



Shifting focus from teaching to learning: Learning leadership from improvising jazz bands (ITL92)

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Abstract

The nature of knowledge in business schools has been under debate for the past decade. The dual objectives of academic rigor on the one hand, and practical relevance of the knowledge produced and taught have been claimed to be contradictory. Furthermore, conventional sources for new knowledge and ideas for business leadership have been partially replaced by new ones. For example, there is an increasing number of corporate leaders that have brought artists and artistic processes into their companies. These processes may be able to offer novel ways of responding to the growing complexity of our world.

The jazz metaphor has been used widely in the organizational behavior and leadership literature as a novel way of thinking about organizing and managing. It has been claimed that the organization of the future resembles an improvising jazz band [5], as the loose organizational structures enable new innovative ideas to be expressed and tested. In terms of teaching in business schools, it is still not clear how to incorporate the metaphor into the curriculum in a way that is meaningful and that it promotes the active learning of the students.

The aim of this study was to investigate how practicing managers perceive their learning when exposed to an unconventional teaching method, i.e. a facilitated use of an improvising jazz band in a workshop on leadership. The key research question was how different learning style orientations influence the managers' perceived level of learning from the jazz band pedagogy. Kolb's Learning Styles Inventory is utilized to study the relationship between learning style orientation on the one hand, and the level of perceived learning on the other. Learning is based on Kirkpatrick's learning evaluation model. Results indicate that those preferring Concrete Experience and those preferring Reflective Observation experience higher levels of learning.

Introduction

The nature of the knowledge in business schools has been under criticism recently [1]. There are several reasons for this. One is the corporate scandals, such as Enron. Another one is the widening gap between management research and managerial practice [2]. In fact, there is a growing concern about the conflict between academic rigour on the one hand, and practical relevance on the other. Business schools are accused of being obsessed with academic rigour, while they at the same time drift away from managerial practice and knowledge relevant for practicing managers [3].

In the meantime, conventional sources for new knowledge, ideas and inspiration for leadership have given way for new ones. For instance, there is a growing interest for arts as a means for finding new sources for creativity and innovation in business. [4] The jazz metaphor has been used widely in organizational studies as a novel way of thinking about organizing and managing. The claim is that the future organization resembles an improvising jazz band [5], as the loose organizational structures enable new innovative ideas to be expressed and tested. In terms of teaching in business schools, it is still not clear how to incorporate the metaphor into the curriculum in a way that is meaningful and promotes learning.



The aim of this study is to investigate how managers perceive their learning when exposed to an unconventional teaching method, i.e. a facilitated use of an improvising jazz band in a workshop on leadership. The key research question was how different learning style preferences influence the managers' perceived level of learning from the teaching method.

Theoretical framework

The current debate on the nature of knowledge in business schools is related to at least two issues. The first is the question of the content of knowledge that is taught. Critics of the business school model as being primarily a producer of scientific knowledge are concerned that schools will produce graduates with feel for the practical world of management. The second issue is the change in the delivery of business knowledge to the students, i.e. the pedagogies employed in management education.

In terms of the academic rigor vs. practical relevance, Bennis and O'Toole claim that business schools go astray when they measure themselves almost solely by the rigor of their scientific research. While some of the research is excellent, most of it is not grounded in actual business practices, and is thus irrelevant for practitioners. [6]

Chia and Holt [7] claim that there are two distinct aspects of knowledge that may help to explain the disparity of rigour and relevance. Firstly, they suggest that management research relies primarily on the idea of knowledge-by-representation. It is based on an idea of objectivity and the detachment so that correspondence between theory and observed phenomena can be justifiably claimed. However, this way leads us to oversee the manner, and method of presentation by which such knowledge claims are made. In management education, it is often the way in which knowledge is presented that has the greatest effect on how it is perceived.

In the words of Chia and Holt: "Infectious enthusiasm, steadfast conviction, and the creative ability to make novel connections with the seemingly irrelevant on the part of the educator evokes the learner's sensitivities and encourages the latter's capacity for the imaginative integration of what is learned with personal experiences." [8] Indeed, this second form of knowledge, focusing on how knowledge is communicated, is called knowledge-by-exemplification.

Related to knowledge-by-exemplification is another stream of research and practice that deals with art and arts-based methods in management and leadership development. The idea of business learning from arts and music originates from an increasing number of corporate leaders that have brought artists and artistic processes into their companies. The purpose is to provide novel ways of both describing and relating to the complexity of our world, which cannot be fully understood by reference to scientific logic. The arts-based practices, are able to offer improved ways of responding to it. [9]

One of the ways of responding to the criticism of business school teaching has been to introduce novel ways of delivery, e.g. pedagogies focused on active and cooperative learning. In fact, combining the arts-based approaches with new pedagogical innovations has led to a dramatic increase in the number of leading business schools introducing courses and workshops dealing with these issues. Some of these include Wharton School's "Leadership Through the Arts" which is run by the dance company Pilobolus, MIT's course where participants perform Shakespeare's Henry V, Oxford University's "Leadership as a Performing Art" by conductor Peter Hanke, and actor/director Richard Olivier's Mythodrama at Cranfield [10].

Method

Managers that were enrolled in executive education programs participated in a workshop that had, as a part of the workshop, a session involving a live improvising jazz band in the classroom. The jazz band sessions lasted between 1 ¾ hours and 3 ½ hours. In these sessions, the band played from 3 to 5 tunes. After each tune, the participants, the teacher, and the band interactively analysed the performance. In the end of the session, the teacher facilitated a joint summary of key learning points.

Sample



The sample was 136 managers in 6 groups of executive education workshops, 3 executive MBA and 3 other executive education programs. The titles of the participants ranged from board chairmen and CEOs to system experts and project managers. The participants represented 14 different nationalities, average age was 39 years (range 26-59), on average 7 years of experience from leadership positions. Slightly over 25% of the respondents were women.

The 136 managers were told during each workshop that they were going to receive an invitation to participate in a web-based survey afterwards. It was emphasized that participation was voluntary. Each manager received an e-mail message with a link to the survey. After a maximum of two reminders, a total of 116 responses were received, corresponding to a response rate of 85.3%.

Variables

The dependent variable, learning, was based on Kirkpatrick's model for evaluating the effectiveness of training programs [11]. It consists of four levels: reaction, learning, behavior, and results. These were operationalized as four items, measured on a 7 point Likert-type scale, as: "The session was a meaningful learning experience" (reaction), "I got new knowledge and ideas for leadership" (learning), "I'm able to use the knowledge and ideas" (behavior), and "The knowledge and ideas will improve my effectiveness and results" (results). The average constituted the dependent variable. The reliability (Cronbach's α) was 0.90, which can be considered excellent [12].

Learning Style was measured by using The Kolb Learning Style Inventory (LSI), version 3.1 [13]. It consists of learning situations that are presented in 12 statements each with four endings. For example, one statement is "I learn best when..." followed by the four endings "I am practical", "I am careful", "I analyze ideas", "I am receptive and open-minded". The respondent then to rank order the endings. In LSI the four learning orientations are "concrete experience" (CE), "reflective observation" (RO), "abstract conceptualization" (AC), and "active experimentation" (AE). The score for each of the four orientations were calculated as sums of those 12 sentence endings that were related to the respective orientation. The reliabilities (Cronbach's α) for the four scales were: 0.84 for CE, 0.84 for RO, 0.83 for AC, and 0.88 for AE.

The control variables were nationality (Finnish or not), gender (1=male, 0=female), age, and years of leadership experience.



Results

To find out the effects of the learning style orientations on the perceived learning of the managers, a multiple regression analysis was carried out. The regression results (Table 2) show that no control variables were significant. On the other hand, the effect of concrete experience is .39 ($p < 0.01$) and of reflective observation .32 ($p < 0.05$) were significant. The results thus indicate that there are differences in how learning is perceived by people with different learning style preferences.

TABLE 2
Regression of Learning Styles on Learning from the experiential activity

Variables	β	t
<i>Controls</i>		
Nationality	.036	.316
Sex	-.087	-.796
Age	-.017	-.124
Leadership experience (in years)	-.005	-.035
<i>Learning style orientation</i>		
Active experimentation	.223	1.176
Reflective observation	.320	1.987*
Abstract conceptualization	.212	1.266
Concrete experience	.390	2.393**
Adjusted R^2	.10	
F	54.08**	
N	116	

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Discussion

The findings of this research suggest strongly that new pedagogical methods that incorporate knowledge from fields other than business and economics lead to learning among business executives. However, it is clear that not all types of learners are inclined to absorb the knowledge and apply it equally effectively. By adopting experiential learning theory, operationalized as Kolb's learning style inventory, we are able to understand the differences in how managers experience this type of active learning pedagogy.

In experiential learning theory, learning is defined as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming experience" [14] Kolb argues that Concrete Experience and Abstract Conceptualization of the Learning Style Inventory are two opposite, but dialectical, ways of grasping experience, whereas Reflective Observation and Active Experimentation are the two dialectically related ways of transforming experience. The jazz band illustration is demonstrably a significant concrete experience from which managers can learn about leadership.

Kolb claims that "immediate or concrete experiences are the basis for observations and reflections". [15] Furthermore, these observations are the basis for forming abstract concepts from which new implications for actions and experiments can be drawn. A multifaceted learning experience such as interacting with a jazz band appears to constitute the first two steps of the learning cycle. As a learning experience it serves its function, as the participating managers relate it to perceived learning. Furthermore, the participating managers started their reflection, which is also positively related to their learning. What is left halfway is the abstraction of the key concepts from the session, as well as their own actions and experimentations based on their conceptualizations. In order to accommodate that, time to reflect is needed, in addition to possibilities to test the implications in practice.



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