Practical-Theoretical Approach in the Application of Theory Models of Organizational Behavior

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the idea of incorporating a practical-theoretical approach to the application of theory relevant to the instruction of organizational behavior. In an effort to move beyond the mere traditional theoretic-based approach of instruction, the practical-theoretical approach brings to life the concepts, allowing the student to experience the learning within the controlled confines of academia.

The paper identifies two important components necessary to the practical-theoretical approach: (1) The identification of a commonality among the students and (2) the discovery of meaningfulness in the issue being discussed. Commonality refers to something each student has in common. Meaningfulness refers to anything that is important to each student.

The organizational behavior theories used as an example in this paper include Bandura's Model of Organizational Behavior and E. F. Harrison's Rational Model of Decision Making. The Model of Organizational Behavior is used as a foundation throughout the course to establish a clear understanding of the behavioral dynamics that occur inside the organization. The practical application of the theory-based Rational Model of Decision-Making brings to life an understanding of the theory that implicitly applies to the student. The use of the practicum supports the importance of the practical-theoretical approach to pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

In the ongoing effort to bring innovative methodologies into the traditional classroom, one must sidestep the mainstream, the status quo, and consider the appropriateness of practicality. The American Heritage Dictionary (2000) defines the term practical as "capable of being used or put into effect; useful." Academic ideology should move beyond a theoretic-based approach toward a practical-theoretic foundation, bringing to life the concepts that typically are mechanically discussed and tested through traditional case study examination.

Recognizing the existence of a multitude of motivation and leadership theories that are the basis of managerial curriculum, this article does not propose that traditional approaches to theoretical learning should be discarded. Instead, it is proposed that applicable theory be closely tied to the professional aspects of each and every student. This clearly becomes a difficult task when considering the diversity of today's students. The traditional approach to academics may not result in improvement in pedagogy any more than merely lecturing to "students about relevant knowledge and theory suffice for the development of professional practice" (Ballantyne, Bain & Packer, 1999).

Today's classroom is replete with a broad range of professional and personal experiences that could become an obstacle to the suggested approach. One must, therefore, overcome the vast experiential spectrum through the identification of commonality among the learners. This is easily accomplished by using the one discernible aspect of commonality: the academic environment itself. Using this approach allows the student to gain a greater appreciation for the utility of the theory and an enthusiasm for subject as a result of the practical application (Johnson, 2001). Both students and the corporate world are demanding a more practical approach to learning, including the use of case studies and simulations that facilitate the practical-theoretical approach (Flamm, 1999).

This article will discuss the practical-theoretical approach using two theories common to the managerial academics: Albert Bandura's "Model of Organizational Behavior" and E. F. Harrison's "Rational Model of Decision Making." At the conclusion of this article, it will become apparent that any and all of the managerial theories can be taught using the practical-theoretical approach. An important aspect of the approach, as earlier noted, is to find commonality among the students. It is also quite helpful to discover meaningfulness in the particular example being utilized. By meaningfulness, I intend to provoke ownership of the issue being discussed; something is important to each of the students.

BACKGROUND

Bandura's Model of Organizational Behavior (Figure 1) identifies three components: individual, group and organizational constraints. This social learning approach identifies that "behavior can best be explained in terms of a continuous reciprocal interaction among cognitive, behavioral, and environmental determinants" (Luthans, 1998). Simply stated, individuals come into organizations, are placed into groups to accomplish organizational goals, and are limited by organizational constraints. This is the appropriate time to use the practical-theoretical approach through simplification and clarification. In place of demanding memorization of terms and processes, I make use of the students themselves to bring the theory to life.

Figure 1. Model of Organizational Behavior

Individuals:	**Groups**:	**Organizational Constraints**:
Knowledge Skills Abilities Personalities Attitudes Goals Individual Decision-Making Emotions Motivation	Task Manageability Task Focus Group Decision-Making Interdependence Communication Conflict Power Politics	Work Schedule Policy/Procedures Legal Considerations Technology Issues Structure and Design Culture

The students are formed into small groups and provided an assignment due at a later date. The groups are permitted time to interact socially and discuss available ways to accomplish the assignment. This brief exercise allows for the practical-theoretical application of the model. The students return a traditional classroom arrangement, where the Model of Organizational is discussed. The first component of the model is the individual and everything each person brings to the organization, both good and bad. The students identify themselves as individuals who bring a plethora of diversity into the classroom. Identifiable individual characteristics include personality, attitude, knowledge, skill, ability, gender, and race. The list, too comprehensive to list here, is both encouraging and discouraging. It becomes readily apparent that the resource typically identified as most valuable to organizations, people, are also a great source of adversity, disruption and conflict.

The second component of the model is the group. The discussion takes a path of interaction, dynamics, stress, power, politics, and leadership. The students discuss the dynamics of their own groups in establishing relationships and focusing on the task to be accomplished. In spite of the professional and personal experiences and maturity of the students, group processes are still fairly predictable. Stages of group development occur sequentially and dynamically.

The final component of the model is organizational constraints. To complete practical-theoretical approach to the model, all that is necessary is to identify what constraints exist within the context of the course. The constraints are clearly articulated in the course syllabus. The constraints include, but are not limited to, the course description, date and time of class, required assignments, examinations and course objectives. Most of the constraints, as in the real world, are clearly spelled out. Yet, there are certain constraints that are not specified in the syllabus that constraining nonetheless. An example of this would include information listed in the university's student handbook, or from an extraneous variable linked in no way to the university or academics, i.e. state laws.

In a similar manner, one can apply the practical-theoretical approach to E. F. Harrison's "Rational Model of Decision Making." The paradigm requires the inclusion of certain assumptions, i.e. problem clarity, unlimited time and cost constraints, and the ability to identify all available options (March, 1994, pp 2-7). These assumptions, often unrealistic and limiting in a practical setting, provide insight into the inherent weaknesses and susceptibility of paradigms involving the complexities of human behavior and interactivity. The model does, nonetheless, permit a rational approach to the decision-making processes, enhancing one's ability to maximize the alternatives within the organizational constraints. Observation of the process in the classroom setting substantiates how situational factors and decision styles impact the effort to use the model in an academic setting. Situational awareness and strong leadership enhance the process (Sweeney & McFarlin, 2002). Harrison's model specifically identifies six steps detailed in Figure 2 (Robbins, 2001, p 132)

<u>Figure 2.</u> Rational Model of Decision-Making

1.	Define the Problem	CLARITY OF THE ISSUE
2.	Identify the Decision Criteria	RELEVANCY
3.	Allocate Weights to the Criteria	PRIORITIZATION
4.	Develop Alternatives	ASSESSMENT
5.	Evaluate the Alternatives	ANALYSIS
6.	Select the Best Alternative	DECISION
7.	Monitor and Evaluate	APPRAISAL

PRACTICUM

In order to assure successful application of the practical-theoretical process, one must discern an aspect of commonality among students (the academic environment itself) and establish meaningfulness in the particular example being used. Using this particular model, one example has worked perfectly every time. As the term progresses, students inherently begin to worry about upcoming examinations. This is an excellent opportunity to use the proffered methodology in a situation that establishes both commonality and meaningfulness.

As the worry about an upcoming examination builds in spite of assurances, offer the students the opportunity to forego the examination. But, they must use the "Rational Model of Decision Making" to maximize their ability to make an informed decision that is consistent with both personal goals and academic objectives. Students are reminded that they entered the course as <u>individuals</u>, bringing with them unique knowledge, skills, abilities, attitudes, personalities, and goals. These unique characteristics impact how each student's ability to succeed in the academic environment, establishing a foundation for work performance, alignment of personal and academic goals, and the decision-making processes that will occur throughout the course.

The students were placed into <u>groups</u> to accomplish course objectives and assignments set forth in the syllabus. The course goals were consistent with desired learning objectives specific to organizational behavior curriculum. The course assignments included examinations, case studies, in-class group discussions and a group presentation. Groups were established to better manage the tasks at hand, maintain a focus on the tasks to be accomplished, capitalize on the decision-making process and create interdependence among the groups.

<u>Organizational constraints</u> were established the first time the class met. Returning to the Model of Organizational Behavior throughout the term reinforces earlier learning, used as often as possible, emphasizes the importance of understanding the principle. With the aforementioned articulated facts set forth, I then allow the students to come to a decision by walking them step-by-step through the model.

The first step is relatively simple. The defined problem is whether or not the class should take an examination. Step two requires a detailed review of the personal goals of each student (commonality and meaningfulness) and the constraints placed on them by way of the syllabus. The syllabus is broken down into sections to determine what is relevant and what is not, followed by a prioritization of the most important criteria. It is not uncommon to find the students note, much to the professor's consternation, that a majority of the syllabus, as a whole, is irrelevant to the needs of the student, as it relates to taking an examination.

The students are quick to identify that the course description, course objectives, teaching methodology, ADA information, case studies, class participation, among numerous other components of the syllabus, although relevant, hold low priority in determining if the desired learning objectives will be met. As students continue to argue that the learning objectives can still be met without taking an examination, they become less vocal when a specific constraint is identified: course evaluation points for the examination. In assuring the students that the decision to take the examination is still theirs, the critical component of course evaluation points takes the forefront of conversation.

Suggestions are made to redistribute the course evaluation points so no points are allocated to the examination, thereby eliminating any effect on the overall grade. An inquiry is made as to the fairness of the request. If it were fair to redistribute the points to eliminate the relevancy of the examination, would it not be just as fair to redistribute the points to make the examination worth even more points? It is quickly agreed that redistribution of the course evaluation points would be unfair, as the syllabus clearly established course evaluation points at the onset of the term. In a few fleeting moments, it becomes apparent that an extremely relevant issue has been identified and is placed on top of the list of concerns. Students are emphatic that no one is interested in receiving a "C" in the course, which is the best one could obtain if the examination were not taken.

Yet, the struggle is not over. Moving to step four, the students are permitted to develop alternatives. Overcome by concern for their grade, but still in the fight to exorcise the examination, creativity falls by the wayside in the suggested alternatives: Open-book examination, take-home examination, open-note examination. In an effort to assist the process, one might even consider taking the examination, as this alternative does align effectively with the overall goals of the student and the curriculum.

In evaluating the alternatives, students are quick to note that most take-home examinations are much more difficult than one taken in the classroom. It is also noted, interestingly, that open-book examinations take longer because students are typically looking up answers to questions of which they already know the answers. In keeping in touch with the practicality of the exercise, the open-note examination is eliminated from contention because the professor decides it is not a viable alternative – because that is just what organizational leaders do sometimes; they identify an alternative does meet the needs of the organization (or in this case, the student).

CONCLUSION

Although this is not in any way about winning or losing, students discuss a sense of defeat. It should be noted with clarity that the decision was theirs, using Harrison's "Rational Model of Decision Making." The conclusion to take the examination was an informed decision using a practical approach to an organizational behavior theory of decision-making. The commonality and meaningfulness, critical to the practical-theoretical approach, was established. The students experienced first hand the "Rational Model of Decision Making," confident that the conclusion they came to was appropriate.

Jennings (2000) cites four challenges facing educators in their effort to provide a quality education to prepare today's student to succeed in tomorrow's workplace: (1) current information; (2) practical application of theory; (3) in-depth learning; and (4) an environment conducive to the learning process. Jennings further notes, "In addition to having industry knowledge and networks to augment this knowledge, educators need to demonstrate the transfer of theory-into-practice."

In citing these two classroom examples, one can see the importance of bringing to life the theoretical application into practical, real-world application. Using a variety of methodologies allows one to move beyond a theoretic-based approach toward a practical-theoretic foundation, bringing to life the concepts that typically are mechanically discussed and tested through traditional case study examination. Practical application of organizational behavior theory can be implemented in the workplace when the foundation of learned principles includes an intimate understanding of the concepts.

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