaching. The implications for changing management education are discussed.