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Realising the potential of art-based interventions in managerial learning: Embodied cognition as an explanatory theory

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ABSTRACT

Teachers and consultants increasingly use art-based interventions (ABIs) to facilitate manager learning. However, there is little understanding of the mechanisms through which ABIs produce learning outcomes of value to organizations. This theoretical paper addresses this concern by revisiting the philosophy of art and education in light of developments in neuroscience known as embodied cognition. Specifically, we examine the role played by *simulations* in behavioral change and the way in which ABIs can foster the creation of simulations. This leads to two propositions, a) representing a phenomenon through new simulations can create new possibilities for interacting with this phenomenon; and b) making art is a means by which managers can construct new simulations. The significance of these propositions is illustrated by re-interpreting three accounts of art-based interventions found in the literature. These propositions have important implications for the planning, implementation, and evaluation of ABIs in management education. In particular, they emphasize the need to match art medium with desired outcomes, provide support for the view that ABIs are well suited to learning about complex managerial challenges, and question the effectiveness of verbal reflection as part of ABIs.

Although art-based interventions are increasingly being used in management learning interventions (Darsø, 2004; Mack, 2012; Page, Grisoni, & Turner, 2014; Schiuma, 2009, 2011; Springborg, 2015, 2018; Sutherland, 2013; Taylor & Ladkin, 2009) there is little understanding about the mechanisms through which various ABIs foster particular learning outcomes. This theoretical paper addresses this concern by revisiting the philosophy of art and education (Arnheim, 1969; Dewey, 1934; Eisner, 2002; Langer, 1951), which is often used to argue the value of ABIs, in the light of research findings from the field of embodied cognition (Barsalou, 2008; Niedenthal, Barsalou, Winkielman, Krauth-Gruber, & Ric, 2005; Rohrer, 2007; Wilson, 2002). In particular, we propose that the notion of ‘simulations’ (Barsalou, 1999, 2008) provides significant insight into the mechanisms through which ABIs work. This understanding offers important implications for the planning, implementation and evaluation of ABIs in order that they may realize their full potential as learning interventions.

The paper is structured as follows: Firstly, the literature on ABIs within management education is reviewed and the particular kind of ABIs of central interest to our work is identified. The process of cognition is then explored, with the point made that one's view of cognition influences how learning mechanisms are understood. For instance, the majority of the current literature on ABIs is based on the symbolic view

of cognition, whereas there is a growing body of empirical evidence which supports a different, *embodied* view of cognition. The embodied view allows for new theories of the learning which might better speak to the potentialities of ABIs.

In particular, Perceptual Symbol Systems (PSS) theory, which proposes that simulations, i.e. activations in our sensory-motor systems in the brain underpin our conceptual system and our interaction with our environment is introduced as being particularly helpful in explaining the learning possibilities afforded by ABIs. To make the connection between PSS and ABIs, we turn to the philosophy of art and education. Two propositions are offered through this intersection of perspectives: a) Learning to represent a phenomenon (e.g. a managerial tasks or organizational challenges) through new patterns in the sensory-motor centers (i.e. new simulations) can open new (previously unimaginable) possibilities for interacting with this phenomenon; and b) making art provides a means by which individuals can create new simulations for themselves.

In order to demonstrate the usefulness of PSS as a means for understanding the learning mechanisms ABIs facilitate, three scholarly accounts of using ABIs within manager development are re-interpreted. The three selected papers are unusual in that they include first person descriptions and reflections on participants' own experience of using

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art-creation as a way of facilitating management learning. This makes them ideal for our purpose of offering a re-interpretation of the mechanisms underlying the learning journeys as experienced by the individuals. Following these reinterpretations, the implications for planning, implementing, and evaluating ABIs are offered. In particular, our propositions indicate why it is important to match the art-based medium to the desired learning outcome (Taylor & Statler, 2014) and why ABIs seem to be particularly suited to learning concerning managerial issues with high level of complexity and contradiction (Cunliffe, 2002). Furthermore our propositions draw into question the necessity of verbal reflection as an integral part of ABIs.

1. ABIs in management education

ABIs in management education cover a broad range of learning interventions. Springborg (2015) defines ABIs as interventions that utilize elements traditionally associated with art, such as artistic media (e.g. poetic language, dance, painting, music, etc.), artistic processes (such as those used in art education or by individual artists to develop works of art), or works of art created by well-known artists (e.g. plays, poems, paintings, sculptures, or architecture). Such interventions are ostensibly used to achieve a number of different outcomes, including entertainment, inspiration, teambuilding and bonding, organizational strategy development, and organizational transformation (Darsø, 2004; Schiuma, 2009, 2011). They are also used to develop particular skills or capacities. For example, Beirne and Knight (2007) offer a theatre workshop with management students as a way of developing skills in critical reflection as described by Alvesson and Willmott (1992a), Bathurst, Sayers, and Monin (2008) use parody (in the form of cartoons) to develop service managers' understanding of key aspects of service, Wicks and Rippin (2010) invite managers to create dolls in order to enhance their understanding of themselves as leaders, and Cowan (2007) uses works of art by artists, such as, Monet, Frank Lloyd Wright, Calder, Hopper, and Bernini to teach leaders about visioning, improvisation, reflection, and inclusion.

This paper focuses on ABIs used within formal management educational settings to facilitate individual, rather than group, learning processes. Furthermore it limits its scope to those interventions in which participants themselves create objects in media associated with art, such as, poetic language, paint and other craft materials, dance/movement or theatre. Interventions in which participants merely attend, appreciate or discuss such objects made by others (e.g. Cowan, 2007) are not considered, although our conclusions might be extended to such interventions. In this way the focus of the paper is on two categories within Taylor and Ladkin's (2009) model of ABIs processes: "Projective technique" in which participants create objects on which to reflect, and "making" in which engaging with the art creation process itself is the goal of the intervention. Referring to Schiuma's categorization of ABIs (Schiuma, 2009, 2011), the focus is on ABIs used for training & personal development and transformation of organizations through transformation of individual managers. Finally, in relation to learning theory, ABIs are placed within the category of constructivist learning interventions, that is, interventions designed to hold a space within which the participants may explore and learn about a relevant topic without rigidly defined learning outcomes. Behaviorist learning interventions, in which specific behaviors are sought through schemes of positive and negative reinforcement are not seen as appropriate to the kinds of learning outcomes desired by most management learning interventions. Neither are cognitivist learning interventions, where the goal is to transfer specific information to the learner of interest here.

Bathurst et al. (2008) provide an example which may clarify the kind of ABIs of central interest in this paper. In their article, students on a Service Management course are invited to explore their concept of service by first observing service workers going about their jobs and then creating various forms of parody to represent what they saw. One of the parodies (a cartoon) produced by students is explored in detail.

The first picture in the cartoon depicts a highly motivated service worker looking forward to providing great service. The next frame shows a situation at the service worker's workplace (a fast food restaurant) where a customer is speaking on his cell phone when he comes to the front of the line. When the service worker tries to take the order of the customer behind the man on the phone, the customer on the phone gets angry and insists that he should be served first, given his position in the line. However, he continues to speak on the phone rather than giving his order. The other people in the queue get tired of waiting and leave. After 15 min the troublesome customer ends his call and orders something that is not on the menu. When the service worker tells him what he wants is not available, the customer gets angry and leaves while complaining about bad service. In the last picture the service worker is very frustrated and demotivated. The cartoon is made in manga style (Japanese cartoon style), with highly evocative, emotional expressions on the faces of the service worker.

Among other points, this cartoon demonstrates the dark side of the customer-is-always-right policies. It shows the absurdity that can result from following such policies in a strict manner – both in terms of bad service (to the other customers) and through evoking the sense of disempowerment created when the service worker attends to it rigidly. In this way, the cartoon captures the contradictions inherent in the concept of *customer service* in a way that a definition on its own cannot. Additionally, it enables those creating the cartoon to own and act on their visceral apprehension of the experience in a way that draws on their emotional and sense-based response to their experience of watching the service workers. Whereas such learning may be valuable to a new service manager, the learning intervention did not set out to teach these specific points, only to create a space in which the students could learn *something* important about service management. Thus, it must be seen as a constructivist learning intervention.

How do ABIs foster the kind of apprehension described above? The answer to this question is not apparent in current theorizing about the use of ABIs. In the following section, the burgeoning field of embodied cognition is introduced as a way of beginning to understand the mechanisms underpinning the learning ABIs of the type described above can foster.

2. The embodied view of cognition

To better plan, implement, and evaluate ABIs in management education, it is important to formulate clear ideas about the mechanisms through which such interventions can generate valuable learning outcomes for the individual managers. Such ideas must necessarily be grounded in the view of cognition held by the intervention's designer. There are a number of views of cognition which could inform design decisions. However, few scholars who study or use ABIs (or other learning interventions for that matter) make a clear choice about which view of cognition informs their design decisions. Often the symbolic view of cognition is unquestioningly adopted, as it is embedded in the many of the theories used in the field of management education (Springborg, 2015), such as reflection (Argyris & Schön, 1974), critical reflection (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992b), and transformational learning (Elkins, 2003). However, the embodied view offers alternative understandings of how cognition works. The following section contrasts these two different ways of conceptualizing cognition.

The *symbolic and the embodied view of cognition* are two contrasting views of cognition. The point of debate is how cognition is grounded. The symbolic view of cognition proposes that cognition is grounded in symbols comparable to words, which are stored in separate centers in the brain. Thus, according to this view the brain contains separate symbols, which represent phenomena, such as, "chair", "car", "freedom", "blueness", and "democracy", much like the words for these phenomena represents them. Just as the word "chair" (both as written symbol and as pronounced sound) does not share any properties with actual chairs, the symbol representing a particular phenomenon in the

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