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Art, science and the challenge of management education



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Summary This article is an attempt to contribute to a theoretical foundation for art in management education. I do so by building on Ernst Cassirer's relational, processual, and non-dualistic theory. I start by introducing Cassirer's main ideas and I try to relate them to management knowledge with a special emphasis on art and science as complementary forms of knowing. Thereafter I sketch some of the challenges we may face if aiming at developing two-eyed management education, that is, education based on a binocular vision that combines the "eye of science" with the "eye of art". I argue in line with Cassirer that art is a way of knowing, and I claim that art has an important role to play if we wish to develop proficient, two-eyed managers.¹

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The need for binocular vision

Art is one of many channels that lead to a more realistic view of the world, a channel very different from how we

discover the world through science. While science is dependent on classification of our sense perceptions and as such leads to a simplified world, art's channel is through illumination and intensification, and leads to richness. A tendency to approach the world by following only one channel, whether it is art, science or any other symbolic form, may imply a gradual development of one-eyedness and increasing habitual blindness. Since art and science have complementary qualities and lead us to different layers of the same reality, these two ways of knowing should be combined if we want to be proficient in navigating in a three-dimensional reality. Developing such a two-eyedness and a binocular vision may then help us become better at mastering a complex world.

These thoughts are based on the philosophy of Ernst Cassirer' (1874–1945). When Cassirer analyzed the logics of science he did so *based on* the natural sciences (Naturwissenschaften) as an ideal form, and he gradually developed his ideas of a relationship between the natural sciences and

Abbreviations: EoM, *An Essay on Man* (1944); LoH, *Logic of the Humanities* (1942/1961); PSF 1, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 1 Language* (1923/1953); PSF 2, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 2 Mythical Thought* (1925/1955); PSF 3, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 3 The Phenomenology of Knowledge* (1929/1957); PSF 4, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume 4* (1996).

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¹ This article is a result of a project where I have studied the potential in Ernst Cassirer's thinking for management education. It builds on earlier publications, in particular, Irgens (2010), and Irgens (2011a, 2011b).

its counterview; the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*), which Cassirer sometimes called the cultural sciences (*Kulturwissenschaft*).²

By bringing in art as a symbolic form, that is, as a culturally and historically developed way of knowing, Cassirer forcefully and beautifully pointed to the power of artistic imagination and how we relate to the world through the logic that follows art as a symbolic form. Art is a way of “being and acting in the world,” where quality depends on the ability to illuminate the multi-level world. In that respect, Cassirer’s view of the role of art differs from, for example, Darsø’s (2004) otherwise thorough presentation of art in business. Darsø claimed that arts-in-business involved four basic options for the use of art: for decoration, for entertainment, as instruments (e.g., for team-building, communication training, and innovation), or in integration with the strategic processes of transformation. Darsø described *different functions* of art in organizations. Art becomes an object, a tool, or a technique rather than a way of approaching, seeing, sensing, understanding, creating, and acting.

Like teachers of innovative management classes, a business seems more and more to apply art as a technique. But critical voices are also heard from the art-in-business camp. Daved Barry was one such critic:

How does one think of such [creative] projects? The old view would have us think of muses and other out-of-the-blue, knock-on-the-head things. A newer one stemming from social psychology (Amabile, 1996) would suggest that simply asking oneself (or others) to be creative can be enough. But I don’t think either one of these can get us to artfully creative ideas. Too often the many creativity techniques that are around result in a mechanical otherness, something that is different, but not lifefully so. (Barry, 2008, p. 38)

In the Aristotelian tradition, one might say that Darsø primarily depicted art as *techne*, while Cassirer explored art as a practical form of knowing that was different from both *techne* and *episteme*, the latter understood as a form of knowing usually related to science. Art as esthetic knowing became in Cassirer’s philosophy a channel to the world with

practical consequences, and as such it was closer to Aristotle’s *phronesis*.

Cassirer’s approach was thus more profound than the use of art as *techne*, in the sense that he presented art as a form of knowing and a way of attaining a more objective view of the world. Taken into organizations, art consequently should open the eye that makes it possible for us to go beyond the formal structures of organizational life. Together with science, art makes it possible to develop a three-dimensional view of organizations, if we are to believe Cassirer, and knowledge that can bring us closer to reality and make us better at navigating in symbolic, three-dimensional space. For example, all of the four functions of art in business described by Darsø may be understood in both scientific and artistic ways; but the combined use of the symbolic forms of art and science, when understanding these and other organizational phenomena, makes it possible to understand how the surface and deeper levels interact. This seems to me to be the core of Cassirer’s practical message: we need to develop the capacity to cope with the world in a binocular way, by combining the forms of science and art.

Applied to organizations, art is not primarily a question of metaphors, decoration, entertainment, or tools for achieving something, although art may also fill all these functions. In Cassirer’s landscape, art is more than function: it is about how we relate to, interact with, and shape the world. It is about intensifying more than reducing, creating rather than categorizing. But Cassirer was not an ambassador of art alone. Science is still an important way of grasping the world. Cassirer perceived science as the last step in man’s mental progress, and the highest and most characteristic realization of human culture. Nonetheless, science is not sufficient. Being a competent practitioner requires the use of both eyes instead of merely one; if we are to believe Cassirer; it requires the eye of science as well as the eye of art. Without this binocular vision, our ability to navigate under complexity will be reduced, because we lose insight into what Cassirer called the third dimension of space, which should apply to the space of organizing as well.

Symbolic forms as channels to reality

Cassirer released his three volumes of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms: Language* (PSF 1) in 1923 [1953], *Mythical Thought* (PSF 2) in 1925 [1955], and *The Phenomenology of Knowledge* (PSF 3) in 1929 [1957]. Symbolic forms are areas of man’s cultural life, illustrating the historical development of human consciousness, and representing different channels, logics and angles of refraction that man can take on to understand reality. In *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, Cassirer chose to discuss myth, language, and science as focal symbolic forms. However, fifteen years later, in *An Essay on Man* (1944, from now on abbreviated *EoM*)³ he included chapters on religion, history, and art as well. In *Mythical Thought*, he also mentioned the possibility that ethics, law, economics, and technology could be treated as symbolic forms (PSF 2, pp. xiv–xv).

² This, and concepts such as *Geist* and *Wissenschaft* surely have put translators on serious tests: In the translator’s foreword to Cassirer’s “The Logic of the Humanities”. Clarence Smith Howe devotes most of his 12 page forward on trying to decode the German tradition to the English-speaking audience. He warns that “(…) the *Kulturwissenschaften*, for which Cassirer and his predecessors are seeking the basic logic, are not to be facily identified with what the English-speaking world refers to as “the social sciences.” Howe holds forth that the German concept of science (*Wissenschaft*) is much broader than its English counterpart: “In this wider meaning, “science” is not concerned with factual descriptions and the exact lawful relationships obtaining between natural events. Rather, it is science in the ancient sense of being a profounder or more adequate knowledge of what we already “know” in the factual sense of our direct and daily encounter of the world and ourselves. Thus, even poetry and mythology can be the concern of that disciplined knowledge which is *Kulturwissenschaft*. It is precisely for this reason that I have chosen to translate *Kulturwissenschaften* as ‘the humanities’ (Howe, 1961, pp. xiii–xiv).

³ See *List of abbreviations*.

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