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Experiential Learning and Its Critics:

Preserving the Role of Experience in Management Learning and Education

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Abstract

This paper considers John Dewey's dual reformist-preservationist agenda for education in the context of current debates about the role of experience in management learning. The paper argues for preserving experience-based approaches to management learning by revising the concept of experience to more clearly account for the relationship between personal and social (i.e. , tacit/explicit) knowledge. By reviewing, comparing and extending critiques of Kolb's experiential learning theory and re-conceptualizing the learning process based on post-structural analysis of psychoanalyst Jacque Lacan, the paper defines experience within the context of language and social action. This perspective is contrasted to action, cognition, critical reflection and other experience-based approaches to management learning. Implications for management theory, pedagogy and practice suggest greater emphasis on language and conversation in the learning process. Future directions for research are explored.

Key Words: experiential learning, language, management

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"A philosophy of education, like any theory, has to be stated in words, in symbols."

—John Dewey (1938, p. 28)

Although a number of variants of experiential learning theory have been proposed, Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) continues to be one of the most influential theories of management learning and serves as the basis of this analysis (Vince, 1998). Over 1,500 studies, refereed articles, dissertations and papers conducted on Kolb since 1971 (Kolb & Kolb, 2002) provide insight into a broad range of management learning processes (Carlesson, Keane, & Martin, 1976; Dixon, 1994; Hunt, 1987; Lengnick-Hall & Sanders, 1997; Sims, 1983; Van der Hiejden, 1996). While countless management scholars and practitioners see "experience" as central to management learning, the notion of experience in management learning has not gone without critical attention. Criticisms of "experience"-based learning arise for both empirical (Freedman & Stumpf, 1980) and theoretical reasons (Holman, Pavlica, & Thorpe, 1997; Hopkins, 1993; Miettinen, 1998; Reynolds, 1999; Vince, 1998). Along with these criticisms have come suggested alternatives or modifications to the concept of experience.

This paper responds to these criticisms by extending ELT based on post-structural analysis (Lacan, 1977) to highlight the role of language in constructing experience. This re-conceptualization remains consistent with the theoretical roots of experiential learning, but places it in the context of the linguistic turn in the social sciences. This extension seeks to preserve the dialectic and integrative nature of learning while redirecting the

experiential learning agenda to consider more fully the complex relationship between personal and social knowledge. More generally, the debate in ELT also serves as the basis to address several important issues facing management learning more generally regarding the nature of management learning as a profession, its study and appropriate pedagogy.

From the outset, this analysis presents itself as an exercise in abstract conceptualization and thus, contains an irony: experience is treated in a purely abstract way. Recognizing this irony, however, creates momentum for future work that can more completely integrate these abstractions with the experiences of managers. Like the American philosopher John Dewey, who sought to simultaneously preserve the underlying values of educational institutions and reform their agenda, this paper seeks to preserve the underlying value of experiential learning theory and refocus its agenda within management learning and education.

REVIEW OF MANAGEMENT LEARNING LITERATURE

While this analysis focuses on Kolb's experiential theory, a brief review of learning approaches helps to locate Kolb in the literature on management learning. One method of organizing the diverse set of agendas, theories and assumptions that compose the literature on management learning lies in epistemology; the study of the nature and structure of knowledge. Epistemology concerns itself with building a vocabulary that constitutes legitimate knowledge within a profession. In the context of management learning, epistemology seeks to identify how theorists justify learning as a relevant aspect of management by responding to the question "Why is learning important for managers?"

Four general, but not mutually exclusive, agendas appear in management learning: action, cognition, reflection and experience.

Action

Action approaches to management learning emphasize the behavioral changes that take place in managers when solving organizational problems (Argyris & Schon, 1978; Revans, 1980; Wenger, 1998). Action-driven learning approaches seek to improve managerial behaviors that increase effectiveness in achieving goal-directed outcomes. This approach often conceives of learning as rational, linear, deterministic and quantifiable. Action approaches legitimize learning as a process that enables managers to detect and prevent errors, accurately transfer information or successfully achieve goals.

Cognition

Cognitive approaches emphasize the intra- and interpersonal transformations that occur within and between managers (Goleman, 1998; Kegan, 1994; Klein, 1998; Senge, 1990; Wegner, 1987). Cognitive approaches to management learning focus less on behavioral changes and more on changes in how managers think. Cognitive learning aids managers in developing coherent and orderly interpretations of their environment. Cognitive learning focuses on individual and group thinking processes such as memory, perception, mental models, schemas and representations. From this view, cognitive structures of the mind, such as brain chemistry, memory or perception, limit the nature of what can be known. As in the action approach, problem-solving is an important aspect of cognitive learning, but the cognitive characterization of the problem rests in its representation rather than behavior. The ultimate goal lies in creating coherent, orderly representations of complex problems in the minds of managers.

Reflection

Reflective approaches to management learning focus on the process of self-discovery and questioning that leads managers to develop a comprehensive view of managerial practice. This includes the historical, social and cultural implications of management (Dehler, Welsh, & Lewis, 2001; Mezirow, 1991; Reynolds, 1999; Schon, 1983; Vince, 1998). By encouraging managers to reflect critically on their assumptions and beliefs, reflective approaches aid managers in achieving emancipation from perspective limiting assumptions. Their concern for holistic understanding of a situation distinguishes reflective from cognitive approaches because a holistic understanding often leads to greater complexity. Whereas the cognitive approach leads towards simplification, the reflective approach leads towards complicatedness. According to the reflective line of thinking, oversimplification leads to incomplete understanding. Reflection surfaces how power, status and bureaucracy lead to repression and how managers might seek emancipation from these social forces. Ultimately, reflective approaches legitimize learning in management as a means to develop fundamentally better organizations, better societies and a better world by freeing managers from socially embedded assumptions.

Experience

Experiential approaches to learning focus on how managers acquire and transform new experiences and how these experiences lead to a greater sense of satisfaction, motivation or development (Heron, 1992; Kolb, 1984; Nonaka, 1994; Reason, 1994; Torbert, 1972). By fully involving managers in new experiences, experiential approaches help managers develop more holistic views of themselves. This holistic sense of one's existence improves the nature of managerial work. Experience is often synonymous with

emotions and their deeper meaning. Thus, experiential approaches conceive knowledge as being largely personal and individual. These approaches distinguish themselves by their concern with the innate self-direction and value of the manager as a person, rather than the manager as an instrument for achieving the goals of the larger organization. They maintain legitimacy in management by demonstrating how better persons make better managers.

This typology provides a brief synthesis of the complex terrain of management learning. Of course, few approaches fit neatly into any one category and many may cut through several. Nevertheless, such a typology organizes the emerging study of management learning in a way that describes individual learning in relation to broader management practices. Arguably, Kolb's ELT occupies a unique place in the study of management learning because it integrates multiple epistemologies into a formal theory of learning. What distinguishes ELT is not its concern for any single aspect of learning, but rather its concern for the interaction between multiple aspects. That is, learning lies in the deliberate recognition and resolution of multiple learning demands. Action, cognition, reflection and experience represent four interdependent processes, each of which is required for holistic integrative learning. While other approaches contain dialectical elements (e.g. , Kegan, Schon, Torbert), ELT integrates all four management learning processes into a single framework where managers resolve the emergent experiential tensions between experience, reflection, abstraction and action. Table 1 juxtaposes the four approaches to management learning and the corresponding dimension of ELT. The next section elaborates on Kolb's ELT and advocates giving it special attention in the

lexicon of management learning because it occupies a unique theoretical place between structural pre-determinism and subjective humanism.

Insert Table 1 about here

KOLB'S MODEL OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

As an integrative theory, ELT rests on a diverse set of theoretical traditions, including Dewey's pragmatism, Lewin's social-psychology, Piaget's cognitive-development, Rogers's client-centered therapy, Maslow's humanism and Perls' gestalt therapy (Kolb, 1984, p. 15). Kolb's theory spans the life-cycle of human development from young childhood to adulthood and encompasses activities such as career choice, education, problem solving and interpersonal relationships. This paper focuses on the theory's application to management learning. ELT proposes a comprehensive theory grounded in the humanist concept that people have a natural capacity to learn. Experience acts as the catalyst for engaging in the process of dialectic inquiry: a process that is based on and confined to the data of human experience.

Learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (Kolb, 1984, p. 41) rests on six assumptions. Learning (a) is a process, not an outcome; (b) derives from experience; (c) requires an individual to resolve dialectically opposed demands; (d) is holistic and integrative; (e) requires interplay between a person and environment and (f) results in knowledge creation (pp. 25-38).

The Learning Process

According to ELT, managers learn by recognizing and responding to a diverse set of environmental and personal demands. Learning involves the interplay between two interdependent dimensions of knowledge: *acquisition* and *transformation*. Each dimension requires an individual to resolve a dialectic or a set of competing learning tensions. The *knowledge acquisition* dimension requires an individual to resolve the tension between apprehension (concrete experience) versus comprehension (abstract conceptualization). Apprehension requires an individual to accept new knowledge through sensory perception and direct experience with the world (i.e., feelings or emotions). In contrast, comprehension occurs when an individual gathers knowledge through abstract concepts and symbolic representations. Comprehension occurs when a person breaks down experience into meaningful events and places them within a symbolic system of culture and society.

Knowledge acquired through apprehension or comprehension readily interacts with the second learning dimension: *knowledge transformation*. The transformation dimension of learning is also characterized by a dialectical tension: knowledge intention (reflective observation) versus knowledge extension (active experimentation). In the process of learning by intention, a learner moves inward to reflect upon previously acquired knowledge. In contrast, learning by extension requires the individual to move beyond the self to interact with an external environment.

Taken in concert, these four processes constitute the *learning cycle*. As managers resolve these dialectal tensions, they orchestrate their way around the cyclical process of learning as depicted in Figure 1. Taken as a whole, *learning* describes a continuous

process of responding to diverse personal and environmental demands that arise from the interaction between experience, concepts, reflection and action in a cyclical, albeit not necessarily orderly fashion.

Insert Figure 1 about here

While Kolb's learning theory is not the only experiential model to employ this dialectic inquiry (e.g., Kegan, Torbert), it provides one of the only models that remains both comprehensive and fully generalized. Kolb's theory is formally and explicitly stated and has generated an extensive body of empirical research and theoretical attention. The ambitious and comprehensive nature may add to its broad appeal in management learning. Since Kolb first developed the theory in the late 1960s, ELT has influenced a diverse range of management topics, including person-job interaction (Sims, 1983), research and development teams (Carlesson, Keane, & Martin, 1976), organizational systems (Dixon, 1994), strategy development (Van der Heijden, 1996), design of management education (Lengnick-Hall & Sanders, 1997) and job counseling (Hunt, 1987). Miettinen (1998) suggests a reason for this influence:

> [ELT] combines spontaneity, feelings and deep individual insights with the possibility of rational thought and reflection. It maintains the humanistic belief in every individual's capacity to grow and learn, so important for the concept of lifelong learning. It includes a positive ideology that is evidently important for adult education. (p. 170)

CRITICS OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Despite its persistent popularity or possibly because of it, Kolb's theory has also been the target of much critical scrutiny. Criticisms of ELT converge on two fronts: (a) empirical validation of the theory and its instrumentation in the Learning Style Inventory (LSI) and (b) its theoretical limitations.

Empirical Limitations

The LSI is a self-report instrument initially designed as a self-diagnostic tool for students and managers to assess their learning along the four dimensions of experiential learning. Researchers also propose the measure as a means to validate several aspects of ELT. Beginning in the 1970s, concerns developed over the psychometric properties of the measure (Freedman & Stumpf, 1980). In response, Kolb redesigned the LSI in 1985 and again in 1999. Initial results indicate that the updated versions largely address earlier concerns (see Greer & Dunlap, 1997; Loo, 1999). One remaining issue lies in the use of an ipsative measure for cross-subject comparison. A measure is ipsative when a high score on one dimension results in a correspondingly low score on another dimension, creating a statistical limitation where the sum of squares for each variable is equal to zero. The self-referential nature of ipsative measures presents problems with using factor analysis to determine internal construct validity and, in theory, inflates internal reliability. Recent research, however, indicates that ipsativity creates only minor empirical deviations that are easily corrected using simple statistical procedures (Greer & Dunlap, 1997). While future work is needed to understand the internal characteristics of the LSI, updates to the instrument have addressed many of the concerns, especially when the instrument is used for self-diagnosis of individual learner preferences.

Theoretical Limitations

Beginning in the 1990s, a second form of criticism—and the basis of this inquiry—began to emerge regarding theoretical limitations. Such criticisms generally argue that ELT de-contextualizes the learning process and provides only a limited account of the many factors that influence learning. These criticisms converge on the proposition that emphasis on individual experience comes at the expense of psychodynamic, social, and institutional aspects of learning (Holman et al., 1997; Reynolds, 1999; Vince, 1998).

Psychodynamic. Vince (1998) represents the psychodynamic critique and points to five limitations of ELT. First, ELT does not adequately consider the context of power relations such as social status, gender and cultural dominance. Second, ELT fails to give ample status to the influence of these power differentials on learning. Third, Vince believes that ELT fails to focus on the "here and now" of experience, instead giving undue status to retrospective reflection. Fourth, ELT ignores the "unconscious" learning processes and defense mechanisms that may inhibit learning. Fifth, he concludes that ELT does not adequately propose a "second order" or higher meta-learning process, such as the questioning of the assumptions of learning communities (p. 309). Reynolds (1999) echoes such criticisms by suggesting that ELT promotes a largely "individualized perspective" on the learning process at the expense of social and political influences.

Vince's (1998) alternative places greater emphasis on power and psychodynamics in the learning process which includes emotions such as "anxiety, fear and doubt". These emotions manifest themselves in denial, avoidance and a variety of other learning inhibitors that are more accountable to the realities of power relationships and social

context (p. 331). Similarly, Reynolds (1999) advocates greater emphasis on critical theory or "reflexivity." Drawing on theories of communicative action (e.g., Habermas), Reynolds emphasizes the role of critical reflection over reflective observation in an attempt to unmask the seemingly objective role of experience. Challenging the notion that experience—and as a result learning—is an objective and rational process, Reynolds focuses on the emancipatory power of learning. Emancipation moves the learner to recognize his or her philosophical assumptions and how they influence the learning process. Critics from the psychodynamics perspective question the nature of learning and suggest relaxing several assumptions of the initial theory, including its emphasis on experience. They call for greater emphasis on reflective practices in the learning process.

Social. A second line of criticism proposes a comprehensive rethinking of ELT to more explicitly account for social aspects of learning. Holman et al. (1997), for example, reinterpret experiential learning by drawing on Vygotsky's (1978) social learning theory. Holman et al. view individual learning as a process inseparable from the social and historical position of the learner. As an alternative to the four-fold process of experience, reflection, conceptualization and action, they propose a series of literary acts such as "rhetoric, argument and social response" (p. 143). Holman et al. believe that the cognitive nature of ELT overemphasizes the role of the individual and "decontextualizes" the learning process. Critics from the social perspective emphasize social activity over emotions to counteract perceived cognitive bias in ELT.

Institutional. A third set of criticisms focuses on the humanist epistemology of ELT. Miettinen (1998), for example, argues that ELT is founded on a misreading of Lewin, Dewey and Piaget and that the diverse theoretical foundations of ELT leaves its

agenda searching for an epistemological home amongst higher consensus fields. Because ELT lacks strong institutional standing, the argument goes, it lacks the institutional clout necessary to contribute to codified knowledge and thus, ELT remains impotent in furthering any one profession. Hopkins (1993) argues a similar point from a phenomenological perspective by proposing that Kolb's structural reductionism and failure to account for the process nature of experience represents an "aggressive" attack on the process nature of experience in learning. In summary, institutional critics propose two solutions: termination or integration of experiential learning theories.

Taken as a whole, criticisms of ELT suggest that the theory's emphasis on the centrality of the experience of the individual has come at the expense of psychodynamic, social and institutional aspects of learning. Alternatives include the introduction of critical theory, social learning theory, psychodynamics and phenomenology, as well as all-out institutional boycotts of the theory itself.

CRITIQUE OF THE CRITICS

Critical scrutiny sheds light on ELT by highlighting ambiguities, omissions and potential limitations of Kolb's initial formulation; however, these critics' success at providing adequate reinterpretations, alternatives or extensions to guide future research and theory on the topic of management learning remains unclear. Much of the criticism of ELT seems preoccupied with the learning cycle and the concept of learning styles. Because critiques often distill ELT into a simple formula, they risk replacing this broad and diverse tradition of management learning with alternatives that are intoxicatingly simple. Reynolds (1999) recognizes that characterizations of ELT often amount to "simplistic reductions of Kolb's work" (p. 539). Such reductionism leads to revisiting old

theoretical territory. Holman et al. (1997), for example, fail to acknowledge Vygotsky's constructivist influence on ELT (Kolb, 1984, p. 133) but proposes to re-conceptualize ELT in constructionist terms, seemingly unaware of their oversight.

Most importantly, critiques of ELT fail to preserve the fundamental assumptions of ELT by first, relaxing assumptions about the inherent potential of human beings to learn (i.e., humanism) and second, abandoning the belief in that improving human potential lies in problem solving (i.e., pragmatism). Critical approaches seem particularly problematic in this regard. Much of the current criticisms of ELT are rooted in critical theory and social criticism (e.g, Habermas, Marx,). Such theoretical influences are generally in opposition to the pragmatic-humanism suggested by the likes of Dewey and Maslow. Thus, much of the criticism of ELT arises from fundamentally different assumptions about the nature of management learning.

In attempts to emancipate managers from social structures, critical theorists seem uneasily prepared to strip managers of the very tools that may enable emancipation in the first place: belief in one's own potential for change. The critical pedagogy, as Kegan (1994) argues, often requires the attainment of social-cognitive skills that are the result of years of highly specialized training. Critical approaches may help individuals gain insight into their social context, but this often leaves the individual stranded in a complex world, without the appropriate tools to reorder this complexity. The newly "emancipated" may experience more repression than ever as they become stripped of their own capacity to respond to new, more challenging demands that come with emancipation. Ultimately, the critical agenda lacks a developmental pedagogy that enables the individual to manage the increasingly complex demands that result once emancipation has been achieved.

Finally, criticisms that ELT lacks sufficient institutional standing to influence academic advancement (Freedman & Stumpf, 1980; Miettinen, 1998) may suffer from a kind of professional myopia that constrains learning research to a highly consensual body of knowledge. This emanates from a modernist (i.e., essentialist) idea of one "best way" to go about knowledge creation in a professional discipline. The issue of paradigmatic discipline in management learning can profit from the recent conversations in organizational studies focused on the nature of low consensus fields (Astley & Zammuto, 1992; Van Maanen, 1995). The debate in organizational studies, which is reminiscent of the arguments posed by Miettinen, lies in whether the field should adopt diverse paradigms, perspectives and theories or converge on a limited set of variables, methods and guiding theories. If the study of management learning seeks to increase learning in the academy, then it might use experiential learning theory as a guide. If the best learning systems engender diversity, then the best approach to facilitate management learning is to broaden, not narrow, the field of inclusion. An alternative approach comes from Geertz's (1983) idea of "blurred genres", in which scholars enlist multiple disciplines to understand the complex social phenomenon of management learning. ELT—with its humanist ideology, pragmatist aim, scientific justification and interdisciplinary roots—provides a lucid example of such blurring. Honoring blurred visions in light of institutional myopia promises a continuous, although not unique challenge for management learning theory.

Critics propose four ways to deal with the limitations of ELT: (a) reemphasis on psychodynamics and social processes, (b) replacement of key elements of the theory with critical pedagogy, (c) integration with other theories and (d) outright banishment. These

proposals point to a key problem with ELT: its failure to adequately account for the relationship between social and personal learning. Each of the proposed solutions, however, entails abandoning or relaxing the key assumptions of ELT and the resolution of competing demands of experience, abstraction, reflection and action. Current solutions amount to privileging one aspect of learning over another and thus selectively devaluing the holistic nature of learning.

An alternative approach, one that preserves the dialectic nature of experience but more fully accounts for its social aspects, lies in broadening the theoretical base of ELT in light of post-structural analysis. Such an agenda begins with a more complex account of the relationship between the personal world of experience and the social world of abstraction. A summary of the critics, proposed solutions, the limitations of each, as well as the responses proposed in the next sections are displayed in Table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

PERSONAL AND SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE

Kolb (1984) links personal to social knowledge—where the personal world of concrete experience rests in dialectic opposition to the social world of abstract language. Kolb writes,

> Apprehension of experience is a personal subjective process that cannot be known by others except by the communication to them of the comprehensions that we use to describe our immediate experience. Comprehension, on the other hand, is an objective process, a tool of culture, as Engels would call it. From this it follows that there are two kinds of knowledge: *personal knowledge*, the combination of

> my direct apprehensions of experience and the socially acquired comprehensions I use to explain this experience and guide my actions; and *social knowledge*, the independent, socially and culturally transmitted network of words, symbols and images that is based solely on comprehension. (p. 105; emphasis original)

Yet, because he devotes little attention (less than two pages) to expanding on the precise nature of this relationship, he leaves the theory open to criticism. A response to these criticisms lies in a more complete explanation of the relationship between personal and social knowledge. The next section proposes a conceptual framework that expands on Kolb's initial formulation by enlisting post-structural analysis (Lacan, 1977).

A POST-STRUCTURALIST VIEW OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

Post-structuralism encompasses a diverse set of theoretical agendas and cultural movements that emerged in response to structural pre-determinism. Post-structuralism's concern with the nature of knowledge and language distinguishes it from postmodernism, which is more concerned with issues of power, politics and culture (Agger, 1991). The psychoanalysis of Jacque Lacan provides a means to express a more precise relationship between personal and social knowledge in management learning. Like Kolb, Lacan proposes a middle way between structural predeterminism and subjective experience. Lacan's post-structuralism offers a generalized model of development which recognizes both the centrality and the limitations of individualism (Harland, 1987). Lacan was influenced by a diverse set of thinkers such as the linguist Saussure, phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, structural anthropologist Levi-Strauss and novelist philosopher Sartre, thus, his work contributes to the interdisciplinary nature and diverse theoretical roots of ELT.

Lacan believes that human developmental processes can be explained by looking at how language mediates between inter- and intra-personal phenomena. A distillation of Lacan's complex and often obscure theory reveals an underlying simplicity: individual development arises from the relationship between need, internalized representation, self-identification and social interaction.[1] While the precise relationship between these elements remains elusive, an approximation is derived through its graphic representation in the L Schema.

The L Schema

Lacan depicts the relationship between these variables using the L schema (1977, p. 193), as presented in Figure 2. As a graphic depiction of the developmental process, the schema provides a heuristic to understand the relationship between personal and social dimensions of learning (Grosz, 1990, p. 73) by conceding an underlying structure to experience. The schema shows how development begins with individual *need* (Es), which is a purely biological or emotional state. Being purely physical-emotional, need has no immediate form of representation, so it becomes represented in symbolic form through *internalized representation* (other). The internalized representation transforms the biological-emotional need in symbol, albeit an imagined and imperfect representation. Need and its internalized representation remain personal processes until they are exchanged with the social environment. This *social exchange* occurs as the internalized representation of need is organized into a seemingly coherent identity. *Self-identification* (Ego) arises when the internalized representation takes on social face. Self-identification expresses the need by placing it within the symbolic framework of the social order. In this way, self-identification represents an ordering process, where needs are given

coherence, location and meaning within the larger universe of language. As self-identification strives to create an orderly and coherent sense of the self, it threatens the tension-filled process of dialectic inquiry. Since language is based on a predefined grammatical structure, it naturally works against the dialectic – choosing order over tension. Further, language, as a form of social knowledge, is not just a reflection of need, but forms its very content by predetermining its structure.

Social action (Other) intervenes in this developmental process by engaging language in direct human interaction. Social action represents a kind of language-in-action, where the order and coherence of self-identification become subject to the whimsical demands of social relations. Social action, in turn, shapes need by providing either confirmation or disregard for the self's representation in its publicly accessible form.

The movement between personal and social knowledge—the social exchange—is not a purely representational process; rather, it represents a transformational process loss. This loss, or "fracture", emerges as internalized representation transforms identity and as social interaction regulates need. The movement between intra- and interpersonal learning reflects an inexact transformation, a process that creates schism, separation and distance between the individual's internal need and its social expression.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Familiarity with Freudian psychoanalysis reveals the roots of the schema. Lacan extends Freud through his characterization of the id, ego, ego-ideal and super ego as developmental processes that arise from language. *Need* is akin to Id, or biologically-

driven processes and *self-representation* is akin to Ego-Ideal, the imaginary perfect projection of the need in symbolic terms. *Identification* is akin to Ego—the integrated, holistic self—while social interaction is akin to Super Ego, the intervening regulatory function. The fracture that occurs as a person moves from intra- to interpersonal development reconceptualizes the distinction between the unconscious and the conscious mind and the recognition of the limits of the ego ideal.

A "Twist" on Kolb

Lacan's logic extends to experiential learning and is graphically represented in figure 3: The K Schema (Kayes, 2001). The K schema presents a more precise conceptualization between personal and social knowledge in the vocabulary of ELT. In regards to the learning cycle, concrete experience (need) manifested in an emotional state becomes represented in reflective observation (internalized representation). Abstract conceptualization (identity) serves as the integrating mechanism by which experience becomes organized. Finally, active experimentation (social interaction) serves as a symbolic smorgasbord, generating the necessary raw material from which experience arises. Importantly, the interaction between personal and social knowledge, represented by *k,* is characteristic of the Lacanian fracture that arises from the social exchange—the process loss that occurs as knowledge moves between social and personal forms.

Insert Figure 3 about here

The K schema represents a "twist" on Kolb's initial formulation of the interdependent relationship between social and personal knowledge by depicting experiential learning in post-structural terms. The model preserves simultaneously the dialectical relationships between learning demands, the sequence of the learning process and the importance of experience in the learning process, albeit conceiving of experience in symbolic terms. Experience is structured like language. Experience maintains a central role in the learning process, but not a privileged one, as the symbolic order constrains the range of available experience. The importance of language in learning is consistent with ELT's theoretical influences, such as Dewey and Vygotsky as well as management learning theorists in the experiential tradition.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT LEARNING

Implications for Theory

The K schema refocuses current discussions about ELT from deconstructing its basic assumptions to building on them and preserves the role of individual experience in the learning process. This approach emphasizes the tension-filled process of learning as a vacillation between social and personal knowledge. This contrasts with other experiential approaches to management learning (e.g., Hopkins, 1993; see also Torbert, 1972) because here, experience emerges from the available language structures, not from elusive mental or emotional processes. Experience is no longer viewed as a privileged category of knowledge, inaccessible from the social world; rather, experience is always formed in the context of existing social knowledge. The language-experience connection also distinguishes ELT from more purely cognitive approaches to management learning and challenges the notion that ELT is fundamentally a cognitive theory (Holman et al., 1997;

Meittinen, 1998; Van der Heijden, 1996). While cognitive approaches focus on concepts, categories and mental models, ELT focuses on words, linguistic processes and their grounding in the direct experience of managers. ELT finds its resolution in Hegel's dialectic, continually in a process of flux and movement, the interplay between the social and personal, whereas cognition reflects Descartes' *cogito*, images located more precisely in the individual mind.

If the idea that experience is structured like a language seems acceptable, experiential learning might be distinguished from reflective approaches as well. In an experiential approach, emancipation is achieved by developing vocabularies, attending to the elements of language and participating in engaging conversations as opposed to developing understanding about abstract concepts such as society, power and bureaucracy. An experiential approach is more closely aligned with Hunt's (1987) emphasis on the interactive processes between individuals and how these interactions facilitate movement around the learning cycle. Another distinction lies between ELT and action-oriented approaches to management learning. If experience provides the starting and ending point for knowledge creation, then experience itself constitutes the measure of knowledge, not normative principles, objective standards or defense mechanisms. This characterizes knowledge creation as an imperfect process, albeit an adequate one, that may leave managers feeling fractured and twisted—not just normal or defensive.

Additionally, the fracturing of knowledge as it moves between personal and social knowledge conflicts with current conceptualizations of organizational knowledge creation as being either explicit or tacit (social or personal) by suggesting that the movement between knowledge forms is not a clean one (e.g. , Nonaka, 1994)—that

something is always lost in the process . A better approach would be to characterize the movement between tacit and explicit knowledge as dialectic and to suggest that this movement might best be characterized as fractured or twisted rather than continuous.

Despite proposing that language provides coherence and structure to experience, this analysis has done little to make the terms ‘language’ and ‘experience’ any less obscure. This remaining obscurity implies several directions for future work in conceptualizing ELT in post-structural terms. For example, Lacan uses the term language in a very limited (elitist?) way – referring to a language such as French or English to the exclusion of a more diverse set of symbolic systems, such as numbers, art or non-verbal languages. Such a limited view of language seems constrictive when trying to understand the variety of symbolic systems utilized by managers in organizations. Developing a more precise vocabulary for what constitutes a language in management learning could be a starting point for future theoretical work. Linguistic anthropology, semiotics and literary analysis should be better sources of inspiration for this study than more structural approaches to language such as syntax and grammar.

Implications for Practice

A post-structural approach to ELT argues for defining managerial practice grounded in concrete language—not elusive organizational process often described in higher level abstractions, such as strategies, systems or environments. Methods that increase vocabularies introduce proximity of knowledge sharing, aid in making connections between personal and social knowledge and organize experience in meaningful ways may lead to management learning. Several popular methods for achieving this in management education already exist. These include experiential

learning approaches to organizational behavior (Osland, Kolb, & Rubin, 2001), writing of life stories and use of critical incident interviews (Boyatzis, Cowen, & Kolb, 1996) and storytelling which orders experiences in sequential and meaningful ways, may constitute another practical management learning tool (Klein, 1998). Also, Fisher, Rooke and Torbert (2000) offer a practical primer for managers built around learning more effective uses of four 'parts of speech' – framing, advocating, illustrating and inquiring.

Two emerging but well developed agendas offer particular promise for putting the post-structuralist ELT agenda into management learning practice. Kegan and Lahey (2001) propose series of exercises designed to surface internalized conversations and to transform old language into a new vocabulary. For example, individual complaints become personal commitments, blame becomes personal responsibility and fears become multiple competing commitments. Social conversations also become similarly transformed as prizes become ongoing rewards and rules and procedures become public agreements.

A similar, but less formal approach to post-structuralist management learning lies in conversational learning (Baker, Jensen & Kolb, 2002) which offers an alternative to traditional classroom and organizational development practice by engaging individuals in five dialectic conversational processes. Unlike traditional methods of management learning which structure learning, a conversational approach enables learning within the existing structure of language. As individuals engage in conversation, they confront a combination of personal and social dilemmas that become the raw material for learning. By engaging in conversation with others, individuals experience the familiar action versus reflection and experience versus abstract dialectics, but also confront three social

dimensions: time, embodied in the tension between discourse versus recourse; power, embodied in status versus solidarity; and community, embodied in individuality versus relatedness.

Both of the agendas just described recognize that learning involves engaging with diverse, complex and competing demands and that multiple forms of learning are at work. While both agendas remain confined to existing language structures, learning occurs both by developing new vocabularies and reconfiguring old ones in new ways. Because the language necessary to participate in these processes becomes increasingly complex, these agendas also embody developmental processes.

This analysis has been an exercise in abstract conceptualization and requires future work to fully integrate the theory with the concrete experience of managers. A few examples of how such integration occurs, however, already appear in the extant management literature. In Bell and Nkomo (2001), experiential learning takes form in personal narratives that describe the struggles of finding professional identity in the face of multiple competing language communities. In Wyss-Flamm's (2002) account of learning teams in an educational setting, experiential learning emerges when personal differences generate social knowledge by juxtaposing language. Vince (in press) utilizes a case study to show that when experience is not engaged socially and remains personal, it has little impact on management learning, regardless of whether the setting is organizational or more traditionally educational. These examples suggest that preoccupation with quantitative measures and validation of ELT has come at the expense of exploring management learning in more qualitative terms. Torbert (1972) continues to

be a good source for understanding the qualitative/quantitative distinction in experiential learning.

Yet even qualitative studies must be stated in words, in symbols, to express experience; thus, the dilemma between social and personal knowledge posed here comes full circle. Ultimately, experience, like theories, must also be stated in words. Experiential learning theory continues to exercise considerable influence in management learning and education despite persistent criticism from several fronts. Researchers and practitioners alike enlist experiential learning for its explanatory strength and practical significance. Critics challenge the theory for its emphasis on individual experience at the expense of social, political and cultural aspects of learning. Explicating the relationship between personal and social knowledge in post-structural terms provides a compelling response to current criticisms. Not unlike Dewey's agenda for learning reform proposed nearly seven decades ago, a better understanding of the role of language in the learning process promises to preserve the role of experience in management learning while refocusing its agenda on the relationship between personal and social knowledge.

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Footnote

1. Because Lacan often wrote in obscure language, using his schema to describe a number of different social processes and reconfigured the relationship between variables at various points in his career, the schema has caused much confusion amongst scholars. In fact, it's not clear if the "L" represents Lacan or the original shape of the schema. For the sake of accessibility and ease, without full attention to the robustness of the theory, this analysis employs a more familiar vocabulary. Primary source information for the schema can be found in Lacan (1977) and a commentary in Grosz (1990).

TABLE 1
Management Learning Epistemologies

Epistemology	Proponents	Process	Outcome	Conception of Knowledge	Experiential Learning Dimension
Action	Argyris, Knowles, Revans, Schon, Wenger	Solutions to management problems	Achievement of specific, clearly defined, and practical goals	Independent variable; normative	Active Experimentation
Cognition	Kegan, Klein, Senge, Wegner	Accurate intra- and interpersonal representation	Order, mental coherence, clear thinking	Dependent variable; mental models, maps, structures	Abstract Conceptualization
Reflection	Dehler et al., Mezirow, Reynolds, Vince	Self-analysis; questioning of assumptions	Emancipation from assumptions, complete and complex perspective	Independent variable; social, historical and cultural	Reflective Observation
Experience	Kolb, Heron, Reason, Torbert	Discovery; new experiences; emotional involvement	Self-direction and self-understanding	Dependent variable; personal; unique to individual	Concrete Experience

TABLE 2
Critiques and Responses to Experiential Learning

	Proponents	Critique of ELT	Proposed Solution	Limitation	Post-Structural Response
Social	Holman et al.	Limited account of social processes	Reconceptualize based on constructivist theory	Misreads basic dialectic nature of learning; privileges abstract concepts	Explicates relationship between social and personal knowledge
Psychodynamic	Vince, Reynolds	Lacks historical context and recognition of barriers to learning	Place greater emphasis on reflexivity; eliminate defensive barriers	Relaxes assumption about dialectic and holistic nature of learning; privileges reflexivity; lacks developmental component	Extends dialectic nature of learning; embeds experience in historical, systemic context of language
Institutional	Freeman & Stumpf, Hopkins, Miettinen	Doesn't fit neatly into a single institutional paradigm	Discontinue use; integrate with other theories; purify theory	Based on modernist notion of "pure" science; ignores practice and multi-disciplinary nature of management learning	Integrates personal and social knowledge into multi-paradigmatic study of learning as "blurred genre"

FIGURE 1
The Experiential Learning Cycle

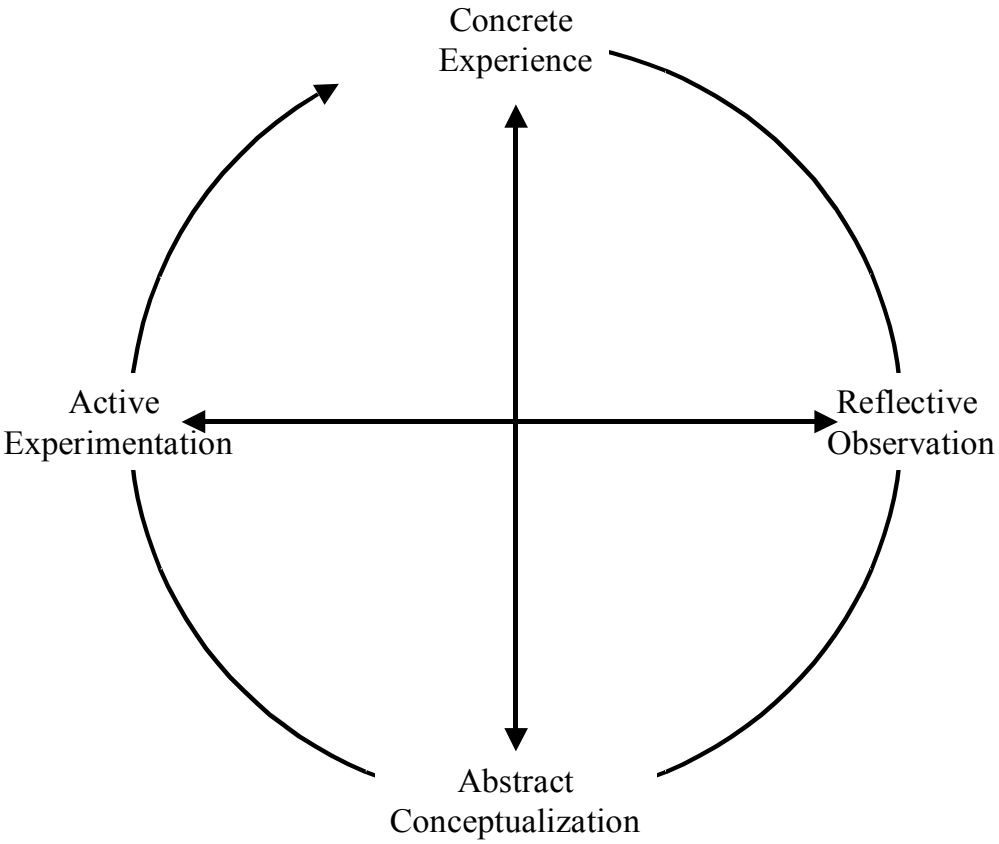

FIGURE 2
The L Schema

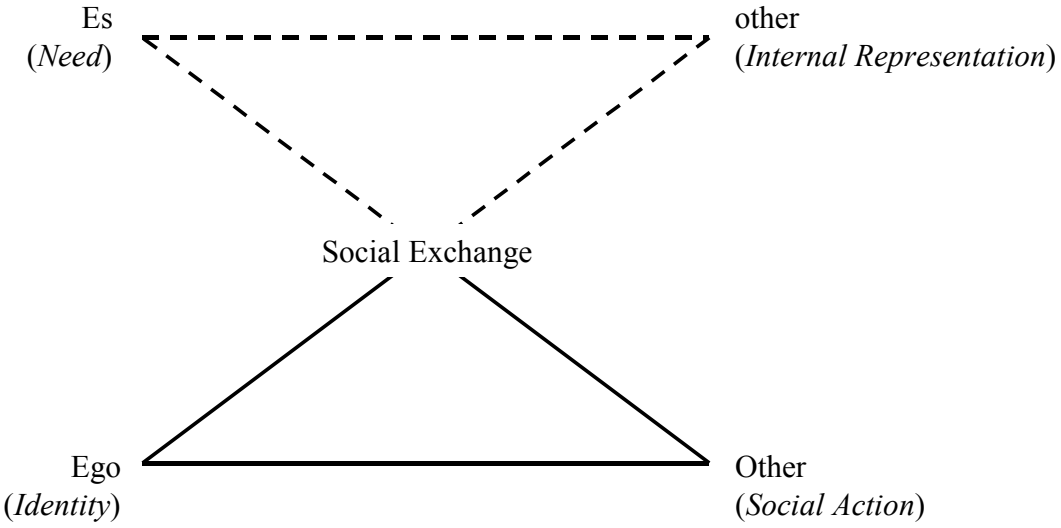

FIGURE 3
The K Schema