Let me tell you a story: an evaluation of the use of storytelling and argument analysis in management education

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Keywords
Management education, Stories, Experiential learning, Narratives

Abstract
Social constructionist perspectives are becoming increasingly influential in organisational and management studies. Evaluates an experientially based personal development module on a management diploma that was re-designed according to social constructionist ideas about learning and managerial activity. In particular, the paper assesses whether storytelling and argument analysis are viable elements in experientially based teaching, and considers how they mediate the processes of learning and action. It is concluded that storytelling and argument analysis are viable techniques, that they facilitate multiple perspective taking and negotiation and help in the creation of intelligible solutions in joint action with others. While accepting that there are a number of difficulties with the approach, we suggest that it provides management educators with another method of experiential learning, and that it is particularly appropriate to those wishing to encourage managers to explore and develop social constructionist perspectives in a practical and action orientated way.

Career Development International
6/7 [2001] 384–395

[ISSN 1362-0436]

Introduction

For a number of years, Leeds Business School (LBS) has included personal development modules as an integral element of the courses it offers. Primarily based on Kolb's experiential learning cycle and problem management cycle, the modules have been structured to encourage reflection on particular problems at work, experimentation with new actions, and the development of skills and abilities (Kolb, 1982; Gold, 1991). This process was aided by the use of diaries and learning logs, the assessment of learning styles and action planning (Honey and Mumford, 1992). Over the years the modules have had many benefits, such as enabling managers to build a complex picture of their reality and the problems they face, the development of new skills, a recognition of the need to be both active and reflective, concrete and abstract, and a growing confidence in oneself. However, the foundational use of Kolb's learning cycle has not met with universal approval by all managers. For example, not all managers could validate the assessment of their learning style as provided by the Learning Styles Inventory, and some managers resented the pigeonholing effect of being categorised reflective, active, abstract or concrete. This fact, combined with the programme leader's developing interest in social constructionist perspectives on management and management learning, prompted reflection about the nature of the management development modules on offer. An outcome of this reflection was to modify the personal development module on one course, the Advanced Professional Diploma in Management Development, so that it addressed the issues raised by these perspectives. In short, the module was changed to emphasise the role of storytelling and argument analysis in the learning process and the role of narrative and argumentation in managerial activity.

The main aim of this paper is to evaluate the redesigned module and in particular assess the viability of storytelling and argument analysis. This paper does not, therefore, seek to show the "superiority" of this approach to other forms of experientially based teaching practices. The paper starts by examining how different assumptions about the nature of management and the nature of learning give rise to different forms of teaching practice in management education. This demonstrates the reasoning behind the design of the original module and the social constructionist influences behind its re-design. This is followed by a description of the redesigned module. The methodology used to evaluate the module is then outlined. The last section reports on the findings of that evaluation, discusses the lessons learned and finishes by making recommendations about how the module might be developed further in the future.

Management work, learning and education

It seems trite to say it, but a core theme in the theory and practice of management education[1] has been the creation of teaching practices that develop learning processes and outcomes which are useful to the way managers work, or should ideally work. What is less commonplace, is reflection on how different assumptions about the nature of managerial work, and assumptions regarding the ideal process of learning, give rise to different forms of teaching practice. This section examines how various combinations of "technicist" and "practice"

perspectives on managerial work, and "academic" and "experiential" approaches to education, have given rise to different forms of teaching practices in management education. By doing this, it is hoped to illuminate the reasoning behind the design of the original module, and why it was changed[2].

"Academic" approaches to education assert that the ideal process of learning is the active acquisition of theoretical knowledge, the acquisition of skills that enable the critique of such knowledge, and the ability to take action based on this knowledge (Barnett, 1990). When this view of learning is combined with a "technicist" view of management (as a rational, scientific and morally neutral activity in which managers achieve their aims by applying objective knowledge and scientific techniques to a fairly concrete reality), then management education is thought to ideally involve the active acquisition of objective and scientifically verified knowledge (which is subject to rational logic, empirical test, and integrated with experience and reason) and scientific forms of analysis and action, such as rational problem solving, decision making and planning. Given this it is easy to see why the ideal image of the manager is a management scientist. Teaching methods should therefore be structured to facilitate the transmission of knowledge (e.g. lectures), the ability to critique such knowledge (e.g. seminars, case studies, essays) and to enable the student to model the application of scientific forms of analysis (e.g. case studies, quasi-experimentation, hypothesis testing). One can label this an academic/technicist approach to management education.

The academic/technicist approach to management education has been heavily criticised. Pedagogically, it is often seen by managers and academics to be too theoretical, as having little practical relevance, and not particularly useful at developing a manager's ability to deal with problems (Revans, 1971; Willmott, 1997). The proposed "open and critical dialogue" is often experienced by students as a monologue, and the encounter with knowledge more passive than active (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). Technicist perspectives of management are criticised for presenting an image of managerial work at odds with how it is or could ever be. Studies of managerial work point to the fact that it is more akin to a pragmatic, fast paced and *ad hoc* process in which a key task is to make sense of, and take action in, a dilemmatic, contested, ambiguous and indeterminate world using an assortment of interpersonal, conceptual, moral and technical resources (Reed, 1989). These studies also stress the social and cultural context-dependent nature of management and the importance of the subjectivity and identity of the manager. This alternative understanding of management can be labelled a practice perspective (Reed, 1989).

In experiential approaches, education is thought to be more useful and meaningful if learning is grounded in the experiences of the person and involves learning through doing. Learning in this way, it is suggested, is more akin to how people learn "naturally" in their everyday lives (Burgoyne and Hodgson, 1983). However, unlike much everyday learning, experiential approaches do not ignore formal/theoretical knowledge nor promote unreflective attitudes (Holman, 1996). Rather, learning is thought ideally to be a process involving the use and analysis of experiential and theoretical knowledge in various forms of reflection, (re)conceptualisation and action (Weil and McGill, 1989). As experiential approaches are grounded in the experience, subjectivity and context of the learner, they are often assumed to be commensurate with a practice perspective of management; and within management education, experiential approaches to education have become closely associated with a practice perspective of management. Thus, an experiential/practice approach to management education suggests that learning forms an important element in the sense-making and action-taking processes of management. Grounded in the experience and multifaceted context of the manager, reflection, re-conceptualisation and action become means with which to solve problems and clarify ambiguities, and develop personal skills and abilities. Teaching practices should therefore concentrate on:

- Developing an awareness of the different aspects of learning and how a manager learns, for example, through discussion of different models of learning or an analysis of learning styles (Honey and Mumford, 1992).
- Developing an awareness of the multifaceted nature of the managers' experiences and present context through reflection, re-conceptualisation and action. For example, most theories of experiential learning in management education argue that managers should be encouraged to reflect on their own experience from different perspectives (Kolb, 1984). Methods for achieving this include group discussion, learning logs, learning contracts, diaries and self-assessment methods.

- Attending to a real problem faced and attempting to solve it (e.g. action learning, Pedler, 1991).
- Self-development, where managers direct their own development rather than relying on the leadership of "expert" trainers (Pedler, 1988).

Studies that have reported on and evaluated the use of experiential learning tend to support the arguments made by experiential/practice approaches, demonstrating that experiential pedagogies are generally preferred by managers, build on the way in which managers learn at work, and prove relatively more effective at developing managers than academic pedagogies (Cox and Beck, 1984; Davis and Easterby-Smith, 1984; Weil and McGill, 1989; Candy, 1991).

The relative success of experiential/practice approaches, and a belief in their basic premises, were the primary reasons for basing the management development modules at LBS on an experiential/practice approach. Like many other experientially based management development programmes, Kolb's theory of experiential learning, particularly the idea of the learning cycle, was chosen as main basis of the module at LBS (Kolb, 1984)[3]. In line with this, teaching practices on the management development module involved managers assessing their learning preferences by completing the learning style inventory and relating these, via a problem management model, to a current problem (Honey and Mumford, 1992; Kolb, 1982). Managers were then encouraged to see how learning preferences might be contributing towards experienced ineffectiveness. Also used at the start of the module were learning logs and diaries, the aim of these being to facilitate reflection on experience. After this period of assessment and reflection, an action plan was constructed that focused on addressing a problematic issue and areas for self-development (Gold, 1996). However, it must be noted that Kolb's model of learning was not followed exactly. In particular, learning was not necessarily seen as ideally occurring in discrete stages, but, drawing on the idea of reflection-in-action, managers were encouraged to understand learning as a process which involved concentrating on reflection, re-conceptualisation and action at different times (Schön, 1983). Overall, the theoretical base of the original module at Leeds was derived from Kolb's learning cycle, but tempered by Schön's conception of reflection-in-action.

The management development module was originally designed seven to eight years ago, and in that time the module leader (Jeff Gold) became interested in social constructionist approaches to organisations, management and management learning (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1993; Shotter, 1993; Holman *et al.*, 1997; Boje, 1994). This reading prompted a greater awareness of the important constituting role of discursive practices in management activity and learning processes, a deeper critique of the existing theoretical basis of the management development module, and a desire to change the module to take into account these new understandings. Before the redesigned module is described, it is thought necessary to outline the major influences on this change in awareness.

Social constructionist influences on the module redesign

In total there were three major influences that prompted a reflection on the nature of the management development module. These influences also informed the redesign of that module. They are:

1 *The nature of reality in organisations and the implications for managerial practice.* Social constructionist perspectives draw attention to the manner in which reality is vague, partially specified, and open to further specification as a result of communicative activity (Shotter, 1993). Meanings are therefore developed through discursive activity in joint action with others, becoming accepted but localised versions of reality (Burr, 1995). Within organisations this implies that, due to the different perspectives and interests of the various organisational communities, organisational members can be faced with a "chaotic welter of impressions". For managers, this suggests that a key skill lies in reading these different meanings in order to form a critical evaluation of the situation at hand. While this skill is undoubtedly advantageous, management is not simply about reading a situation from different perspectives, as multiple readings may simply add to the welter of impressions. So how can managers proceed when faced with a bewildering array of claims about their reality? One solution is to ignore different meanings and be dictated to by the certainty of one's knowledge; although the extent to which such an approach is sustainable is questionable (Gergen, 1995). Alternatively the manager can try, in joint action with others, to generate intelligible and more determinate formulations of the vague and ambiguous

feelings that might surround contested issues and objects in the organisation. An important element in this process would involve an active reframing of the complexities and dilemmas faced into a landscape of enabling-constraints relevant for a range of next possible actions, and a the creation of a persuasive argument for this landscape amongst those who must work in it (Giddens, 1979; Shotter, 1993). In this way, it is suggested that managers must be *authors*, albeit practical ones, and the image of the manager is of a *practical author*. This perspective also emphasises that sense making cannot be achieved by the manager alone. Rather, the creation of new meanings and landscapes are not imposed but developed jointly. The social constructionist perspective thus extends the practice perspective to include the idea that the process of management is an inherently social activity, and ideally based on building relationships of trust and shared obligation (Watson, 1994).

2 *Learning and language use.* Social constructionist perspectives on learning assert that the way in which people interact with others, mainly through dialogue and conversation, is the primary medium through which higher order learning takes place, and it is the way in which we converse with others and ourselves that has an important influence on what and how we learn (Vygotsky, 1978). Allied to a practice perspective of management, the focus of management education becomes centred on practical language use in joint action with others.

With the emphasis in management education on language use, attention becomes focused on the types of discursive activity that managers might use in reflection, re-conceptualisation and action, both intra- and interpersonally. At a general level, discourse can be understood as having narrative and non-narrative forms (Georgakopoulou and Goutsos, 1997; Weick and Browning, 1986). Narratives are concerned with the temporal ordering of ideas and as such tend to focus on the sequential patterning of events and the role of actors in them. Narratives are seen to be useful as they are a powerful means with which to explore and understand one's values, ideas and norms. Narratives also enable the person to build a picture of complex social situations and explore the different actions of the various actors in that story. To date, we are aware of only a few studies that have reported the use of narrative in management education. For example Barry (1997) examined a narrative approach to effect change in a health-care organisation and Morgan and Dennehy (1997) used story-telling as a technique in training managers to learn more about their organisation and understand its culture. Non-narratives are more concerned with non-temporal patterns such as the relationships among propositions, e.g. arguments, descriptions and evaluations[4]. We were particularly interested in the ideational and interpersonal (Halliday, 1985) use of arguments in management education as suggested by Holman *et al.* (1997). It was thought that an analysis of arguments could enable managers to critically reflect on taken-for-granted versions of reality and the interests and ideas that they and others promote (e.g. those contained in their stories), open a space for alternative arguments, and make a persuasive case for each alternative considered (Wenzel, 1990; Landry, 1995).

3 *Critiques of Kolb's experiential learning theory*. With regard to social constructionist perspectives on management learning, the main source of critique came from a critical analysis of Kolb's experiential learning theory (Holman *et al.*, 1997). There are a number of elements to this critique. First, apart from the fact that Kolb splits up learning into stages that may not reflect how people learn, the stages and order of the learning cycle bear a strong resemblance to scientific modes of enquiry (e.g. the manager observes what has happened, deduces or induces theory from the observations and then tests them). Furthermore, Kolb argues that the learner can proceed through these stages like a "practical scientist", an image which is at odds with how many managers see themselves (Pavlica, 1996). Kolb's theory may not be so dissimilar from other positivist and technicist perspectives in management and management education, and be at odds with a practice perspective of management. Second, Kolb's account is too individualistic and pays too much attention to learning as an internal process. The individual is portrayed as a kind of "intellectual Robinson Crusoe", cast away and isolated from his/her fellow beings. Alternatively, it can be argued that social processes are involved in every aspect of learning. For example, reflection can clearly be both internal (e.g. thinking to oneself) as well as external (e.g. discussion and argument with others). It is also interesting to note that Schön is

also fairly individualistic, as reflection is still seen to be primarily an internal cognitive act done in the head.

In summary, these new insights led to the module being refocused on how managers use language, particularly in its narrative and non-narrative forms, how language is used to create joint action with others, and a movement towards a more social theory of experiential learning.

Description of the redesigned module

The module is part of LMU's Short Course Accreditation Scheme leading to an Advanced Professional Diploma in Management Development. Designed to run over six months, the course is divided into three phases: diagnostic, learning activities and project. This paper examines the first phase, the diagnostic phase where managers undertake a module of manager learning to examine their actions within their work context. The revised first phase of the programme covers a period of five weeks and is broken into three stages as follows:

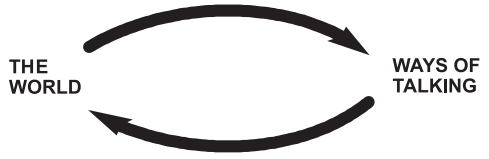
1 *Stage 1 – full day at LBS*. After a brief overview of the course stage 1 starts with managers being asked to identify a work problem currently faced involving themselves and others. They are then asked to provide a written narrative account of this problem. Once managers have provided a narrative account, the following four questions are posed:
   - Can you explain why events have happened in the way they did?
   - What insights have you gained about yourself and others? What questions remain?
   - What were you arguing for in the story?
   - What have you learnt from the story about yourself, the situation and the organisation?

   Managers then presented their stories to each other in small groups. With gentle encouragement from the tutor it was hoped that the discussion generated by this process would:
   - Help managers make sense of their workplace reality by probing more deeply into the meanings they give to this reality and illuminate how those meanings might be contested and/or problematic.
   - Heighten their awareness of the way their talk reveals particular preferences, value orientations and the arguments for them.
   - Demonstrate the way in which managers are often expected by others to find solutions, "intelligible formulations", and a way of talking that can make a difference; that these intelligible formulations have to be presented and justified to others, and how a manager needs to take joint action with others, i.e. the idea of a manager as a practical author.

   A further aim was to show how managers' actions and practices may reinforce their view of reality, and that they may not have to accept or reinforce their version of the problem as it currently stands. We present Shotter's interdependency cycle (see Figure 1) to show managers the interdependency between their ways of talking and their social reality.

   It was thought that the model would provide managers with a heuristic device, similar to the utilisation of Kolb's learning and problem management cycles, but giving managers much more discretion and flexibility in how they approach the next stage of working out how they might talk and act in a way that matches their social and cultural context.
2 *Stage 2 – five weeks at work*. Managers return to work and are asked to continue to collect written stories and the analysis of them. Storytelling logs, an adaptation of Honey and Mumford's (1992) learning logs, provide both the means and a record of the consequences of a manager's attempts to preserve or change their practice.
3 *Stage 3 – half-day at LBS*. Managers return to LBS to complete a review of the programme so far. We begin by asking managers to place their stories and analyses on a single page chart and examine the way some arguments overlap but also how others occur in particular situations. The chart serves as a record of their awareness and attempts to create agreed actions with others. It also provides an opportunity to consider future arguments and possibilities for action. Managers then discuss their findings with tutors and each other

Figure 1
Shotter's model of interdependency



before, exploring similar issues as outlined in stage 1, They are then required to write a 2,000-word report for assessment.

Summary

Given that this new module was new and innovative, to the tutors at least, the module leader was concerned with evaluating the module. It was hoped that an evaluation of the module would illuminate the following areas:

- The general reactions of managers to the module.
- Was the use of narrative and argument analysis a viable form of teaching practice in management education?
- How did storytelling and the analysis of argument mediate the learning process and forms of action taken?

Methodology

The methodological approach taken was interpretivist, the general aim being to understand and thematise the experiences and actions of the students in relation to the module (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 1991; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). Data were collected from all 53 students on the 1997/1998 module. These data mainly took the form of the written material required by the module and included managers' storytelling logs, charts (where access was permitted), and their reflections and analyses of them. Manager reactions to the module, both in classroom discussions and individually with tutors, were also recorded. The students came from a range of organisations and contexts including a software house, a social services department of a local authority, a careers service, an engineering company and various SMEs in Yorkshire. Analysis was stopped after reading the accounts of 30 students, as it was felt that, at this point, the themes generated were saturated (i.e. that further analysis would not add further understanding). A reading of the data from the remaining 23 confirmed this. Analysis of the data was based on grounded theory, in which themes are generated from the data in a bottom-up manner (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). However, we recognised that all analysis and interpretation is guided by particular perspectives, frameworks and questions. We therefore chose to frame the analysis according to our concerns as outlined in the summary above, and explore the themes within those issues. The process of generating themes was iterative and, although analysis mainly took place alone, the authors did discuss the themes they had generated with each other throughout the process of analysis. Checking each other's interpretations enabled a degree of confidence to be maintained about the reliability of the themes generated.

Findings

This section discusses the managers' experiences of the redesigned module. It first examines the general reactions of the managers to the module and then looks in more depth at whether managers found the narrative and argumentative approach useful, and how telling stories and analysing arguments mediated the learning process and forms of action taken.

At a general level, managers' reactions to the module were positive. While there was some initial concern about the direction of the module and what was required, managers quickly became comfortable with the use of narrative and argumentation, the presentation of social constructionist ideas and the requirements of the course.

From the managers' reports it was quite clear that the use of narrative helped managers to develop rich and complex descriptions of their experiences at work. The storytelling process clearly facilitated reflection, as evidenced by the authors" comments on particular acts or events as their stories unfolded. The analysis of arguments also encouraged reflection on, and the clarification of, the manager's own position (e.g. What am I arguing for? What is my position?) and the relationship of this to others' arguments and positions (e.g. What is the opinion of my manager?). One outcome of this was that managers had, at the very least, to consider two positions. In some instances, when the position of the other had not been explicitly stated, the manager often had to invent or attribute an argument to the other (cf. Bonaiuto and Fasulo, 1997). Interwoven within managers' stories and descriptions of the problematic differences between their and others' positions were accounts of how they attempted to develop some form of intelligible solution, mutual agreement or common ground with others. What was interesting in these accounts was the role and importance of negotiation, and the differences in the way that these negotiations were conducted. Thus, some managers sought to build consensus through compromise, while others sought to persuade others of the validity of their position (normally by trying to "win" an argument). Overall then, the use of storytelling and the

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analysis of arguments appeared to highlight and promote two forms of activity, multiple perspective taking and negotiation. This process can be seen in the account given by Martyn.

Martyn's story

Martyn is a young manager in a SME engineering company. Recently employed to complete a marketing project, Martyn was becoming increasingly frustrated at his slow progress. It seemed to him that "work was taking twice as long to complete". The MD seemed to block him because "he required things to be done in a certain way" and he regarded Martyn as "too academic" and his proposals not sufficiently "real world". The following shows how Martyn began to obtain mutual agreement for action with his MD:

> It was becoming clear to me that both the MD and myself had strong opinions about how things should be done, and that I had to consider both our opinions when making proposals to him. I was asked to help resolve the problem relating to the amount of redundant tooling we had in stock by ringing old customers and asking what they wanted. However, they were reluctant to make any decisions and the process began to drag on. I was coming under pressure from the MD for answers but I knew I could not supply these and I felt that this problem was outside my remit. I decided to argue for a change of direction; set a definite cut-off date for a decision from the customers and inform them all by fax rather than waste time by calling them individually. I was able to get what I wanted by making sure I considered the MD's goals and getting a mutually agreed way forward.

This quote demonstrates that Martyn needed to consider the position of his MD and to negotiate with him (or argue with him in this case) in order to develop an intelligible solution. It proved to be a crucial turning point in his understanding of his reality. When reflecting on what he had learned Martyn states that:

> I had learned to consider the goals of the MD and anyone else involved rather than just my own and to suggest an alternative that would better achieve them.

And:

> Winning agreement requires that I see the problem from "the hill top" of the other person and allow them to gain something in any agreed shift in the situation, even if this involves a minor concession on my part.

Martyn's story can be seen as a good example of the role of perspective taking and negotiation in the creation of intelligible solutions. However, it does not illustrate other important themes that emerged from the accounts managers gave. Katy's story is used to exemplify how perspective taking and negotiation were used to develop intelligible solutions and areas of mutual agreement between different communities within an organisation, and not just between individuals as illustrated in Martyn's story. John's story examines how identity was reconstructed in context and Graham's story is used to illustrate a number of themes, namely, the role of identity in the learning process; the dilemmatic nature of many of the problems faced, and the moral issues involved in these dilemmas.

Katy's story

Katy is the team manager of a group of professionally qualified social workers in the social services department of a local authority. Katy perceives that her senior managers make decisions "without being aware of operational issues". As a consequence, she has to "cope with the many conflicts between senior manager expectations and team member interests". Katy thus finds herself as being "stuck" between two different communities, across whose boundaries she must cross daily. The following extract shows the competing claims, the dilemma she is presented with, and her efforts at reconciling it.

> The team has problems meeting targets set and as the team manager there is a constant need to highlight to senior management the reasons for not meeting such targets. I have highlighted to management how targets are set according to incorrect information. I have also encouraged the team to try and gather more accurate information. My line manager accepts that if more accurate information has been gathered then this will be taken into to account. The use of objective statistical information with valid sources clearly represents a strong case for any argument. In this case, it was important to show how much effort was being put into trying to meet the targets. As a team manager, I represented the positive work staff had been involved with despite a non achievement of targets. I felt it was important to point out the structural problems of meeting targets ... and as a team manager I felt it was my role to represent the team's views on this. Suggestions were made by senior managers as to how these targets could be met. I was able to persuade them that these suggestions may improve our performance and was able to look at how in practical terms we could implement the suggestions.

While storytelling helped Katy understand her experiences, the focus on argument also enabled Katy to look for the backing to her claim that senior management set targets based on incorrect information. Indeed later Katy states that

> I have appreciated how to get my manager to listen to and do something about a problem. The use of statistical quantifiable information has strengthened the case for my arguments.

In her rhetorical performances with senior management Katy can also be seen as drawing upon an "ideology of objectivity" to justify her claims to herself, senior management and her team (Gergen, 1994). In this context the "ideology of objectivity" can be seen as a "boundary object", a collective representation that mediates interaction between different communities (Star, 1989). Thus, for Katy, the "ideology of objectivity" enables her to talk to and negotiate with both communities and move towards some form of reconciliation of their differences. Engestrom *et al.* (1995) point out that identifying arguments can provide a useful means with which to generate boundary objects.

John's story

John is a project manager in a small but growing professional partnership for which he is developing a marketing strategy. As a recent university graduate, he was facing a difficulty of establishing his expertise with the partners and more established staff, who seemed to refuse to acknowledge this aspect of his valued identity.

> I have obtained a degree in marketing through my study at university. I have also held a marketing position in a construction company. I reached the levels the university set and therefore this is proof for the statement that I have more knowledge of marketing than anyone else in the organisation. Other employees do not have qualifications in marketing and have not held marketing positions.
>
> When I arrived at the partnership, JB was already promoting the services of our sister company. The partners felt he needed guidance so I developed a course of action for him to follow. He is older than me so I felt it prudent to make it seem like a discussion, not just telling him what to do. This was successful and I feel he gained confidence from the fact that someone supported him and could give advice.
>
> I argue that I can share my knowledge. I tried to be diplomatic because I am younger than those I am advising and conscious that they may be offended if I try to make them feel inadequate. They may also be less responsive to my advice.
>
> It may appear that I have an inflated opinion of myself and my marketing knowledge. In reality, I am at the beginning of my career and others have far more knowledge of how to work and get results in a business situation.

Since the module used storytelling as a means of sense-making and critique, this inevitably allowed some managers to relate important parts of past life to present activities and experience. In this case, John, like many other graduates before him, is attempting to reconcile his past success at university with the demands of the present and construct a revised and reformed identity. The process of telling the story about events changes John's identity before his very eyes (Widdershoven, 1993). He is no longer just a graduate expert in marketing with the necessary qualifications which no one else has; he is also seeking to become a key player in the business with a career to match. It is also important how storytelling and the narrative mode of thought (Bruner, 1986) provide John with the resources to contextualise and temporalise his identity within the partnership and in relationship with others. It is through his conversations with others at work that John makes the self that he now sees himself to be. He is aware that he can no longer work with the abstract and decontextualised identity of an expert in marketing based on his university degree. To do so would potentially invoke a negative response and positioning (Davies and Harré, 1990) from those that he needs to make his emerging identity viable.

Graham's story

Graham is a group leader in a public service organisation. We learn that in a "previous set-up" he had a managerial position with considerable "influence and scope for action". However, after a reorganisation, he not only feels that his job as group leader has a lower status, which he is resentful about, but he questions whether the job is managerial at all. "Are we real managers?" he asks. He also feels angry that Alison, who was previously his subordinate, is now his manager. It is important to add that other group leaders in the company also reported resentment towards Alison and her "authoritarian" style of management. Given this background we will now let Graham describe his problem and how he dealt with it.

> The incident concerned my attempt to get resources by bypassing my line manager, Alison. I made a direct approach to the resources manager who recognised my legitimate concern to provide a team member with the "tools" to do his job. Alison would not have seen such a request in this light and would have used it as an opportunity to exercise irrational power. By going round her to someone more senior I incurred her disapproval but the result was that I got part of what I wanted. It may be that Stuart, the resources manager, got some enjoyment from undermining Alison's authority in which case he would be predisposed to assist me in

> such a direct request. As the stratagem was successful I need to consider using it again in other guises. The dilemma it presents is that each such incident will further undermine trust between us and the relationship could deteriorate badly. On the other hand, I should not collude with Alison in her irresponsible use of power. Perhaps the relationship needs to deteriorate in order for the issue to come to the attention of senior managers.

This example shows how Graham, in trying to develop an intelligible solution to his problem, bypasses the "legitimate" pathway to his line manager, and attempts to develop a mutual agreement with another manager. By doing so he makes a move into a "zone of indeterminacy" (Shotter, 1993), which, as he is aware, could have unintended and unpredictable outcomes. Despite this uncertainty, Graham considers that the success of this approach is worth trying again "in other guises", and that he has handled the problem in a

> more determined (and yet subtle) way, which involved identifying where the power lay and attempting to win allies to strengthen my hand in negotiations.

In learning this about himself, he reflects on the fact that in the future:

> Perhaps I need to be more strategic (or more devious) and to sideline my emotional response (e.g. frustration) and regard the problem as a challenge.

Yet, for Graham this future is problematic as it conflicts with his own sense of what is morally right – he has previously stated that he places a "high value on honesty and straightforward dealings" and on a basic level of trust between individuals. The moral problem he faces might be why he questions whether he wants to:

> develop into a highly political animal as the price to be paid for getting benefits for my group and seeking improvements?

Graham clearly is uneasy about becoming "devious" and "political", and ends his account by suggesting an alternative way forward, the development of joint action with other group leaders:

> Perhaps group leaders need to be more assertive about pushing back the boundaries and insisting that Alison adopt a … hands-off style of management.

Such an action, Graham concludes, would enable them to become more like "real managers". This aim, to become a "real manager", is clearly connected to the ambiguity he feels about his present role and the doubts about whether he really is a manager. Accordingly, this alternative way forward appears preferable to Graham, enabling him to reaffirm his identity as a manager and avoid having to become "devious" or overtly "political". Thus, in addition to being a story about the dilemmas faced by a manager and the moral implications of them, Graham's story can also be seen as a fairly long internal argument in which he is debating, analysing and constructing his identity as a manager.

So far a generally positive picture has been presented. However, one possibly negative element was present in a number of managers' accounts, namely an equation of the term argument with objectivity (see Katy's story) and the suppression of emotion (see Graham's story). While these understandings of argument as a purely rational and logical activity may be a feature of managers' discourse more generally, such understandings are at odds with the way in which argument was construed by the course developers, i.e. as a rhetorical and relational activity. The emphasis on rationality, objectivity and the suppression of emotion also resonates with the technicist and scientific understandings of managerial activity that we criticised earlier, and an image of management that the course was trying to move away from.

Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to evaluate the viability of an experientially based personal development module which was primarily based on the use of storytelling and argument analysis but also included learning logs, group discussion and some social constructionist theory.

From the findings outlined above it can be seen that there was a generally positive reaction and, like other experientially based teaching methods, this method had the following benefits in that it:

- situated learning in the context of the manager;
- enabled managers to address and solve a problem of their choice;
- facilitated reflection;
- promoted self-awareness and an understanding of others;
- encouraged new types of activity, and;
- promoted self-development.

From this it can be concluded that storytelling and argument analysis are viable techniques within experientially based teaching methods.

Another initial concern was how storytelling and argument analysis might mediate the learning process of managers. From the evidence presented it would appear that storytelling and argument analysis seem

to emphasise and encourage multiple perspective taking and negotiation in the creation of intelligible solutions. This process appears to highlight to managers that much of the responsibility for moving forward lies with their ability to make shared meanings with others that are "hammered out on the forge of daily relationships" (Gergen, 1989). Martyn, John and Graham's stories showed this process taking place between two individuals, Katy's between two communities, and Graham's story illustrated this process taking place at an intra- and interpersonal level. It can be suggested that there are indications that the managers on the course were starting to understand their activity as a social process of creating joint action with others, and that they were moving away from individualistic understandings of action. Another way in which the use of narrative and argument mediated the learning process was the way which it brought to the fore the moral issues being faced by managers. This is possibly a result of the fact that stories are often saturated with value and how considering arguments highlights the value positions of the actors in those stories. A further consequence of "moral dilemmas" being raised is that managers quickly consider their own identity, i.e. who they are, who they want to become and who they are becoming.

While there were many benefits to the course and indications that managers were trying to consider their actions in accordance with social constructionist ideas, there were also, for us, a number of disappointments which provide us with areas for further work. First, many managers emphasised rationality, objectivity and the need to suppress emotion (Fineman, 1997). Managers were still thinking about their actions according to scientific and technicist models, although there was little evidence that they considered themselves to be scientists. A conclusion from this is that the module, or other modules on the course, should be much more explicit about different models of managerial action and the problems with them. The managers on the module might also have benefited from a discussion of the different types of argument and the nature of rhetoric. Such a discussion might have prevented managers from so readily equating argument with objectivity and dry, passionless analytical inquiry. One possible way of helping managers explore values more explicitly is to move towards the more formal approach of Toulmin's model of argument analysis (Toulmin, 1958). Although more formal, it is an approach considered to be relevant to the practice of argument and has been interpreted as a rhetorical model which can provide an understanding of the emotions, values and motives contained in an argument (Ehninger and Brockeriede, 1963).

One valid criticism that can be made of the module is that it is fairly normative and did not enable managers to explore critically some of the issues raised by their reflections and actions. We readily accept that many of the issues raised could have been problematised further by reference to critical theory, labour process theory, feminist theory and post-modernism. For example, in Graham's story, why is Alison's voice not heard, why does Graham silence Alison, and why does he want to suppress his emotions? Also, both Katy and Graham refer to a technicist view of management. Perhaps the reasons why these issues were not explored in reference to critical approaches was a lack of time, the experimental nature of the module, and the tutors' theoretical backgrounds. On a more positive note, the fact that such issues were being raised may provide encouragement for critical management educators to consider the use of storytelling and argument analysis in their teaching methods.

We are also very much aware that there is so much further to go with this approach. While managers were encouraged to engage in argument analysis through the simple question of "What am I arguing for? This tended to produce very general responses when their stories usually contained multiple arguments indicated by the number of claims made in a typical story of events. If such arguments can be identified, this provides an increased possibility that managers may be able to understand their positioning in a multiplicity of worlds (Hermans and Kempen, 1993), each with its own goals, intentions and valuations and a means by which the voices of social languages are heard (Bakhtin, 1981).

To conclude, this paper has demonstrated the viability of using and combining storytelling and argument analysis in management education. This approach, while in need of some development, provides management educators with an experientially based teaching method that is particularly appropriate to those wishing to encourage managers to explore and develop social constructionist perspectives in a practical and action oriented way.

Notes

1 Management education is used here to refer to those courses that are primarily situated in institutions of higher education.

2 Therefore we do not look at critical assumptions of management nor critical pedagogies.

3 Kolb (1984) argues that learning ideally occurs in a series of four discrete stages. They are: Factor 5, capabilities.
- reflective observation, in which the manager reflects on their experiences;
- abstract conceptualisation, where insights from reflection are used to develop new theories, hypotheses and concepts. (Theoretical knowledge is seen to play an important role in reflection and abstract conceptualisation);
- active experimentation, in which new ideas are tested out, which leads to;
- concrete experience.

4 It must be stressed that, ultimately, non-narratives always take place within the context of a wider narrative.

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