

OD practitioner

How I Lied My Way Out of Latin and Became a Behavioral Scientist

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"When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school it's a wonder I can think at all. . . ."

—Paul Simon, Kodachrome

During the years 1949 to 1961, while other men—so I fantasize—had affairs with women, I had a series of love trysts with universities. I attended five (including two Big Ten and one Ivy League), taught in one, earned two degrees, completed courses for a third, and nearly was admitted to candidacy for a fourth. Semester after semester I worked diligently to improve my position in the human (rat?) race by stuffing down a mish-mash compendium of western knowledge, especially in literature, history, philosophy, the arts, music, sociology, and social psychology. I also took up more mundane (or esoteric, depending on your prejudices) subjects like forestry, photography, accounting, business management, editing and writing, and earned three academic credits for my pilot's license.

I subscribed to 25 magazines and the

daily *New York Times*, and was conversant with a dozen scholarly journals and two dozen scholars. I attended lectures, debates, the theatre, concerts, political rallies, and argued into the wee hours whether integrated housing in the suburbs would solve America's social crises (I was cautiously optimistic). I learned 64 chord changes on the piano and took up folk guitar. I knew a little about almost everything, nothing in depth about anything, and nothing whatever about myself. My friends considered me well-informed.

During that same period I married, fathered a child and wrote a book on photography. I began professional training in American Civilization at a

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prestigious graduate school. American Civ was a hot new interdisciplinary field, with scope so vast it could contain, though just barely, my many interests. For me they waived the usual undergraduate degree requirements. My master's degree in journalism, my score on the Miller Analogies Test all showed "unusual promise."

Like a junkie in a drugstore, I went on a learning jag. I soaked up Puritan culture, Civil War history, colonial anthropology, the Human Relations Area Files, and psychosociohistoriographic research methods. I got all A's, hardly paused for another child (after all, my wife did most of the work), and passed the Ph.D. qualifying exam. I even boned up and got by the graduate Spanish test. I was particularly proud of this achievement because, despite good grades in high school Spanish, I had long defined myself as a person with a hang-up about learning languages.

I couldn't then and can't now explain my passion for knowledge. Certainly I didn't acquire it in high school. The teacher I remember best was a white-haired, kindly-looking lady of 60-odd years—a Norman Rockwell portrait of your grandmother. She taught Latin as if she were running a Nazi death camp. It was her practice to select five people at random each day—peeking speculatively over the tops of her bifocals for the subtle cues thrown off by the least-prepared. The selection proc-

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called on the same five, over and over, until the bell rang. A stutter, hesitation, or bad guess led to an instant "zero." Whereupon, your name was dropped from the list (how else handle a zero?) and another added, at random, to remain on the treadmill so long as he/she/it produced correct answers. I sat through this torture session—stomach knotted, palms wet, tongue dry—five days a week for a year. Nights I studied my ass off.

I was astounded when she invited me to continue with advanced Latin (an event to ponder if you think fear is inconsistent with high performance). However, I was not so tongue-tied that I couldn't invent for her benefit the most outrageous lie of my life—a fantasy about my future career in Engineering which required math (lots of it!) rather than optional languages. I forgot my cases and conjugations within weeks and, except for required Spanish, never took language lessons again.

So there I was, a dozen years later, ostensibly over my language hang-up and well on my way to acquiring a license to practice. I never gave much thought to what it was I would be practicing. I gave a lot of thought to the setting—sunny, tree-shaded, book-lined, the air crackling with stimulating talk, hot buttered rum, fireplaces—a protected environment in which I would write an unending string of contributions to that vast storehouse of knowledge which marked the dividing line between people and great apes.

The Balloon Bursts

Then, in one memorable spring afternoon, my academic balloon burst, and with it my intellectual pretensions. I flunked the master's degree exam in American Civ. For most Ph.D. candidates this was a mere footnote, a formality, a checkpoint on academia's fourlane highway (Passed German? Check. MA in American Civ? Check.). For me, it was Gettysburg, Bunker Hill, Manila Bay. American Civ remained impregnable. I simply didn't know the answers to the questions. They came out of undergraduate courses I had never had.

I can't fault my teachers. I declined their offer to cram and try again. Having perished at the outset, I'd show the bastards by publishing (posthumously). Indeed, publishing was one of the few things I actually knew how to do. Starting with *Music Journal* in 1953, I had

The Journal of Applied Behavioral Science announces THE 1975 DOUGLAS MCGREGOR MEMORIAL AWARD

The McGregor Memorial Award was established in 1966 to recognize excellence in the application of the behavioral sciences. For 1975, we announce a Award for the best article exemplifying the interplay between theory, practice and values in any domain of planned change. An honorarium of \$1,000 accompanies the Award. Announcement of the Award and the award-winning paper will appear in the February 1976 issue of the *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*. Articles should be sent to LaVerne Collins, NTL Institute, Box 9155, Arlington Virginia 22209.

Articles should be 3,000 to 6,000 words in length. They should be submitted in quadruplicate no later than September 1, 1975, following the usual format for JABS, and will be judged by an Award Committee chaired by Herbert A. Shepard, and including Barbara B. Bunker, Harvey A. Hornstein, Rosabeth Mos Kanter, Paul R. Lawrence, and Robert Tannenbaum.

Now, writing for a living remains for all but a handful a decision "tantamount" (as we journalists used to say) to taking vows of poverty without the solace of faith. To finance my new obsession, I worked even harder in the family business, an enterprise which also had sustained my sojourn in academia.

My father, who counted on me to succeed (him) in business without really trying, applauded my decision. The years flew by. I wrote for the *New Republic*, *Reporter*, and *Progressive*, recounted my adventures in child-rearing for *Parents*, was reprinted in *Reader's Digest*. I published two more books—one on presidential campaigns (my doctoral dissertation?), another of true

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adventure stories from a voluntary service organization—and edited a third

ing systems, bad debts, ad copy, hiring and firing, market analysis, production planning, inventory control, blacks and whites working together, budgeting, plant layout, and the damnable tendency of perfect systems to be screwed up by imperfect people.

A "Mind-Blower"

In 1966 I read Douglas McGregor and, in language I didn't know it but was soon to learn, it "blew my mind." Theory X, theory Y. I knew which side I was on. I began fiddling with work teams without supervision. Perfectionist that I am, I assumed I was McGregor's prime example, Non-Linear Systems, was simply one of hundreds if not thousands, of firms making it with Theory Y. Not having had a clue in it, I started with a simple question: If I *really* believed in Theory Y, what would I do differently Monday morning? McGregor told me that work teams really work. What he didn't tell me was *how* to make them work. Was it about coffee breaks? Raises? Training? Customer complaints? Filing?

What I did Monday morning was to get the people together and tell them what I planned to do. From now on, instead of five specialized departments, deal in sequence with every order, we'd have five work teams, each with five people dealing with their *own* customer orders. One specialist from each department would staff each team. My

about training. "Teach each other your jobs," I said. As an afterthought I added, "Take care of the customers. Do whatever they want." I gave each team its own typewriters and telephones.

It soon became evident we had a lot of problems not solvable by my all-purpose formula. When the teams begged to have their supervisors back, I balked—and went back to studying Non-Linear Systems. The solution, I said to myself, reading between the lines, was meetings, a technique in which my abiding faith was exceeded only by my lack of experience. I asked people to save up their problems. Once a week each team would send a representative to a meeting, where we would listen to and solve each others' problems.

The meetings dragged on interminably. I couldn't believe the teams had so

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many problems—nor that we had run a business successfully for so many years with three-fourths of the work force knowing next to nothing about what they were doing. I realized, with a pang, that indeed the supervisors, now eliminated, had for years been making every decision. Every one, that is, (and I was suddenly appalled by the number) except those they were passing to me. Everybody else, it seemed, was what the computer people call "peripheral equipment." They were hooked up to the phones and typewriters and billing machines and file cabinets as extensions of the machinery, programmed to do or die and not to reason why.

A "Little Spark"

After four meetings, I was ready to give up. Theory Y, I confided to my wife, was a fine theory. It just didn't work in real life. People weren't ready. McGregor was a college professor, not a manager; all those thousands of Theory Y companies were full of business school graduates who (I added illogically) had had courses in Theory Y techniques, and besides they paid more than we did and could afford better help. blah blah

as I planned to reveal, final meeting. The troops filed in and sat down. Everybody looked at everybody else. Nobody said anything. "Where are the problems?" I asked, tightening my gut against the coming barrage.

"We don't have any this week," one woman said sheepishly.

"What do you mean you don't have any?" I asked. (Did they sense my disappointment?).

"Well," said another bravely, "nothing new came up. Everything that happened we knew how to handle from our other meetings."

From our other meetings. (Those long, unproductive, time-wasting meetings?) I could hardly believe it. "When you really understand something," Wolfgang Langweische, a famous flight instructor, once wrote, "a little spark jumps." And he added, "Watch for it!" In that moment, in the fifth meeting, a little spark jumped for me.

I understood, *really* understood, what learning was all about. I became aware that it took time, required real problems to be solved, involved trial and error, and generated tremendous anxiety. I also began to understand—I had no words for it then—what good teachers do instinctively: structure the chance to learn, offer feedback and support, provide some tools and ideas, and stay out of the way.

With a shock I realized the way I ran my business was anti-learning. I had no tolerance for mistakes. I wanted everything done right the first time—including the solutions to problems nobody had faced before. Naturally, only I could handle such problems. Naturally, only I knew what a fraud I was—appearing (more self-deception) to be the only one who invariably knew the right answers. In my own, low-key, nice-guy, uptight sort of way, I made a pretty good Latin teacher. To discover that women with high school educations, who had not piled up 180 credit hours and taken half the courses in the catalog, not only could handle "my" problems, but do a better job of it than I was scary. It was also liberating.

I went home, mixed a drink, and formulated my first independent managerial concept: When you do away with supervisors and create work teams, it is not something called "democracy" or "participative management" that fills the vacuum. The *only* alternative to supervision is education—a chance to learn and grow, not in any old direction, but within the framework of clear goals, dis-

(how stupid of me not to have known this sooner!) on behalf of the customer. Now that takes a very tough-minded kind of management. It was two years before I discovered, reading Mary Parker Follett with mounting excitement, that "the law of the situation" was an old concept.* I'd learned it from a bunch of people with high school educations. Indeed, we had discovered it together.

Now, I said to myself (more fantasy; life's one damn fantasy after another), I was on to the game. At last I understood what those thousands of Theory Y companies—all way ahead of me in that grim race I was running in my head—had learned in their expensive management development courses. The name of the game was Theory Y, and I was playing catch-up. For more than a year I played hard and for keeps. Little by little I turned it all over to the work teams—who to hire, who to fire, when to promote, what to give raises for (they decided the main criteria should be multiple skills, something that never had occurred to me), what equipment to buy and how to schedule lunches and coffee breaks. So I was not terribly surprised when turnover (except for the ex-supervisors, who left early on) went to near zero and our order-processing capability jumped 40 per cent. After all, that's

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what it should have been all along Right?

Jugglers and Roller-Coasters

Meanwhile, on the home front productivity tripled. We had two more kids. took up housework and hated it. My wif

*Metcalf, H. D. and L. Urwick (eds.), *Dynami Administration: the Collected Works of Mar*

wrote a book on art. Despite my liberal education, vocational education, multiple careers, I still found myself re-deciding, every morning, what it was I *really* wanted to do. I knew next to nothing about learning. I had a glimmer, that was all. How to learn, what to learn, how to use what I already knew, seemed fragmented—a sort of 2000-piece jigsaw puzzle, in which I'd managed to fit a few edge pieces and didn't know which ones to attack next.

Budgeting, marketing, productivity, book-writing, ad copy, social science—I had more balls in the air than a three-armed juggler. Values remained something in an ethics course. It's a wonder I could think at all.

In 1968, I gave up on business the way I had given up on academia. The wave of the future was Theory Y work teams. My old man—who had built a respectable enterprise out of \$50 in capital, guts, ingenuity, and a profound belief that one's relatives in management were the safest form of Depression insurance—balked at my grandiose scheme to hire professional managers. In one traumatic weekend, I decided it was his business and he was entitled to run it his way. I quit.

Most of my experience, I reflected in

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a burst of self-pity, had been wasted. I knew nothing about management except how to run one small business. In truth, I didn't know very much about that—and besides who would be interested? Three careers in 15 years, and none of them very satisfying. One hell of a long lab with no processing. I knew a lot about anxiety, but, like a lot of other things, I had no idea that I knew it. After all, I was one of those who

emotional roller-coaster, zooming to euphoric heights, dipping to the edge of panic. I got by only with a little help from my friends. One introduced me to the world of charitable foundations, another to (big) business, a third to medical schools. Building on my only marketable skills, writing and *chutzpah*, I began to consult and write about the things people were doing with behavioral sciences in education and industry. Through a process I'll gladly relate if you ask me over drinks, I metamorphosed again. The end of 1969 found me with little experience, less skill, and—much to my relief—a handful of clients. The latter being all you really need, I appointed myself an OD consultant.

In changing careers again, I went through a series of re-education experiences, including the obligatory T-groups, Gestalt labs, and consultation skills workshops. I began rubbing shoulders with people who viewed education differently than I had. From folks like the late Mike Blansfield (don't bother to look him up, he's not in the literature), I learned to value and use my *own* experience and to stop living vicariously on other people's. When Mike said it was possible, in a two-week workshop, to pick a client out of the yellow pages, make an appointment, get a contract, and spend the rest of the week consulting—I didn't believe him. I was astonished to discover he was right. I've since said the same thing to dozens of trainees in consultation skills labs. It continues to astonish me that all of them go out and get clients. It astonishes *them* even more.

On "Having Been There"

Which brings me to my second conclusion about education: The only difference between teacher and learner is not in the facts one knows but in the teacher's *sure* knowledge, born of having been there, that if you hang in long enough, and believe in yourself, you can do things today you couldn't do yesterday. It's not possible to learn this from books or lectures. Hearing it, reading it, talking about it—all probably are essential. None, though, is worth a damn without also *doing* it. At some point you just have to put your rear end on the line or you can't grow at all.

It was Mike Blansfield's genius, I think, to figure out that while T-Groups were ideal for learning about interpersonal processes, the *experiential* analogy to T-groups for applying such learn-

to me why traditional management development workshops are such low-potency activities and team building powerful for improving organized work.

Concepts are best learned by *using* them. No two of us do it exactly alike. Some learn best by thinking, the doing, and others just the opposite. A Latin teacher thought everybody learned best by memorizing and reciting to hear. I find I learn more when I'm teaching.

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somebody else—which may explain why she knew so much and the rest of us knew so little. Writing this piece, oddly enough, has taught me how essential my year in Latin was to my understanding of work teams.

Knowing *how* I learn, it troubles me less *what* to learn. Let me talk a while and I'll figure out what I'm trying to say. Awareness, said Fritz Perls, is changing whether or not you do something about it. I've become aware that wherever I've been striving to go all these years, I'm there already. What's more, I always have been. There's something lost and something gained, sings Joni Mitchell, living every day. I'm trying to live every day. I'm not very good at it, but at least I've gained awareness that it's possible. What I've lost is the wish to know everything. Well, it's a starting place.

Some assumptions I've let go:

- Education is measured in books and courses;
- If it's easy and enjoyable it's not learning;
- Techniques fail or succeed independent of people;
- Mistakes are a sign of weakness;
- Everybody else knows more (do more, is better, faster, smoother, more charming, harder-working, more easy-going, more serious, funnier) than I;
- Failure (not poverty) is the biggest sin to be guarded against by a

can't fail. Right? Yet, to quote Paul Simon, my favorite philosopher, "You got to learn how to fall before you learn to fly." *That* is a hypothesis carrying what we social scientists call "explanatory power." It accounts for the data. It makes coherent a lot of apparently disparate information. It is what we like to call "replicable," which means that if you, living your life, find you've had some of the same experiences I have, you're likely to have the same feelings about them. How come nobody ever let me in on this hypothesis sooner? Not in grade school, not in high school, not in college, not anywhere. Late in life I find myself copying it off one of my kid's record albums.

Increasingly, it seems clear that my 20 years or so of formal schooling did little to prepare me for the way I earn a living, except that I appreciate the binds my clients are in because they so closely resemble my own. My kids, and my wife, who's a teacher, tell me schools are changing. For a lot of us, though, it's too late. The only education we can hope for is what we invent for ourselves. Our most valuable asset is our own experience, the critical events we've lived through, if only we could learn to conceptualize them.

A Practitioner "Tip"

All of this is a long prelude to a practitioner tip. Most people I work with need to hear that OD practitioners construct learning events in a different way from what they're accustomed to. (We do, don't we?) What they *don't* need to hear is a message I sometimes see practitioners unintentionally convey—that there's something wrong with people who don't enthuse over their first brush with experiential learning (as if everybody didn't get where they are "experientially").

Anyway, a few years ago, as a way of reassuring myself, I began reflecting on, rationalizing, and publicly stating my learning assumptions to managers. It troubled me (and still does) to hear my colleagues talk about "resistance" in groups, as if people don't want and can't use what we have to offer. What people don't want are not-okay feelings. All of us need as much acceptance as we can get—from ourselves and others—of our experiences, anxieties and dilemmas.*

My fear for organization develop-

Learning Assumptions

(Different from Usual School/Conference)

We assume that each person:

1. **Has a unique learning style.** Some learn best by reading, others by doing, still others by discussing, or listening. Hence, we provide a *variety* of methods, not all of which will suit everyone.
2. **Learns at a different rate.** Hence, some may be confused or "lost" in the early stages. It's okay not to "get it" the first time you hear it. Try to be patient with yourself and with us.
3. **Learns different things from a common experience.** Hence, we encourage trading of perceptions and acceptance of different feelings and views.
4. **Learns best from his/her own experience.** Hence, we urge application of ideas to your situation and support a healthy skepticism towards "the one best way" to solve management problems.
5. **Learns more in one workshop than the world will permit us to apply.** Hence, we focus on *small-scale* steps within larger perspective.
6. **Has the ability to help and teach others.** Hence, we encourage participation and drawing on each others' expertise as well as ours.
7. **Benefits from trial, error, and feedback, if given support and a chance for success.** Hence, we provide opportunities for this to happen in relatively low-risk situations. No one is required to invest in these opportunities.

ment resembles the one Jerry Harvey expressed so humorously in these pages recently.** As OD becomes a religion, another panacea, a set of incantations and universal "process issues," it's my old Latin teacher all over again. New bottle, fancy package, bright ribbon,

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nice salespeople, glamorous results—oh yes, the content's changed all right. To the extent there's still a set of hoops to jump through (express your feelings! stop and process! admit your defensiveness! stop being so uptight! grow!), then the process (which we claim like one famous purveyor of industrial processes "is our most

It is not a reflection on our competence that some problems have no solutions, or that some people never learn (what we think they should know). In college, I thought I'd be okay if only I knew everything. Now, I feel okay when I have the wit to say "no"—to things that don't interest me, to knowledge I don't want or need, to demands I can't meet, to books I will never read, to clients who won't use what I have to offer. From Latin I saved myself by lying. How save myself from Behavioral Science? I'm trying to learn how to survive by telling the truth, to other people, sure, but more importantly to myself.

The accompanying box represents a workshop handout which I've found useful, especially with managers, in reducing my own and others' defensiveness born of the bad experiences we've had with "formal" education. I find that talking these through up front helps all of us get in the mood to deal more directly with each other. These items form an important clause to workshop contracts for me, the more so because I came to them so late in life. I find it impossible to take these assumptions for granted, just as my erstwhile