Development of the Learners’ Management Philosophy in a Critical Management Studies Course

Stream: Whither the MBA?

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Abstract
This study addressed the factors affecting the development of learners’ management philosophy during their participation in a CMS course. Two factors emerged in response to the research question. One factor centered on the way participants linked prior experiences to the content, using experience as a guide for the usefulness and validity of the course. The second factor identified the role of the instructor and discussion. The results of this study revealed that a CMS course can impact the learner’s management philosophy in multiple ways within the same course. Some learners enter CMS courses with critical management philosophies and critical management educators can provide a legitimate space for them to find their voice. At the same time, we can provide spaces for them to engage in actual practices to change organizations. In this way, CMS can move from deconstruction to action with potential to affect how organizations operate in the world.

Keywords: critical management education, MBA education, qualitative research, management philosophy, adult education, and critical management studies

Introduction
The literature addressing the importance of Critical Management Studies (CMS) to management education emphasizes using a socio-political lens as a necessary step both in teaching managers and prospective managers to explore the underlying power and privilege that oppresses many marginalized groups, and as a vehicle for bringing about a more equitable economic system (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, 2003; French and Grey, 1996; Willmott, 1997). French and Grey (1996: 2) point out that,

The fact that management is socially important means that it is vital that it be exposed to critical interrogation. In addition, since management education is such a significant arena for the reproduction of management, it follows that it is a primary site for such interrogation.

Learners usually do not readily accept this challenge to the prevailing worldview (Reynolds, 1999b). Capitalism is considered the primary economic system that governs the way organizations operate (Korten, 2000), and the CMS course experience has the potential to provoke strong reactions in learners. Therefore, the consideration of learners and their interactions through the learning process to this challenge is a significant area of research in developing an educational experience employing Critical Management Education (CME) to critique the principles of management and organizations.

The CME literature has focused primarily on the need for critical content and critical pedagogy (Caproni and Arias, 1997; French and Grey, 1996; Nord and Jermier, 1992; Reynolds, 1999a, 1999b; Roberts, 1996; Thompson and McGivern, 1996). However, few empirical studies of the learning process in CME have been undertaken. The problem addressed in this research sought to correct this lack of attention to the learning process occurring in CMS classrooms and its impact on the development of the learners’ management philosophy.

Outside the arena of CME, scholarship has focused on issues arising in higher and adult education when courses are offered addressing power and privilege
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as it manifests in our society. These issues have usually been situated in terms of race, class, and gender (Allen, Floyd-Thomas, and Gillman, 2001; Banning, 1999; Chan and Treacy, 1996; Davis, 1992; Higginbotham, 1996; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1998; Meacham, 1995; Tatum, 1992; Tisdell, Hanley, and Taylor, 2000). These courses are a ‘challenge to some students who find this material foreign, question its inclusion in the curriculum, and may be deeply disturbed by the implications it has for thinking about themselves’ (Higginbotham, 1996: 203). Some learners react to these challenges by resisting (Davis, 1992).

Some studies in CME have looked at learner reactions in terms of both learner engagement and resistance to these issues (Mazen, Jones, and Sergenian, 2000; Rigg and Trehan, 1999). The conclusion of these studies is that providing CME to address societal power and privilege can foster positive outcomes such as personal growth or affirmation but in other cases can generate negative outcomes resulting in anxiety and disempowerment. Both Vince (1996) and Kumashiro (2002) state that it is important to deal with resistance and anxiety rather than focusing primarily on the rational and practical.

Issues of power and privilege are part of every educational agenda whether acknowledged or not (Cale, 2001; Tisdell, Hanley, and Taylor, 2000). These issues are also part of the process that learners use when encountering a dialogue critiquing capitalism. Managers, as a professional group, exert considerable influence on many aspects of society (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, 2003; Friga, Bettis, and Sullivan, 2003; Reynolds, 1999b). The learning process can significantly facilitate or impede the capacity of the learner to engage in critical thinking about these issues. A better understanding of this process will help management educators open up important conversations about the issues of power and privilege embedded in capitalism. The research question addressed in this article asks: What factors within the context of a CMS course contribute to the development of a learner’s management philosophy?

Method

The lens of power and privilege, especially in terms of voice, was important in the construction and analysis of this study. Alvesson and Willmott (1992) point out that one purpose of CMS is to pose questions about voice: Whose voice is speaking loudest? Whose voice is silent or can barely be heard? Whose interests are served and whose interests should be served in the area of work and capitalism and its impact on the individual and society?

As a qualitative researcher, I am interested in the interactions of individuals with their world and the way individuals construct meanings and experiences from these interactions (Merriam, 1998). In this study, I was interested in the world of the learners’ participation in a CMS course. I selected two CMS educational sites from four instructors that responded to my research request on the CMS listserv: a University in the United Kingdom and one in the United States. The criteria for a site were a Masters or Ph.D. level course in a traditional business school with an agenda centered on CMS.

The course in the UK was a required course in an MSc management degree program titled ‘Critical Perspectives on Management.’ The purpose of the course was to ‘provide an introduction to “anti-corporate” and “anti-managerial” movements, with a view to a deeper understanding of the reasons for the emergence of this current resistance to business and management.’ The second site in the southeastern part of the US was a required Ph.D. seminar in ‘Critical Accounting and Accounting Information Systems (AIS).’ The course objective was to provide the
learner with an ‘in depth understanding of the critical accounting and AIS literature and acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to undertake scholarly research in the area.’

This research used multiple methods for data collection. They included semi-structured interviews with the learners, class observations, and interviews with the instructors, and course documentation. While learners volunteered to be interviewed, I also specifically sought out volunteers who were representative of the class demographics based on gender and nationality. Table 1 provides details about each participant.

**Table 1 – Participant Profiles**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Degree</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Nationality</th>
<th>Years of Work Experience</th>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Msc</td>
<td>Late-20s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Turkish</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>Msc</td>
<td>Mid-20s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>British, Anglo-Indian</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>Msc</td>
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<td>F</td>
<td>Greek-American</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lucy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosemary</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
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<td>F</td>
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<tr>
<td>Trent</td>
<td>Msc</td>
<td>Late-20s</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>British, white</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The interviews contained three sections. First, I asked the participants to discuss the ethical positions surrounding a topic discussed in a previous class. At UK University, this topic was the minimum wage and at Southeastern USA University, the topic was the issue of integrity and independence in accounting. These topics were selected based on conversations with the instructors and learners that they had generated a high level of learner engagement during the class discussions. In the second section of the interview, I asked the participants to describe in detail a personal learning experience related to the CMS course and why it was significant to their learning. During the third section of the interview, the participants were asked to describe a personal management situation that involved some tough decisions on the part of the manager. For both the first and third part of the interview, I asked the participants to identify their perceptions of the ethical issues involved, assess the topic or situation through the lens of a manager who used a CMS perspective, and to describe their views on the situation both before taking this class and at the time of the interview. Personal experiences are considered potentially more revealing of a participant’s assumptions, motivations, and worldview than direct questions providing examples that refer to a wider and more social context and meaning (Tripp, 1993).

The class observations were another data source. I was an outsider to the instructors, learners, and institutions. I decided that I would not participate in the classes, especially because I was entering these particular learning communities at the end of their time together. At the beginning of my first observation, the instructor
introduced me as a researcher who was interested in the learning that occurred because of someone’s participation in a CMS course. He stated that I would be observing the last three classes and would be interviewing students. At this time, I personally invited students to volunteer to be interviewed. The main structure of the class observation was to note who was talking and for how long, as well as the topics that were discussed and content of the discussion. Given the nature of class observations the topics and discussion were recorded with broad brush strokes and not in detail. I was trying to understand the way the students were relating to the topics from a critical management perspective, especially around the issues of voice and participation.

The primary method of analysis used was the constant comparative method applying a lens that focused on power and privilege dynamics. As I developed themes, I looked for comparisons and contradictions within each participant, as well as across the participants and other data. The constant comparative method, based on Glaser and Strauss (1967) grounded theory approach ‘has been adapted by many researchers who are not seeking to build substantive theory’ (Merriam, 1998, p. 159).

In any research, it is important that we explicitly discuss any associated limitations and biases (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). Two different research sites in two different countries had limitations and advantages. As an American, I was an insider (emic) at Southeastern USA University. I had another insider perspective there because I am a CPA and have worked in the accounting field at various levels for 20 years. My insider perspective enabled me to understand jargon and identify closely with the participants in the PhD seminar in Critical Accounting. This shared background enhanced the depth and scope of our conversations, as well as adding to the analysis. The disadvantage was the missed opportunities to delve further into something the participant said because of an assumption on my part about a shared understanding. The result of this is that I felt that the interviews with participants at the site in the UK were richer and more complex. Being a cultural outsider (etic) in the research site at UK University also brought advantages and disadvantages. Though my outsider perspective caused me to notice things that an insider might have overlooked, on the other hand, because I was not familiar with the cultural nuances, I may also have missed something that was important.

Included in this emic/etic tension is the fact that I have an Americanized view of the business world. In spite of my critical worldview of capitalism, I benefit from the system. In addition, because of my perspective as a critical adult educator I have assumptions about the educator/learner interaction and learner engagement/disengagement that color the way I conducted my interviews, interacted with participants, and with the data. One way I managed this tension was to consciously be aware of and actively work to bracket my assumptions during observations, interviews, analysis, and write up of my research (Patton, 2002). I did this by approaching the data with an open mind, as well as checking perceptions with participants and others.

Findings

I began by categorizing the participants as having one of two beginning management philosophies: a mainstream management philosophy or a critical management philosophy. While I used specific categories, it is important to recognize that management philosophies start and end along a continuum (see Figure 1). Even those who fell at the critical end of the spectrum accepted some of the tenets of capitalism. Under the mainstream management philosophy category,
capitalism is defined as the primary economic system where the most important objective of management is to ‘maximize shareholder wealth.’ On the other hand, the critical management philosophy category recognizes that capitalism is not necessarily the best system, especially when it focuses exclusively on profits. Therefore, a socio-political lens is important in critiquing management. In addition, the manager’s role is to use their power to affect an individual or organizational situation by acting in ways that place other values (the environment, for instance) higher than or at least equal to profit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mainstream management philosophy</th>
<th>Critical Management philosophy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Capitalist</td>
<td>Socio-political critique of capitalism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goal: Maximize shareholder wealth</td>
<td>Goal: Multifaceted</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 1. Definitions of management philosophy*

In the analysis of the impact on a learner’s management philosophy, I established that there were four possible directions for the learner to move. My analysis revealed that participants were either affirmed in their original philosophy or there was movement from a mainstream management philosophy to a critical management philosophy. Although I looked for movement from a critical to a mainstream management philosophy, none of the participants appeared to move in that direction.

**Development of Management Philosophies**

Figure 2 illustrates the development of the participants’ philosophies during the semester. These findings indicate that learners come into CMS classrooms with different orientations. In fact, the course simultaneously reinforced these different, even opposing, orientations at the same time. This occurred even though each of the courses was highly critical, even anti-capitalist, in nature.

Six of the eleven participants began the class with a mainstream management philosophy. Four of these six learners had their philosophy ‘affirmed.’ These participants, all from UK University experienced the course as an affirmation of their beginning beliefs even when the course content ran counter to those beliefs. They viewed the models of good management and capitalism espoused by both society and their other management courses as important to their success. Maximizing shareholder wealth was the ultimate goal. As an example, Heather stated, ‘if you study, for example, management, your goal is to be a manager and earn a high salary, this is the outcome of your struggle …you are not supposed to be anti-capitalist and I don’t consider myself anti-capitalist.’ Trent described himself as ‘an ardent capitalist.’

Two of the six participants from UK University experienced a shift from a mainstream management philosophy to a more critical view of management and organizations. While they continued to view capitalism as the primary economic system, they were now aware of some of the problems caused by capitalism and dilemmas that needed to be addressed.

John illustrates this movement to a critical management philosophy. His undergraduate degree in business provided him with a firm foundation in mainstream management philosophy. He described it, as ‘before I took this course, I would have
thought that effort does mean something at the end of the day, it's productivity. I guess I was a capitalist at best.' However, the course moved John beyond his prior experiences. By the end of the course he stated, 'Productivity and profits wouldn't be what I solely focused on. I would still consider them...obviously, it would still be important...But it’s not the be all and end all so you would take other things into consideration.' The course helped the participants to expand their management philosophy beyond the mainstream management agenda. In a movement toward a critical management philosophy, they both felt that other issues needed to be carefully thought about in addition to maximizing shareholder wealth and managers had a responsibility to consider these issues.

The other five participants began the class with some aspects of a critical management philosophy and the impact of the class was to affirm and clarify their philosophy. Two learners from UK University and all three learners from Southeastern USA University began the semester supporting a critical management philosophy. They related stories about prior work experiences where they acted from an ethical or critical stance. The UK participants related experiences where the consequence could have been that either they lost their job or their employees would lose their jobs based on their actions. Those from the US had been involved in

Figure 2. Development of the participants’ management philosophy
unethical situations where as accountants they needed to take stances that resulted in someone being fired, an investigation by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), or even a major restatement of the company’s profits. The choices they made reflected a decision to place a higher value on something other than profits. In fact, their actions resulted in less profit. These participants thought that the CMS courses affirmed their beliefs.

Gary worked as the head butcher in a supermarket. His story dealt with managements’ directive to throw away extra meat sent by mistake to the supermarket. If they sold the meat, the store would have to record a loss. Management preferred to throw the meat away rather than reduce the price. Gary explained,

In the end, I reduced it. I was like “if you want to throw it away, you throw it away, I’m reducing it.” So I did. I sold it and I said to the manager, “Well, if you have got any problems, call me in…until you stop this happening. I’ll do whatever I want” and they were like, “We’re your managers.” “Yeah, but I’m the butcher.” This kind of power struggle [was going on].

He indicated that before the course he did not believe that ‘profits should rule.’ The impact was ‘the course has confirmed my beliefs….what this [master’s program] has been saying to me so far is that…profit rules. I believe profit shouldn’t rule, so this [CMS] course has confirmed more what I think’.

Factors Influencing Development

Based on the findings regarding the impact of the CMS course on a participant’s management philosophy, the next important issue was to examine the factors within the context of a CMS course that contributed to the learners’ development. Learning dynamics are the interactions that occur between learner and course content and process, between the learner and the other students in the class or outsiders as they communicate about the course, and the interaction between the learner and the instructor. This study determined that the main factors that influenced these interactions and the learning occurring in CMS courses were content and process. These factors in turn affected the development of the participants’ ending management philosophy.

The primary factors influencing the development of the participant’s management philosophy were (a) course content interacting with elements of prior educational and life experiences that could act as a bridge to the concepts of CMS, and (b) the process in terms of the role of the instructor and the discussions, which occurred both inside and outside of the classroom setting. After a general discussion about each of the factors, I will discuss how these factors affected the development of the participant’s ending management philosophy.

The interaction of course content with prior experience was one factor that influenced the development of a learner’s management philosophy. For most of the participants, this course was their first exposure to a critical perspective not only in management but also in any subject area. Therefore, prior experience acted as a guide to the validity and usefulness of the course content. This strong influence determined the way the course affected any change from their beginning management philosophy.

The role of process involved the interaction of the learner and the instructor as well as the interaction between the learner and others. These interactions are designated as (a) the role of the instructor, and (b) the role of discussions. In all
classroom situations, there is an interaction between the learner and the instructor. Both instructors used critical pedagogy to engage the learners in expanding their understanding and viewpoints to think about management in a critical manner. Discussion was the primary critical pedagogical instrument. In the Ph.D. seminar, the class of four learners easily lent itself to the discussion format. In the course at UK University, with 60 learners, a large class discussion was part of the group presentations. In addition, the instructor engaged the learners in smaller group discussions as part of each groups’ preparation for their presentations. Both instructors tried to be as neutral as possible in their input into class discussions, presenting positions that were not their own, and attempted to keep the discussions on track and focused on substantive issues.

The participants shared Sharon’s assessment of the instructor as someone who has ‘got that expert power.’ While the instructor was viewed as the expert on the subject, the participants also felt the instructors did not try to get the learners to regurgitate the instructor’s views on the course content. In fact, in contrast to their other management courses, the participants felt strongly that the instructors encouraged the students to develop their own opinions and beliefs about management. From the participants’ point of view, this freedom to develop their own opinions and views was an important aspect of the class. The instructor’s expectations, as well as the course content and discussions helped the learners to develop their management philosophies. The participants felt that this course was different because the instructor encouraged the learners to think about, articulate, and voice their own opinions, provided the students with ‘more freedom to think’, and was ‘more encouraging of your own thoughts.’

The role of discussion was another important learning dynamic. John used the term ‘collective learning’ to describe this dynamic involving discussion, both inside and outside of the classroom. This allowed the learners to engage in discussions where, as Daniel pointed out, they could experience ‘an opening in my mind that not everyone thinks the same way.’

Mainstream management philosophy affirmed.

All of the participants whose mainstream management philosophy was affirmed had strong experiences or beliefs that outweighed any new knowledge learned in the course. Lucy firmly believed that her ‘views are determined by my upbringing, my experiences, and my education more than just one module course.’ Sharon was able to establish abstract links from the course content to her previous coursework; however, it was a different matter when she talked about her prior experiences and the minimum wage earners in her father’s firm. Then she saw the issues in an entirely different light explaining,

We are lucky in a way that if someone takes a day off, they don’t want to be paid for sick pay because, again, it’s a family atmosphere. But I suppose if I was working perhaps in the public sector…we have to get something back from them if you gave them more than the minimum wage. We can give them incentives like training for taking on extra work.

Her experiences informed her views that in her father’s firm employees were willing to give up sick pay because they were part of the ‘family’ and not really employees. She never indicated that she was aware of the ‘privileges’ that actual family members had, such as receiving profits, that were denied to employees. She forged
links from her prior experiences to the course content only on an abstract level allowing her to affirm her mainstream management philosophy.

These participants felt that the information they received from the content did not change their beliefs based on their prior experiences. They tended to view the content as being extreme. As Heather pointed out, managers were portrayed as ‘monsters.’ They viewed the course as providing information and something they needed to pay attention to only because it was a required course. However, this information only served to affirm their belief. Trent contended that, ‘it’s not capitalism that is the problem, it’s human nature.’ The participants viewed the questions posed by the course content as leaving them with only two choices – you are either a capitalist or an anti-capitalist. Viewing the choices that way, the course content affirmed their original mainstream management philosophy.

The instructor’s role was described by Sharon, as someone who had knowledge that might be valuable, ‘he is the lecturer and I thought, well, maybe he’s got a point there. We look up to him and say, ‘he knows what he is talking about; obviously, he’s the lecturer’ so that gave me another perspective on it.’ Only Sharon noted that her CMS course ‘lets me explore my own views whereas the other modules don’t really ask for your opinion as much as this one does.’ Heather’s view was that neither criticism nor discussion was appropriate in management courses. The other two participants did not mention that learners were encouraged to form his or her opinions.

They also described the discussions in a very casual manner as ‘fun.’ Trent talked about ‘they are really starting to get into it.’ These participants saw the discussions and course content primarily as a place to gain new information and facts. They did not need to develop their voices; the dominant view of management had already given them a voice.

Moving toward a critical management philosophy.

For both Daniel and John, their prior educational and life experiences were very different from the course content presented. In spite of this, they were able to build bridges from their experiences that allowed them to integrate them into their new knowledge and move to a critical management philosophy. John described prior educational experiences as teaching him ‘to run your own business, to be the chief executive of business…we’ve been sort of told that’s the thing to do, you’ve achieved something with your life if you reach that position.’ However, John was very interested in the course content and new ways of looking at management. He was willing to do additional reading and to seek out different sources to obtain new information and viewpoints, because of his interest in the critical content.

Daniel thought the content helped him ‘to see kind of how management fits into the real world.’ When discussing the minimum wage issues Daniel linked the topic to his experiences as a missionary pointing out,

I have been out and experienced that situation a little bit to see people’s lives that were struggling day by day just to have enough food to eat….I don’t think I’d really thought about the implications on a wider scale. I’d seen implications on a personal scale but not the ricochet effect that I was talking about.

These participants used their experiences as bridges to gain a different way of looking at the world. In essence, what happened that was different from the experience of mainstream participants was that they developed a new link. Through
the content, they acquired a different way of viewing their experiences that moved them to a critical management philosophy.

For these participants, the role of the instructor was more than an expert. His ability to invite the learners to think for themselves was also important. Daniel felt that the instructor invited the learners 'to think, it's invited us to have our own opinions and give our views on certain issues which are not just applicable in terms of management, they're applicable in terms of ourselves, our own lives.' It was important to these participants that not only were their opinions valued but that the course material was relevant to their lives.

Both John and Daniel experienced the discussions as important. For instance, Daniel mentioned,

I just think discussing that with other people in my group and just seeing sometimes the differences in opinion, that that's 'just the way it is' or people who share the same opinion, "that's terrible"....I think people's reactions were the greatest thing, an opening in my mind that not everyone thinks in the same way.

This realization gave him permission to look at management and capitalism in a different way. As they endeavored to understand management in the light of the discussions in the course, the encouragement to develop their own voices and their ability to bridge their experiences with the course content, moved them to a critical management philosophy.

Critical management philosophy affirmed.

The participants who experienced the course as an affirmation of their beginning critical management philosophy did so because their experiences aligned with the course content. The intersection of the participant's past educational and life experiences and the course content was instrumental in this affirmation. The content confirmed their experiences and provided a language to articulate their beliefs about these experiences. All of the participants reported prior experiences that formed a basis for a critical management philosophy.

David illustrates the way the participants interacted with the content in light of life experiences. He explained his experience of writing the final course paper:

You start with that [a theory] and then you go back into I guess you call background stuff that you know. And so when I ended up writing about the Alaskan native situations, you're dredging up a lot of - for me, it seemed like there was a lot of - I found it very difficult to divorce - or you can't divorce your own viewpoint away from that type of work.

While his experiences helped him to resonate with the ideas of Foucault presented in the content, he regarded the affirmation of his critical management philosophy as a very negative endeavor. The story is always the same. It's a matter of subjugation and colonialism and the exercise of power and greed. Then everywhere you look that is what you see and somehow or another that rubs off on you. And I went through that kind of process and so I felt pretty uncomfortable with it. But then again I also realize that's the way I see the world.

For these participants, the interaction with the content spanned a number of different levels; including gaining a new perspective that could help them with their anticipated real world problems, as well as helping them to find out more about who they were as individuals.
They valued the instructor’s encouragement as essential to the development of their voices. While they viewed the instructor as the expert, the development of their voices was instrumental in affirming their critical management philosophy. When Edward was comparing this CMS module to his other modules he said, ‘in this module, we were asked to think, we were asked to develop ideas, opinions, which we cannot find in any sources or any other places, the only way is to think about it.’

They also valued the discussion as the most significant interaction influencing their learning. The discussions, both the small group discussions with the instructor and the class discussions, opened the participants to different opinions. Edward pointed out, ‘when you have a discussion with a person face to face, you can understand something more about his attitudes. I think experiences are important and these are experiences that I will remember in the future.’ The representation of different cultures in a learning environment was also important. Edward, who was Turkish, explained, ‘For example, Chinese people may view a different kind of response than in England or in your country….I experienced a different culture’s response about that issue. It was helpful…. and reinforces us to read and think about the issues.’ This reinforcement helped to affirm his critical management philosophy.

For Ann, the discussions were also an important aspect of the course; her experience of taking this course was that it’s opened my eyes to more things. I learned things here that I couldn’t learn in books. That’s the difference. It doesn’t matter how many papers you read on this stuff, but having discussions about it is what makes it real and makes you get it.

Other participants viewed the discussions as a tool for moving from the lectures to practice. Gary explained ‘the encouragement of conversations in the class… It just helps you learn basically, helps you think, helps you put what is happening in the lecture into practice and that’s quite difficult.’

Power and Privilege in Discussions

The collective learning that occurred during the discussions was an important factor that was highly valued by the participants in the process of developing their management philosophy. However, they also raised questions about the type of participation that favored the dominant learners over those who were disadvantaged especially in terms of their English speaking skills. Participation in the discussions was important not only because an individual learner was allowed to articulate their own views but because they provided a way for learners to hear from others about their views and experiences on the topic. The participants from UK University were also well aware that only a handful of students participated in these classroom discussions. Five out of the eight U.K. participants felt that this disconnect was important enough for them to point it out to me in the interview.

In terms of the lack of participation in the discussions by the majority of the learners, only two of the participants with an ending mainstream management philosophy mentioned this. Sharon pointed out ‘there’s a couple of those who speak out, not everybody speaks out.’ Overall, these participants felt that the participation level of the discussions was acceptable and did not view the lack of participation outside of a core group of learners as problematic.

John, who had moved to a critical management philosophy, talked about the low level of participation by most of the learners but also did not view it as
problematic. He attributed the low level of participation to be the result of the learner's personal decision rather than a systemic problem privileging native speakers over non-native speakers. As he explained in our group discussion at the end when the questions arrive, there's only a few people who usually talk, a lot of people try not to say anything because they are shy or not understood or some people just don't like to speak out in front of other people.

Edward, whose critical management philosophy was affirmed, felt that the discussions were a very important element in the learning; however, he was concerned about learner participation in the discussions that favored some learners over others. He informed me that I don't know if you know this or not, but everybody is not talking in class. Some of the people feel comfortable to talk among others. And I don't know if you noticed or not, but...mostly the natives are talking in the class.

Many of the participants discussed the dynamic that restricted participation of some of the learners even though it was at odds with their other comments about the importance of discussions to their learning. Based on my notes from three class observations I found that indeed there were only a handful of students engaged in the discussions each week. There were 60 learners in the class in the UK, but the total number participating during each class ranged from 11 to 20 students or about a third of the class. Most of those students participating were native English speakers. On average native speakers engaged in the class discussions for 78% of the time although they represented only 45% of the class membership. For two group discussions the native speakers monopolized the discussions.

It is important to note the instructor's assessment of the discussions. Overall, the instructors did not appear concerned with the way that a minority of learners (mostly white native-speaking males) monopolized the class time during the discussions. This is where the hierarchical nature of the learning dynamics was most evident. For instance, neither of them indicated awareness that the power dynamics as part of the educational process needed to be addressed. The instructor at UK University talked about the fact that only a handful of learners were engaged in the large group class discussions. He pointed out that only one female was a regular participant of the discussions. However, there was no mention of the fact that those who participated were also white and native English speakers. From the instructors' point of view, the fact that only a small group of students participated indicated that this problem was a result of the individual learner's lack of engagement with the course. There was no explicit acknowledgement of an underlying power dynamic privileging some learners over others. In other words, the instructor did not see it as a power dynamic that needed to be talked about in the class and perhaps intentionally shifted in order to create space for other learners. Their ideology about capitalism and society did not translate into the educational dynamics occurring in the classroom. If the discussions are an important factor in the development of the learner's management philosophy then this brings up two questions. What learning is occurring with the students who are not actively engaged in the discussions? In a course where one of the premises of CMS is to bring unheard voices into the forefront, what implications does this contradiction have on the learner's ability to learn about critical management ideas?
Conclusion

This study examined the impact of CMS courses on the development of the learners’ management philosophy and the factors that contribute to that development. Of the eleven participants, four experienced an affirmation of their original mainstream management philosophy, five had their critical management philosophy affirmed and two moved toward a critical management philosophy.

The contributing factors of content and process in a CMS course had varying affects on the development of the learners’ management philosophies. For those whose mainstream management philosophy was affirmed their prior educational and life experiences outweighed the course content, the power of the instructor as expert, or the discussions to change their philosophical outlook. In the class, they did learn new facts but overall viewed them as deviant events in the system of capitalism.

The two participants who moved to a critical management philosophy also had educational and life experiences that supported the dominant view. However, their experience of the course was analogous to getting eyeglasses to improve your vision. The course content, the instructor as expert, and his encouragement to think and form their own opinions coupled with discussions that allowed them to hear what others were thinking helped them to see their experiences and the world of management in new ways.

The participants who experienced an affirmation of their critical management philosophy responded to the course in ways that were different then the others. The content, the instructor’s expertise, the encouragement to think about management and organizations in new ways resonated with their prior thinking and experiences. Within the course, they found a legitimate space, especially in the discussions, to voice their own critical management philosophies. In many instances, this was first place where their voice was the dominant viewpoint. This experience of validation was a powerful one for most of these participants.

The first conclusion is that CMS courses can impact a learners’ management philosophy in multiple ways within the same course. Both the adult and higher education literature recognize that learners and educators enter a critical course invested in some position in relationship to the critical agenda (Ellsworth, 1989; Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1998; Kumashiro, 2002; Tisdell, Hanley and Taylor, 2000). Ellsworth (1989) found that not only educators but also learners bring their own political perspectives into the educational setting. However, the implicit assumption in CME has been that the instructor brings a critical perspective while the learners bring a more mainstream management philosophy (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992, 2003; Reynolds, 1999b; Nord and Jermier, 1992). The focus is on the teacher as the expert who can clearly articulate for the learners the existence of different perspectives that are contained within the assumptions of management and organizations (Grey and French, 1996). This assumption of the teacher as expert further assumes that the learners are unaware of different perspectives and that they have accepted without question most of the underlying assumptions of capitalism. However, as this study points out, some learners enter the educational setting with critical management perspectives. They may or may not be able to articulate their critical perspectives in the language of the critical theorists but they are well aware of the power relationships that exist and the flaws in the system of capitalism and management. The participants in this study spoke of the CMS course as showing them the real world of business as opposed to the models for success that they applied in their other courses.
The CMS literature has suggested that managers are not homogeneous and in fact work within fragmented identities based on various organizational and social divisions (Parker, 1997). This study further supports this literature focusing on the fragmented identity and position of managers. Some participants in this study brought experiences to the classrooms weighted toward the ‘good’ of capitalism. The result of the course was that it affirmed their mainstream management philosophy. Others entered the course with experiences that reflected their beginning critical management philosophy and understanding that other values besides profit need consideration in organizations. The CMS course affirmed this critical management philosophy. Finally, other participants were able to bridge their previous “capitalist-oriented” experiences and mainstream management philosophy to move to a critical management philosophy.

Transformational learning as characterized by such educators as Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1990) postulate that learning results in dramatic and fundamental changes in our worldviews or philosophies of society and our role in it. Mezirow (1990:14) contends that through critical awareness, adults’ will choose ‘more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative perspectives’ as the superior perspective. However, the findings of this study revealed that change is not likely to occur in a CMS course. If the purpose of education is to change the behavior, attitude, or beliefs of learners than these classes had little impact. If the purpose is to engage the learners to think critically about their underlying values and assumptions around the issue of capitalism, then the class had a major impact on how the participants viewed themselves. Even those whose mainstream management philosophy was affirmed seriously thought about the content presented in the course.

A second conclusion is that the important factors of a CMS course affecting the learners’ development are derived from the intersection of course content, course process, the instructor, and the learners’ prior experience and identity. Learning from experience has been an important part of educational models (Jarvis, 1987; Kolb, 1984; Mezirow, 1991; Miller and Boud, 1996; Vince, 1996). Some have suggested that unique past experiences are instrumental (Boud and Walker, 1992) while others have discussed that past experiences are retold in the learning experience and then integrated at a different level (Bateson, 1994; Usher, Bryant, and Johnston, 1997). This study extends the focus of experience to encompass and reinforce the importance of prior experience as a contributing factor in the development of the learners’ management philosophy. In contrast to the previous literature about current learning experiences and their usefulness in helping the learner to achieve a different philosophy (Freire, 1970; Mezirow, 1990), this study found that while current experiences were important to the learners’ development that it was the prior experiences that affected the development in different directions.

It is sometimes assumed that self-reflexivity in a critical management course will lead to the learners broadening or changing their perspective (Caproni and Arias, 1997). However, this study found that self-reflexivity and critical course content are not sufficient in and of themselves to move a learner’s management philosophy from a mainstream philosophy to a critical philosophy. For those with a mainstream philosophy and strong mainstream experiences, self-reflexivity did not move these participants to a critical philosophy; it only served to affirm their original mainstream philosophy.

The use of dialogue has been problematized because it assumes that all members have equal opportunity to speak, and that safety and mutual respect are
components of the dynamics experienced by all learners (Ellsworth, 1989). However, power dynamics play a significant role in the learning environment and in turn over the ability of the learners to engage in the dialogue, which purports to privilege all voices (Johnson-Bailey and Cervero, 1998). Even the staple of adult educational techniques – discussion, both large and small group, is problematic because of the unequal power relations among the learners and the learner-to-educator dynamic (Brookfield, 2001). The notion that critical pedagogies, in and of themselves reduce or eliminate unequal power relations has been problematized in both the fields of adult education and critical management education (Ellsworth, 1989; Perriton & Reynolds, 2004; Reynolds, 2000; Reynolds & Tehran, 2001).

These are important implications for management education, especially with an MBA program. The corporate scandals of the past few years that began with Enron highlight the urgent need for discussions critiquing management including the issue of corporate ethics. The findings of this study suggest that management educators can provide important spaces for learners to examine and critique organizations. In this study, two participants moved to a more critical and ethical stance in their management philosophy. In addition, five participants experienced an affirmation of their original critical philosophy. The course validated their philosophy. That some learners enter our courses with critical philosophies means that if we can provide a space for them to find their voices then we may also be able to provide space for them to engage in actual practice within their organizations using different criteria for success other than just “maximizing shareholder wealth.” In providing this space for learners to initiate actual change, however small, within the corporate sector, we must also help them to understand that changes in one part of the system affect the other parts. Therefore, it is imperative that we to extend our critiques of organizations in the abstract to critique of the results of these changes in practice so that we are not just moving the oppressive and damaging aspects of capitalism from one marginalized group to another (Ellsworth, 1989). In this way, we can move from deconstruction to action that has very real potential to affect how organizations operate in the world and the number of voices that are included at the boardroom table.

References


