

**Finding meaning in management:  
Work-inexperienced students' constructions of management**

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## Abstract

*This study reveals how work-inexperienced first-year students' conceptions of management changed across a semester. The study occurred in the context of a radical redesign of an introductory management unit. Forty-five participants responded to a survey twice during semester. Staff judgements of student development and engagement were included. The results suggest that (a) two fundamental conceptualisations of management underpinned student responses, (b) work-inexperienced students have some formal management concepts, (c) after the intervention, student conceptualisations of management reflected higher complexity, (d) compared with the beginning of semester, fewer negative conceptions of management were reported, (e) gender or cultural differences were not evident in the data. Our research design does not allow causal conclusions about the efficacy of this intervention. Nevertheless, we argue that more "real world" authentic learning experiences are likely to make a positive contribution to enhancing student conceptualisations of management.*

### **Finding meaning in management:**

#### **First –year, work-inexperienced students' constructions of management**

##### *Introduction*

Managerial and leadership capabilities play a critical role in the success of public sector organisations (Koch, 1999), private sector organisations (Conger & Xin, 2000; Industry Taskforce on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995), and individuals (Atkinson, 1999). Trends in organisational design suggest that management and leadership capabilities are necessary across all organisational roles, not just in formal management roles (Miles, 1985; Rindova & Kotha, 2001). Consequently, preparing students in all professional disciplines for management roles is a critical task of management education.

Despite its importance, designing management education interventions for work-inexperienced first-year students poses significant challenges. Specifically, first-year students often believe they have little prior experience to draw upon, that a managerial career is a distant prospect, and, for many, their interests lie in a particular content discipline rather than managing. Little is known about how first-year students construe management. Much of the existing research on management education focuses on MBA students. Yet gaining insight into first-year students' conceptualisations of management is a prerequisite to designing successful educational interventions. This paper identifies first-year work-inexperienced students' conceptions of management at two points in time in the context of the redesign of an introductory management unit.

##### *Theoretical Perspective*

In this paper we assume that a critical outcome of educational programs is evidence of a developing, coherent and "complicated" construction of the relevant knowledge domain. These constructions have been labelled, among other things, mindsets or mental models (Senge, 1990). Clearly, researchers cannot capture all elements of a mindset about a

particular knowledge domain, yet it may be possible to capture enough elements to contribute to insights that lead to better educational designs. Consequently, we are concerned with how first-year work-inexperienced students conceptualise management.

The aim of organisational change and educational interventions is to help people develop new ways, and/or change pre-existing ways of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Therefore, the purpose of the intervention is to help people development new and more sophisticated mental models, mental models that better map the environment within which those people must operate. In this paper, we draw on theories of organisational change to suggest unit design strategies consistent with facilitating the development of more coherent and “complicated” constructions of management.

Both organisational change management and education question whether change is best managed from the top down (programmatic change) or from the bottom up (emergent change) (Beer, Eisenstat, & Spector, 1990). While both views are promoted, there is a growing view that successful change is a function of bottom-up or emergent processes (Orlikowski, 1996; Weick, 2000) rather than top-down processes and that we tend:

To underestimate the value of innovative sensemaking on the front line, the ability of small experiments to travel, and the extent to which change is continuous (Weick, 2000).

Emergent change theory also suggests strategies for facilitating innovative sense-making and enhancement of cognitive constructions of knowledge domains. Weick (Weick, 2000) argues that successful change programs (1) animate people and get them moving (2) provide people with a direction; (3) encourage updating through improved situational awareness and (4) facilitate respectful interaction that fosters trust, trustworthiness, and self respect.

Applied to our unit, we have assumed that successful learning and change outcomes are more likely if students have an opportunity for innovative sensemaking in the context of learning tasks they confront directly and where there are opportunities for sharing knowledge across their “learning organisation.” In other words, we assume that more authentic learning experiences (Callison & Lamb, 2004) will better reveal and enhance students’ constructions of management. However, we acknowledge that our research design does not permit us to draw causal links between design and this educational outcome.

### *Unit redesign*

The unit is mandatory for all business students attracting 2000-3000 students a year. Only a small proportion of these students have chosen management as an area of study. The vast majority are enrolled in other disciplines, accounting, marketing and so on. Many of these students will not take a management unit again.

The unit was redesigned to engage students by providing them with a positive, more authentic learning experience and “complicating” their conceptions of management. Authentic learning experiences parallel real world working experiences and are more personally meaningful to the learner (Stein, Isaacs, & Andrews, 2004). Using a team-based activity students were required (a) develop a new business idea, (b) develop a business strategy using an assessment of their external and internal environment, (c) develop a social responsibility statement for the business, (d) develop an organisational design that realises their business strategy, (e) develop people management strategies aligned with business strategy, and to (f) develop a plan for managing their business in one other non-Australian culture.

Each person in the group must take responsibility for providing leadership on one aspect of the task. Each team member has to conduct initial research to gain an understanding of their own area of responsibility and then teach this knowledge to their team members. The shared information is then input into decision-making on each task. Crucially, none of the individual tasks can be adequately completed without input from the other team members. Tutors are available to facilitate decision making in each team as required.

### *Method*

The purpose of the research is to reveal aspects of the participants' constructions of management. While we have identified the context as worthy of consideration, this context constrained our ability to apply research designs that permit causal conclusions. However, we feel, on philosophical grounds, that studying student constructions of management and context would provide insights for future research, both interpretive and quasi-experimental.

#### Participants

In this study, we focused on students who have one year or less of work experience, that is, work-inexperienced students. At time 1 (week 1 of semester), 45 work-inexperienced students participated (30 females and 15 males) and at time 2 (week 13 of semester), 26 work-inexperienced students (18 females and 8 males) were involved. Sample mortality is an issue and its implications are considered in the discussion of our results.

As we were concerned with collective constructions of management, we studied the students as a group rather than as individuals. Students worked in small teams of 4-5 people; constructing their own solution to the learning task. If required, staff facilitated discussions and learning as each team confronted the managerial tasks associated with identifying and developing a new business venture.

#### Data Collection Methods

Two sources of evidence were used. First, an instrument consisting of eight sentence completion questions was developed. Illustrative questions include: "For me, being a manager means ..."; "I would expect the most important job a manager has to do is .."; "What attracts me most about being a manager is ..."; "What turns me off the idea of being a manager is .."; "I would expect the most difficult thing about managing in an intercultural environment would be..." The same instrument was used both times. Consistent with our constructivist approach, we expected that these questions would provide work-inexperienced students with sufficient latitude to elicit their constructions of management.

In addition, we also sought, at the end of semester, staff judgements of student development and engagement. Staff members were directly engaged in facilitating student learning and acquired an intimate knowledge of students and the way their understanding of management developed across the semester.

#### Analytical Strategy

A thematic analysis of the data was undertaken. Each author coded the data and then met to reconcile interpretations. The data were reviewed by gender to see if work-inexperienced females and males differed in their constructions of management. Finding no differences, the

female and male data was amalgamated. The lack of differentiation on gender grounds may be due to students' inexperience of managing, and, as Powell et al (2002) suggest, that while *managerial stereotypes have less emphasis on masculine characteristics than earlier studies, a good manager is still seen as predominantly masculine.*

## Results

### Time 1 responses

At time 1, two fundamental constructions of management and managing were reflected in work-inexperienced students' responses. One group of respondents viewed management as more egalitarian and relational, the other as elitist task master.

#### Egalitarian and relational management

This first construction of management identified by respondents discussed management as a partnership with employees espousing a relationship between workers and higher level positions which was based on cooperation and team work. The outcome was to ensure *equality and a relaxed environment* to facilitate task accomplishment. Moreover, students in this group identified personal characteristics of managers consistent with realising this outcome. That is, managers were *organised, committed, ready to listen and respond, friendly and approachable*. Managers were also open to change with *good people skills*, which were articulated as strong communication skills and an ability to manage conflict.

The concern with collegial relationships was also reflected in what attracts these students to management. Students saw management as an opportunity *to meet people and learn to interact with others* through communication. They described the role of management as *being able to motivate team members to their full potential*, even during challenging and uncertain situations, through leading, training, listening and advising. In summary, those students with an egalitarian and relational mindset focused on developing positive relationships with employees as the means of achieving task outcomes.

#### Elite task master management

This view of management reflects a concern with controlling employees to achieve organisational outcomes; it is an elitist, manager-centric view of managing. Representative responses from this group viewed management as consisting of *a superior of a group of people who supervised and instructed people on what to do*. Participants described a feature of management as organising, assigning and planning roles to them and making sure they are working efficiently.

This view of managers as elites was also reflected in respondents' assessment of the distinction between managers and non-managers. For example, managers were reported as being *more organised than* [non-managers] and are in charge, and accountable for others. By virtue of this authority, *managers have the right to speak up and non-managerial employees usually listen*. Further, students in this group also described managers as being *more proactive, with non-managerial employees more reactive*.

Moreover, for these students an elitist orientation was a key motivator for being a manager, and this was reflected by their responses. They indicated they were motivated by being *able*

*to decide how to do things and not what other people want and being in a position of control to order people around.* Common terms used included, *authority over other employees; possessing status and position.*

Others with the elitist task master mindset deemed the intrinsic aspects as important, such as opportunities for achievement and responsibility. These themes were reported through responses that centred on the organisation, for example having *flexible time*; an interest in finding the best structure for a business to ensure it is effective and efficient; or, *really* being able to make a change and influence outcomes to potentially be a success.

Managers work a lot harder than everyone else

Two aspects of students' constructions of management with more agreement were that managers tend to work harder than non-managerial staff and that managing in an inter-cultural environment was particularly difficult. For virtually all respondents there was a perception that managers tend to have high workloads, must deal with resistant employees, and have much more responsibility. These were seen as negative impacts on the managers' personal and social lives, making the managerial role less attractive to respondents. Being a manager could be perceived as having an adverse influence on the quality of working life.

Managing in an intercultural environment

All students referred to the complexity of managing in an intercultural environment. Given this complexity, it appeared that students were unable to develop a functional conception of this domain of the management task. Previous research suggests that the most difficult problem associated with internationalising the curriculum is lack of student interest (Neubaum, Burden, & Bryan, 1997). However, this study suggests that attitudes may be a function of complexity and the difficulty of construing this management task, rather than a lack of interest. For example, responses included *the time consuming* nature of interacting with people from different cultures and the difficulties in *managing people from different backgrounds*. Students also highlighted potential issues arising due to lack of knowledge about the environment and difficulties adapting to the style of business in another culture, including *different laws, political, economic, social systems, and of course, language barriers*.

In conclusion, in time 1, two constructions of management were differentiated. In addition, there was widespread agreement of two traits of the management role; (1) management involves more demands which have demands an adverse influence on quality of life, and (2) managing in an intercultural environment is complex; there is little evidence of a coherent construction of this aspect of the management task.

*Time 2 responses*

Responses from students at the end of semester reflected the same polarisation found in week 1 responses. The elite task master management and egalitarian and relational management were still apparent, though with less clarity. After exposure to management concepts, there tended to be a greater reliance on formal management concepts (PLOC) in student responses.

## Egalitarian and relational management

There appeared to be a stronger reflection of egalitarian and relational management in round 2. However, this result might well be a function of the reduced sample size in round 2; it is possible that more students with an elite task master orientation failed to complete round 2 of the study. Nevertheless, egalitarian and relational management was well reflected in round 2 data. Illustrative responses described management as being an influential, *integral part of the organisation, able to inspire and motivate others*. Possessing *good listening and communication skills and being able to deal with conflict*. Further replies also discussed management as creating *good team dynamics, managing change* and *being a good role model for others*.

## Elite task master management

Though the egalitarian and relational construction of management was strong in round 2, the elite task master orientation was still very much in evidence with comments such as, *managing within the business, bossing people around and controlling everything*. The focus was very much on overseeing and managing.

For this group, the main motivations for becoming a manager tended to reinforce their perceptions of what managers do. By way of illustration, the key motivations for these students wanting to be a manager were *being in charge* by virtue of positional power, which provided the manager with *the right to give orders* and influence others. Nevertheless, there was evidence of a shift in some of those with an elite task master construction of management. In particular, the discussion of using interpersonal skills is far more wide spread at time 2, even among those with an elite task master construction of management. Indeed, there was some evidence of greater concerns with relationships among this group at time 2. For example, one student in the elite task master group reported at time 1 that 'being a manager means':

*I am the one who takes responsibility to lead the employees to achieve the company goals*

At time 2, this same individual reported that being a manager means:

*Having good listening skills, communication skills, able to deal with conflict, able to make decision when necessary; a manager motivates group work and dynamic.*

## Managers work a lot harder than everyone else

On this issue, round 2 responses reinforced round 1 responses. Students tend to see the management role as involving many more demands, more responsibility, and more stress, implying an adverse influence on quality of life. Again, in real world organisations, this perception raises significant issues particularly in the context of the introduction of work and non-work balance policies.

## Managing in an intercultural environment

The conceptions of managing in an intercultural environment between times 1 and 2 are similar. For virtually all respondents, the most difficult thing about managing in an international environment is perceived to be *managing difference*. For example, the cultural differences would be challenging to manage because of an inability *to predict how another culture would react to certain situations* and how they would undertake work. Students

talked about the certain conflict that would occur due to differing standards between the cultures. Thus, these differences give rise to changing managerial strategies depending upon the cultural group, most students said this would be hard to successfully accommodate.

In summary, students find it difficult to build a coherent construction of managing in an intercultural environment to guide their behaviour. The learning task faced by students required that they consider the issue in a practical way and draw on the cultural diversity in the class to facilitate this. At this point it seems that the intervention needs significant development if students are to gain insights from this aspect of the learning task.

#### Tutor Observations

Tutors reported, on the grounds of their facilitation of team discussions, that students' conceptualisation of management issues was much more sophisticated at time 2. Key areas of development include an ability to understand and discuss issues associated with management with more sophistication. Rather than students "parroting" management text responses, they are using a more complex language in discussing or explaining managing or management. They also demonstrated a grasp of management theory by linking it to practical examples from the intervention and incidents gained from their limited work experience.

#### *Discussion*

In the absence of prior research, this study focused on first-year work-inexperienced students' constructions of management. We found evidence of some development of students' constructions of management. At the same time, with only a semester's exposure to a very complex field of study, students found it difficult to develop coherent constructions of management that would guide their behaviour and permit them a means of embodying new information derived from future experiences in the management program.

Three important findings were reported; (1) students tended to have stable and polarised conceptions of management that tended to be developed across the semester, (2) that the managerial role is unattractive as managers have to work harder which disrupts work - non-work balance, and (3) first year students have difficulty conceptualising managing in an intercultural environment. Therefore, there is significant scope for more applied research to better understand how we might intervene to help students find meaning in management.

An analysis of the responses of student with less than one-year work experience suggests that these students may begin their studies of management with polarised views of management. There is a parallel polarisation in the broader literature on both management and leadership. For example, a distinction has been made between command and control management and team + collegial leadership (Industry Taskforce on Leadership and Management Skills, 1995) and between task-motivated leaders and relationship-motivated leaders (Fiedler, Chemers, & Mahar, 1976).

While more research is necessary, this outcome suggests that if these orientations are relatively stable then student constructions of management might be enhanced by helping students develop more insight into their own orientation and the implications for their interpretation of management roles. Nevertheless, the results do show some development in students' constructions of management. Where the time 1 responses tend to focus on one or two themes, the answers to the same questions at time 2 are more detailed and complex. The



time 1 responses lack depth and are quite short, despite the students being asked to explain their answers. This suggests a limited understanding of the overall concept of management at time 1. However there is a substantial difference in the responses at time 2. Particularly noteworthy, the use of more sophisticated language, more detailed answers and two or more themes emerging from single answers.

It is clear that time 2 responses were more developed. There was noticeably less motivation tied to external aspects like pay, as students' focus shifted to the intrinsic motivation provided by being in control of the situation. This could demonstrate that students appreciated the opportunity to be in control of their learning experiences, as provided through the intervention. Research indicates that intrinsic motivators are more powerful than extrinsic motivators, and students' responses show they are feeling more motivation from the characteristics of managing, rather than the anticipated monetary rewards. Additionally, at time 2, there were considerably less 'turn offs' to being a manager reported, one student commented that "*nothing*" turned him/her off management. The decrease in feelings of overwhelming responsibility attributed to the management role may demonstrate that we have made the task of management achievable and more appealing.

It was noticeable that the post intervention responses no longer focused on conflict as being the most difficult aspect of managing. Student responses reflected growth during the semester by identifying, post-intervention, individual differences as the most difficult management task. This development of responses may be attributed to the success of the intervention, where students who had not known one another previously were required to manage individual differences, including cultural differences, to reach a successful conclusion. This was one key learning we aimed for; the recognition of individual differences and a greater acceptance of diversity, as we felt this characterised modern organisational environments.

The issue of managing in an intercultural context proved particularly problematic for the first year students in this study. Yet the reality is that many of these students must develop appropriate mindsets and capabilities in this area (Neubaum et al., 1997). From the point of view of designing educational interventions, the intervention incorporated into this unit does hold some promise, yet there is a need to devote more energy and resources to it to help students develop a useful construction of this aspect of the management role. Previous research suggests that the key problem in developing a international skills is lack of student interest in international perspective (Neubaum et al., 1997), though complexity of the task may be a better explanation.

First-year students perceptions of the demands of the role are also worthy of more investigation. There is probably some truth in their perceptions that managers spend more time at work, yet in this era when there is a greater focus on work and non-work balance it would seem to be an opportunity to help students find strategies for working smart rather than working more. In work organisations there seems a gap between what managers espouse and what they practice. HR policies that address this issue are unlikely to work if managers do not set an appropriate example. We need to help our students develop better strategies in this area.

In conclusion, this study has provided direction to further develop our educational intervention and for further research into first-year work-inexperienced students' constructions of management. The utility of the intervention has been demonstrated throughout the analysis, but it would be interesting to determine whether the changes we have

identified in terms of greater engagement with management flow on to greater student participation in management studies. Monitoring student majors could provide an area for future investigation. Moreover, we see value in drawing theoretical frameworks from our own discipline as a means of driving the design and implementation of our educational interventions. Emergent change theory, in particular, would seem to have some potential for improving our ongoing management education interventions.

There are of course limitations with this research; by using a qualitative approach we were unable to interview the entire student population. A quantitative study could be designed to collect data from a larger number of students to more accurately reflect the student population. Nonetheless, qualitative data provides rich insight into student feelings which is reflected in the study. Additionally, we have not used all the qualitative responses collected through our study. This gives a future opportunity to compare the responses of students with limited work experience against those who are able to draw on their work experience.

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