

An Examination of Management Learning Systems Using Metaphors

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The pervasiveness of Western ideas and technology is evident in most modern Asian civilization and societies, so much so to the extent that modernization implies Westernization. Historically, there is no doubt that the West have been very influential in the development of the modern Asia and in many ways, the political, economic and education systems of the emerging Asian economies resemble that of their Western counterpart. The theory and practice management in Asia is no exception, Western teachers, lecturers and gurus have in many ways help shaped and transformed our ideas, views and how we do business through their teachings.

In essence, the cycle of teaching and learning can be thought of as a learning system and more specifically a *management learning system*. The purpose of this system is to enable and foster the process of imparting and the acquisition of knowledge. There are really two parts to this process, the teaching and the learning. Teaching in this context is more than just an imparting of knowledge and skills, it is a way to persuade, to change opinions and to influence others. Learning on the other hand, is the acquisition of knowledge and skills, it is a cycle of input, thinking and reinforcing of ideas that may result in changes to the human or organizational behavior.

In *Beyond TQM*, Flood introduced idea of the using metaphors as filters of a systemic microscope that allows us to see the system from different angles. By changing the filter, we can see the very same system in another way. By putting our management learning system under this microscope and equipped with the machine and brain filters, we shall observe the roles of Western teachers in teaching management to Asian students.

In many ways, our learning system behaves like a machine. This teaching machine has inputs and transform these inputs into outputs. On one end we have the inputs which are management ideas and research findings in the form of published materials (books, research papers, journals), media (audio and video), we can even say that the students are also part of this cocktail of inputs. The machine have cogs of various sizes, shapes that serve difference purposes. The teachers are the cogs in the machine that mix these inputs, process and fuse them into MBA graduates and management literate professionals that comes out at the other end.

University undergraduate programs clearly illustrates the efficiency and consistency of our machine, here is an example a bureaucratic teaching organization where the goal of the system is to produce graduates. The young students will happily fit into the course designed for mass production. The programme typified with one way communication lectures with the size of hundreds of students, followed by assignments to fuse the theories in the students' minds. Examinations at the end of semesters is a limited form of quality control. Teacher and students have well defined objectives, with roles and responsibilities that are enforced to ensure that the objective are met, timetables, passing rates/quotas and passing marks are some of the typical instruments. The concept of specialization through division of work is clear, we have economics, finance and accounting lecturers and their respective departments. At the end of the three or four year course, the students are presented with a piece of paper that say that they possess an certain level of knowledge and the product is considered "complete", a truly "run off the mill" operation.

Our management learning machine is not much different. The differences, if any at all, are the increase of scope to include professional management training courses (like the skunk camps run by Tom Peters), the shorter time taken to produce the outputs and the fact that there are more types of cogs in the machine. In addition to management academics and lecturers they include management consultants, gurus, hero manager and even Western expatriates. The bureaucratic organization they represent are their employers, consulting practices and training institutions.

In *Management Gurus*, Huczynski's described the process of productivization of management ideas where ideas are transformed into different types physical products and services by the "middlemen" teachers. Publications and training events are some examples. The notion of predictability is evident where their products are often based on a dominant theme such as leadership or business process reengineering or "MBA in TQM", which indirectly suggests that if the students who have any of the related problems can buy this package and their problems can and will be fixed. The training aids (workbooks, video and audio media) developed and sold to the masses implies that the original teachers themselves are replaceable as the cogs in the machine. The uniformity of their teaching instruments (e.g.

self completed questionnaires) suggest that the tool is applicable across all cultures and applicable to all environments. Their products do not offer any channel for feedback nor encourage more in depth and experiential learning. It is often left to the students to deal with the differences between the theories and reality. Like the lecturers in the university, these teachers typically specializes in one subject area and will preach their management ideas in the training events often conducted in the manner that he knows how to. The way these messages are delivered, often implies that there is a “one best way to do things” that not surprisingly, coincides with the teacher preaches.

While the mechanical construct of the management learning system is very proficient in single loop learning but the achievement of double loop learning remains elusive. The ability in setting the objective and continuously monitoring the performance in relation to the objective is evident in both degree and non degree programs. Controls such as passing marks for each subjects, assignments and a degree or a certification of sorts at the end of the program are some features that encourage of single loop learning of the students, whereas the performance measurement criteria imposed on the teachers discourage them from deviating from operating norms and procedures. Many teachers and institutions fail to review, let alone challenge the underlying operating norms and policies in relation to the relevance of certain management theories and ideas being taught in light of the cultural differences and the applicability to the local business environment.

Morgan (1986) contends that the truly bureaucratic organizations actually obstructs and inhibits the learning process. The fragmented structure of management learning system in universities in setting specific organizational goal and departmental / faculty sub-goals, this strict definition of often prevent the teachers from behaving creatively. Hence each teacher have a different view of the total situation leading then to pursue the sub-goals as if they were the end in themselves, unaware of or disinterested in the way they fit in the objective of the organization or the purpose of an MBA programme. On the larger scale the whole management learning system is fragmented into various schools of thoughts that are based on a set of coherent theories such as scientific management and neo-human relations. Each have only a partial view of the business situations, each pursuing and defending their own ideals and interests in being *the* one best way of doing things and for some it is the quest for the one best

way to achieve fame and fortune ! Each of the single loop learning system, be it universities, management consulting practices or even schools of thought, have a some form of set objectives and even sophisticated rules to that may keep them on the wrong course because the teachers and students alike are unable to or not prepared to challenge the underlying assumptions of the theories that they and their affiliates espouse.

While the rationality of the bureaucratic learning system is instrumental and predetermined and thus limit its flexibility to cope with changes in the external environment, there is evidence that the management learning system also resembles the brain with respect to its capability to process information, to learn and capacity of learning to learn. This implies flexibility, adaptability and the ability to cope with uncertainties, a characteristic that is quite contrary to the mechanistic view of the system.

The bureaucratic management learning system does exhibit a limited if not primitive form information processing capabilities that is routinized and characterized by the flow of information in a top - down fashion that takes the form of teachers passing information to students through their lectures. Limited information flow upwards in the hierarchy in the form of single loop control feedback system such as assignments and examination results. Similarly, the questions and answers session in training events represent a limited form of feedback.

Nobel prize winner Herbert Simon argued that individuals and organizations are never perfectly rational in their decision making due to their limited access to information and limited information processing capacity, therefore they settle for a “bounded rationality”. This aspect is institutionalized in universities in the form of faculties and in the management arena as research centers and in a broad sense, the schools of thought. Management subjects are divided into various fields such as organizational psychology and financial management, each tackle a particular type of related problem that businesses face with little regard for integration.

But what differentiates the brain from the machine is where brain like systems possess a self organizing ability that Morgan term as “substantial rationality”. Substantially rational systems are able to modify their behavior in awareness of the appropriateness of the actions, the very

characteristic of the double loop learning system in the simplest form of brain that is able to self organize and cope with the unexpected. The brain like learning system is the one that promotes bottom up or participative approach to learning the same way a human brain and nervous system function as a sophisticated feedback system. Case study methods used in MBA courses is a form of participative learning cycle where students are encouraged not only to justify their views but to challenge the view of others, including the teacher's. Brain like Western teachers begins the class by soliciting inputs from the students as to how they want the class to be conducted rather than stating up front what the objective of the class is. They seek to define or redefine the criteria for success and failure rather than having it imposed unto them by some authorities. Therefore the roles and rules of assessment criteria should be deliberately left ambiguous so that they can be clarified and through inquiry and feedback. Both teachers and students need to continually question the relevance of theories and practices and challenge the boundaries of the system to deal with business environment in a holistic and integrated way, in effect they form a system capable of double loop learning. Hence the brain like learning system would require the teachers and students who adopt a more complimentarist view of things as opposed to the reductionist view in bureaucratic systems.

There is also a striking parallel between the level of intelligence of management learning systems with the brain. Morgan compared the human brain to the elephant's, though substantially larger in size and weight, clearly the elephant does not exhibit the level of intelligence that of a man. The difference lies in the richness of interconnections between the neurons. Therefore the intelligence of the management learning system is enhanced when there is not just interactions with the teacher and students but student with students as well, some good MBA programmes seek to put students of different discipline together in study groups that foster different views of the same problems presented in case studies. The learning is process is not just limited to the students, the teachers themselves can also learn from the students. Similarly, the teachers can form work groups to share their views with others from different schools of thought. The Western teachers should work with their Asian counterparts to improve their ideas and products that will evolve to better meet the Asian business environment rather than just imposing their views of one model of the world.

The brain like learning system places a lot of emphasis on self inquiry and criticism, something that not everyone is prepared to do including Western teachers. It is something even more difficult to do for the Asians students whose norms is to prefer deference over open challenge. Types of “collaborative” learning such as case study debates what encourages criticism or the threat of criticism can be intimidating or even terrifying experience for some. It is this very fear that usually inhibits the double loop learning. The Western management teachers should sometimes play the role of facilitating the group learning environment that nurtures constructive criticism and self inquiry rather than learning for the sake of passing exams.

In comparison, both the metaphors of management learning have given us a rather paradoxical view of the system. On one hand there is a need to introduce ambiguity into the learning system to ensure self organization and yet it becomes necessary to bureaucratize the system as its size and complexity increases for the same reason of control and coordination. One can look at these two ends as a process of evolution where a learning system is initiated with a small class size, the learning system seemed more brain like where there is stronger cohesiveness amongst the elements (teachers and students) and exhibit brain like qualities of strong coordination, communication and control. However, as the class size grows, this ability to coordinate and cohesiveness weakens due to the limited information processing capacities of the elements and it becomes necessary to introduce rules resulting in a bureaucratic learning system (Flood 1996, pp81-84). The control and coordination of learning process evolves from one of adhocracy and spontaneity to one of “preordained” and formalized. Given the two extremes of the learning system, one is tempted to say “let’s go-in-between” ! But that it is felt that this is not about choosing or the designing of the systems. The role of the Western teachers in the management learning system is no doubt a significant one because they can, to a certain extent, set the tone of the learning environment. However, the teacher’s behavior depends on what their underlying interest really is. If the teachers are like gurus and consultants that are profit or fame driven, their tendency is towards a mechanistic approach that maximizes returns with volume. Although there may be some teachers who really are genuinely interested in imparting their knowledge and learn from others, but there are certainly some who are out to make a profit or going after a coveted position. This is the very aspect that the two metaphors do not expose - the human interest, conflicts and power, i.e. the political aspects of the learning system.

Perhaps the more provocative question to ask is “Who benefits?” and “Why?”. Do *management gurus* benefit more than the students in this system? It would certainly *appear* so! But do his students or their respective organizations *really* benefit from his teachings? From the systemic stand point, the two elements did interact and some changes did occur in both parties, ideas were communicated, people may have been influenced, but to what extent, what are the outcomes? At the higher level, have Western management teachings benefited the Asian economies? These are not easy questions to answer, perhaps there are even no answers but they need to be asked in order to fully understand how the actions of both Western teachers and Asian student affect each other. Both Western and Eastern civilization and culture have much to offer one another, but what is important is that both can complement and learn from one another.

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