TOWARDS A POETRY OF REFLECTION AND REINVENTION: The Poetry Gallery Workshop

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ABSTRACT

This presentation is an adaptation of The Poetry Gallery workshop to the conference theme. It was originally designed to sensitize students to the subtle, personal and emotionally charged dimensions of the undergraduate Organizational Behavior course. Through encounters with modern poetry, the Gallery evokes, clarifies and intensifies the metaphors through which students make sense of uncertainties in their own lives, deepen their appreciation of one another and creatively re-conceptualize course material. We believe that the conference themes of reflection and re-imagination can be enhanced by a good dose of poetry.

Key words: Experiential education, poetry, organizational behavior

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Introduction.

Traditional management education has been widely criticized for an overemphasis on rational, analytic, arms-length approaches to the detriment of softer, more intuitive capacities. Most critics agree that today’s management students are over-drilled in the routines of calculation and analysis, but underprepared for the dynamic and turbulent settings in which managers often find themselves. The Carnegie Foundation’s Report on the state of undergraduate business education (Colby, Erlich, Sullivan & Dolle, 2011) has identified two deficiencies—the need for reflexive education and the need for multi-disciplinary understanding. The arts-based movement in management education has emerged as an approach to these problems. Professors working in this tradition use experiential approaches evoke intuitive “right brain” capacities in the context of management learning. Our work extends this approach to the realm of language, most notably poetry and poetic metaphor.

We attempt to leverage the power of poetry for management courses through the creation of an aesthetic workspace that uses modern poetry as it core material (Taylor & Statler, 2014). Within this space, poetic metaphors are evoked and intensified. They are then used to manage and make sense of one’s self and one’s world. It is both a setting and a set of activities that provide an encounter with modern poems, a shared aesthetic experience, and an emergent framework for organizing course materials in terms of personal relevance (Van Buskirk & London, 2018). We call this workspace “The Poetry Gallery.” We have conducted it more than 100 times with audiences as diverse as business executives, university professors, community organizers, cancer patients, graduate and undergraduate students. In academic settings we have conducted it in undergraduate management and organizational behavior courses. We have also used it in MBA Ethics courses and Strategy courses.

Theoretical Foundation

*On metaphor: conceptual and poetic*: We approach the vast dimensions of language, poetry and experiential education through the lens of metaphor, more specifically the work of George Lakoff and associates (Lakoff & Johnson, 1985; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Lakoff & Turner, 1989; Lakoff, 2008). This work goes beyond common understandings of metaphor as ornamental, figurative or poetic (cf. Katz-Buoninontro 2015). Rather, through a voluminous body of work, Lakoff and his colleagues demonstrate that metaphor is a fundamental, universally available conceptual resource for sense making. Its value lies in a facility to enable us to understand one thing in terms of another (i.e. uncertainty in terms of something closer to home.) Metaphor, as Lakoff conceives it, results from the interaction of two domains: the target domain characterized by uncertainty and the source domain which contains a wealth of familiar, easily conceptualized experience. Thus, when faced with situations where they don’t know what to do or what to think, people use metaphor to map the evanescent, subtle, complex and mysterious dimensions of life in terms of their own experience (Lakoff, 1989; Barry and Meisek, 2010; Sutherland & Jelinek, 2015).

Metaphors are not only cognitive maps, but they also carry emotional content. They tell us how to feel about what we envision. For example, to use the metaphor *death-is-sleep* is to rely on a set of familiar correspondences embedded in how we routinely think and speak. Both death and sleep involve silence, stillness, a prone position, lack of consciousness and closed eyes. In this instance, common experience is used to understand (to some degree) one of life’s great mysteries. However, when Shakespeare takes hold of this metaphor, it becomes something else.

*to die*, *to sleep: perchance to dream: aye there’s the rub;*

*for in that sleep of death what dreams may come…*

In Shakespeare’s hands the death-is-sleep metaphor becomes at once more complex and more emotionally charged. He adds the element of dreaming which itself opens up visions of nightmare and hell—two lively possibilities in the Elizabethan mind. No wonder Hamlet was ambivalent.

Our approach builds on Lakoff’s work. It contributes to management learning by evoking a wide range of poetic metaphors through which uncertainties in student’s lives are suffused with new understanding and energy. This occurs in the Poetry Gallery through encounters with modern poems, reflections on those encounters, sharing with others and by writing one’s own poem. By providing a lively, communal experience of metaphor, the Gallery opens classroom discussions of management and Organizational Behavior to more personal and intuitive realms. Students gain insights into themselves and their classmates, and they structure course concepts in line with their own interests and life experience.

Learning Objectives:

The Gallery is an experiential workshop designed to evoke and heighten the student’s experience of poetry and poetic metaphor in the interest of a more intuitive, nuanced, personally relevant and emotional understanding of management and Organizational Behavior. Specific objectives cited here have been gathered from student reflection papers. These include:

-Students discover metaphor as a personally relevant resource to make sense of uncertainties in their professional and personal lives (Lakoff and Johnson, 1985).

-Students learn, through experience, about the cognitive/ conceptual strength that metaphors provide (i.e. metaphors provide a provisional structure for uncertain situations) (Lakoff & Turner, 1989).

-Students learn to recognize the tacit dimension in organizational concepts and issues (e.g. politics, emotions, power, gender, race and ethics). They learn that these issues don’t go away simply because they are not spoken (March, 2006).

-Students develop a deeper, more nuanced sense of one another through metaphor and sharing their experiences. (Van Buskirk & London)

-Students learn to appreciate the emotional power of metaphor as a tool to motivate themselves and others (Whyte, 2007).

Relation to the theme of the conference

*Reflective Reinvention: Harnessing our Heritage to Reshape Management Education:* As we understand it, the call for papers is a call to poetry. For what are “Active reflection on our roots” and “reshaping management education”—but invitations to use our capacity for metaphor in the interest of re-visioning our lives and our work. In Lakoff’s terms, this intersection of past and future constitutes a kind of target domain—something beyond us that the management rhetoric from which we teach cannot fully encompass (March, 2006). This creative fusion requires more from us than the language we routinely use in our day-to-day activities. Cognitive and emotional resources embedded in the metaphors we carry need to be included in the conversation. Our language needs to be as lively as our goals are wide.

To this end we are re-designing the Poetry Gallery to reflect the concerns of the conference. We draw on the power of the Gallery to evoke implicit metaphors of participants and to use those metaphors to generate a culture where a more expansive conversation around the topic can happen. To this end we are selecting poems from our files that bear, more or less, on the twin concerns of the conference—topic. We have also selected discussion questions that will elicit participants’ views. Otherwise we are retaining the structure of the workshop as we usually present it. We need a 90 minute time slot to run the workshop as an experiential exercise. We prefer this arrangement. In the event that a 60 minute slot is required we can describe it in a conceptual way with a few illustrative examples.

Schedule of activities

The Setup: Approximately 60 modern poems will be displayed on the walls of the room. Poems will be shown in enlarged fonts and on brightly colored paper. Participants will begin by browsing the gallery accompanied by appropriate mood music.

Arrival: Participants arrive, are greeted by workshop leaders and begin to browse the Gallery.

Browsing the Gallery: Participants walk around the room reading various poems, as if they were at an art-gallery. (15 minutes)

Choosing a favorite poem, finding a partner: At the end of the browsing time, participants are instructed to choose one poem that “really stood out for them” or “spoke to them.” They take that poem down from the wall and find a partner (5 minutes).

Sharing in dyads: Participants read their favorite poem to their partners and share why they picked the poem. (10 minutes)

Whole group sharing: Participants re-arrange themselves into a large circle around the room. Each individual is given the opportunity to read his or her poem. Both reader and partner respond to the poem. Others in the room respond briefly. Responses are limited to how the poem affected participants. Emotional responses are welcome (20 minutes, depending on how many participants show up for the workshop.)

Free-write: Participants choose one line from their chosen poem to use as a prompt for a free-write. In free-writes, individuals write without stopping for about 8-10 minutes. The purpose of the exercise is to surface material related to the stem that may have been implicit or unconscious. (10 minutes)

Performing the Free-write: Members who wish to do so can read their free-writes to the group. (Time required varies greatly depending on the desire to share. Some groups have only 1 or 2 volunteers. In other groups everyone participates. 20 minutes)

Reflections on the experience: Participants will be given a series of reflection questions relevant to the theme of the conference. In addition, a great deal of reflection happens throughout the workshop as members experience the activities in light of their concerns, (Time: 10 minutes).

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