Embodied realism by design in Thai management education

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A B S T R A C T

In response to calls for changes to make management education more relevant in increasingly 'messy', unpredictable and complex business contexts, we report in this paper on a more situated, exploratory learning approach emphasizing experimentation, intuition and imaginative reflection.

We explore an alternative approach to teaching management in a Thai Master's program using an emic-idiographic, interpretivist approach. In doing so, we do not claim generalizability of findings as the focus is in providing a 'thick description' of an innovative pedagogy and its effectiveness for a particular group of Thai learners in a business school in Bangkok. Through the literature on design thinking and embodied realism, we present an abductive tool particularly suited for the Thai cultural context as it encouraged students to uncover their intuitive insights and to experiment with imaginative exploration and reflection. We report on using this exploratory tool in Thai management classrooms and elaborate on cultural challenges as well as learning benefits we discovered, such as students developing a deeper level of intuitive understanding of organizational issues and exploring the pluralism of meaning-making among team members. We commend the approach as a potentially valuable alternative to what Kuepers & Pauleen (2015) call the dominant 'cogni-centrism' in management education.

1. Introduction - making management education more relevant

Management scholars and educators have long been calling for changes to make management education (ME) more relevant for current business contexts. For a literature review on the irrelevancy critique of ME, see Sheppard, Minocha, and Hristov (2015). To summarise, authors such as Weick (2007), Bennis and O'Toole (2005), Mintzberg (2004), Schön (1983) among others have been reminding us that business and management are not as logical and rational as most business school courses seem to assume; rather, they are complex, 'messy', 'emic' or context specific and unpredictable. To deal with such an environment, the rational-analytic teaching approach adopted by many business schools is regarded as lacking. Instead, it needs to be complemented with a repertoire of methods that allow for more active, situated and creative forms of learning. Supporting this, March (1991) encourages exploratory learning alongside the traditional rational approach to learning (which he calls exploitative learning). Pfeffer and Fong (2002) criticize the overreliance on lectures and case analysis to the detriment of learning by doing.

Several authors have argued for a rebalancing of the 'scientific' approach to management by introducing an 'art' focus. Mintzberg (2004) suggests that management practice should be considered a combination of art, craft and science, whereby the 'art' component introduces creative insights and the 'craft' component emphasizes practical experience and experimentation. Along the same lines

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Adler (2006, p. 487) calls for a "cross-fertilization" of the arts and leadership in order to stimulate the creative insights needed to deal with an increasingly interconnected business reality. Starkey and Tempest (2009) see management as both art and science and postulate "We need to balance calculation with imagination" (2009, p. 578).

Based on our own experience of teaching in Thailand and based on years of personal reflections on how to make management education more locally relevant, we have felt an increasing urge to complement our teaching approaches with more intuitive forms of learning which might be better suited to the local cultural context. The gap in the literature we identify is a paucity of approaches aimed at meeting idiographic-emic cultural learning requirements and an over-emphasis upon generalizability and universal applications. This is in contrast to the literature on arts-based methods that stresses the contextual nature of these learning methods and the "situatedness of the experience" (Kuepers & Pauleen, 2015, p. 495). Specifically, we were intrigued by the question posed by Taylor and Ladkin (2009, p. 67) on arts-based methods in management: "Are there contexts that enhance or inhibit the processes?"

Our assumption was that Thai students as members of an embodied culture would benefit from an embodied approach to learning. This led us to experimentation with design thinking and embodied metaphors which will be explored in more detail in the following literature review before we introduce our experiment in Thai management classrooms. The objectives of our experiment were to explore the use of design thinking and embodied realism in a Thai context and discover context-specific benefits and challenges.

2. Literature review

2.1. In need of an approach to address these issues - beginning with the lens of design thinking

In recent years, a number of authors have called for the adoption of a 'design' approach to management education (Dunne & Martin, 2006; Glen, Suciu, Baughn, & Anson, 2015; Leifer & Steinert, 2011; Welsh & Dehler, 2012). Design thinking incorporates "the cognitive processes employed by skilled designers as well as their methods, techniques, and sensibilities for solving problems" (Glen, Suciu, & Baughn, 2014, p. 653). What makes design thinking particularly attractive for management education is that it addresses the needs identified earlier in this paper for dealing with 'messy' and dynamic contexts. In contrast to the rational analytical problem-solving paradigm, where thought precedes action and problems are well-defined, design thinking sees thought and action as mutually constitutive and uses an iterative approach to problem definition and problem solving. This is based on the fact that designers (such as architects, product designers, engineers or urban designers) usually deal with situations where their clients do not know what they want and the final product has to be developed in several dialogical iterations and in constant interaction with the client. In order to achieve this, designers have to employ a bricolage approach to pay close attention to particular user needs and try to see the world through their clients' perspective (Glen et al., 2014).

For Owen (2007, p. 27) design thinking helps in "dealing with complex, ill-formed problems" through its characteristics such as systemic vision and ability to work with qualitative information. Design thinking involves "ambidextrous thinking" (Faste, 1994) – the ability to use the left and right hand equally well – extended to the whole body in creative, kinaesthetic thinking. "Problems become internalized and worked on by the entire body, not just by conscious thought" (p.1). Faste (1994) calls this a "whole person approach to problem solving".

One important technique designers use for information processing is visualization. With the help of sketches, images, or three-dimensional models they engage in a dialogue with their clients and thereby further clarify the problem to be solved. Visualization provides several advantages; it supports the use of intuition, helps to surface mental images (tacit knowledge) and allows to actively experiment with them (Brown, 2008). One way of introducing visualization into managerial problem-solving has been explored by Barry (1994). In his article "Making the invisible visible", Barry refers to the visualization techniques that are typically used in design thinking as analogically-based methods. These methods, or projective techniques as they are also called, derive their name from the use of 'physical analogues' (e.g., drawings, collages, toy models, objects) which serve for projecting conscious and unconscious impressions, emotions and mental images. Barry (1994) proposes the use of 'analogically mediated inquiry (AMI)' to uncover unconscious organizational patterns. Participants first create an analogue of their internal view of the organization. The analogue then mediates the inquiry process, whereby the consultant helps the participant to elicit insights into the participants' unconscious through guiding questions. Borrowed from the fields of depth psychology and art therapy, this method can be considered valuable for two distinct reasons.

Firstly, its creative, playful, non-threatening approach is markedly different from normal work routines and allows for participants to express hidden meanings more freely. Secondly, participants are required to engage actively in the creative process. Barry specifically recommends the tactile modality "to get participants away from over-intellectualization" and argues that "a tactile, non-verbal approach might 'derail' participants' normal routine long enough for new perspectives to be developed" (Barry, 1994, p. 42).

While design thinking originated from its use in designing products and processes (Devin & Austin, 2012; Postrel, 2003), it has successively been used in education, in designing curricula and shaping learning experiences for students (Benson & Dresdow, 2014; Faste, 1994; Reigeluth & Carr-Chelman, 2007). When transferring these design approaches to management education, this means, first, getting participants to think in terms of projects where you solve 'wicked problems' (Buchanan, 1992, p. 16) by using abductive reasoning ('good guessing' exploring what might work), in addition to deductive and inductive skills. This means moving from over reliance on prior analytical deduction and promoting equality for creative speculative abduction.

2.2. In need of an approach to address these issues – adding the lens of embodied realism

Heracleous and Jacobs (2008) use a very similar approach but link it to a different theoretical perspective. Their approach is