

**THE NATURE AND VALUE OF REFLECTING ON
EVERYDAY ORGANIZATIONAL MEANING-MAKING**

DRAFT

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Introduction

The effectiveness of management development has been criticised as being devoid of, and divorced from, practice (Pfeffer & Fong, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004). Within this scrutiny, although there is much debate (Chia, Donaldson, Pfeffer, & Wensley, 2005), there is a degree of consensus that, as a management pedagogy, reflective practice has a role to play in making ‘better’ managers. The reflective practitioner is able to work with tensions created when ‘good management practices’ are contradictory or not easy to implement (Huxham & Beech, 2003) allowing managers to productively ‘flounder’ in equivocality (Schwandt, 2005; Huxham et al., 2003). Specifically, in proposing that managers become philosophers (Schwandt, 2005), it is thought that managers need to generate multiple and diverse sensemaking frameworks for use in everyday meaning making through reflective learning. Sensemaking is needed for pragmatic action and learning is needed because what is ‘pragmatic’ changes over time and according to social context. Such work is micro and fits into the new agenda of researching how managers develop their skills (Whittington, 2004).

Empirical work has shown the value of encouraging managers to keep paradoxes open and through serious playfulness transform them or move on from them through action (Huxham et al., 2003; Beech, Burns, de Caestecker, MacIntosh, & MacLean, 2004). The role of reflective practice has been empirically explored in professions such as nursing (Newton, 2000; Winter, 2003) and teaching (Larrivee, 2000). Empirical work that investigates how managers learn to learn and hence practice critical reflection within dynamic environments is however lacking. If it is not known how managers learn to learn, then we can neither be certain of its value, nor know how to teach managers to become philosophers.

This paper analyses the reflection reports of 48 MBA students written post a course in the strategic management of technology-based firms. The course is designed to highlight the contradictions inherent in managerial practice and considered by Schwandt to lie at the centre of good organizing. These include, for example, never possessing perfect data which can be analysed to make the ‘right’ strategic choice, data having both objective and subjective qualities, facing paradoxical choices and coping with organizational power and politics. Analytically, the theoretical structure of integrating different adult learning orientations with sensemaking (Schwandt, 2005) is used to search for evidence that student managers can be encouraged to adopt progressive learning orientations, that these can be used to sensemake in more varied ways, and that the enhanced sense-making is acted upon in an ongoing process in and outside of the classroom. The paper investigates how managers develop the micro-capability of reflecting upon everyday meaning making to improve future sensemaking in fast moving organizational environments.

The paper first connects the recently developed 'how do strategists acquire skills'? part of the micro strategizing and practice research agenda to the debate about the nature and value of MBAs to the discussions of what reflective practice is and how it might add value. This juxtaposition creates the research question - how might the micro capability of reflective practice be developed and make better managers? Second, Schwandt's framework is discussed and 'translated' into what type of evidence would need to be found in student manager reflection reports for the framework to be justified. Third, a methods section details data collection and analysis. Results are then provided in a fourth section, revealing how much of what type of learning is found as well, when and how it is linked to action, and in process terms how learning progresses. Data that does not easily fit into the framework is discussed. The last section concludes with comments on the empirically tested theoretical framework and implications for management development.

Management Practice, Management Development and Reflective Practice

Recently there has been a movement towards viewing management, and strategy in particular, as practice (Johnson, Melin, & Whittington, 2003; Whittington, 2004). In this mode the attachment, seen as a form of scientific detachment by Whittington, to economic theory can be replaced by an interest in strategy as a social practice including how strategy skills are acquired and the role of reflexivity. The emphasis is on strategy as a micro-activity (Johnson et al., 2003; Felin & Foss, 2005) and understanding that activity leading to practical knowledge of value to managers in their everyday lives. This new research agenda has yet to be tied directly to management development.

Within the management development literature, there is fierce debate as to how MBAs add value, (Chia et al., 2005). Mintzberg (2004) argues that the connection with practice has been largely lost in most MBAs especially when the qualification is expanded to include young 'managers' without experience they can reflect upon. Reflection on practice is an essential skill of managers (Schon, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Reynolds, 1998). It is seen as connecting theory to action. Recent revisions of the MBA curriculum have included the addition of 'management as practice' streams which includes self-understanding and management (see Warwick Business School, UK).

Despite this enthusiasm, how to become a reflective practitioner and how reflection is linked to action is relatively unknown. It is not a spontaneous everyday activity, is epigenetic, associated with the recent evolutionary development of free will and has to be learned and encouraged (Gelter, 2003). A task for modern management is to make individual learning more explicit for managers to become practical authors of learning (Pavlica, Holman, & Thorpe, 1998; Pavlica et al., 1998). Value is accrued through managers able to engage critically in their social meaning making rather than following technical paths and recipes (Reynolds, 1998; Reynolds & Vince, 2004; Reynolds et al., 2004).

Empirical work in reflective practice is limited and what there is methodologically limited to case studies analysed without any specific analytical framework. Case studies reveal that academics need to be prepared to have their own practice questioned if they promote reflective practice in the classroom (Corley & Eades, 2004). Another example of work which uses cases as illustrations of conceptual development involves considering dialogue as an enabler of strategic innovation (Jacobs & Loizos, 2005). Other work in the organizational domain is very context specific. Steeping out of everyday routines to reflect on partnerships in a sub-regional network of reflective practitioners was deemed useful in identifying pertinent issues (Armistead & Pettigrew, 2004). Work that is indirectly relevant shows empirically that hybrid methods of teaching generate students with more complex mental models (Nadkarni, 2003). Research has been

conducted in social work where the capacity to reflect was seen as related to the introduction of new knowledge, interactions with other students, the culture of the course, field work and making connections across classes (Gardner, 2005). Nursing has also been an area of reflective practice research where reflection and portfolios allow nurses to alter beliefs and behaviours affecting personal and professional growth (Maich Matthew, Brown, & Royle, 2000). Lastly, again using a case study approach, the use of reflective diaries in undergraduate management education has shown the approach to serve as a 'learning vehicle and module assessment tool' (Rothwell & Ghelipter, 2003). Comprehensive, non-illustrative, empirical work that considers the capabilities of the individual manager is lacking. With regards to management development specifically, the effectiveness of management education is rarely assessed (Chia et al., 2005) and especially not when it comes to self-awareness (Hogan & Warrenfeltz, 2003).

The Theoretical Framework

The aim of this paper is to draw links between management development and management practice at a micro capability level. Specifically, this takes the form of the relationship between theory and action (Schwandt, 2005) in a post-positivist world where the boundaries of management education and learning are being revised to include discursive plurality and power (Clegg & Ross-Smith, 2003). Learning is both about understanding and behaviour. Pragmatic action oriented sensemaking emanates however from a different paradigm to learning, combining these reveals contradictions and similarities which are symbiotic and complementary (Schwandt, 2005). The research is micro as it delves into learning orientations and processes within student managers. It studies the development of a capability which involves the process of learning to be a managerial philosopher, in the sense of having a feel for all sorts of knowledge and acting upon the learning in a political context.

Schwandt develops a framework in which areas of cognition are viewed in terms of adult learning orientations and sensemaking. Areas of cognition include nature of knowledge and meaning, action-learning relationship, social context and reflectivity. Adult learning orientations reflect the progression of the adult learning paradigm and include behaviourist, cognitivist, humanist, social learning and constructionist orientations. The nature of knowledge, for example, is no longer linear, technical and singular fulfilling basic needs, but more complex as well as emotional, personal and self-actualising, accumulated during mastery and can bring about transformational change if it involves questioning one-self and the assumptions underlying the nature of knowledge and meaning. Sensemaking, citing Schutz and Weick, is seen as connecting cues of today with frameworks developed in the past allowing the manager to reduce equivocality.

When adult learning orientations by areas of cognition are compared with sense-making, sense-making is seen to lack the angle of reflective action seen in the social constructionist learning orientation. Equally learning orientations, even in their more progressive forms, are seen to lacking a consideration of the social context in which learning occurs.

INSERT TABLE 1

In summary, the 'manager as philosopher' framework (see Table 1), by linking learning orientations (development) to sensemaking (ways of processing knowledge that lead to action), provides a solid framework on which to build empirical enquiry of reflective practice as a capability. Use of this framework allows learning to be seen as progressive (involving successively more sophisticated learning orientations), able to take on different orientations at

any moment in time (pluralist), able to cope with management as practice needing to involve reflective practice courtesy of theory-action disconnects (Huxham et al., 2003) and routed in enactment of what is possible in a social context where change can be transformational. The research question is – how do managers become philosophers?

The following section details what data was collected and how the theoretical framework was converted into an analytical framework.

Method

Working with qualitative data is messy and invariably involves uncodifiable leaps of intuition (Langley, 1999). The analytical framework used here helps structure the data, but even so it was difficult and time consuming to code. One issue when working at such a micro level trying to understand capabilities is that capabilities are individual, especially when the capability under scrutiny is reflective practice, the essence of which is that there is no answer or rather that answers are individual.

Data collection

Data collection possibilities include indirectly and directly accumulating relevant data within a learning environment or within everyday managerial settings. Possible indirect data collection approaches include interviewing student managers about their learning process, and stimulation and debate within a learning situation about how to become better managers. Direct data collection approaches include observing good practice and asking where managers learnt to perform that way, or educating student managers to become reflective practitioners and asking them to capture and comment on their learning including how they intend to use that learning to become better managers. Direct data collection is favoured over indirect courtesy of the enhanced validity of the data. In either case of the direct collection methods, there is still an element of indirect data. Collecting data amongst working managers, by asking them to explain how they have learnt to be good managers, is rejected as it required time-consuming observation to identify good practice and more importantly the recall of the connection between action and learning. Collecting data within a management development setting which included managers working part time and managers taking time out to consider their future careers is favoured. In this way the learning process could be captured as it happened. The disadvantage of this method is that data on action is collected indirectly.

The Management of Technology MBA at the Segal Graduate School of Business furnished the data. The particular course is entitled the ‘Strategic Management of Technology Based Firms’. These choices of setting and course are pragmatic as the author teaches this course, but are also appropriate. First the course is designed to both teach the basics of strategic management and teach that these basics are perhaps too basic in that what sounds easy, such as – ‘strategy involves moving towards a common goal’ – has some underlying assumptions which may be difficult to implement, such as arriving at a common goal (Huxham et al., 2003). Table 2 describes the course structure and the areas that attention is drawn to regarding the difficulties in practising good strategic management. Importantly, the core text book for this course was ‘Exploring Corporate Strategy’ (Johnson & Scholes, 2002), which includes seeing strategy through different lenses. Additional reading was suggested in the form of Strategy Safari (Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, & Lampel, 1998) and Images of Strategy (Cummings & Wilson, 2003), thereby reinforcing the ‘seeing strategy in different ways’ message.

INSERT TABLE 2

Second, the students on this MBA operate in highly dynamic and complex environments where good management practice is rarely obvious, where there is a fine dividing line between failure and success and where sustainable advantage is difficult to achieve because of hyper-competition and the high risks associated with high-tech firms. Third, experience says that these students tend to come to the course and MBA expecting the course content to reduce equivocality in line with the technical training most of them underwent to become scientists and engineers. For these students the concepts of subjectivity, social construction and self-awareness are invariably new to them and sometimes particularly difficult to grasp. It has also been noted that managers with this type of background tend not to be promoted as fast as managers with social science backgrounds (Mintzberg, 2004). Thus the type of course combined with the type of student and the environment these managers tend to work within made for an appropriate sample.

The course grading involves three pieces of work. The first piece of work is an exam formed of a short case study. The case tests the ability of the student manager to apply the more basic areas of the course in a structured, analytical way under time pressure. The second graded piece of work involves working in groups of between 5 and 6 student managers. Here the students choose a company and apply the course material to the company to create a strategic report. The report can address a particular strategic issue or can be a general strategic review of the company. The students are encouraged to involve the company in their thinking where possible. The report includes a group reflective piece on the group dynamics and contributions of individuals, what the group found difficult or easy, what surprised them, what effect involving the company had and anything else that they feel adds to their report in a reflective way.

The last piece of work is a reflective practice report and forms the data set of this research. Students are required to keep a reflective diary to which they contribute after each course unit. In this diary they are asked to comment upon:

- What they liked and did not like of that course unit and why.
- What was useful and not useful and why.
- How they might view a past, current or future differently as a result of their learning.
- How their learning might affect their future career development.
- How their learning makes them view good management differently.
- What action they might take as a result of their learning.
- What questions the unit left answered - why and how they might matter
- Anything else they find helpful to write about / wish to comment on / consider as reflective practice.

At the end of the course the student managers convert the diary into a report of no more than 2000 words. They are encouraged to move from a time-based diary to a report that is theme based (by seeing whether there are themes that crop up in different parts of their diary) and action-based, but which also does comment on the process of learning to become a 'better' manager.

The reports of 48 students are included in the analysis. Ten of these students worked on-line, the remainder were students taught in a face to face setting. In all but one case, draft versions of the report and diary entries are included in the analysis. Students are actively encouraged to seek feedback from the instructor of their work in progress. My feedback to them provides further data. In this way not only the final result, but the process of becoming reflective is captured. In the case for which no feedback and drafts are included, the student opted not to seek feedback.

Data Analysis

An analytical structure is required that can cope with different forms of learning, progressive learning over time within student managers, learning associated with action, and management development associated with complex environments. The Schwandt framework is judged as able to provide all of these angles, but being a theoretical piece needs to be converted into an analytical structure detailing what empirical evidence would constitute support for the theory. Table 3 reveals the conversion and the remaining paragraphs provide details.

As regards sensemaking, empirical evidence is searched for regarding the sensemaking of learning during an MBA as it relates to the manager's everyday world. Within the behaviourist learning orientation, evidence is searched for which has a stimulus-response feel to it, in terms of being required by the course to 'be reflective' and hence being reflective to get through the course. Reflectivity is therefore seen as an appreciation of the importance the instructor gives to the reflective practice and hence the importance the student needs to place on this.

The cognitivist orientation is evidence that the student manager is able to apply their learning, experiment with it within a relevant social context and learn from that experimentation. A relevant social context is either their workplace or with the classroom. The classroom is very much positioned within the learning as a safe place in which to experiment. Some level of awareness of personal ability in applying the learning is looked for in terms of reflectivity.

Evidence of a student manager working within the humanist orientation is seen as material very much written in the form of the first person and in terms of their needs as a person over and above their needs as a manager. Reflectivity is considered as very person centred and driven by the person.

Social learning evidence is seen as learning within a context specific to that person and with an appreciation of that social context. It embraces developing skills through experience gained in a relevant context, an appreciation of learning as ongoing because the social context is always changing and being motivated by what is socially normal. Reflectivity is a matter of performing within a social context and striving to perform better within that social context.

Evidence of social constructionist learning is considered to be appreciating the value of understanding social construction at a personal level and also that others socially construct knowledge (differently). An appreciation of what this means in terms of managing better and giving example of where the reduction of equivocality has been a barrier to understanding or action at the level of self or at the level of interacting with others is seen as important evidence. Reflectivity is perceived as evidence of actual change through floundering in equivocality rather than reducing it as might be the case the cognitivist orientation.

The reports including feedback comments from me are imported into NVivo, the software package designed to analyse qualitative data. Coding is on the basis of evidence within each report for each of the categories within Table 3 with the addition of any learning that did not fit into any of the categories.

Results

Having coded the data, insights are searched for. Whether there is evidence of all types of learning is investigated in the data-set as a whole and in individual students. The processual dynamics of learning are investigated by seeing whether students move from one learning orientation to another (and back again) over time. The types of instructor feedback and effect on this process are investigated. Whether learning is present that does not fit into the analytical framework is considered.

Evidence of all types of learning

Evidence is found for all types of learning within the data-set as a whole. Table 4 shows the type of evidence found within each of the analytical framework orientations and areas.

Within the sense-making about learning area of the framework students did see management education as serving to reduce equivocality. Only one student talked of practicing diary writing before the course and even that student saw the course as having elevated its value. Students did seek clarification from the instructor on what she meant by reflective practice. Students did state that post the course they would make reflectivity an ongoing activity even if it could not answer every question nor deliver solutions through the reduction of equivocality.

As regards the behaviourist orientation, evidence is present in the indirect sense of the student managers attending the course, writing diaries and reports and submitting them to instructors both for feedback and grading. There is one example of a student directly musing about the fact that the instructor must consider this important given the grading weighting of 40%.

The majority of evidence fitted within the cognitivist orientation. Students 'showed off' their ability to analyse information of relevance to them to the point of action. This was mainly report style data but also to a lesser extent involved people-based information. Some struggled to see themes in their own reflections and thus to convert them from diaries to reports. They rarely commented on their own abilities in this area in a reflexive mode. One student commented that filling in boxes because he was told so riled him. Another more reflexive comment was how much more difficult data from people was in comparison with normal data.

The humanist orientation was where the third heaviest loading of data fell. Not all students however found it easy to feel or talk about emotions. For some devising actions that were personally career oriented was too difficult. For some reflecting opened up clearer future career paths, especially in terms of involving strategy in their thinking whereas before they had considered it something someone else would do. There were examples of data where students sought organizations for future careers that were in tune with their own values. There was no obvious data about improvement of their personal standing in society as a result of their learning.

The social learning orientation was difficult to analyse. There was data on practice and experience as a source of learning. The action-learning relationship category was difficult to differentiated coding wise from the same category in the cognitivist orientation and the constructionist learning orientation. The orientation was however more critical than the analytical framework suggested (see below).

The constructionist orientation was where the second most data was coded. A factor in this ranking must be the emphasis the course placed on social construction within strategy making.

There was an overlap with the humanist side in terms of becoming more aware of how self socially constructed the world.

INSERT TABLE 3

Types of progression

Two types of learning progression are seen within the data-set. Steadily progressing through the orientations is the most common type of learning seen within the data. Getting stuck in an orientation is another form of learning. Student managers got stuck either in a humanist emotional orientation or in the cognitivist orientation.

As regards steady progress, some students move more or less slowly up the ladder towards a more complex set of learning orientations. This is seen in part as a function of the course, in that in unit 8 different lenses (ways of seeing strategy) are introduced, providing students with the didactic material that allows them to move into a constructionist orientation. It is also in part due to student managers responding to instructor feedback which generally took the form of:

- Encouraging the student to translate their thoughts into actions, personal to them and relevant to them
- Asking why questions and thereby encouraging them to be reflective
- Suggesting they might experiment in the workplace or classroom with some new way of thinking or acting they talked about

It is also a function of reflective practice being a journey; that it takes practice to be reflective and reflection creates as many questions as it does answers. Indeed a number of students talked of the process as being a journey and one that raised questions:

'While my diary contains many unanswered questions, there are a several key ones....' (KJ)

'I began this essay with the purpose of addressing how strategy can be applied to my current situation, as a soon-to-be MBA graduate with some career decisions to make. I feel now, having almost completed it, that I raised more questions than I answered. But perhaps that's what strategy is all about: not contenting oneself with surface meanings and understandings, probing continually deeper, raising ever more questionable questions. I still don't know for certain what direction my career is headed. I am, however, more accepting of that uncertainty.' (MB)

In this context of unanswered questions though, there are direct signs of an ability to flounder in equivocality. It can be argued that for these students the practice of reflection has led them to develop the capability of floundering productively in equivocality.

Each step from one orientation to the next had its own characteristics. For some getting started on the diary and therefore moving from a behaviourist to any other orientation even if that was showing they had analytical skills in cognitivist mode was difficult. It appeared that for these students the concept of showing an instructor draft work was problematic, for others thinking of something to say was difficult despite starter questions being provided per unit. Even so it was sometimes difficult to get students to answer very open starter questions such as – which analytical tool did you like and why and to move beyond answering in behaviourist style the starter questions to reflect on their own initiative. This point of blockage was seen in students

without experience and students whose cultural background let them to believe professors in a didactic way rather than to engage with them in debate.

For most students moving from working within the cognitivist orientation to either humanist or constructionist, or both, was more difficult. Purely thinking and writing in terms of 'I' rather than in third person analytical mode was difficult. This was especially as 'I' involved self-awareness and stepping back from an analytical cognitivist task to look at 'I' doing the task. Moving to constructionist was difficult as 'we scientists and engineers tend not to think like that.'

'Getting stuck' in some cases involved arriving at the cognitivist orientation and struggling to go beyond it. One case illustrates this well. When asked to think in terms of 'I' and particular actions the student rephrased their cognitivist work in terms of 'I' as follows:

Draft 1

Sustainable advantage and superior performance are difficult to achieve and strategy makes a difference.

Became as follows in Draft 2

Sustainable advantage and superior performance are difficult to achieve and by acting strategically I will make a difference.

Another 'getting stuck' involved using the report to purely analyse emotionally the role of others in making a work situation stressful and unproductive. Feedback to these students tried to persuade them to move on from what was obviously cathartic and therapeutic but which needed to move onwards, but failed.

As regards seeing the data-set not as a whole but as sets representing individual student managers, there was a bell curve of capabilities. If capability is considered to embrace working across all orientations, translating learning into relevant applicable action, personal behavioural changes aimed at making the person a better manager and finally committing to making critical, social, personal and action based reflection practice plausible on an ongoing basis within day to day management.

Within some students there was a tendency, a personal preference even, to emphasise a particular orientation. For example, for some the constructionist orientation was such a revelation, this dominated their reflections. For others, there was a large humanist component as the act of reflection was illuminating or they had a lot to say about the future career choices. This was especially the case with engineers and scientists acknowledging they needed to practice managerial skills and move on from a technical based career.

Learning out of the analytical structure

In some cases data fitted more or less easily in the analytical framework. Table 5 reveals more.

First there is the case of the nature of knowledge according to the student managers when they enter the course in sense-making rather than learning mode. For many there is the expectation that MBA teaching and learning will reduce equivocality, especially through case study analysis which is what social context has led them to believe MBAs are about. One student commented that he wanted more case studies in the course and less reflection. When asked what skills case

work over and above what was done in the class would give him skills wise, he was not so sure. Exceptions to the assumption that students come wanting a reduction in equivocality do exist. For one student there was the fear that she would be expected to reduce everything to a recipe. Others dared to invent their own definitions of strategy, management and reflection.

Second, at the other extreme of the framework it can be argued that a learning orientation is missing. The course teaches the student managers to rebuild a holistic and dynamic picture of companies after they have subjected it to analysis. Within this learning is the request that they draw images of the company which do not contain words nor conventional organograms. This learning to be creative within a complex thinking paradigm suggests that a complex theory learning orientation is perhaps missing. A quote from a student is illustrative (N.B. Unit 10 is the holistic dynamic picture building part of the course):

It might sound like an odd title for reflection on the whole course, but Unit 10 is where it all came together for me. In unit one I looked at the idea that things were all going to crystallize for me at the end of this course as a nice idea, but tearing my concepts of strategy down so I could rebuild them seemed like a bit of a stretch. This is my third strategy course, each, very different. (DH)

Again this orientation is a function of the introduction of didactic material which covered building pictures of organizations which are holistic, complex and dynamic but work has shown that working with complexity theory rather than purely Newtonian thinking expands students' mental models ((Aram & Noble, 1999).

Less obvious differences between the data and framework also were found. Social learning took on more of a critical theory angle with student managers talking not only about the exercise of their self influence on events but also the power of others to use power and their own agendas to influence events. For most the action-learning relationship with the constructionist orientation was around the revelation of the world being socially constructed and the insights that followed rather than an dis-orienting event sparking use of this orientation.

Conclusion

As the business world becomes more complex and hypercompetitive, sustainable and renewable advantage are more reliant on excelling at the more difficult aspects of management. Thus whereas in the past using analytical tools concurred advantage, now that their use is so common, it is how they are used that might confer advantage. Research is turning to discovering how such micro level skills are developed. Simultaneously MBAs and management education are under scrutiny. Integrating reflective practice into MBA pedagogy is thought to help managers deal with moving beyond normative 'best practice' but little empirical research exists to help understand how this happens.

This research uses a framework which is learning *and* sensemaking oriented to discover how student managers learn to be reflective in a way that is action oriented. Evidence is found for each of the learning orientations and how those led to different sensemaking and action. For some students moving into "I" mode when learning is difficult to imagine and hence they resist starting to try. For others, moving beyond the cognitivist mode of 'showing off' their analytical information processing skills is difficult even in simple terms such as stating what they like or

dislike about such tools. Some students get stuck in the humanist mode, where they purely reflect in a cathartic fashion about a current or past employer, never seeing themselves as part of that picture. For others the constructionist orientation is such a revelation this orientation dominates their reflections.

Is the framework sufficient? The framework appears to perhaps lack the orientation of seeing the organization as a complex and dynamic system. If the humanist orientation is seen as where emotions play a part in learning, then the framework misses the consideration of accepting certain knowledge as fact if personal morals, ethics or political values play a part, where the emotions of others are considered and where personal negative emotion versus an employee prohibits the student manager from moving beyond critiquing that employer. As regards sensemaking, students do come to MBAs with the expectation that case studies will be how they learn, but some arrive worrying that this will be the case to the detriment of their desire not to reduce equivocality but to flounder in it. Others as a function of the learning create their own definitions of management, strategy and reflection. As research has shown, it is necessary for the instructor to allow for novel definitions if they are not to self-defeat their own argument of reflection needing to be critical and embrace all possible social constructions. Lastly, not all, indeed not many, explicitly state they will make reflective practice, an activity they do regularly, but some do.

Conducting such micro level research into capabilities is not easy as the qualitative data is messy, difficult to code and contains many 'exceptions', which rather than test the norm might be considered as the norm. That said the research can claim to have shown how reflective practice can be facilitated such that students learn to become better managers through moving beyond an analytical orientation to one that thinks about the role 'I' play and feel and the entitlement of others to construct their own role. Reflective practice need not be too insular an orientation. It can be encouraged in the direction of sense-making. Students can 'rebel' and create their own definitions, can adopt more personally fulfilling career paths and can learn to manage different social constructions. To teach reflective practice is to accept that the instructor cannot be right either.

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TABLE 1 – Comparison of Sensemaking with Adult Learning Orientations by Areas of Cognition (reproduced from Schwandt 2005)

Areas of cognition	Sense-making	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social Learning	Constructionist
Nature of Knowledge and Meaning	Identity construction Reduction of equivocality	Individual needs satisfaction	Needs satisfaction Mental problem solving Information processing	To fulfil the individual's cognitive and affective potential Self-actualization more important than content	Personal efficacy through mastery Skill proficiency	For transformational change About premises and assumptions Within oneself
Action-Learning Relationship	Enactive of sensible environment Ongoing	Reactive Stimulus response	Thought leads to action through projection Action is a source of feedback	Use of individual peak experience for growth Process is self-initiated	Exercise of self influence to bring about results Experimental and observational Relies on social action	More periodic Based on dilemma or disorientating event
Social Context	Test meaning in social environment Focus on cues from environment to trigger	Social events can be stimuli Focus on predetermined stimuli	Environment and others are a source of information Recombining multiple stimuli form the social environment	Learner's need centred Personal growth in society	Reciprocal causation among individual behaviour, environment and personal factors Continuous social process	Requires social interaction Social construction of knowledge
Reflectivity	Retrospective Driven by plausibility	Condition-response Driven by reduction in need	Rational logic applied to information Mental prediction and extrapolation	Self reflective Understanding of oneself Drive by learner need and choice	Driven by learner need and choice	Reflective action Driven by change Critical thinking

TABLE 2 – Problematizing management practice

Unit Subject Area	Issues
An introduction to Strategy?	Validity of assumptions underlying any definition of strategy and strategic management Strategy as differences in performance and if management is that easily taught or learnt then why difference in performance between firms?
Strategy and Technology	Technology created as invented or created as used? Unknown / debated effect of technology on the economy Technology as the source of change
External Environment Analysis	If everyone has access to these tools then why do firms performance differ Why does each analysis of the environment produce different result and does it matter and if do how?
Internal Environment Analysis	How do we know what competencies to develop / renew/ discard? How do we develop unique competencies?
Strategic Choice	Can we make rational choices?
Organizing	How does organizing relate to strategy? What can be organized? How technology shifts industry boundaries and how organizational boundaries are often far from clear Draw a picture of an organization without using words and without using an traditional organogram
People	Knowledge workers as powerful, difficult to motivate and difficult to measure
Strategy as Lenses and Strategic Change	Seeing strategy as design, experience and ideas Strategy as a changing complex system
Building a Holistic Picture	Building complex system and dynamic pictures of organizations
Student Presentations	However good you are – you still need to be able to communicate what you mean and stand for

TABLE 3 – Examples of empirical evidence per area / learning orientation

Areas of cognition	Sense-making	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social Learning	Constructionist
Nature of Knowledge and Meaning	Making sense of learning Learning as a source of definitions that identify the manager Entering MBA conceiving it as helping to deal with complexity through the reduction in equivocality	Acknowledging need for MBA through course attendance	Knowing more and being able to show that know more by using knowledge to analyse and problem solve within classroom and outside of it	Emotional needs fulfilled by learning (to learn) or being emotional about what learning allows person to do that could not do before	Acknowledgement that experience and practice counts Acknowledgement if, and if so how, current skills need changing Seeking career development that will allow skills to be practiced	Acknowledgement that self includes personal premises and assumptions that affect managerial sense making Seeking to change or actually changing
Action-Learning Relationship	Learning as tacit – so we managers do need to take time out to reflect OR Learning comes naturally – no need to learn how to learn (rejection of concept of reflective practice)	Being told to write diary and make it into a reflection report Action of writing a diary / report	Experimenting with knowledge through practice Feeding back experimentation into further learning	Seeing learning as an important personal achievement and source of self-growth Not needing much encouragement to learn	Collecting data from environment before acting Seeing within this data relationships between individual and others as source of learning material Using learning to change how others act	Articulating some tension as source of learning Working through that to come to some action
Social Context	Looking for social cues as to what is valued in a manager in including management development and education	Acknowledging 40% grading as important Seeking direction on what is being asked for Writing what manager thinks instructor wants to hear	Others having an influence on what student considers as knowledge Going beyond linear diaries to seeing themes across diaries when writing report	Seeking organization prepared to allow this type of development or even promote it Seeking organizations with same personal values Personal standing growing as a result to being a more qualified manager	Seeing management as learning because social context always changing Thinking about what is possible and how it is possible given social context	Seeing context as determining own bias and seeing others in environment as having bias
Reflectivity	Not having the time to reflect During day to day sense-making as work so busy. Past-present – future blur into one long string of practice Versus It is plausible to make reflection everyday even if it does not provide neat solutions and answers	Need to reflect because course demands it (40% grading means difficult to pass without handing in report)	Being aware of increased abilities in this area and commenting on them	Understanding of self as a manager Wanting learning to open up choices Seeing learning as empowerment rather than critique of skills	Evidence of desire to improve self-efficacy but within social norms What is therefore acted upon is thought about in terms of likelihood of success given social context	Reflection action bringing about actual change through critical thinking and in terms of social construction dynamics of environment

TABLE 4 – Examples of empirical evidence per area / learning orientation (quotes in normal script)

Areas of cognition	Sense-making	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social Learning	Constructionist
<p>Nature of Knowledge and Meaning</p>	<p>I have to admit that coming to the class, my expectation was that the course will be going over specific strategies in different cases, with follow up discussions. (LD)</p> <p>Now I feel confident that I can not only work on the details, but also be able to contribute to the definition of the scope of strategic plans with a new found tolerance for ambiguity and a greater ability to deal with diversity which will be necessary if I am to become the successful strategic manager I intend to be. (LL)</p> <p>Here is my own definition of reflection. (KJ)</p> <p>It might sound like an odd title for reflection on the whole course, but Unit 10 is where it all came together for me. In unit one I looked at the idea that things were all going to crystallize for me at the end of this course as a nice idea, but tearing my concepts of strategy down so I could rebuild them seemed like a bit of a stretch. This is my third strategy course, each, very different. (DH)</p> <p>Strategizing, as I defined it, was the natural extension of dreaming. As such, I approached this class with a certain measure of trepidation - I worried that I would be compelled to reduce my holistic sensibilities down to minutiae-oriented algorithms.</p> <p>Throughout this, I recognize that true learning only takes place on 'the edge of chaos' - when cognitive dissonance is at its most timorous. So, I'm pushing the edge out, as of that class. I have promised myself that I shall make time to have the freedom to teeter, as I have over the past weeks, again, and therefore expand my</p>	<p>I need business skills to move away from my technical role.</p>	<p>I learned a lot about the Futures industry, as well as the metal and oil industries in China. I believe these industry knowledge is very helpful for my future career. (CM)</p>	<p>Through my reflections in this course I have come to some exciting decisions on how strategy development can enable my own success in whatever I do. (TG)</p> <p>Offshore outsourcing when and how to use? Can I get comfortable with the concept? (JK)</p> <p>Looking forward, I realize that I will likely only be able to lend whatever expertise I have to firms who share my core values. (LB)</p> <p>These events also highlight how strategy can become emotional and personal for people and serves to remind that implementation of strategy ultimately relies on people thus putting structures in place to ensure that workers - especially knowledge workers - are committed to the firm's goals are critical. (IF)</p>	<p>This is yet another reason for me to improve my people skills by conscious efforts such as attending social and business events. (AM)</p> <p>This project gave me more confidence in dealing with people and communicating with them. (NF)</p>	<p>I was 2 hours into your first class when I realized that Doug's (previous instructor) definition is a load of bull, that strategy was what I made of it and the important part was that I made an effort to think "strategically." Now, after a little pondering I realize that Doug definition was right, at least in that particular context. The point is I was supposed to present a strategic analysis to him and I did not know what his definition was, I was basing my approach on my old definition and therefore was killed on the assignment (by that I mean a low mark and a little humility). (DH)</p>

Areas of cognition	Sense-making	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social Learning	Constructionist
	<p>understanding of strategic management.</p> <p>I should start out by stressing that my experience with this course is not akin to an epiphany or revelation. ... In other words, there were a few milestones within the topics covered in this course that helped to format and organize the chaos surrounding 'corporate strategy' that was already present in my mind.(CK)</p>					
Action-Learning Relationship	<p><i>There was no evidence in the reports or diaries of students rebelling against reflective practice as a way of making sense of learning as much as some struggled with the concept</i></p> <p><i>One student did want more case studies</i></p> <p><i>One student did not hand in work for instructor feedback and others had problems handing in draft work / work in progress</i></p> <p><i>Many asked for more information in class about reflective practice</i></p>	<p>All students completed report</p> <p>One student commented – 'people are striving to write what they think you want to hear.'</p>	<p>'The learning in this course has created substantive new ideas, several of which may be new applications of existing principles. Key activities for my first 90 days on the job include understanding the culture and determining the core competencies.'</p> <p>Some questions that management needs to consider: (here learning is still in the third person) (SM)</p>	<p>This is a huge change for me in recognizing this a real difference in how I think about strategy. (KJ)</p> <p>As I look toward the future and reflect on what I have learned from this class, I realize that I cannot and do not want to continue working in such a bureaucratic environment. Why? Because I hold a very different set of values from that of management. I believe in collaboration and education.(MY)</p>	<p>Another technique to achieving a learning style balance is to consider the environment the class, team or organization and examine how others structure their learning, the goal being to provide a basis against which I can assess my learning process.</p>	<p>On a more proactive approach, I also have a better understand of how the usage of the three lenses may lead to better decisions in the company and any other role I may have going forward. In fact, by dedicating more time to strategy on a proactive basis, with buy-in from others, I may be able to create more renewable advantages that can be used to the company's benefit. (CK)</p>
Social Context	<p><i>One student did not hand in work for instructor feedback and others had problems handing in draft work / work in progress</i></p> <p><i>Many asked for more information in class about reflective practice</i></p>	<p>Specifically, it sounds like Jill wants us to reflect on how this course will improve the students as future managers (in the context of strategy). Interesting.....This looks like a diary throughout the course, with a summary paper due at the end. It is also worth a big chunk of the grade 40%. So, this must be extremely important to the instructor. (KJ)</p>	<p>Technology cannot be considered independent of its social and economic context and I need to consider conflicting expectations. (trying to become 'reflective by placing I within a rational logic style sentence)</p> <p>An area that I believe we as an organization are not clear on is understanding what our key competences are. When I return to work I will seek to develop a plan to uncover what these are. (TG)</p> <p>It is more difficult to collect the data from the clients. We thought that it would be easier than this but we were facing with some challenges.(NF)</p>	<p>At the start of this class, I wondered if I am good at strategy and if not is that ok. (DH)</p> <p>This course has also increased my confidence in my ability to perform new business functions at my new post-MBA workplace.(AM)</p>	<p>For example, a manager may be threatened by a realization that the contribution he or she makes to the firm is not a driver of the firm's success and may be motivated to include his or her area of expertise as a core competence even when it is not. Using the broad corporate functions is a politically inclusive approach that may serve to protect some roles by suggesting that everyone is making difference.(IF)</p> <p>I am going to include a slide from the course here that really spoke to me about power. The reason why this diagram spoke to me is that it emphasized the social aspects of decision making which is an "aha" for me.(YJ)</p>	<p>A personal challenge is remembering that differentiation and implementation of strategy can be done in different ways. I need to be open to businesses defining differently how they are going to implement their strategy.</p> <p>When I was first put in a group with three academics (Scott, PhD, Brian PhD candidate, and Laura, MA), I was worried about the potential for imaginative strategic thinking. Especially with Brian, his understanding of business theory made it difficult for me to understand his point of view; I couldn't imagine him communicating</p>

Areas of cognition	Sense-making	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social Learning	Constructionist
						<p>with business people in the real world. The concept of “MBA speak” represents a drop in the bucket compared to his theory base but working with the academics taught me a few things.(DH)</p> <p>In my opinion, the array of personalities in our group helped balance my biases; the result was useful recommendations. Such is as it should be. (LB)</p>
Reflectivity	<p>These questions address the fact that my continual reflection and resulting improvement will not stop when the journal is completed, nor when I have the chance to implement my ideas and beliefs. This is truly part of a career long process, of which BUS752 was part of the journey.</p> <p>One tool that I have to support continuous growth is to improve my reflecting process. Presently, I write to a journal daily with special weekly entries every Sunday that look both forwards and backwards in time. The reflection process practised in this course has gone substantially beyond this “diary process” it’s made a transition from simply recording to enhancing performance.(JY)</p>	All students completed report	<p>I previous had not thought of explicitly considering what is resisting change (part of the forcefield analysis).</p> <p>I can use this (stakeholder analysis) to improve my own business skills and influence my handling of internal issues.(TG)</p> <p>It is mind boggling how much information there is around us, and how many choices we can make. Yet, it is often just one or few choices that are “right” at any given moment.</p> <p>I am still concerned that our case studies aren’t telling the whole picture that just because company ‘A’ followed strategy ‘S’ and succeeded doesn’t necessarily mean it was a good strategy we are ignoring the influence of luck and serendipity on the outcome.</p> <p>I don’t think I’ll ever be the guy who fills out two by two grids for my own thought processes, or for that matter kill me if I have to fill these out with other peoples perceptions.(DH)</p>	<p>I have an answer to my earlier question. I am good at strategy.(DH)</p> <p>. These reflections are a milestone in terms of thinking about myself and my future.</p> <p>As we end the course I fully intend for strategy to continue to play a major, in fact increasing, role in my career. I can see many applications of the learning to my job in HR but I am also attracted by the idea of taking the knowledge gained from the MBA, combining it with my HR experience and back-ground in high-tech and applying the package in a more externally focused way to other parts of the value chain as opposed to returning to my former role which was very inwardly focused on the organization.(IF)</p> <p>I became startlingly aware of how my feelings about a company’s value system affect my ability to think strategically on their behalf. While I do not wish to change this aspect of my persona, I am pleased to recognize it, as I shall be able to target firms for whom and teams within which I will naturally do my best work - firms which share my values, and teams made up of people unlike me. (LB)</p>	My technical background combined with a hands-on style of learning has predisposed me towards an analytical way of thinking, which in turn, has shaped the way I grasp new concepts. Strategy is no exception (JZ)	Simply put, what concepts am I likely to understand and likely to miss due to the way I think? (JZ)

TABLE 5 – Evidence that pushes the limits of the analytical framework

Areas of cognition	Sense-making	Behaviourist	Cognitivist	Humanist	Social Learning	Constructionist
Nature of Knowledge and Meaning	Whilst student managers identify with 'management' as reducing equivocality (through case study analysis) there are many other starting points for making sense of learning including <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - not reducing equivocality - defining management, strategy, reflection in their own terms - ordering the chaos of how to manage in the minds of experienced managers - moving away from a technical role 	Class attendance good	Appreciation that knowing more is good Some frustration with conventional analysis leading to little that is helpful not as much written as was said verbally in class!	Whilst there was material about self-actualization, there was material about <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - whether a view point could be considered as morally acceptable - how the emotions of others had meaning - report entirely dominated by venting emotional frustrations around current employer (GB) 	Examples of practicing analytical skills but also practicing dealing with people in a leadership and client capacity – so soft skills mastery and confidence important	As per framework
Action-Learning Relationship	General acceptance by student managers of role of reflective practice	Single case of explicitly stating that instructor must value reflection given grade	Actions were often personal but for some students thinking in terms of action THEY could take was very difficult. This was a sticking point.	Less use of peak experiences much more about doubt around personal abilities	????	Based on new knowledge that social constructionism exist rather than a dis-orientating event
Social Context	Students did within class ask for clarification of what reflective practice was No student rebelled openly about instructor feedback	All students completed report but there was a reported element of the students not understanding the need for the report to be theirs – that what was considered as valuable by the instructor was what is valuable to the student manager	Rarely were other people seen as sources of analysis more data driven A revelation for some that tools could be combined and made dynamic in time	Little on this – despite the typical MBA student being arrogant – very little about personal growth	If anything is here it is in Critical Theory mode – perhaps this is what this orientation is really?	A lot of awareness and experimentation with new found manager as philosopher status
Reflectivity	Plausible to reflect on an ongoing basis within work and tie to action in the future	All students completed report	A good deal of reflection but only in those students able to think in terms of I	Lots of good stuff but not in nearly all students	A lot of this especially in those that took humanist approaches throughout report	Not really critical reflection this was coded as humanist – here saw lots of positive reflection around how could become a better manager for the revelation that this orientation brought