

Light adaption

You walk out from a dimly lit room into a bright, open area. It takes around 20 seconds and a few rapid blinks for your eyes to adjust and focus on your outdoor surroundings. When you look back at the dim room, it's only then that you realise just how dark the room was.

I feel like the last 10 -12 weeks of my life in Management 300 can be analogised very nicely by that 20 second adjustment time, and I'm only now seeing just how different that room was. I started from a point of overwhelming scepticism and aiming for detachment from the course. I am now finishing the course with a reversed attitude regarding change, and a self-awareness that I'd never before seen as beneficial. While this "learning block" slowly eroded - and is still eroding - away, I reflected on two major modifications in my behaviour. The first of these is my attitude and actions regarding how I work in teams, and the second of these is changing my priorities.

Eroding the learning block – "inertia" (resistance to movement)

Before I could start to learn, I had to shift some boundaries so that I could change from being reasonably static and resistant-to-change to being more dynamic. True learning changes people, and "is key...to unearth[ing] new and important meaning" (Daudelin, 1996, p. 38-39). My resistance to change was impeding learning, and this was evident throughout my earlier learning journals.

One such example of this was my initial desire (before and at the beginning of the course) to approach tasks with a kind of "compartmentalised" attitude; there was "Me" – which includes my personality, beliefs, opinions and thoughts. There was "technical me" – the part of me that solves equations, writes essays and completes university tasks. And there was the task. But while the task and "technical me" could communicate, I didn't want the task to interfere with "Me" (see the arrows in [Figure 1](#)). Why didn't I want this? Because it was a means for me to resist change - implementing a self-protection mechanism from a fear of failure and the unknown. The detachment meant a barrier erected so that if I did fail at the task, I would be able to move forward without feeling failure that would cause me to seriously look at myself and see what was wrong. So change was resisted because I wouldn't learn from the past and make things different; I would just purge myself of the emotions with this "boundary" to avoid any change. Change presented a scary place, because it meant that I hadn't been there before and couldn't predict my own performance.

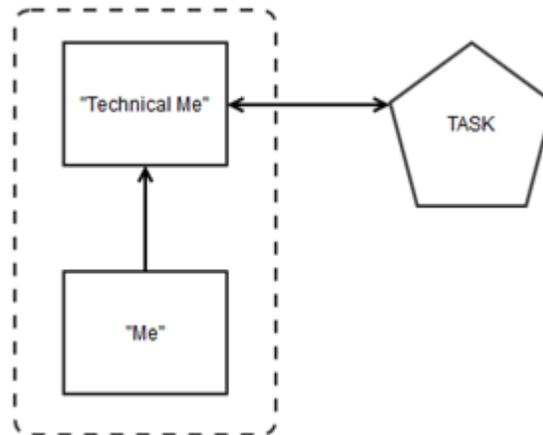


Figure 1: How I tried to approach tasks at the beginning of the course – simplified block diagram

This was again confirmed in other early learning journals; through my scepticism over the usefulness of reflection (2014a) and through my repeated doubting of theories written by experts who had devoted their entire lives to a subject (2014b).

This "inertia" and its effects - compartmentalisation and continuous doubting – were clearly detrimental to my personal and professional growth.

Fortunately, Management 300 was the type of "Task" that wouldn't stay neatly contained in its "pentagon"; it overflowed immensely into both "Technical Me" and "Me". The weekly reflections enforced a realisation upon me; that I was changing (if ever-so- slightly) and developing a self-awareness that was helping me in my teams and outside of university life. While it was scary – as new places are – it was also rewarding to feel as if I was moving forward.

Now, I continuously remind myself that there is no point carrying out a task and not learning from it. Kolb (1976) writes:

Today's highly successful manager...is distinguished not so much by any single set of knowledge or skills but by his ability to adapt to and master the changing demands of his job and career – by his ability to learn...continuing success in a changing world requires an ability to explore new opportunities and learn from past successes and failures (p. 21).

This is especially important to me as I study engineering, and I've noticed – in multiple readings – that while engineers are very good at developing “Technical Me”, they often lack training to be able to respond to change and learn from it as to be able to successfully manage companies. For instance, Kolb (1976) also describes how an electrical engineering company, once successful because of its unique-product, struggled as competition entered because most of the top executives were former engineers and responded to problems “primarily from an engineering point of view” (p. 30).

How to make sure this that I'm not that person? And also, how can I help people who are in this position to learn too, without formal management training?

It is a good start to know that willingness to change is a pre-requisite for learning, and learning is a pre-requisite for growth. But to put this knowledge into action, I aim to carry out an “after-action” “hotwash” (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, n.d.) after turning- point activities, major tasks or occurrences – and not just those related to university/career. If that project went well, why did it go well? If I had an in-depth conversation with a friend, what caused that and how can I make sure it happens more frequently? If my Mum and I have an argument, how could I have handled it better? If someone is injured at Taekwon- Do, how could we have responded faster?

Jon Kabat-Zinn (1994) wrote – This moment is all we really have to work with... we have got to pause in our experience long enough to ...*feel* the present moment, to see it in its fullness, to hold it in awareness and thereby come to know and understand it better. Only then can we accept the truth of this moment of our life, learn from it, and move on (p. xi-xii).

Rather than ignoring the past, I must be prepared to let the lines blur and work through feelings of failure and success to learn from my experiences. I must be prepared to make decisions that encourage change, so that I can move forward.

Changing “Me” in teams

This slow but sure movement of the “learning block” allowed me to realise that I needed to “fix” the way that I work in teams. During the semester, I had two group projects – MGMT 300, and an engineering paper (“robot” paper). As achievements matter to me – more on this later – it was important to me to pin down any problems in these teams and find solutions. The problem I initially *thought* I was having was that my teams do worse off without me (Lowe, 2014c). I reflected on this for a little while, and I came up with the first proposed solution of leaving better instructions behind when I left my groups. I then identified this as single-loop learning though – this would only be a temporary fix; I would have to leave detailed instructions again and again. This to me was a perfect example of Argyris’ (1991) analogy – “a thermostat automatically turns on the heat whenever the temperature in a room drops below 68 degrees” (p. 4). Thus I discounted this solution, and proposed another: the solution of communicating more clearly with my groups – thinking aloud more so that they could understand my thought processes and continue without me. I decided to “action” this out by starting to make continuous thought-sharing a habit. Peter then commented on my learning journal (commented on Lowe, 2014c), asking “is it them or is it [me] that is the problem?...[am I] doing something that is inhibiting [my] team?”. He also pointed out that I was demonstrating single-loop learning only, rather than double-loop learning (Argyris, 1991).

I then thought about Peter’s comment – and realised he was absolutely correct; this was a perfect demonstration of single-loop learning. I used the thermostat/heater example in this learning journal as a test for the first hypothesised solution, but never tested the second one against it. And it has the exact same effect – both first and second hypothesised solutions are me trying to adjust my teams to that same temperature/level, rather than me asking – what level *should* we be at? The fact that I was trying to get my team to more clearly see my thought processes indicated the real root of the problem - I was stopping my teams from doing better than just me. By getting my team to always do what I thought/think like me, I was defeating the purpose of a “team” – “to produce extraordinary performance results...way beyond the reach of separate individuals” (Katzenbach & Smith, 1992, p. 3).

Sprier et al (2006) also confirm that “overachievers tend to command and coerce, rather than coach and collaborate, thus stifling subordinates...oblivious to the concerns of others” (p. 72). I talked about this with my Dad too – he made me realise that I always present my ideas first – I don’t give others a chance to come up with their own solutions, but rather, just ways to fix/change mine.

Did I feel embarrassed and ashamed that Peter had to point this out to me? Definitely. But the embarrassment is good for me – as Argyris (1991) so aptly put it, I need to develop “the tolerance for feelings of failure” and “the skills to deal with these feelings” (p. 8). I wanted to “solve” this problem straight away, too – it was eating away at me.

I thought about what my Dad had said regarding my presentation of ideas, and decided to try to take a step back, and when decisions are being made or possible solutions/algorithms being discussed, I would listen to everyone’s ideas and reasoning first. Then I would think back to my reasoning, and contrast the two – had I thought about X?

Have they thought about Y? What about the effect of A on B? I discussed this with my MikesBikes CEO, and she agreed – I needed to back off a little, but not too much as my contribution was still valuable. By not limiting my team(s) to only evaluating my ideas, I am effectively choosing the “temperature” of the room to be at its optimum – not just keeping it to my own level.

I trialled this out in our next few MikesBikes meetings, and in my “robot” team meetings. While I didn’t manage to completely wait until the end in some meetings (time was an issue), my teams were managing to come up with several ideas that I never would have come up with on my own. My management team came up with well-reasoned decisions and my robot team came up with an algorithm that surprised me in its originality. While I had to give significant “hints” in order to get the algorithm working, I think that this was because my team was so used to relying on me that they needed more practice “thinking” without me. Feedback from my MikesBikes team at the end of the course mentioned a recurring theme of being more transparent in my decision process and sharing the workload. This reinforced that I still have work to do - that there is no “quick fix” for me – I will have to keep a constant eye on my behaviour and change that temperature so that I’m at my best for the best of the team.

Prioritising for a fulfilling life

Another behaviour modification that I can attribute to this course is my attitude toward my priorities.

I have always been a high-achiever academically, and like Sprier et. al (2006) describe, I get that natural (short-term) high from accomplishment – but there is an additional dark side on top of the stifling-of-team-members. I spend a tremendous amount of time and effort and stress on getting good grades, often at the cost of other things.

Our robot did not end up working at the final hand-in last Tuesday (21st October), and I was devastated. I had a little cry at home after. It seemed like such a waste of time – all those midnights in the labs, 7am starts, and gargantuan brain-strain amounting to nothing.

This made me think back to the learning journal I'd just written titled "Priority Inversion" (2014d); a computer systems term that describes a lower-priority task blocking a higher-priority task – a strangely common occurrence in the computer engineering field. The journal was written after finding out that my MikesBikes SHV had dropped significantly; causing me to feel "down" and wondering what to do with the feeling. While in the past I had normally distanced myself from the "failing" event to protect myself from these feelings, I was unable to do that in this case – I had put tremendous value on this result. So, to attempt double-loop learning (Argyris, 1991) again, I tried not to think of an escape to stop feeling this or effectively change it to something I'd prefer, but rather – why am I feeling this? And should I be? Christensen's (2010) reading struck home hard – I had chosen to devote my most treasured efforts to "activities that yield[ed] the most tangible accomplishments...endeavors that offer immediate gratification...allocating fewer and fewer resources to the things [I] would have once said mattered most" (p. 49-50). Proof of this was evident all around me. A few days beforehand, I had missed a close friend's birthday, and while I had felt bad, it wasn't comparable to the disappointment with my SHV. There are several high-school friends that I have fallen out of touch with over the past three years, and I didn't know my sister had had her nursing course-hospital orientation until days after – Christensen (2010) again hits a chord – "You can neglect your relationship[s]...and on a day- to-day basis, it doesn't seem as if things are deteriorating" (p. 49-50).

So, if I'd just written that university and grades were not as important as building relationships, why was I so completely crushed by this one grade? Clearly, I'm not there yet (and have a long way to go), and I'm not sure if this change is a destination that I can "arrive" at. But interesting is what the failure had caused to happen – I'd fallen back on my family and friends to provide comfort and support. This is probably why God had it happen this way - to remind me that I have good people around me that I don't value enough, that purpose is through relationships with God and people and not wholly through grades or careers or possessions or power. There was no absolute failure, because having an incomplete robot strengthened relationships that would not have been strengthened had the robot succeeded; this realisation in itself is a step toward where I want "Me" to be.

The solution is not to detach myself from university or these emotions (this would have the detrimental side-effect of bringing the learning block back into play); the solution is to change my perspective into a long-term perspective so that I can see clearly the relationship between my actions and my priorities and purpose. But what does this look like, specifically – how does it happen? Christensen (2010) recommends scrutinising allocation choices, avoiding "just this once" mistakes, remembering humility's importance, and choosing the metric that we want to use to measure life's success. Regarding allocating resources, I have decided to catch up with someone that I haven't talked with in a while every week for at least half an hour – whether this means having lunch, or just a having a conversation to see how they truly are – it means less of my time spent on university projects. It sounds small, but starting off small and growing seems more likely to happen than jumping in the deep end; and by no means do I intend to "slack off" at university – it is still important. Regularly tracking this progress is something I intend to do monthly – it is important for me to keep specific timings in order for things to actually happen. I have also determined to keep reflecting after this course – perhaps not always formally written down, but regularly stepping back from decisions I have made and checking that they align with my purpose. To make sure that change is happening means checking that I am satisfying the deep-relationship hunger rather than hollow short-lived flares that can never be fulfilled.

In Taekwon-Do, the belt is tied around the waist only once to represent serving one master and pursuing one goal. To tie it around twice would be wrong; one cannot fully serve two masters. I think life is much the same; I can only have one true purpose at any point in my life. Yes, there can be plenty of "mini" branches off this one purpose, but ultimately they are all connected to the same thing and helping to achieve the same thing.

Getting to that brighter place doesn't just happen. I have to walk there, I have to blink my eyes to make sure I'm adjusting to seeing the right things, and I have to conquer the fear of not-completely-controllable change. The light is blindingly uncomfortable for a bit – bordering painful, and it's easier to keep your eyes closed. The analogy is slightly flawed in that the brightness isn't really as bright as I think it is compared to the darkness; much change doesn't happen in humungous leaps, but rather in small steps. It's rare that a course will try to change "Me" (rather than just "Technical Me"). I can't say that I'm a completely different person than when I started the course – of course not. I'm still "Me" – I still like reading, Taekwon-Do, and playing card games. But that "Me" is moving slightly; becoming more dynamic, learning about myself and not fearing learning from failure, taking risks and holding fast to who I want "Me" to be.

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