



Creating the Learning Space for Insider Inquiry: Threshold Concepts in Observing Organisations

Anne Graham & David Coghlan
School of Business, Trinity College,
Dublin 2, Ireland

Email: aregan@tcd.ie and dcoghlan@tcd.ie



'Insider Inquiry' Skills



*'Getting it is tough
when you don't even
know what you're
supposed to get!'*



Introduction

Examination of how an undergraduate business course was designed and delivered to enable final year students to learn ‘insider inquiry’ skills by focusing on both organisational dynamics (Coghlan & Rashford, 2006) and their own cognitional processes.



‘Insider Inquiry’

- ‘Inquiry from the inside’ and ‘inquiry from the outside’ are two modes of inquiry presented by Evered and Louis (1981). Typically researchers act as onlookers, and they apply a priori categories to create universal, context free knowledge.
- ‘inquiry from the inside’ researchers immersed in local situations generating contextually embedded knowledge which emerges from experience.
- Experience and inquiry from the perspective of being insiders creates the potential of developing skills that undergraduate business students can draw on in their future careers, especially those who become managers in later life.
- Insider inquiry of its nature requires a methodology that accommodates direct experience and closeness.



Knowing

- Structure of human knowing is a three-step process:
- experience, understanding and judgement (Lonergan, 1992).
- The cognitional operations form a general empirical method, which requires
 - i) attention to observable data,
 - ii) envisaging possible explanations of that data and
 - iii) preferring as probable or certain the explanations which provide the best account for the data (Coghlan, 2008).
- Such a reflective method provides an appropriate and useful approach for engaging in insider inquiry.



Davies and Mangan (2006)

- 3 Stages
- 4 Key Pedagogical Issues
- 4 Pedagogical Principles
- 3 Types of Activities



Davies and Mangan (2006)

- **Stages**
 - 1. Students progress in stages towards a deepening engagement with their academic communities.
 - 2. Becoming aware of and mastering threshold concepts enables the student can approach a deep learning and progression toward an integrated understanding is more likely.
 - 3. As students meet further threshold concepts, these may in turn transform their understanding of previous threshold concepts. This may have profound implications for their progress and achievement.
- **Key Pedagogical Issues**
 - 1 *a threshold concept acts as a keystone, bringing form and robustness where previously there was a collection of ideas.*
 - 2 *the threshold concept is distant initially from conscious experience and can only be experienced hypothetically.*
 - 3. mastery of threshold concepts within a discipline lead to an ability to bind ways of thinking and practicing within the discipline which creates an opportunity for an ontological shift in the learner.
 - 4. acquisition of threshold concepts transforms understanding of previously acquired subject knowledge, students need to be able to accept that, at each stage in their learning, their understanding is provisional.
- **Pedagogical Principles**
 - 1. Highlight variation
 - 2. Rework understanding of previously acquired concepts to help integration
 - 3. Expose ways of thinking and practicing within the discipline
 - 4. Each stage of student's learning is provisional
- **Activities**
 - 1. Reflective exercises
 - 2. Problem focused exercises
 - 3. Threshold Network exercises



Reflective Exercises

Area	Key Topics
Hand-in 1 Week 6: Term 1	This exercise invited students to apply the construct of organisational levels to their chosen organization. They were asked to identify who constituted the individual level and to pick a particular individual and recount that person's formal relationship to the organisation and data about the informal relationship picked up in conversation.
Hand in 2 Week 4: Term 2	Students were required to apply the construct of large system change to their organisation and to outline their experience of change in their case organisation. This hand-in was aimed at forcing the students to begin to anticipate their second essay which would be about large system change.
Hand in 3 Week 7: Term 2	The student was required to apply the 'strategic foci' construct to their case organisation. Strategic foci refer to activities in which organisations engage to frame their corporate picture, name their corporate words, do corporate analysis, choose and implement corporate action and evaluate corporate outcomes. The students were asked to relate this construct to their case organisation.
Seminars Weekly basis through both terms	Conducted in a facilitation of learning manner the instructor used some seminars were devoted to exploring the core content of the course by means of case studies from the core text, a video case, and the majority of seminar work focused on the progress of student's individual work and thinking in respect of their development of the understanding of their case. This offered opportunity for students to experience a wide range of organisational contexts, experience and issues.



Theme/Question
We would also like to know about your experiences of learning to reflect on experience.
I am familiar with this approach to teaching and learning.
It was clear to me how I was invited to learn in this course unit.
This course enabled me to learn how I know about something from direct experience.
I was able to ‘work from what I know’ and this helped me to understand my case/ organization.
Demands made by the course unit
What I was expected to know to begin with.
The rate at which new material was introduced
The skills or technical procedures needed in this subject.
The amount of work I was expected to do.
Working with other students.
Organising and being responsible for my own learning.
Communicating knowledge and ideas effectively.
Tracking down information for myself.



Theme/Question
What you learned from this course unit.
Ability to reflect on experience.
Skill of recognising how a particular event can be understood as a general organization issue.
Organising and being responsible for my own learning
Ability to communicate knowledge and ideas effectively.
Ability to track down information in this subject area.



Q.3. What would you say to David about how he should give the course next year?

Cutting Lecture Time

Double lectures too long to take in everything

Perhaps to be more concise & clear. A 2 hour lecture could be cut down to 1.

If the material is the same amount try and cut down on lecture time or split it into 2 one hour sessions. It's quite hard to pay attention for 2 hours when there isn't that much new information being presented each week.



Teaching abc 123

Teach first part of course quicker

Perhaps have a different tutor so students won't feel inhibited in expressing their confusion

Spending more time on strategy chapters

Work Feedback

Select the best essay from this year and distribute it as an example

More negative feedback ... feedback is always so encouraging. Would appreciate if David was more critical



Hand -Ins

More hand-ins to keep us focused on other things, not just the big essays

I found the hand-ins almost counter-productive. I rushed to get them in and they bore little resemblance to my actual papers.

More Live Cases

More concrete cases

More quest speakers – members of senior management brought in.

Use current business cases to contrast outsider inquiry. Use the observe, understand + judge process on how each of the students learns to aid learning

More through case examples to work through to guide

Live Cases



Maybe use 2 cases each instead of just 1, so to apply theory to our different experiences in orgs.

Perhaps have more cases so that people who find it difficult will get a better opportunity to try to understand

More concrete examples of OC in companies

Use live cases more from local Irish sources e.g. Lios Carraig

More outside readings for a different perspective

Analysis of different types of companies

More academic cases for seminars to fully cover each of the 3 areas, & then the 3 together

A few more case studies to illustrate how to look & analyze experience – His perspective not just ours

Positive Feedback



Keep going David you're great!

Keep it as it is

Similarly

I think he should do the same next year.

He should give a Masters course in OD

Negative (Constructive Criticism)

I would say to David to be patient and encourage more participation in the tutorials

Emphasise that the initial theory of exp – understanding – judgement is important and not simply let people get too immersed too quickly in their organisations. The way of thinking that is required needs to be more developed before addressing the organisation..



Findings



Davies and Mangan – 3. Stages

- Students progress in stages towards a deepening engagement with their academic communities.
 - *‘My first experience with the messiness was one of frustration. I found it difficult to gain any understanding of my case. I was too accustomed to inquiry from the outside with hypothesis, academic references and being impartial*
- Becoming aware of and mastering threshold concepts enables the student can approach a deep learning and progression toward an integrated understanding is more likely.
 - *The interactive nature of inquiry from the inside allowed me to develop some understanding of XYZstore that I would ordinarily have never received. It also allowed me to develop a way of looking at organisations that I can use elsewhere.*
- As students meet further threshold concepts, these may in turn transform their understanding of previous threshold concepts. This may have profound implications for their progress and achievement.
 - *In developing an attitude of inquiry, and constantly conversing with my co-workers in the duration of writing this paper, I found that by processing my thoughts along the three step process of experience, then understanding and finally judgment. I gained a clearer picture of life in the organization and indeed, what was happened around me and also concerning me.*



Davies and Mangan – 4. Key Pedagogical Principles

- **First**, insider inquiry as a threshold concept acts as a keystone, bringing form and robustness where previously there was a collection of ideas.
 - *“It’s a new refreshing way of looking at a subject, applying theory to what I already know as opposed to learning straight from a book.”*
- *“It was a completely new way of looking at things.”*
- **Second**, the concept of insider inquiry, is distant initially from conscious experience
 - *“Brought to the surface knowledge I had that I didn’t know I had”*
 - *“I have developed confidence in my own experience and ways of looking at things to a certain extent. I still have to recheck ideas to make sure they are referring to personal experience rather than a presupposed theory or business idea.”*
- **Third**, through engaging with their own organisational experience and attending to insider inquiry as a way of practicing and thinking makes the relationship between organisational levels, interlevel dynamics and strategy and change visible.
 - *“It was good not to be bogged down by a reading list and instead taking the time to think about what I know.”*
- **Fourth**, acquisition of threshold concepts transforms understanding of previously acquired subject knowledge, students need to be able to accept that, at each stage in their learning, their understanding is provisional.
 - *To understand the real simple essence of the problem often requires great understanding and knowledge both of the organisation and the ‘phenomenal field’. Insider insight yields knowledge that is ‘inherently more valid’ being in tune with how people react to specific changes because of their personal values”.*



Davies and Mangan – 4 Pedagogical Principles

1. Highlight variation

'New, refreshing way of looking at a subject, applying theory to what I already know as opposed to learning straight from a book'

2. Rework understanding of previously acquired concepts to help integration

'Yes from spending time thinking about it you realise things that you would never have even considered'

3. Expose ways of thinking and practicing within the discipline

'I had always looked at organisations from my perspective. Now I look at most I am involved in from others' perspectives also.'

4. Each stage of student's learning is provisional

Good for thinking about what was going on in the organisation, but... extremely confusing for writing up the case and applying the frameworks. Probably would have chosen a different case had I known what was to come.'



Davies and Mangan - Activities

1. Reflective exercises

- 3 staged hand-ins and weekly seminar work

2. Problem focused exercises

- Examination and discussion of each person's organisation and problem / issue
- Exercises related to core theory and course work on organisation levels, interlevel dynamics, strategy and change.

3. Threshold Network exercises

- 2 major essays (4000 words)



Conclusions

- The ‘space of learning’ is defined by Marton as “pattern of variation inherent in a situation as observed by the researcher” (2005:21). This variation can have any number of dimensions, and the space of learning depicts the possibilities of learning in relation to the capability in question that the learner will achieve.
- Basically the space is created by challenging the ‘taken for granted’ nature of the experience of ways of knowing in the person who previously only ‘knew’ one.



Conclusions

- Through the experience of engaging in insider inquiry, most of the students were able to progress towards the deepening engagement with their academic community as described in Davis and Mangan's (2006) three stage process.
- They were challenged to consider
 - what building blocks they had acquired within their subject areas,
 - how they were integrated across and within the subjects in the context of organisational realities,
 - and finally to cross a threshold in transforming their understanding of ways of learning and previously acquired knowledge.



Conclusions

- The action research approach adopted in this study engaged the authors in collaborative cycles of action and reflection over the duration of the course.
- . The collaboration between the authors throughout enabled the instructor to reflect-in-action and to make adaptations to the course as it progressed.
- This concurrent engagement of inquiry with action in the service of creating a learning space for the students to engage in insider inquiry as a threshold concept worked to deliver both practical outcomes for the students and actionable knowledge for the teaching community.



Questions?



Insider Inquiry as a Threshold Concept

Attributes of Threshold Concepts	Reflections on the Course
Transformative	The concept of using ‘insider inquiry’ defined in terms of attending to their own cognitional operations changed student’s perception of themselves and the subject area. As potential future managers, their role in organizational change requires them to integrate their own experience with that of other people and find workable solutions to complex organizational issues. There is no one simple answer or approach
Irreversible	Students generated contextually embedded knowledge which emerged from their experience. Hopefully they will not return to viewing organizations only from the outside in terms of the rationalist theories they have studied
Integrative	The insider inquiry conceptual process worked from direct experience forcing students to integrate their understanding from multiple sources and levels of complexity. It changed students’ perceptions of how to make sense of organizations and how people interact within them.
Bounded	Depending on the context and scale within which a proposed organization change was taking place the detailed management task differed. However, the nature and scale of the change at the levels of the organization helped to define the boundaries and clarified the communities of research and practice.
Troublesome	Adopting an ‘insider inquiry’ approach to organizational change is taken for granted by senior managers, consultants and practitioners. The knowledge associated with this is tacit, alien and ritualized. Furthermore it was conceptually difficult for undergraduate students bound within a particular discipline, to be asked to focus on both organizational dynamics and their own cognitional operations. It can also be inert, a technique learned by them at an earlier point in their studies but never related by them to everyday applications or to their business studies.