2001: A Research Odyssey
Teaching Different Types of Learning
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Background
Business schools and management colleges engaged in running post-experience management development programmes are becoming increasingly concerned about developing a competitive edge in their attempts to facilitate managerial learning successfully. The primacy of this issue, in terms of its importance, is largely due to a general awareness of the need to accommodate a new cadre of sophisticated, demanding managers, whose quest it is to seek a kind of universal management wisdom. Many of those who are faced with the task of facilitating such learning appear to be openly enthusiastic about the size of the challenge ahead. However, there are also those who are voicing the sort of personal and organizational fears which suggest a strong reluctance to accept the need for change. Many of their concerns centre on the status of subject disciplines and insecurities regarding teaching methods and styles.

If we are to progress our understanding of managerial learning realistically, then we have to attempt to develop a practically useful framework within which all of these issues can rest comfortably. It was with this in mind that the research reported here sought to explore the views of a sample of practising Ashridge College tutors/teachers. Twelve semi-structured interviews, focusing on learning and programme design, were conducted with a sample of tutors across a broad range of subject disciplines. In accordance with a descriptive research design, it is qualitative analysis of each subject interview which has driven the design and outcomes of the end result.

The article begins by proposing a framework for gaining a greater understanding of all types of managerial learning which builds on Gregory Bateson's[1] notion of levels of learning. It then goes on to discuss some of the emergent issues, which have implications for the everyday realities of programme content and design, namely the trend towards experiential learning and a cyclical model of learning. The article concludes by exploring the rudiments of a particular Ashridge programme which uses this framework extensively to guide its development.

Three Types of Learning
During the analysis of the interviews it quickly became apparent that, despite the fact that there is a healthy, multidisciplinary facet to many of Ashridge's programmes, tutors' views on what constitutes learning varies according to the nature of his or her subject discipline. This apparent allegiance to the basic tenets of their discipline appears to have a reciprocal effect on all aspects of their...
perceptions of the learning process. In other words, their assumptions and beliefs about learning are to some degree guided by the epistemological nature of their subject discipline. A useful, broadly acceptable indicator of where a subject may be positioned along such a continuum is the notion of “hard” and “soft” disciplines. Hard disciplines are those which project an image of objectivity and raw factual knowledge (i.e. finance, statistics), whereas soft disciplines are universally viewed as having degrees of subjectivity and are, hence, regarded as rather woolly (i.e. leadership, coaching).

The extent to which this particular theme impinged on tutors’ views about learning projected it into being the focal starting-point of the article. This is best exemplified by a range of tutor comments regarding their learning objectives which neatly divide into three broad categories. First, there are those who believe that their major task is to impart knowledge. Second, there are those who feel that they are updating skills or competences. Finally, there are those who believe that they are trying to effect some form of self/personal development. The following quote is from a tutor who clearly endorses the imparting of specialist knowledge approach:

I have got to have a knowledge base before they can do any activity. It does not work sending people out into the desert with nothing. If I try to, I am building up frustration. They get very turned off by that sort of approach and they feel that this guy should have told us. We did come here to be told. In any hard discipline I can see no alternative - and I have thought about it for a long time - other than telling them in the beginning. You give an impression of confidence that they are going to get some answers from you. They are going to get something useful that is accurate because this guy knows what he is talking about.

This remark is taken from a central group of tutors who appear to be most concerned with updating skills or competences:

We give them the tools and the thinking in the first week and then we give them a number of opportunities to utilize those skills in the second week. We are trying to get them to integrate it, so that their behaviour changes and they learn new skills.

Finally, of the tutors who feel that they are trying to facilitate some sort of self-development process, this comment is fairly typical:

My personal goal as director of the programme is to create agents of change, people who have questioned their own core beliefs and attitudes and are prepared to continue to learn and develop themselves as future managers way beyond the Ashridge experience... I am hopeful that, by the end of the programme, individuals have changed and are different, bigger, better people as a result of it.

After having cited three broad categories or approaches to learning it is important to note that their separation is not intended as an incitement to the idea that they should stand opposed to one another. On the contrary, as a consequence of the multidisciplinary aspect of many of Ashridge's programmes, many tutors recognize and respect the need (in most cases) for several complementary forms of learning.

Although there would appear to be broad recognition of the need for several types of learning, or approaches to learning, there still remain widespread fears
and uncertainties concerning the development of a precise, common understanding of the nature of the different types. Related to this, there is also a need for constructing a value-free, universally (i.e. across all subject disciplines) acceptable language in which the differing types can be described and discussed openly and freely. A conceptual framework which, as well as reflecting the research evidence, goes some way to satisfying both of these demands is a typology which is similar in nature to Gregory Bateson’s[1] three levels of learning.

The three types of learning proposed here are as follows:

**Type 1**

Learning occurs as a direct consequence of absorbing factual information or knowledge, which has an immediate relevance but does not have any long-term effect on a manager’s view of the world or personal identity in general. A good example of type 1 learning occurring is when a manager absorbs information about how to read and understand balance-sheets. Tutors who engage in this type of learning clearly feel that they have to promote the idea of the “expert” to build and protect their professional reputation. This is a good example of such a desire:

> When they come up afterwards and ask questions about their own situation or their own firm, I can identify that I have succeeded in putting forward this impression that I know something of what I’m talking about, because they don’t come and ask you unless they think you have. So that’s my main criterion for judging that some learning has taken place.

**Type 2**

Learning occurs as a result of building on the absorption of factual information or knowledge, so that behaviour changes and becomes transferable from the present situation to another. In other words, managers change their conception about a particular aspect of their world in general, although it remains situation-specific. A good example of type 2 learning occurring is the learning of subtle interviewing skills which are absorbed and result in situation-specific behaviour changes, but do not impinge on a manager’s genuine personal identity. The following comments are a good representation of how a tutor might view learning in this particular mode:

> Learning is actually in your mind. In your memory is what you remember and how you organize the world. What it does is to integrate a new piece of information with all the old information, or help reorganize the old information so that you have in fact learned and your behaviours will change the next time a stimulus comes in. It somehow relates to that part of your memory where your behaviour will be slightly different because of what you have learned. I think that’s what learning is!

**Type 3**

Learning occurs when managers become conscious of their conceptions of the world in general, how they are formed and how they might change them, and ultimately become aware of the effects which these changes may have on
personal identity or development of self. This kind of learning is not, therefore, situation-specific. A good example of type 3 learning occurring is when a manager is able to reflect on life incidents and go beyond situational behaviour changes to effect real personal change, such as an improvement in confidence when dealing with important customers and others. Clearly, this kind of learning is comparatively rare. This tutor’s overall programme objectives imply quite strong elements of personal change and self-development:

It's a programme that's really about increasing awareness of what works for you, not changing people to be something that they aren't. If you take development as meaning to reveal or to show the person what they have within them, then that is what this programme is about.

To summarize, type 1 learning, the absorption of factual information or knowledge, is viewed as being highly dependent on effective memory retention. As a result of this kind of operation being largely associated with the head, it will be described here as cerebral learning. Type 2 learning, on the other hand, builds on this and results in concrete behaviour changes. The absorbed knowledge becomes integrated into a person's identity, resulting in superficial behaviour changes which are situation-specific. In other words, it is a kind of skills-based behavioural learning. Finally, type 3 learning implies a whole-person process in which an individual becomes conscious of a change in who they are (i.e. development of self). This change could be either very minor or fairly major, depending on the learning activity. It will be depicted here as transformation learning.

Figure 1. The Three Types of Learning
When viewed in relation to the full range of management education activities, the three types of learning can be expressed diagrammatically with different overall objectives, as outlined in Figure 1.

When examining Figure 1, it is important to note that there is a certain amount of fluidity between the types, hence the horizontal narrowed lines. If desired, pure knowledge-based sessions could be transformed into competence-based sessions, provided that the integrated knowledge is designed to produce situation-specific behaviour changes (and, vice versa, competence-based sessions could be transformed into knowledge-based sessions). Obviously, this would involve redesigning the sessions to include greater opportunities to practise the acquired skills. Similarly, competence-based sessions could be transformed into self-development-based sessions, if the learned skills reached a deeper level where they effected personal change and were no longer situation-specific (and vice versa). Changes of this nature would involve giving more opportunities to give/receive feedback and reflect on more personally meaningful, holistic issues.

After having created the sort of conceptual framework which encompasses the broad spectrum of learning events in a way which satisfies the need for mutual understanding and a common dialogue, it now becomes possible to consider various aspects of programme content and design which may assist in developing more learner-oriented programmes across all three types of learning.

The Trend towards Experiential Learning


Anon.

The first major theme which evolved from the research, as a consequence of viewing managerial learning as three complementary types, was a general expression of the need for a gradual shift in emphasis towards experiential learning across the complete range of programme activities. There is a widespread feeling among tutors that climate changes in the business environment have resulted in the development of a new cadre of sophisticated managers who are no longer content to attend seminars/lectures which are high on entertainment and low on lasting impact. Instead of passively accepting an inert, traditionally-based learner role, managers are reportedly becoming more inclined to demand learning situations which are thoughtfully built around actual experience. Perhaps this is due, in part, to the fact that as well as giving them greater confidence to apply the learning beyond the duration of the programme successfully, “learning by doing” appears to concur directly with a manager’s everyday reality of the nature of management itself. The following quote is a typical expression of this sentiment:

Managers, yes, I think they learn by reflecting on their experience, having new insights, but it needs not to be theoretical, it needs to be related to situations where what we teach has relevance. I wouldn’t try to teach anybody something that existed in a theoretical framework...
without having lots of practical examples. I think managers learn by doing. I think anybody learned by doing if they want real learning to take place. This is a particular programme which needs to increasingly emphasize this.

In terms of the future design of management programmes, the significance of this movement towards more experientially-based activities appears to have different implications for each of the learning type extremes (types 1 and 3). In type 1 learning there is a fairly straightforward concern to supplement the dominant lecture mode of tutoring with more participative activities to assist the creation of learning energy and consolidate the integration phase of the learning process cycle. The following is a good example of such a concern:

I have a cardinal rule which I keep to very, very closely - that no group should sit in one position for more than one hour fifteen minutes without a change of activity. That is, a coffee break, a lunch break or breaking into groups, which means they can move around a bit and change their seating position or whatever. Given more time, we really need more participation from them because it helps to keep the whole thing moving.

The implications for those operating according to type 3 learning are rather different, in as much as there is a feeling that, on the whole, a sensible balance exists between experiential activities and other modes of learning. However, most of these tutors recognize that, in their attempts to continue to create learning situations which are personally meaningful, there will be a continual need to review the depth and quality of such activities. In particular, there are suggestions that there is a tendency to adopt a rather conservative approach to facilitating self-development to satisfy two fairly complex demands. First, on an individual level, tutors are naturally reluctant to engage in the facilitation of personal change which is too painful or emotionally challenging for the recipient, because it compels them to use heightened facilitation skills in what is a potentially damaging public forum. Second, on an organizational level, the criteria for measuring the success of a programme (i.e. the programme evaluation sheets) appear to restrict some tutors from taking those major personal risks which are so important for creating a genuinely open, learning environment.

Successfully overcoming either or both of these demands, and pushing back the boundaries of transformational learning, will be largely dependent on the risks (both individually and organizationally) which tutors in this mode are prepared to take when designing and running future programmes. The centrality of the concept of risk to this success is summed up in the following remark:

The most successful programme I have personally run was the last time I ran this particular programme. Maybe that's significant, because I said I am going to take more risks than I have ever taken before, and will see how far I can go on feedback and on pushing them to expose some of their own personal assumptions... As a result, they totally took control of the process of the programme and by the end we were obsolete. We were unnecessary in the process by the end; and that for me was great. We just couldn't believe that it had happened; you know, total revelation, awestruck by what had happened. It was time to go after that, time to find another job because I felt that we had done something. The importance of having the courage to take risks has stayed with me ever since!
A Cyclical Model of Learning

The final emergent theme relates to the complete cycle of learning. On closer inspection of the programme elements on offer at Ashridge in relation to the differing types of learning, the research revealed large variations in the degree of importance placed on pre- and post-programme activity when designing and running programmes. As a means of analysing these differences in greater depth it is useful to view the learning process as a cyclical model, as outlined in Figure 2.

The model is explained in terms of individual learning. However, it is equally applicable to organizational learning. The elements of the cyclical learning model are as follows:

1. **Equilibrium** is the assumed starting-point, where previous learning has been assimilated and learning needs are neither strongly known nor felt. In other words, a state of unconscious ignorance exists.

2. **Diagnosis** of learning needs is a rational thinking process carried out by either the learners themselves, by learners and management developers working together, or by an employer, consultant or tutor on the learners’ behalf. Diagnosis in practice might be far less formal and scientific than the word implies.

3. **Awareness** is more of a feeling process and requires that the learners become aware of their lack of knowledge, competence, or personal deficits. This is often accompanied by strong feelings, either of excitement and curiosity, or discomfort and inadequacy. Both sets of feelings can increase motivation, but the negative feelings can also become a barrier to learning. Awareness is a state of disequilibrium or conscious ignorance. It provides the energy to learn.

4. **Resolving** is both the resolution to act and the ability to make sense of a complex picture and resolve a focused plan from the vaguely perceived awareness of need. It is the transition between feeling and thinking.

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**Figure 2. A Cyclical Model of Learning**

![A Cyclical Model of Learning Diagram](http://www.ashridge.org.uk)
(5) Reshaping is the time for new inputs, new advice, new models, new ideas, and for intellectual evaluation and assimilation. It is a time for reading, listening, thinking and doing.

(6) Experimentation and feedback help learners to consolidate the learning, as they do not necessarily apply the inputs successfully at the first attempt. Retention, competence and change come from repeated experimentation and feedback.

(7) Integration is the process whereby the learning is transferred back to the learner’s own environment in the form of retention, competence or personal change. The learning is generalized to new applications and eventually used creatively.

A number of sub-loops might exist within the model. For example, entering the integration phase may necessitate revisiting the reshaping and experimenting elements of the cycle. For the sake of simplicity, only one major sub-loop has been shown.

After having already highlighted the contrasting objectives of the three learning type programme elements (i.e. cerebral learning, behavioural learning and transformational learning), it is perhaps not too surprising that different degrees of importance are attached to each of the phases of the learning process cycle when designing and running programmes. As the most stark differences in emphasis appeared between the type 1 and type 3 programme elements, it is useful to compare comments from each of these tutor groups to gain a greater understanding of how they operate in practice.

Type 1 Learning

The following quote is taken from the dialogue of a tutor operating according to type 1, and is in reply to the following questions: “What do you do to make people aware of their own state of knowledge or ignorance when they first start the programme?”

“I don’t think we do anything in the early stages to make them aware of their knowledge or ignorance. I think that is something which they develop themselves as they go through the programme.”

After analysing the complete disprogrammes of those tutors who are more concerned with imparting knowledge (i.e. cerebral learning), it is most apparent that they appear to be very efficient at the reshaping, experimenting, feedback and integration phases of the learning process cycle. However, their statements reveal little conception of the need to assist their learners with the diagnosis, awareness and resolving phases. The reasons for this become clearer when considering the overall objective of type 1 learning, which is to absorb information as a means of updating or improving one’s cerebral learning, or, as one tutor suggested:

“At a junior level there is a need for people simply to have more information... The rules of accounting are best learned through lecturing... At some point somebody has actually to undertake the unexciting work of simple learning and absorbing some facts and some rules.
Put another way, it is assumed that the diagnosis, awareness and resolving phases have already been entered into at an earlier stage, back at work. This has resulted in the client concluding that there is a need to update or improve a particular business specialism of the cerebral learning type e.g. to improve one's numeracy/statistical skills.

As a direct consequence of being restricted by the nature of the learning to operating within the latter half of the learning process cycle, tutors in this area have to put a lot of effort into nurturing and maintaining their "expert" status in order to command respect from their clients as soon as possible during the reshaping phase. Also, as they are unable to participate in the awareness phase of the cycle which, under normal circumstances, provides considerable amounts of learning energy (refer to the learning process cycle), they have to be very proactive in stimulating this energy themselves. For an accomplished type 1 tutor both of these objectives can be achieved by introducing the material in a stimulating, often charismatic, manner.

Type 3 Learning
In direct comparison with tutors who are operating according to type 1, those tutors who are more concerned with transformational learning appear to have much broader objectives in relation to the learning process cycle. The following comment, outlining these broad objectives, is fairly typical of this group:

The first block is all about diagnosis and raising awareness – an awareness of yourself, what you do and how it fits with your organization. The next block is about how groups work... communications... and various other important topics. Finally, we have time set aside every day for working in a small group to apply the learning that they have taken from whatever we've done during the day to a situation they face back in their company. So we build in the start of the transfer process.

This quote is a good example of how tutors who are operating according to type 3 attempt to complete a full tour around the learning process cycle when designing and running programmes. Again, when one takes account of the overall objectives involved in transformational learning, it is perhaps not so surprising that there has to be an equally strong emphasis on the diagnosis, awareness and resolving phases of the cycle. Indeed, in some instances, clarifying one’s personal learning needs and overall programme objectives is considered to be an essential prerequisite for an individual to be able to progress effectively to the remaining phases of the learning process cycle.

The emphasis placed on all phases of the learning process cycle, when engaging in transformational learning, ensures that the learning enters a deeper level of personal meaning. The ability to be able to encroach on and ultimately reach this level of the psyche involves facilitative skills which are very different from those tutors’ skills which are effective in type 1 mode. Among other things, tutors in this mode have to have a well-developed intuitive perceptual acuity which is well tuned to the patterns of thought/behaviour of others. This is summed up in the following comment:
I think the more information I give them the less successful those sessions are... The less information I give them and the more I make them go out and find it themselves, the more productive in terms of learning it is for them... If they think that you are receptive and sensitive to their needs as individual human beings, it always makes a good programme.

**The Cycle in Action**

To bring these ideas to life Ashridge has incorporated much of this thinking into programme design and development. A good example of a programme which encourages participants around the complete cycle is the Developing Managerial Skills programme, highlighted by C. Osterweil[2] in a recent issue of the Journal of European Industrial Training and depicted in Figure 3.

**Diagnosis and Awareness**

Diagnosing the participants’ learning needs begins when they are sent a learning needs audit, six weeks before the start of the programme. This contains details of all the competences (totalling 46) covered by the programme, and is intended as a tool to encourage discussion between the participant and significant others. It focuses on the effectiveness with which they are deploying particular competences, as well as their respective organizational needs. This creates a situation whereby equilibrium is disturbed. Part of the tutors’ role is to address this disequilibrium as soon as the programme begins. After putting it into context, and explaining its rationale, tutors begin to help the participants to analyse and interpret their audit results. From the outset, they are encouraged to build links between the programme and the workplace through small group discussions with their peers and a facilitator (their self-development group).

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**Figure 3.**

Inside the Ashridge Developing Managerial Skills Programme
Such learning is reinforced with a two-day management exercise called “Dash”, which combines role plays and a computer-based simulation to reproduce life in a retail branch environment. In terms of its content, it allows the participants to take decisions on finance, marketing, operations and human resource issues at the same time as dealing with demands from head office and face-to-face customer enquiries.

Its process elements are designed so that it allows participants to validate the results of the learning needs audit as well as gain a greater understanding of their own characteristics, particularly in a team context. The emphasis here switches to the “doing” of management, encouraging the involvement of all participants. Occasionally, action is “frozen” to allow the participants time to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and to think about their learning needs. This is invaluable as an assisting mechanism when, on day four of the programme, they are encouraged to submit their self-development plans for the remainder of the programme and beyond.

In revisiting “Dash” in the final week of the programme, it also acts as an integrating device, linking diagnosis and awareness with later stages in the cycle. Repetition serves the purpose of providing participants with a sort of gauge against which to measure themselves.

Resolving
Participants’ self-development plans, which are based on the familiar idea of the learning contract, naturally take them into the resolving stage. Each participant identifies:

1. His/her learning objectives.
2. The course of study to be followed and the resources required to achieve it.
3. How the learning will be implemented and how it will be evaluated.

The programme offers an innovative range of core and elective sessions. When they are not attending sessions participants are expected to engage in self-study, using the semi-structured study resources designed specifically for this purpose. Their individual plans are flexible, to take account of the fact that, as their awareness of the need to learn increases, their ability to diagnose their needs becomes more acute. Consequently, the resolving stage often continues into week two and beyond. As this process unfolds, the tutors’ role moves towards helping the participants to focus on their major objectives and to encourage them through the final stages of the learning cycle.

Reshaping, Experimentation and Feedback
A major characteristic of all formal Ashridge sessions is that they are designed to allow participants to move through these stages of the cycle. It is most important that they are encouraged to build on the ideas and experiences gained earlier in the programme and to repeat the reshaping experimenting
feedback loop shown in Figure 2. As with other elements of the programme, they do this at their own pace, carefully integrating core sessions, electives and self-study time between the three stages, as appropriate.

Integration
Throughout the programme, but particularly during the latter stages, emphasis is placed on integrating the acquired learning. This is achieved in three different ways:

1. The participants are encouraged to reflect continually and capture their "learning nuggets" in the form of a learning journal. This allows them to record any key thoughts, learning points and actions which they should consider taking on their return to work.

2. The live management exercise, called "Dash", is reintroduced, serving as an ideal forum in which to practise the acquired learning and gauge the progress.

3. On the final day of the programme successful re-entry to the workplace becomes a major priority for all concerned. The participants focus on all of the relevant issues by presenting their self-development plans to their respective self-development groups. In keeping with the flexible nature of the programme, some are presented as action plans, while others are very personal summaries, describing the insights gained.

To summarize, the Ashridge Developing Managerial Skills programme is a good example of how theoretical ideas based on action research can feed into and contribute to the design and implementation of management training programmes. A current example of a similar interaction are those programmes at Ashridge which are concerned with major or strategic change projects. Viewed within the context of the cyclical model, real-life projects or unresolved problems are introduced, enabling part of that programme output to be a solution which can be implemented. In effect, this gives the potential to create an exciting form of ongoing action learning.

Conclusion
Having initially set out to explore the views of a group of practising Ashridge College tutors on learning and programme design, this research stresses, above all, the need to begin addressing important questions by recognizing the significance of those debates which are widely considered by practitioners to be too academic. Developing conceptual frameworks, which are at the same time practically useful, serves the dual purpose of stimulating the kind of debate which may lead to mutual understanding and a common dialogue, as well as providing a base from which to go on and explore related issues in greater depth.

The types of learning framework proposed here, which emanates from the popular notion that there are "hard" and "soft" subject disciplines, provides us
with just such a framework. It is used as a pivotal point, enabling a further exploration of two particularly vibrant and often culturally sensitive issues, which are fairly prominent among practising management developers at the moment. First, what level of experiential activities should be included in the programme and, second, to what degree does a tutor have to diagnose the learning needs and begin the process of helping individuals to implement what they have learned, when running a programme? It is only when business schools and management colleges begin to understand and appreciate the variety of justifiable positions taken on these issues that they can hope to develop an effective overall "learning" strategy which genuinely encompasses all facets of the marketplace.

Although it is more comfortable for management educators to delude both themselves and their clients that all tutors, from a variety of subject disciplines, share the same basic assumptions about learning, surely it is more intellectually honest and productive in the long term to suggest proudly that they belong to organizations which encompass a wide range of viewpoints. Indications from the marketplace suggest that the new cadre of sophisticated managers will judge their worthiness largely in accordance with their responses to this particular challenge.

References