

Learning and innovating: mindless and mindful practices

This paper aims to bring together notions of learning and innovating as embedded in times –meaningful events and personal frames.

Learning and innovating melt into each other as dawn does melt into the day and dusk into the night. Innovating conjures up in my mind such terms as; renewal, progress, transition, transformation, discontinuity, uncertainty...different...utopia, muddling through. Learning walks along such terms as unlearning, relearning, past experiences, routines...

If innovating implies shedding the old skin, the habitual thinking practices and their outcome actions, it implies discarding what Chia & Mackay (2007) call 'unreflective familiarity...the mindless practical coping' and thus substituting them by something different...

Here I play with the notion of history as contended by Levi Strauss (in Clark 1990¹) and present it as post hoc rationalised chronological account of actions and events. Then innovating is about seeing the messy, untidy emergent processes in this. However, to see habitual thinking as impediment to innovating is a functionalist mode of interpretation and we may argue- to acquire habits *per se* is to have the knack for learning and for that matter, unlearning.

*Strange, is it not? That of the myriads who
Before us pass'd the door of darkness through
No one returns to tell us of the road.
Which to discover we must travel too.
Khayyam-Rubaiyat-v 69.
Briggs 2009.*

To note innovating as erasing the comfortable familiar can be based on the contention that past organizational paths, thinking practices are imprinted - founding conditions (Stinchcomb 1965) and to overstate the point here then we may see organizations in this context as 'birth marked'².

In this paper I will attempt to wash these ideas with some colours from non-Western theses and ideas. This is to note that the notions of learning and innovating are not necessarily differently understood in such theses. One constant colour running through will be that which represents time and temporality.

¹ History as 'heterogeneous collection of chronological codes...'

² Term was coined by professor Margaret Grieco whilst at Aston in the 1980s-now in Napier University UK.

*What does not exist looks so handsome.
What does exist, where is it? An ocean is hidden.
All we see is foam, shapes of dust, spinning, tall as minarets,
But I want wind....
Invisible ocean, wind, visible foam and dust: this is speech.
Why can't we hear thought?...
Why organize the universe this way...
Rumi, Mathnawi V 1026-1050-
Helminski 1999.*

In considering the habitual ways I will also note the notion of 'herding' (Ariely 2008) whereby first ideas, decisions and actions are turned into habits- the initial experiences become 'anchors' creating stability and continuity. Yet the 'dizziness' in analysis of the roots of our knowing (doing) is in that we are using that which is being analysed in order to do the analysis...(Maturana & Varela 1998). And, as Rumi said: "If you want to see the truth, close your eyes to what appears to be true. See that the things which seem most real are actually least real..." (VI, 1360-67- in Van de Weyer, 1998).

Zohar and Marshall (2005) note that too often "we take refuge in what we already know, what we have already learned in conditional habits of thought...becoming our paradigms, dogmas...", the antidote to which is 'spontaneity'. Spontaneity is often bounded by 'fear of failure'. A crude interpretation of 'mindfulness', which is described beautifully by Weick & Putnam (2006), will stress being introspectively aware and avoiding mindlessness of habitual thinking- it is about the presence of mind, attention- it is being in here and now- it is fleeting. It is the impermanence and continuous editing of what we think we know.

With this background I will attempt to further discuss learning and innovating in times and times in learning and innovating.

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