

Plural Factors That Can Reshape Our Thinking

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As I write this editorial, we are entering the assessment season in our academic year here in Aotearoa New Zealand. No doubt we remember our own student years, during finals, experiencing anxiety, and perhaps fear of those questions for which we have not prepared. Now, as an instructor, on the other side of the academic divide, I find my anxiety has shifted from fear of the unknown, to doubt about what students have or have not discovered during their time with me in my class. The questions for me now are: "What did I teach and what did they learn?" And indeed, did my teaching and their learning in some ways coincide?

By way of background, I lecture postgraduate students in management and leadership. Notwithstanding that the distinctions between these two subjects become somewhat blurred in their definitions, they are deemed to be separate areas of study in my context. Most of the students (over 90%) come from other countries where English is a second language and whose social systems vary greatly from our context here in Aotearoa New Zealand. This diverse student population makes for an enriched yet problematic environment. Students come with the intention of learning how to fulfil roles as managers and leaders, while my agenda is to introduce them to the cultural diversity of the context in which they have arrived, to help them understand the complexities of organisational life, and to develop a critical awareness of those complexities.

To help fulfil my agenda, I use works of art in each lecture to prompt key ideas about the field. Students have reported to me that at the start of each semester they ask themselves, "Can I learn anything from this lecturer?" Their beginning expectations seem so far removed from what I offer.

I too question *their* motivations and ask myself, "Can I teach these students anything beyond their sometimes single-minded desire for discovering the instruments of the management trade while they attempt to achieve high marks?" These student goals are not mutually exclusive but neither of them motivates me as their instructor. My interest is in helping them discover how to bend the neo-classical line (King, 2007), to challenge the hegemony of hierarchy (Parker, 2009) and introduce a nuanced view of collaborative processes (Austin & Devin, 2003).

How then, can this agenda be fulfilled?

In each lecture I introduce at least one work of art. My purpose is to demonstrate to the students that the world is rich and varied and that art offers a way of approaching the rich complexities of our world. I claim that art works speak to us, requesting engagement and response. This purpose clashes with the students' immediate intention to learn how to manage effectively. However, I desire that they discover a world that

cannot be easily resolved to a single way of operating; a way of perceiving that behaves more like the fox rather than the hedgehog (Berlin, 1957), where no single epistemology dominates and is nuanced beyond binary either/or thinking (Glenn, 2004). A reasonably easy agenda for an aesthete, one might think.

I realised the difficulty of this plan when I asked in class several years ago, "Who has heard of the name Beethoven?" My idea was to discuss organisational change using part of the first movement of Beethoven's Third Symphony ("Eroica"). Not only is European music foreign to them, they have little affinity for, or even knowledge of the historical contexts within which a work like this was written.

In first movement of the Eroica, Beethoven uses the triple metre, and to help the students sense the underlying pulse of the work, I teach them to conduct the three pattern, using a pencil as a baton. This is the simple part.

The difficulties arise in Beethoven's contestations of that triple metre. He devotes much of this first movement to developing the main ideas and this is where it gets complicated. At times Beethoven disrupts the three by accenting every second beat creating cross rhythms. The challenge for the students is to maintain the three pattern, while attending to the duple rhythmic dissonance that Beethoven establishes. In performances some conductors abandon the triple metre and beat those sections in a two pattern (for an example see the first 4 minutes of this YouTube version <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cziRynzmWaA>), but this seems contrary to Beethoven's intentions, which I think were to have listeners *feel* the struggle within the music (this link goes to an older example but the conductor maintains a three pattern <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vj4JFAQ0N8c>).

How, then, do students respond, particularly with an exercise that is foreign and beyond anything they have experienced? By the looks on their faces, some are bemused; others comply with the conducting instruction in a perfunctory manner. And from the smiles on other faces, there are some in the class who respond positively to the exercise. My hunch is that an exercise like this enables students to feel disruption, stimulating them to develop a language with which to talk and write about complexity in their conversations and written assignments.

By the end of the semester, students are affirmative. Some say that they have never experienced classes like this and others appreciate the explorations of ideas and artefacts that are not normally discussed in a business school. Why, then, do I have nagging doubts about taking this approach? Am I, in my enthusiastic desire to help students grasp the pluralities of the world, acting in a monologic manner by insisting they engage with works of art that *I* know and appreciate; privileging ways of seeing the world that come from *my* perspectives (Crowder, 2003) rather than drawing on their experiences? These doubts remain unresolved, and yet I continue to pursue this approach.

There are consolations for my doubts, however. Often students reveal to me their own backgrounds in the arts representing fields like graphic design, music, literature, linguistics, and movie production. Some even complain that they are attending a business school to fulfil parental expectations and then realise that some of their unfulfilled dreams in the arts may indeed become possible in this new context. And this is our objective in *Organizational Aesthetics*: to explore what is possible at the intersections between the arts and business. Perhaps even to dream and then to share these dreams of a world enriched by aesthetic responses, and to invite colleagues to take risks in sharing their journeys into the complexities and paradoxes of wonderment.

References

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