**IN SEARCH OF AN ETHICAL COMPASS: a poetical adventure**

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**Session format: Activity or Exercise**

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**This session is intended as a Conference Track theme.**

**IN SEARCH OF AN ETHICAL COMPASS: A Poetical Adventure**

ABSTRACT

Now, more than ever, a thoroughgoing grasp of ethical values and implications is proving essential to navigating organizational environments. This effort is complicated by individual and organizational dynamics that keep these issues decontextualized, submerged and implicit. This experiential workshop harnesses the power of poetic metaphor to spark insights into implicit value orientations which often lie dormant in discussions of business ethics.

**Introduction:** Teachers of Business Ethics have long recognized the difficulties in applying ethical principles learned in management classrooms to organizational settings. These difficulties involve a disconnect between espoused ethical principles, at either the individual or the organizational level, and the deeper values embedded in organizational culture or individual psyche. At times this disconnect leads to flagrant, conscious rule-breaking, while at others it allows for reflexive justifications of ethical violations that lie outside the purview of conscious awareness. Increasingly corporate leaders are trying to “get ahead” of this problem by building ethical codes into their strategies (e.g. Whole Foods, Apple, Southwest Air, Nucor Steel, etc). We believe that finding, one’s own ethical compass is increasingly important as an executive skill. Surfacing implicit, even unconscious values is becoming an important part of our business ethics courses.

At the core of this consciousness-raising is a workshop that builds on work in the arts-based curricular movement. In this work, intense interaction with works of art (or with the process of making art) become metaphors that engage students with a variety of subtle management concepts (Sutherland, 2012; Barry & Miesek, 2010; reference withheld, 2008, 2012, 2018). This connection is often emotional and imaginative, providing an experience that is at once engaging and relevant to real world emotional concerns. In our workshop, we use the medium of modern poetry to create encounters that deepen the discussion of business ethics. We call our workshop *The Poetry Gallery.*

We have used this workshop in a number of MBA ethics courses to heighten awareness of students’ implicit ethical values. It evokes, through encounters with modern poetry, an experience of embedded valuing that is closely connected to the student’s life, relationships and beliefs about how organizations work. This application to Ethics courses is based on our earlier work where we use a Poetry Gallery format to intensify student experience and understanding of metaphor. These workshops have been previously developed in contexts of leadership, general management, organizational behavior and strategy courses. This workshop is the first time we are presenting on our attempts to extend it to ethics courses.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

We approach the vast dimension of values and valuing through the lens of metaphor, more specifically the work of George Lakoff and associates ([Lakoff, 2008](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Lakoff & Johnson, 1985](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051), [1999](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Lakoff & Turner, 1989](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051)). This work goes beyond the common understanding of metaphor as ornamental, figurative, or poetic (cf. [Katz-Buoninontro, 2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051)). 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 the wealth of familiar, easily conceptualized experience. When faced with situations where they do not know what to do or what to think, people use source material to map uncertainty in terms of their own experiences ([Barry & Meisek, 2010](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Lakoff & Turner, 1989](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Sutherland & Jelinek, 2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); references withheld, 2008, 2012 2018).

This metaphoric mapping can be either conceptual, or emotional. 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, immobility, lack of consciousness, and closed eyes. In this metaphor, 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 the possibility of nightmare and hell—two lively possibilities in the Elizabethan mind. No wonder Hamlet was ambivalent.

It is at this point that metaphor becomes more than the sum of its parts. It is at once a vehicle for transferring clarity, passion, beauty and values from one domain to another. Metaphor creates a direct experience of uncertainty in ways that are at once concrete, intuitive, imaginative, emotional, and beautiful (or ugly). These capacities correspond to what the arts-based movement seeks to cultivate in management students ([Irgens, 2014](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Kolb, 1984](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Maranville, 2011](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Sutherland & Jelinek, 2015](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051)). It is this kind of participation that is implied in many of the executive-level skills studied in our literatures, (i.e. formulating mission and vision, communicating goals to stakeholders, framing and reframing environments, integrating ethics with operational requirements, empathizing with diverse populations, or forging strategies that are unique ([Maranville, 2011](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [March, 2006](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Morgan, 2010](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051); [Whyte, 2007](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1052562917739051)). All of these skills, and many others, imply a capacity to use metaphor. Through this workshop we enable students to view how they hold their own values, and how this framing might relate to the corporate realms in which they participate.

A second influence on our thinking has come from Cultural Sociology. This discipline has long been concerned with the connection between aesthetic experience and societal issues. Tia DeNora and her associates have extended this work through fine-grained studies of how identities are shaped through vital interactions between individuals and art objects. In her work on the sociology of music, DeNora makes the point that music doesn’t stop with the performance, the recording, the distribution and the consumption of CD’s, or even in the listening to the CD.

*The “career” of an artwork, a particular symphony or pop tune, for example, is by no means “over” once concerts are given or LP’s, CD’s and singles are distributed to outlets, played on radio stations and purchased for home consumption. Nor after the critics have pronounced…*(DeNora, 2000)

The “music” goes on inside the listener(s) head even after it falls silent. She makes the point that this “replaying” of music, as it goes on in us, has extra-musical effects. It makes us want to *do* things.

*One of the most striking (and usually underplayed) points is that we do things to music and do things with music: …eat, fall asleep, dance, daydream, exercise, celebrate, commemorate, even procreate, to music. Things get done to music, moreover, as it plays out both in real time, and as it is played and replayed in memory and imagination.* (Denora, 2000)

As music, and by extension all art that is vitally engaged, “gets into our heads” (and stays there long after it is seen or heard). It begins to shape who we are, and how we orient ourselves to the world. In DeNora’s words, it is an “ordering device at the personal level…a means for creating, enhancing, sustaining, changing subjective, cognitive, bodily and self-conceptual states.”

Therefore, the music doesn’t stop when it is “over”. Nor does the painting, the poem or the play. Art experienced as a process, shapes our identities, makes us want to move, to do things, to interact with others and to elaborate and enact social forms. Denora’s work details how identities are transformed and individuals are shaped as agents capable of acting in the world in a specific way (DeNora, 1995; Sutherland, 2012).

It is this dynamism that has captured the attention of management scholars looking for ever-more engaging ways to develop non-rational capacities their students: intuition (Maranville, 2011), insight into organizational dynamics (Irgens, 2014), creativity and empathy (Katz-Buonincontro, 2015), pattern recognition (Sutherland, 2012), and envisioning (Maranville, 2011). We see ethical decision making, as it actually happens in real time, to be one of these subtle variables. Our approach is to craft a workshop that provides a number of encounters with modern poetry at its center (References withheld). Poems evoke themes about which students are passionate, and which can be used as a lens for a wide array of conversations in the Ethics course.

Relation to Conference Theme: We see this workshop as directly related to the Conference theme. Change agents in the dynamic, subtle and complex environments of today’s organizations requires a “tool box” of skills adequate to navigating these environments which are themselves shaped by powerful language. Many of the articles cited in this review deal with one or more of these skills (e.g. intuition, insight, empathy, creativity, pattern recognition and envisioning.) This workshop adds to this list a sensitivity to deeply-held ethical values—to a clear and lively appreciation of one’s ethical compass. Modern poetry is a powerful tool for this because of the dynamics inherent in poetic metaphor—concrete images and ideas point the way toward dimensions of ethical behavior that are subtle and often beyond the reach of rational formulation and understanding.

SESSION DESCRIPTION AND PLAN

If possible, a 90 minute block of time would be best to allow a true experience of poetry to unfold.

We will design the setting beforehand. Approximately 70 poems will be displayed gallery-like with enlarged fonts on multi-colored paper. Musical accompaniment will be provided. Activities may include:

Browsing the Gallery—participants will spend approximately 15 minutes walking through the Gallery to the accompaniment of music.

Choosing a favorite poem: Participants will choose a poem that particularly spoke to them.

Sharing in Dyads—they will share the poem and their reasons for choosing it with one other participant: 15 minutes

Sharing their selected poems with the group: 15-30 minutes. If the group is large—more than 15 members—this step may be bypassed at the discretion of the facilitators.

The bulk of the session will involve a debriefing session (approximately 45-60 minutes) The debriefing of the discussion will proceed along five lines depending on participant interests.

-participants responses to the workshop/ poems

-embedded personal/ ethical concerns of participants that were triggered by workshop

-pedagogical issues (i.e. how participants would use the workshop format)

-consideration of specific poems chosen for relevance to ethics.

-tips for facilitating Poetry Gallery workshops

UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO OBTC

The Poetry Gallery has been used in more than 100 classroom and management training experiences throughout the US and Europe. Our research has revealed that students are able through artistic experience to connect to course material, to “customize” it to their own experience and to reframe it in ways that increase engagement and relevance to their own lives and concerns.

The difference in this year’s presentation lies in the focal topic: ethical issues in business. We have long noticed the difficulty in transferring ethical orientations from one setting to another and we have intuited that ethical orientations run deep. The work of Lakoff and Denora have provided a way to think about this. This is the first time we have presented the Gallery as a workshop to facilitate deep ethical discussion in the MBA classroom.

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