A Quest for Reality: Deconstructing the Democratic Environments of Learning Organizations

Devi Akella

The concept of management has been guided by the idea of science being objective and rational. This has given support to the image of management being a technical and neutral activity. Managers have been represented as competent mediators between stakeholders and other interest groups: consumers, suppliers, and employees. They have been portrayed as specialized groups possessing professional expertise to ensure rationalized and effective decisions for the efficient functioning of the organization (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). Drucker (1977) comments that once an organization grows beyond its small size it needs to depend on professionally qualified and skilled individuals known as managers to direct and coordinate the organization. In other words, management is grounded in a discipline and informed by the objective needs of the organization and of its people rather than on management-based ownership or political appointment.

But, this provides an inadequate and incomplete image of management. When management is discussed within its cultural and historical framework, it emerges as a highly political activity. It is as if recourse to science has been invoked simply as an ideology to subvert resistance towards the exercise of managerial power (Baritz, 1960; Wood and Kelly, 1978). Pfeffer (1981) opines that managers like to portray themselves as individuals who are involved in efficient allocation and use of resources—implicitly for the greater good of the society rather than think of themselves as organizational participants engaged in a political struggle over values, preferences, and definitions of technology.

In fact, management theory by ignoring "many deep-seated features of organizational life - inequality, conflict, domination and manipulation" in favour of "behavioural questions associated with efficiency and motivation" (Thompson and McHugh, 1995)-does not take into consideration the interests of management as agents of ownership or agents of control. Yet management can be argued to be "a labour process conducted for the purpose of control within the corporation and conducted moreover as
a labour process of production although it produces no product other than the operation and coordination of the corporation" (Braverman, 1974). Moreover, management is concerned with creating structures of relationships and power to implement strategies which ensure the effective subordination of labour to the demands of capital (Zeitlin, 1974). Management, in other words, is shaped and influenced by the capitalist structure of production. Managers can be described as bearers of capitalist structures primarily concerned with the development, application, and maintenance of social and technical frameworks to preserve the interests of capitalist owners. This directly focuses attention on the contested nature of management (Edwards, 1979) recognizing the relationship between the logic of capital accumulation and the implementation of various forms of managerial strategies of work and control.

Whatever attention has been given to the role of ideological and political dimensions prevalent in management has been simply to criticize its existence with relevance to the rationalized and technocratic image of management. Moreover, nearly all management studies have concentrated on conflict, only with the objective of neutralizing its effect within the organization, instead of stimulating debate of the legitimacy of the contemporary management measures (i.e. TQM and BPR) and questioning its impact on the existing organizational dysfunctions. For instance, corporate culture has been described as a medium in which employees could be ensured autonomy and job satisfaction. But, simultaneously, corporate culture can also be envisaged as a totalizing means of management control (Willmott, 1993) which internalizes the values and norms selected by senior management (Deal and Kennedy, 1982).

Further, the tensions and dysfunctions existing within contemporary organizations cannot only be attributed to the institutional divisions of classes within the organization, but also to "managers' contradictory social positioning within relations of production which repeatedly stimulate conflicts and struggles between employees over the organization of work and the distribution of resources" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996), simply because the values of managers are also inconsistent with those of their owners. Managers would also be influenced by their own career and financial interests. Dalton (1959) offered a description of the political activity within an organization formulated on the basis of various informal activities such as power struggles between cliques, negotiation and implementation of corporate policy at local level, the reward system, and methods adopted to secure or defend resources. This is similar to Fletcher's (1973) study which differentiated between managerial cliques and cabals. Myers (1967) explained how managers sought to influence and obtain ends not sanctioned by the organization or to obtain sanctioned influence ends.

Therefore, management is thus not influenced by the institutional arrangement of the society leading to labour/management conflicts, but also by interpersonal difficulties resulting in departmental and inter-managerial conflicts within organizations.

**Meaning of Science**

There is a wide ranging debate in literature regarding the similarity between social and natural sciences. According to Giddens (1974), social sciences have a "technical character which is purely instrumental in form;" in other words, "the findings of sociology research do not carry any logically given implication for practical policy or for the pursuit of values. Sociology like natural sciences is neutral in respect of values."

But, this idea of value-free knowledge is questionable because what counts as scientific knowledge is basically a product of the researcher's value judgements (e.g. ontology and epistemology) that are influenced and conditioned by specific historical and cultural contexts (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). In spite of claims to the contrary (Giddens, 1974; Popper, 1983), science is a product of particular values that give it meaning and direction. This section will develop an argument to support the view that social science is a product of the researcher's values.

Weber (1949, as discussed by Alvesson and Willmott, 1996) argues that science can present facts but it cannot force the individual to accept these facts and comply with its demands. Especially if these facts are contradictory to his/her beliefs and values. "There is no (rational or empirical) scientific procedure of any kind whatsoever which can provide us with a decision here," views of life "can never be the products of increasing empirical knowledge" (Weber, 1949). This clearly distinguishes between the production of facts by science and the development of value judgements by individuals. "Facts could inform the process of meaning but could not legitimately prove or justify value judgements since this would necessarily involve a leap of faith" (Weber, 1949).
In other words, science can only determine facts but any amount of facts cannot disprove of a value judgement. Furthermore, Weber (1949) comments on the misconception that an accumulation of facts could resolve the choice between values. The scientist is guided to his/her topic of research on the basis of his/her interest and tastes, i.e. his/her subject matter is dependent on his/her value judgements. Therefore, the concept of one correct method or facts speak for themselves, are invalid. In reality, the whole process of decision making between competing values is based on an exercise of power of argument rather than rationality (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996).

Even though Weber (1949) accepts that the choice and topic of scientific investigation is "coloured by our value conditioned interests," he neglects to discuss the fact that different value judgements will have their own conception of science (i.e. which need not be the positivistic view). He discusses how a scientist selects his/her study from an absolute infinity but ignores the simple logic that this could also be applicable to the value standpoint of science. So, not only do values determine what constitutes knowledge from fact (i.e. epistemology) but also what constitutes fact itself (i.e. ontology).

In other words, researchers' ontological assumptions (philosophical beliefs about human nature) determine the paradigms of scientific knowledge, while what constitutes scientific knowledge is determined by the researcher's value judgements (i.e. epistemology). Science, thus, is a product of the value judgements of the researcher and these values are conditioned by specific historical and cultural contexts of production. Therefore, it is not possible to generate impartial, non-ideological knowledge about the external world (Habermas, 1972; MacIntyre, 1985; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996).

Therefore, the whole Weberian doctrine can be termed as an "illusion of pure theory" (Habermas, 1972; p 312). It also draws attention towards the connection between science and politics involved in the generation of science. Thus, the development of science is itself a highly political process.

Habermas (1972, as cited in Alvesson and Willmott, 1996) argues that the production of scientific knowledge is embedded in the distinctive relationship between nature and human beings. He explains that knowledge is produced through materially grounded arousal of cognitive interests (i.e. human interests). Science is basically a form of knowledge created by varying human interests. Moreover, this knowledge is usually created as an instrument of self-preservation. In other words, our interests guide our way of thinking, reacting, enquiring about the society and the external world. This influences and contextualizes the medium whereby it develops knowledge about the external world. It is possible through this interdependent relationship to generate three forms of knowledge which are useful in further development of scientific knowledge. There arises a cognitive interest in researchers to predict and gain control over the unruly natural and social forces. This leads to generation of different kinds of technologies whereby it is possible to calculate and gain power over human behaviour and natural world. This type of science, termed as empirical analytic (Habermas, 1971), is applicable to the fields of management and organizational studies. In this category can be included all those studies which have focused upon developing causal relations and attempting to predict and control employee behaviour. The second form of science is historical-hermeneutic science, which is concerned with the betterment and empowerment of the ability to communicate between individuals and their capacity to comprehend the organizational world and its external surroundings.

Both streams of science leave the historical and political forces unexamined. This is developed under critical reflexive knowledge motivated by the emancipatory interest of the researcher. The major concern of critical science is to expose various forms of domination and exploitation to reveal the connection between experiences of frustrations and suffering within the patriarchal practices and capitalistic institutions.

**Critical Theory and Critical Perspective**

Critical theory derives its roots from the enlightenment tradition which emphasizes the need for researchers in this area to combine a "philosophical understanding of human basis of seemingly divine or superhuman (e.g. scientific) authority with an empirical investigation of contemporary ideas, dogmas, and prejudices" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b).

Critical science believes that people should be liberated from unnecessary traditions, ideologies, assumptions, power relations, and identity formations which may distort opportunities for autonomy, satisfaction of needs, and wants (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1947; Marcuse, 1964; Habermas, 1971; 1984; Fromm, 1976; Fay, 1987). Thus, the essence of critical theory is a "combination of philosophy with empirical study" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b). The
academicians of this theoretical perspective believe that, by ignoring philosophy, empirical research ends up just mirroring the existing reality, i.e. legitimizing existing dogmas and prejudices. This is usually achieved by ignoring the role of historical and cultural frameworks in producing and sustaining the external reality. Critical theory concentrates on the demands of the social world, construction of the self, the way social world is produced and transformed. So the major task of "critical theory is to combine philosophy with social science to facilitate" change "in an emancipatory direction" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b).

In other words, critical thinking is:

motivated by the effort really to transcend the tension and to abolish the opposition between the individual's purposefulness, spontaneity and rationality and these work process relationships on which society is built. Critical thought has a concept of man [sic] as in conflict with himself until this opposition is removed (Horkheimer, 1973/1976).

According to critical thinking, an individual is not separate from the historical and cultural processes of the society. All institutional media, i.e. the industry and science through which the individuals' consciousness and opinions are regulated and formed, are controlled and manipulated. Critical theory is concerned with challenging all those forms of knowledge and practice that help in sustaining such an illusion of autonomy and replace this illusion with a structure of social relations where the concept of autonomy is an actual reality (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b).

Basically, the instrumental rationalism which underpins all scientific form is exposed in critical theory. There is recognition that facts cannot be separated from values. Instead, it is essential to specify one's values and objectives in undertaking the research. Knowledge must discard the illusion of objectivism which "prevents consciousness of the interlocking of knowledge with interests from the life world" (Habermas, 1971, as cited in Johnson and Duberley, 2000). The role of epistemology is accepted because science is understood to be embedded in the human interests (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996). The basic essence of critical theory is its emphasis on emancipation of the oppressed (Habermas, 1971).

The issue of emancipation raises the issue of whether it is appropriate to focus on managers when using a critical perspective. For, usually critical research deals with subjects who are suppressed or oppressed. But, as Fay (1987, as cited in Nord and Jermier, 1992) argues, the criterion for selection as a subject is not so much the hierarchical position as his/her feeling of being oppressed by others, "it is the experience of unhappiness which is the wedge a critical theory has to justify its entrance into the lives of those it seeks to ...". Braverman (1974) believes that managers are both targets as well as agents of capitalist control. Others (Jackall, 1988; Alvesson and Willmott, 1992a; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996) portray managers as functionaries who also experience moral and ethical dilemmas; thus, even managers can be perceived as victims of the organization's policies and practices.

But if the researcher is merely interested in being critical without getting entangled in the web of emancipation, it is possible to critically evaluate the empirical data gathered, whilst working within a broadly critical perspective where the researcher is required to "attempt to stand back from their work and interrogate their findings with a critical eye" (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). Such an approach would involve "an epistemology perspective in which knowledge and critique are intertwined" (Harvey, 1990). Empirical research would now not just be a mere collection or accumulation of facts gathered through a mechanical process but an analysis of the social process. This enables the researcher to delve beneath the dominant conceptual frames to reveal the existing underlying practices, their historical specificity, and structural manifestations, i.e. "to dig beneath the surface of appearances. It asks how social systems really work, how ideology or history conceal the processes which oppress and control people" (Harvey, 1990).

The researcher engages with the oppressive structures and questions the prevailing knowledge. The basic essence is to provide a critique of scientific knowledge which sustains the oppressive structures. The researcher is required to develop new forms of demystification techniques to expose the power relations disguised within the democratic layout of the organization. Examples of such an approach would include Marx's (1970) engagement with positivist political economy throughout Capital and Oakley's (1976) critique of the sexist nature of sociology in Sociology of Housework (Harvey, 1990).

Learning Organizations

This paper critically examines the concept of learning organizations within the professional sector. The airr
is to address the issue of power and politics and their role in the overall functioning of the learning organizations. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- What is a learning organization?
- What are the various types of surveillance and disciplinary techniques found within learning organizations?
- To what extent such a form of control is absolute and total in nature?

To effectively address the above issues, one had to gather the opinions and beliefs of the employees working in learning organizations, and deconstruct these subjective accounts to reveal the power relations existing within the organization. In addition, it was essential that both anti and pro-management voices were recorded simultaneously. In-depth interviews can provide insights into how organizational members can be affirmative and yet hold critical opinions about a particular organization and how it is managed (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992b). Moreover, to ensure replicability of empirical data, the choice of a multiple case study with its elements of comparative framework analysis is essential. Overall, forty-seven interviews were conducted in two professional accounting firms which claimed to be people-oriented and learning organizations. These firms will be referred to as Case Study A (CSA) and Case Study B (CSB). Both organizations possessed all the basic features which constitute the model of a learning organization: learning strategy and culture, flexible rewards and structures, participative decision making, and open communication systems. Thus, not only did the firms claim to be learning organizations but they also possessed all the features of learning organizations. The managers belonged to lower, middle, and top levels.

As discussed in previous sections, research can never be value free. In fact, values determine what we study, how we understand our data, and our final presentation of findings. It is impossible to act the role of a neutral, disinterested evaluator. Even in the case of quantitative methodology (questionnaires and surveys), researcher bias and prejudices have an influence on the outcome of statistical tests. To be able to give more voice to research subjects, it is essential not to relegate the subjects to mere passive objects. Instead, the researcher is required to present reality from the point of those subjects (i.e. interviewees) who are being exploited and oppressed. In other words, it is possible to write from one perspective and focus on that part of the story (i.e. research study). This process of deciding one's value position is by itself a political decision. It is not new in qualitative research to side with one section of society, usually the powerless and the oppressed. Mills (1959) and Becker (1966) have argued about the essentiality of accepting the political nature of research. According to Mills (1959), it is the responsibility of the researcher to help understand the personal troubles and problems experienced by an individual.

A list of questions was submitted to the interviewees before the commencement of the research. It is better if the interviewee has an idea about the research and the questions. This results in more concrete and specific answers. It also generates an atmosphere of openness and trust which helps in the collection of empirical data. But the format and the sequence of the questions were changed during the actual time of the interviews. Next, all the interviews, except for two where the managers refused to cooperate, were tape-recorded. All interviews lasted approximately from thirty minutes to one hour. After collection of empirical data, a cross-site thematic analysis was conducted. First, the interview quotes and field notes were reread to relate and categorize the empirical data under the emerging themes. Then, both case studies were compared to know if there were any differences. The empirical data gathered from the two organizations were similar with only a few differences which could be attributed to differences in the overall size of the organizations.

**Division of Professionals**

The empirical analysis suggested that, like most, if not all, employing organizations, the firms - CSA and CSB - can be divided into two groups: management and employees. Management has a financial interest in the firm's performance and is chiefly interested in profitability and growth. To achieve its objectives, management constantly encourages its professional employees to learn and acquire new skills and knowledge. There is, as explained by one of the interviewees, Mathew, "a marriage of interest" between the environmental factors like market changes and competition with the need to generate learning within the organizations. There is also unequal distribution of power and authority within the firms. While management is responsible for the overall administration and decision making of the firm, employees are relegated to performing the work allocated to them by their seniors.
Moreover, the partners control the work of their employees through various forms of surveillance and disciplinary techniques. In CSA and CSB, clients are charged on the basis of overall time spent on each client, and all employees are ordered to record their working hours in time sheets, weekly reports, and progress schedules. This system of time management can be interpreted as an insidious form of surveillance technique. Employees are given the impression that they have the autonomy to manage and control their work and time, i.e. self-control. But, in reality, it is management which has the power to fix the targets of the employees. In other words, management is indirectly monitoring the performance of individuals through the concept of time recording.

Regime of Culture Controls

Managements of CSA and CSB effectively create corporate clones through various types of culture controls like family, professional, and learning culture which encompass performance appraisal, reward systems, and open communication channels. The different forms of surveillance practices found in the case studies are discussed below.

Elimination of Boundaries between Home and Office: CSA and CSB generate an atmosphere where the firm seems one big family and the office another home. All employees are encouraged to address their superiors by their first names. All managers are required to keep their office doors open, greet their staff members, and take a keen interest in their personal welfare. The objective is to create an informal, friendly, and relaxed atmosphere which ensures open and free communication between all levels of the hierarchy. Superiors thus become more approachable and can now be looked upon as confidantes and good friends. The official boundaries between work and home become blurred.

With the organization becoming a "home," the superiors assume family roles of a father or mother who has to look after his/her "sons" and "daughters" (i.e. subordinates). This family/caring attitude disguises the actual objective of management. For instance, employees are skillfully manipulated to take up more work with no reward other than "a pat on the back," and with a gentle reminder that goes with being a part of a warm and loving family. A son or daughter should help out his/her parents during times of need. Management creates competition between its members to compel them towards an optimum performance. All employees are asked to confess their doubts, failures, and successes in front of their colleagues and superiors during task for formal, and team meetings. The members dread these sessions and as a consequence work harder produce quality work. The whole team has become an iron cage within which the members are held. Just like imprisoned animals, the members are wary of each other and their tailor (i.e. management). Management, thus, has successfully gained control over the feelings and emotions of the individuals and it is obviously using this advantage or pov to its own benefit.

Management also absorbs the social life of its employees within the four walls of the office. It firms hold regular social events after office hours which all employees are required to attend. One firm also tries to cater to the different interests of its employees by forming a movies and sports club a publishing a monthly magazine (CSA only). In other words, the employees' social, emotional, and leisure needs are met and developed in accordance with the requirements of the organization.

Development of Ideal Accountants: Managements in CSA and CSB, through the process of socialization, guide the employees to avow the values and standards the organization as their own. Management defines the meaning of being a professional as an individual who finishes projects within time, maintains a neat appearance, is a good team worker, and committed to contributing towards the profitability of the organization. In other words, professionalism means achieving the goals of the organization.

Further, to ensure that employees match the organization's image of ideal accountants, CSA and CSB recruit individuals who possess not only the required technical skills but also a specific personal background. For instance, in CSA, employees are selected on the basis of their qualifications overall appearance, voice quality, personal manner confidence, mental alertness, motivation, and ambitions.

The firms also implement various types of performance appraisal systems, such as inveri appraisal, self-appraisal, and downward appraisal systems, in order to control any deviation from the required behavioural code of conduct. Final management links the performance of the employee with their reward provisions, i.e. salary and career progression. The employees are, thus, forced to behave in a manner specified by the organization.

Thus, it can be argued that the organization indirectly manipulate the behaviour of their prol
sional employees by defining the meaning of professionalism such that it is to their own advantage and benefit.

Training is not Learning: Learning organizations lay emphasis on developing a learning environment which can generate learning amongst the employees. Training, according to Poell et al. (2000), remains the most well known practice associated with learning. The findings of this study suggest that employees' advancement and growth is manipulated and coordinated by the training policies in order to achieve the objectives of the organization. Both CSA and CSB, at the commencement of each year, hold a meeting where the partners and directors determine the overall needs of the organizations. On the basis of these meetings, each professional's target is decided. Then each employee is required to learn and acquire additional skills, gain knowledge, and establish new contacts to be able to generate a specified amount of income. In other words, while the employee is under the impression that s/he has the autonomy to plan his/her career, in reality it is management which decides the targets of each professional. Management, thus, makes sure that the employees' growth and development is within the boundaries and is serving the objectives of the organization.

Resistance Practices
In spite of the above surveillance techniques, management in CSA and CSB has failed to gain control over the employees' subjectivity. The employees in CSA and CSB seem to be aware of the control being exercised and are resisting it in their own way. However, there is no direct confrontation or any form of aggressive displays. This could be attributed to the link between long term career advancement and an employee's performance and commitment. The employees negotiate their terms with management which in this study are voluntary imprisonment to codes of conduct and cultural norms and values in exchange for future career prospects and higher pay scales. Learning organizations, according to the findings of this study, are complex and intricate working environments where employees and management negotiate with each other to effectively function as one organization.

Conclusion
The findings of this paper suggest that the working environments of learning organizations are places where there is constant negotiation between labour and management. In fact, learning organizations can be described as political arenas where there are different conflicting groups, i.e. employees and managers.

In other words, the groups tacitly agree to follow specific codes of conduct and behaviour and enact certain roles to function as one organization. Management in learning organizations would now emerge as a process where all groups cooperate with each other to get things accomplished. It is a drama which takes place within a social setting, where all members coerce, persuade, manipulate, agree, and bargain with each other to achieve their personal and organizational goals. Managers could be described as actors who possess reflective and political skills, critical ability, and an acute sense of sensitivity to deal with various types of intricate, perplexing, and complex situations and relationships which may arise within contemporary organizations.

Based on the above findings, it is plausible to argue that management in learning organizations is far from rational, neutral, and apolitical; in fact, the whole process is underlined with hidden personal values, agendas, and objectives. This image of learning organizations can be unearthed as argued in this paper by adopting a critical perspective and a value-based political methodology.

Thus, critical social science is helpful in exposing various forms of domination and exploitation and in revealing the connection between suffering of the individuals and the capitalistic and patriarchal institutions of the society. It facilitates a researcher "...to jump over one's shadow" and dig deep into the mysterious unknown behind the fagade (Lumerick and Cunnington, 1993). Critical social science facilitates this ability to be self-reflexive so that researchers can "attempt to stand back from their work and interrogate their findings with a critical eye" (Johnson and Duberley, 2000). The researcher by adopting a critical methodology is able to engage in various unexplored issues and come up with startling new scientific knowledge and data.
References


