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Management education: reflective learning on human interaction

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to describe an attempt to develop a more effective technique to teach self-awareness and relationship skills.

Design/methodology/approach – A journal is used in combination with a model of human nature. The model lists human characteristics that the management trainee must identify in themselves and others they interact with. Students kept a journal and analysed their interactions in reference to a list of human characteristics.

Findings – Initial plans were disrupted by an earthquake. Analysis in the first journal instalments was limited and students regularly found negative characteristics in colleagues. Feedback was given and the second instalment showed greater quality of analysis. Students regularly found and showed understanding of the characteristics in themselves and others. They also put more thought in to how to manage those traits. The model provided a solution to the problems of marking reflective journals.

Practical implications – A key limitation of this approach is the difference in opinion that may exist between academics as to what characteristics managers should look for in themselves and others. There may be substantial divergence on this.

Originality/value – This paper contributes to management education by suggesting a method for enhancing both relationship skills and self-awareness. Problems in assessing reflection essays and journals can be overcome by grading their knowledge and understanding of the human characteristics.

Keywords Relationships, Journals, Reflection, Human nature, Human traits, Self awareness

Paper type Technical paper

1. Introduction

Waddock and Lozano (2012, p. 265) criticised management education stating that “We face a world in which management education, particularly MBA education, is by many assessments in crisis”. They quoted a number of studies that stressed the low relevance of university education to professional practice. A common criticism of business education is that graduates “are technologically literate and able to deal with intricate problem-solving models, but are essentially distanced from the human dimensions that must be taken into account” (Dilworth 1996, p. 49). Waddock and Lozano (2012) stress the need for self-awareness and self-development. They also need to understand those with which they work (Clydesdale, 2009).

Management success is highly dependent on interaction between the workers and colleagues that comprise an organization. The problem is how to teach this. A popular technique is reflection essays in which students and management trainees reflect on their activities (Raelin, 1997). A variation on this is the keeping of journals or diaries in which students describe events and reflect on their activities and interactions. Like



reflection essays, journals allow introspection, self-assessment and emotional evaluation. However, they are hard to assess as they involve highly individualised experiences. They can also suffer from an abundance of personal thoughts lacking an objective framework to structure thought and analysis.

This paper seeks to overcome these problems by combining journaling with a model of human characteristics. The next section discusses the use of journals, the model and some of the characteristics of the model that require further explanation. Section 3 describes the method of instruction, while Section 4 describes the results from the two journal instalments and student evaluations. Most of the students were practicing managers and their evaluations suggest that this is an effective and valuable learning tool. In conclusion, the list of human characteristics provides a useful guide for self-analysis and understanding interaction with others. It overcomes problems with marking found in other reflection essays and can provide detail on contemporary management problems.

2. Reflection journals and human nature

A key problem in management education is how to teach self-awareness and relationships skills. One common technique is to promote student reflection on their interactions and their responses to daily encounters. Gray (2007) describes a range of tools and processes that promote management reflection. These include storytelling, reflective and reflexive conversations, reflective dialogue, reflective metaphor, reflective journal, critical incident analysis, repertory grids and concept mapping. Holden and Griggs (2011) found that the quality of reflection deepened with more structured approaches. They conducted a study which encompassed a range of different reflective methods and found that more structured techniques encouraged deeper reflection than free form reflection.

Reflective journaling requires students to keep a journal and reflect on their day-to-day interaction in their workplace. A large range of studies have supported the benefits of reflection through journaling (Cyboran, 2005; Ballantyne and Packer, 1995; Fisher, 1996; Gorman, 1998). Reflective learning journals have been identified as valuable tools for translating theory in to action (Loo, 2002). They enable self-critiquing that promotes self-awareness, bringing thoughts and feelings to a conscious level which they can then analyse. As a consequence, Cunliffe (2004) states that it helps to develop skills as critical reflexive practitioners.

A number of studies have advanced the use of reflection exercises, but also revealed limitations in their use. Lawless and McQue (2008) used reflection exercises for an MA class in strategic HR. While successful in developing students questioning abilities, they found that the academic nature of the literature that accompanied the course undermined student learning. This raises the question of the ease of comprehension of the material that reflection is used in conjunction with.

Black and Plowright (2010) identified a temporal element to reflection quality. They required a postgraduate class for pharmacists to keep a reflective portfolio/log and found a qualitatively superior and deeper difference when reflection occurred at a later date, compared to initial reflections. In their study, students reported an almost unanimous appreciation of the value of reflective writing.

Journaling also draws on recent developments in management education including action learning and situation learning theory. The advantage of these is that learning

occurs in the context in which managers work. Many opportunities for learning occur as they perform their jobs; however, most manager do not know how to tap these opportunities (Marquardt, 2000). A large number of potential learning experiences occur that are never exploited, so action learning seeks to capture these experiences as learning (Smith and O'Neil, 2003).

Situated learning theory (SLT) recognises that learning in the course of work practice enables more relevant learning and is based on a different view of the education process to traditional learning. Fox (1997) notes that formal learning approaches see the mind as a container waiting to be filled up, with an emphasis on knowledge acquisition, storage and retrieval. By contrast, SLT “sees mind-in-action in the everyday world, creating knowledge and learning simultaneously in interaction with the social and material aspects of the lived world” (Fox, 1997, p. 732).

Action learning makes it possible for managers to learn from their own experience in real-life situations (Pedler, 2011; Marquardt, 2000; Dilworth, 1996). In action learning, participants meet in small teams to discuss workplace issues. However, discussion in small teams is not always appropriate for highly personal issues. Students and management trainees may feel uncomfortable airing their personal reflections in front of others. In some cases, students may have to address other people's faults, and open discussions on other people's faults could raise ethical concerns. Given the importance of confidentiality, a journal is a better learning mechanism for self-awareness and relationship skills, using the model as a guide to analysis of their own behaviour and interaction with others.

Journalism does not provide the team-based feed-back that action learning provides. This means that students do not get the intensity of advice that action learning offers, and increases the importance of feedback from the course supervisor. The importance of feedback is also stressed by Stewart *et al.* (2008) who noted that keeping a reflective journal is a skill in itself. Students may not possess the skills required to keep a high-quality reflective journal, and this places an emphasis on examiners to provide quality feedback.

Another problem with reflections is their personal nature which can be hard to mark and the variation of each student's encounters makes it hard to provide a structure for analysis. Betts (2004) went as far as suggesting that the subjective nature is so high that educators cannot decide if a piece of reflective work has failed. This has serious implications for the use of reflective material for, if we cannot assess if a material has been learned, we cannot reliably state that a required education goal has been achieved.

Markers can also be affected by their own pre-existing outlook. For example, in one study, Stewart *et al.* (2008) found that one marker adopted an academic perspective, while the other adopted a practitioner perspective. This suggests that the examiner should be aware of his/her own tendencies and fully explain the marking schedule in advance. Nevertheless, the authors believed these limitations can be overcome if learning outcomes and assessment criteria are designed to address the purposes for which the journal is used.

A solution can be found by considering Raelin's (1997) model of instruction. Raelin provided a model to illustrate how conceptual knowledge, as taught in class, can be turned into applied tacit knowledge. This could occur if learning went through four stages. The first stage is “conceptualisation” in which the student acquires knowledge through theory. The next stage is “experimentation” where students get to explore the

knowledge. The next stage is “experience” in which the student applies that knowledge which facilitates its conversion to tacit knowledge. Finally, students make sense of their experiences through the final “reflection” stage.

The problem is finding a suitable conceptual framework to aid student analysis and form a basis for marking. This paper argues that management theory and practice could be advanced if a model was used that provided that covered many of the characteristics that managers contend with in the workplace. However, this position leaves itself open to a number of problems, most notably, what human characteristics should be taught. Different management theorists have stressed different characteristics. For [Simon \(1957\)](#) and [Williamson \(1981\)](#), it was specific cognitive traits. For [Maslow \(1943\)](#), it was motivation. For [Goleman \(1995\)](#), it was emotions.

Humans have so many characteristics that any model will have omissions which lead it open to criticisms of inaccuracy. However, no model can include every aspect of humans, as [Williamson \(1981, p. 1544\)](#) notes “Human nature as we know it is marvellously rich and needs to be reduced to manageable proportions”. The process of reduction requires a selection of characteristics that best informs management. However, every management theorist will have their own idea about what characteristics should be included.

The characteristics chosen should have high relevance to management practice and theory and be supported by a significant research base to justify its inclusion. [Clydesdale’s \(2013\)](#) model was chosen, as it included all three categories: motives, emotions and cognitive characteristics that have been identified as being of high relevance to management (see [Table I](#)). Although [Clydesdale](#) describes it as a model, it is more accurately a list of characteristics.

The model lists cognitive, emotional and motivational characteristics of humans that impact on workplace interaction. Most of those characteristics will be well-known to management educators. The cognitive characteristics include schemas which refers to mental frameworks an individual holds about the way the world works, shaped by their experience and knowledge acquisition. Cognitive dissonance was also included. It refers to the anxiety or discomfort when we possess two incompatible thoughts ([Festinger, 1957](#)). Attribution theory refers to how individuals perceive and use information to arrive at causal explanations for events ([Fiske, and Taylor, 1991](#)). It was taught in conjunction with self-serving bias and the fundamental attribution error.

Characteristics that readers may be less familiar with include the limited span of judgment, which originates from the work of [Miller \(1956\)](#) who published a review of studies on cognitive capabilities. The studies revealed that the accuracy of human judgment and memory varied depending on the amount of information that subjects had

Cognition	Motivation	Emotion
Limited span of judgment	Understanding and control	Emotional leakages
Schemas	Self-identity	Temperament
Cognitive dissonance	Self-esteem	Gut feeling
Attribution theory	Belonging	Limbic hijack
Reciprocity	Security	Lingering and simmering
Social comparison	Physiological	
	Acquired needs	

Table I.
[Clydesdale’s \(2013\)](#)
core characteristics
for managers

to contend with. There are upper limits on human ability to remember and process information. That limit depended on the experiment but a common pattern was for subjects to exhibit perfect performance when dealing with five or six pieces of information; however, performance would drop with an additional piece of information. While similar to Simon's (1957) concept of bounded rationality, Miller's concept places an emphasis on how much information a human can effectively carry and on the reduction of performance when that capacity is reached. This concept has huge relevance for management. Managers are continually bombarded with problems, ideas and information that they must sift through, so if information quantity and quality impairs performance, even the most intelligent are vulnerable to impaired performance. In fact, we could re-define a manager's role as one in which they must balance their cognitive limitations. This has implications for the build-up of stress and the use of tools for accommodating their limitations, including planning and decision-making tools and delegation. It also draws management attention to the need to acknowledge the limitations of their staff.

Social comparison theory refers to the tendency of humans to gage fairness by comparing their own situation with those around them. It has importance for the workplace, not just for discipline, rewards and promotion, but also for day-to-day interaction with staff. Social comparison is commonly found in the workplace, and those comparisons play an important role for workers to determine what is fair (Vecchio, 1984). Social comparison theory underlies Adam's equity theory, which states that it is not just a simple process of comparison of outcomes, but also requires a comparison of inputs; what they put into work to get those outcomes (Adams, 1965). However, its use goes much beyond this and can influence a number of workplace issues including judgment as to fairness and appropriate behaviour on minor day-to-day interactions (which in turn can arouse emotion and affect motivation).

Reciprocity refers to the tendency for people to treat others as they have been treated by them. It has relevance for interaction at all levels of the workplace. It can direct the way an organisation member treats his/her colleagues, with workers placing consideration on how they have been treated in the past. A manager aware of reciprocity can build sustainable high-quality relationships with workers (Brandes *et al.*, 2004).

In this model, motivation is seen from a broad perspective. When management theorists study motivation, it is normally in the context of increasing worker effort. However, core motivations can underlie a number of behaviours at work, not just how hard people work. It is important to note that people will have different motives and not everyone wants to satisfy their motives for control, belonging and esteem at work. Needs change over time, and what motivates someone at one time may not motivate them at a later date.

Two motives that must be differentiated are self-identity and self-esteem. A body of research reveals that people are motivated to understand their place in the world. As people grow and gain more experience in the world, they gain knowledge about their capabilities and potential. They learn about their strengths and weaknesses and in what situations they are most likely to succeed. This self-learning results in a sense of identity; a knowledge about personality traits and any idiosyncratic characteristics. As our sense of identity develops, people create a mental representation of themselves that is referred to as a "self-concept" (Markus, 1977). Self-concepts can be a problem for managers in that they may not be accurate. Individuals may have poor self-perception

due to lack of experience or a desire to maintain self-esteem. This may place a manager in an uncomfortable situation where he/she has to give feedback that is inconsistent with how workers perceive themselves. Fortunately, people have a genuine desire for self-improvement (Sedikides and Strube, 1997).

Self-esteem and self-identity are closely related. A person's self-concept is an important factor contributing to welfare and success in life. With a positive sense of our self-concept, we have high self-esteem; by contrast, those with a negative self-concept have low self-esteem. "Self-esteem refers to an individual's overall self-evaluation of competence and social worth" (Kreitner *et al.*, 2002). It can be linked with both worker welfare and higher productivity.

Protecting self-esteem does not mean inflating self-concepts and creating an artificial sense of competence, as this could lead to a number of problems, especially when people fail to acknowledge their weaknesses. This can be a barrier to staff interaction, learning, identifying and solving problems. They will find it hard to acknowledge criticism, and if a manager does successfully change their view of themselves, the change in identity and loss of self-esteem may lead to a disassociation from the workplace. The challenge for managers is to reduce false self-concepts regarding work while maintaining the workers' self-esteem.

The emotional components of the model include temperament, gut feeling and limbic hijack. The latter concept refers to that when people experience high levels of emotional arousal, the limbic structure hijacks brain processing, overtaking the more rational thought processes that are linked to the neo-cortex (Goleman, 1995). Emotional leakage refers to the fact that we may unconsciously reveal our emotions to others despite efforts to hide them. Voice tone, facial expression, vocal patterns and body posture can all betray our attempts to appear calm. Because of their subconscious nature, we are not always aware that emotional leakage is occurring. This has important implications for managers who may put a lot of effort into saying the correct thing, but find the tone of their voice and body language are saying something totally different. Consequently, our colleagues receive a totally different message to the one intended.

The model also referred to the lingering and simmering nature of emotions. In-line with this, students were asked to consider their emotional response time, that is how long do their emotions simmer for. This was to encourage self-awareness and also acknowledge that others may have differing emotional response times.

3. Method

The class was taught in 2011, on a "leadership" course for a Master of Professional Studies degree, a degree similar to an MBA. The paper was taught as a distance learning course with seminars to be held in Christchurch, where the university is based, and Rotorua in the centre of the North Island.

The model was to be introduced in the first seminar. It was to provide an introduction to common human traits, which would be expanded on as the course progressed. Consistent with Raelin (1997), the seminar provided the conceptual theoretical framework, and students were given guidance on how to apply it to problems they encounter in day-to-day management.

At the end of the seminar, students were required to keep a reflective journal in which they were to analyse their workplace interactions by reference to the human characteristics in the model. The reflective journal constituted 35 per cent of the

assessment for the course. The model of human behaviour was to provide common characteristics that they would ideally observe and note in their journal how it impacted at their workplace.

A number of difficulties have been associated with the use of journals. Cunliffe (2004) noted that some students feel uncomfortable with its personal and unstructured nature. Students need to feel secure in recording sensitive and personal information (Loo, 2002), so confidentiality must be assured. This placed a huge demand on the lecturer to create an environment where it was safe to self-critique. To achieve this, the model was used to help introduce failings that we all suffer from. A theme of the course was that a good manager was not free of these traits but acknowledged them and found strategies to overcome their limiting effects. In class, the lecturer acknowledged many of his own failings. However, it is important not to over-do this, as it could appear weak and the students could lose respect for the learning process. Seeing failings as normal helped to remove stigma and accelerated the learning process.

Students can also fall in to the trap of reporting daily activities without a critical analysis (Cunliffe, 2004). And there is also the issue of how to grade journals and allocate percentages. The marking schedule examined their understanding of the human characteristics discussed in class. It involved:

- (1) Analysis of daily interactions:
 - reference to a large number of concepts from the course material;
 - journal entries show full understanding of those concepts; and
 - the activities described in the journal are appropriately linked to those concepts.
- (2) Re-evaluation of problems the student had during the day, how they dealt with them and, with hindsight, how they could have done it better.
- (3) Considering, in hindsight, other attributions.
- (4) Quality of the critique.

This raised another problem with the journals in that they contained an incentive to look for human traits when it may be that their workplace interactions offered nothing of interest during the time that the journals were recorded. Some students asked how many journal entries they should make and how big those entries should be. In response, they were told that it will be their workplace activities that determine the number of entries they can make and the nature of the discussion it enables, but clearly, their journals will provide a better learning experience with a larger number of in-depth analyses. However, this could provide an incentive for students to manipulate issues to meet the requirements of the marking schedule.

Another potential problem that this could encourage is the tendency to find faults in others. In this light, the model could be seen as a template for finding human weaknesses in others. Students were warned that this was a natural tendency and reminded of social comparison theory and the fundamental attribution error. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that their colleagues will have faults. Herein lies a problem when marking. A marker cannot assess if the colleague is the problem in any conflict or impasse. They are too detached to judge their assessment. Nevertheless, the students were still expected to view the situation with a constructive eye. The issue then becomes “how do you deal with someone with those traits in order to have a constructive

relationship?" Even if that person does have negative characteristics, they still need to work with them and avoid conflict.

Another problem came with one student who did not have a job and was at a disadvantage in having no current workplace interactions. He solved this by referring to interactions in previous work and in his home life. Finally, there was the potential for students to use the journal as self-promotion and report what a good job he/she was doing. To try to reduce problems, the journal was discussed in class. A theme in this discussion was that good managers are not faultless people, but people who understand their faults and those of others and find ways of working with them.

Consistent with elaboration theory, the model and interpersonal exploration also sought to provide an introduction to relationship management strategies that were taught later in the course. Elaboration theory states that learning should start with a few simple and fundamental ideas, which make it easier for the trainee to identify with the new knowledge. This early knowledge acts as scaffolding for later learning, which becomes increasingly more complex and elaborate (Wilson and Cole, 1992).

Major earthquake

The course was a distance learning course with seminars to be held in Christchurch, where the university is based, and Rotorua, a town in the centre of the North Island. However, two days before the first seminar, a major earthquake struck Christchurch killing 183 people and placing much of the city out of bounds. The university was relatively unscathed but the course coordinator lived in one the worst affected areas. The earthquake had a number of consequences for the course:

- The first seminar was cancelled.
- The journal which was to be submitted in three instalments was now to be submitted in two, which reduced the amount of feedback the students received.
- With buildings damaged, one student was forced to work at home, reducing interaction with colleagues and his chance to explore human nature in the workplace.
- Most workplaces experienced increased work with less resources.
- Christchurch-based students reported a greater concern for their own families than work issues.

Despite these issues, the same marking schedule was maintained but had to display tolerance of the circumstances in which the journals were being written, a factor easily done given that the instructor was also significantly affected by the quake.

4. Findings

First instalment

The Christchurch student's entries showed a pre-occupation with the earthquake. Christchurch-based students had new demands, as their workplaces had to respond to the quake. They found themselves operating under more stress, performing new tasks and balancing production and security issues with staff welfare. Many found their normal ways of operating were no longer suitable and they had to show greater

tolerance of others. One student, whose workplace was relative unscathed, reported how it affected normally mundane aspects of life:

As a result of the recent 22 February earthquake, many staff have heightened concerns about safety and working in large buildings or multi storey building. Staff are parking nearer the roadside and away from the building. Some people at work even park the car facing towards the road so that they could just start the car without having to reverse or make turns. At first I thought that was unnecessary, and people are just over reacting. But after talking to some people, I then realized the impact of such an event have on most of these people.

Despite the over-whelming shadow cast by the earthquake, students showed that they could use the model to explore human nature in the workplace. A common pattern in the early entries was for students to see more cognitive limitations and pursuit of self-esteem in others, than in themselves. They would commonly refer to “egos”. In marking these diaries, the marker could not say they were right or wrong. However, in feedback, it was stressed that if these features exist in their colleagues, how should they work within these features to overcome any weaknesses.

As entries progressed, students continued to note the importance of the ego, but increasingly saw self-esteem as a legitimate human motive. They also noted that, as managers, they needed to protect their colleague’s self-esteem if they are to work through many workplace issues.

Another common feature of the first instalments was a tendency to repeat a small range of human characteristics. For example, once one student identified schemas, he seemed to see it everywhere. This is not necessarily erroneous, as once a feature has been observed, it becomes easier to identify in other situations. However, the feedback on the first instalment prompted the need to identify other human traits.

As well as given individualised feedback, the class were reminded of the need to consider other attributions for circumstances and methods of overcoming problems. The need to self-critique and expand their repertoire of managerial behaviours was stressed. Feedback also stressed the importance of considering other ways of interpreting and responding to situations they experienced stating “not only does that mean considering more attributions, but it requires you to re-think causation and broaden your leadership repertoire. And be careful of the fundamental attribution error”.

Issues of bullying were reported and the journal seemed to play a therapeutic role, although that was not the purpose of the journal. The marking schedule could only consider how they analysed it, consideration of different attributions and alternative ways of dealing with it. If the student focused merely on how badly they were treated, it was necessary to draw attention to their analysis and attributions without appearing to blame them for their problems. In trying to promote alternative views of the situation, it is possible that the student might think you are saying that they are wrong to interpret it as they did. So, it is important to recognise the legitimacy of their experience and perceptions and not offer other explanations. Nevertheless, they were encouraged to analyse their situations in depth and from other viewpoints.

Second instalment

There was a significant leap in quality in the second instalment. All students saw the journals as a chance to improve their management performance, and most made a point of searching for their weaknesses, two going as far as giving surveys to their colleagues and staff to comment on their own performance.

The traits chosen for the model were regularly identified by the students. However, some human characteristics appeared more than others. The most common motivations impacting on the workplace were, in order of importance, self-esteem, understanding and control, belonging and self-identity. The motive for security was only explicitly noted twice but was implied regularly in light of the earthquake. Physiological motives and acquired needs were only mentioned once each.

Self-esteem was commonly seen to influence business discussions, both in themselves and other participants, with some noting that a knock to their self-esteem affected their sense of belonging to the organisation and subsequent motivation to work. In some cases, colleagues appeared to be complete shockers including pushy salespeople, rude bosses and incompetent staff. In some cases, feedback was given to students that respect was a two-way process, and there were times they needed to protect their own self-esteem.

The student's entries detailed how group interaction affected motivation, for example, a staff member bringing scones for a group meeting helped increase a sense of belonging and positive feelings between members. One student identified that it was important not to be too assertive in matters that could impact on other's self-esteem:

An alternative attribution may have been that the clients were simply looking to maintain self-esteem; that my actions placed them in an uncomfortable truth, one which they felt compelled to fight. I was over-assertive and directing when the clients simply needed gentle nurturing.

The emotional traits in the model were reported less frequently than the cognitive and motivational features, although students regularly reported if they were upset and noted the state of their emotions. For example, one noted:

Some people say to let these emotional issues go, but they do affect and manifest in individuals differently overtime.

Students commonly showed a consciousness of their own emotional responses and how a knock to core motivations, in particular self-esteem, could generate an emotion both in themselves and others. When students reflected on their actions, some reported times when their emotions got the best of them and led to prolonged discussions that detracted from productive work. However, realising this enabled them to remedy the situation at a later date, as seen in this student's entry in which one worker was having to act as a translator for the multi-cultural workforce:

If I had done active listening with her, she would have felt calmer and felt understood by me acknowledging her point. Thereby cutting the time where she had to repeat her concerns to me. I would not feel so annoyed too and would be more efficient in terms of my work arrangements. I recognized that the time we spent discussing about the problems we have encountered in the kitchen is quite long [...].

[...] recently, I raised the issue with her again, and asked if what she was trying to tell me was that she felt tired as a translator because it felt like the Chefs were directing the anger at her and using her as a medium of transferring their anger to the other person which made Joyce look like she was the villain. With this, I acknowledged Joyce's feelings and she felt understood. Joyce looked better and I felt better too for being able to lift some stress off her and hopefully had created a better working environment for her.

Students commonly reported limbic hijacks and emotional leakage. Vocal tone and body language were the most commonly identified forms of leakage. This increased consciousness lead many to identify the need to control their emotions, a fact that many stated was not easy. Many referred to their “emotional response time”. Linked to the simmering and lingering nature of emotions, this referred to the length of time that it took for an emotion to calm down and allow more objective judgment. This was a useful tool for self-awareness with students frequently referring to this while noting how long it took for their emotions to calm down. This provided an excellent introduction to relationship management taught later in the course.

A notable feature of the journals was the strength of feelings that students felt towards colleagues, and it was apparent that this played an important role in workplace functioning. Students commonly noted how conflict raised stress and anxieties that flowed on to their personal lives and health. Consistent with elaboration theory, such acknowledgements reinforced the cost of bad relationships and the importance of relationship management which was the next topic in the course.

The journals provided a good platform for increased self-awareness, and the students constantly noted the cognitive patterns from the model in themselves. This included cognitive dissonance when awkward decisions were made. For example, one student questioned whether he should have convinced a solo mum with limited funds to buy a product, and found himself adding a consonant belief saying it would be good for her child.

Two students observed how people held different schemas in different departments in their organisations and noted that these were a source of conflict. Others reported that self-serving bias and the fundamental attribution error may have influenced their interpretation of some events.

In one case, a prolonged conflict was solved at the end of the journal, and while it is impossible to attribute this to the course content, in one of the two main communications, the student noted “In the email, I used some knowledge I gained from this particular leadership course in the way I structured it”.

Others noted that their management functions frequently placed them in positions where they exceeded their span of absolute judgment. This admission about their own limits enabled them to increasingly think about when such moments were likely to occur and the need for planning. Consistent with the notion of elaboration theory, this provided a good basis for a later part of the course which dealt with fighting fires, advanced planning and reducing stress.

A common theme of the journals was the balancing act that managers found themselves walking. For example, one manager noted that there was a fine line between helping and interfering. Another example of the difficulty in finding balance could be seen in the case of a manager who tried to boost his staff’s self-esteem but was seen as not being genuine by those staff. It was noted that colleagues varied in motive and emotions. One noted how colleagues had varying temperaments that required different responses from him and through this reflective process expanded his behavioural repertoire:

Since maintaining a diary of personal interactions I have gradually developed awareness around purposefully tailoring my interaction to match client or colleague temperament. In this event it was an explorative process.

As the course progressed, journal entries also made reference to relationship management strategies and leadership theories taught later in the course, but these factors are beyond the scope of this paper.

Student evaluation

At the end of the course, students were sent the standard university student evaluation with two extra questions on the journal and model on human nature. With the majority of students being practicing managers, the feedback is informative on the usefulness of the teaching technique. The questions were sent to all 13 students enrolled, including two who did not finish the course and one who failed. Six responses were received.

The documented feedback is consistent with informal feedback received and is shown as follows:

Student evaluation: questions and answers:

- Q1. Did the material on human nature assist your knowledge of the leadership process?
- Yes, the human nature topics laid a good foundation for the leadership topics.
 - Yes, I thought it was an excellent “lead in” to the leadership process.
 - Yes. Especially the diary made me think twice, and reviewed my own actions even after it has passed.
 - Yes, leaders need to understand human nature to be effective leaders.
 - Yes, I thought it was an excellent introduction. I come from a background in biological science. Thus, it really made sense to me. I really liked the effort in improving (dare I say it). A soft science or a philosophical approach using scientific method, i.e. economics, by way of linking the more “hard” or natural science knowledge.
 - Yes. I found it helped to understand aspects of how people think and processes of the brain.
- Q2. Was the diary a suitable assessment method to explore your knowledge of the material on human nature?
- Yes, a good way to relate the learning to everyday work.
 - When I first started the diary, I thought it was going to be an excuse in tedium, but as I got in to the course, I equally got in to the diary. I think it was an excellent tool in exploring human nature and the leadership process. The course was excellent in its content and was extremely well-presented. I am thinking about it constantly long after I posted off the final assignment.
 - Yes, but perhaps more explanation on how you would like the diary presented.
 - Yes, was particularly relevant for problems I was going through at the time
 - This was an excellent idea. I will continue to use this (although in a more restricted/streamlined form).
 - I found it very enjoyable and a way of reflecting on issues and focusing on why some people act and analyse their schemas.

The model was an excellent guide for learning about human characteristics that impacted on the workplace, and the journal was an excellent technique for reflecting and bringing these issues to the level of consciousness. Secondly, consistent with elaboration theory, the model laid a strong foundation for topics taught later in the course.

Implications

The study reinforced [Stewart *et al.*' \(2008\)](#) observation that keeping a reflective journals is a skill that requires formative feedback to develop. There was a significant leap in analysis after feedback was received, although changes after the earthquake reduced the number of instalments and opportunities to provide feedback.

Feedback quality is undermined by the fact that examiners suffer from lack of contextual knowledge. The examiner has limited knowledge of the context in which any reported interaction occurs. This includes any historical baggage or precedents and any contextual information that the student may not be aware of or just fails to report. With this in mind, the examiner needs to be very sensitive to what he/she can and cannot say. Examiners are not in a position to say that a student is wrong. They can however state if the student has knowledge of the model and if they have applied it correctly. The study encourages finding different interpretations, but the examiner found he had to repeatedly check himself and not make comments that exceeded the situation description. He might at times be able to say that "the way you have written this suggest" another possibility. However, this is still contentious as, the student may feel the exercise is undermining their judgment.

This raises an important ethical issue given the very sensitive nature of the interaction. As part of the reflective process, students may need to reflect on interactions that upset them. While this is part of the process, and it could be argued that learning to deal with others involves such reflection, it also raises serious ethical issues. It also may raise barriers to learning. Negative experience can truncate learning ([Yeo and Marquardt, 2015](#)) and affect ones motivation to learn ([Dewey, 1938](#)). For this reason, in subsequent classes students were asked not to engage in experiences that were likely to significantly upset them.

Another criticism linked to context is that of de-contextualisation, assuming individuals can transfer their learning from one context to another ([Pedler, 1997](#)). Given the variation in historical baggage, personalities and other situational factors, education must acknowledge that in human action, one approach or favoured behaviour does not fit all.

A final issue is the on-going impact of the education beyond the classroom ([Holden and Griggs, 2011](#)). The student feedback suggests it has had some effect, but the examiner felt more could be done to convert the experience in to more effective action. In subsequent classes, a conversation tree was introduced, based on a decision tree, but where students had to plan a conversation not having certainty on how their partner would respond. This is a matter for further research.

Conclusion

This study sought to find a more effective method of teaching self-awareness and relationship skills by combining a model of human characteristics with reflective journaling. The characteristics in the model provided a guide for self-analysis and interpretation of interaction with others. Understanding of the traits, as revealed in the

journals, formed the basis of the marking schedule, thereby overcoming a significant concern with reflection-based instruction.

Student evaluations revealed that both the model and journal were excellent tools for enhancing management practice, with students noting that they continued to refer to them after the assessment was finished. While useful for practicing managers, it raises the question, could this approach be used for undergraduates? Undergraduates have fewer opportunities to explore workplace behaviours but many have part-time jobs and will still engage with other people in their daily lives.

The journals could have another use. An early use of journaling was that done by Portuguese explorers in the fifteenth and sixteenth century who would document their voyages. Their journals would then be used as a store of knowledge and learning tool for those sailors who subsequently sailed on those routes (de Jesus Teodoro Dos Martines Lopes, 1997). This illustrates the learning potential that journals have, not just for reflexion, but for use by others if confidentiality is maintained and student approval gained.

Most of the students were in management positions, and the journals themselves provided excellent insight in to the role and tasks of managers. They could be a useful tool for other management students and academics in illustrating the issues that a manager faces and how they can be interpreted and addressed. Their description is arguably more illustrative of real-world management than many textbooks. For example, many text books stress the value of cultural diversity; however, these journals showed a very different picture with migrants from different cultures unable to get along, and another worker complaining she was tired of being used as a translator. She wanted to be left to do her job.

This paper provides a model to integrate human nature in to management education, with the goal of enhancing management performance. Understanding human characteristics and the relationship between them can guide managers in workplace interactions and increase the chance they get the outcomes they seek. Managers have been regularly criticised for their poor understanding of human nature. It is time that educators turn to this topic to advance management practice.

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