

DOOR to Deep Learning

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Abstract

This brief paper draws from my current Doctoral research which aims to address the question - *How can I as a leader shift my focus from action to deep reflection?* The research journey is crystallising a framework called the 'DOOR' which integrates action and reflection and through iterative cycles progressively deepen the learning of the self and our understanding of the world at large.

Introduction

The benefits of reflective practice, and the nexus between doing and reflection, are widely explored in academic literature with a strong community of educational researchers and scholars addressing various aspects of the benefits and difficulties of such practice.

Learning from my Masters thesis provided me with a focus for over a decade on designing and facilitating programs that helped Leaders to reflect on their practice. My current Doctoral research focuses on how I embody reflection within myself- in short do I practice what I preach and by emulating it for myself can I better enable it for others.

This present research is a continuation of my personal application of reflective practice personified by the frameworks of (Argyris et al., 1985) and (Schon, 1987). This continued thread allows me to now focus on the concept and practice of 'deep' reflection, the notion of 'deep' is my umbrella term that attempts to cover various other frameworks around Critical reflection (Fook and Gardner, 2007) including reflexivity (Steier, 1991), postmodernism and deconstruction particularly in relation to power within organisations (Brookfield, 2001) and

Critical Social Theory (Mezirow and Associates, 2000).

Also reflection as viewed from other traditions such as Neuroscience (Pockett et al., 2006), (Siegel, 2007), Inner spirituality (Krishnamurti, 1995), (Sinclair, 2007), (Lama, 2006) and Integration Theorists (Wilber, 2007).

My research methodology is primarily Auto-ethnography and Action research supported by relevant literature and interspersed with a genre that I have created and titled, called 'Pictoems', which are pictures combined with poems that capture moments in time. They offer an opportunity to reflect metaphorically and symbolically on the issues explored within the central Question and upon life's essence.

The DOOR Framework

The research also expands on a model I have created and titled 'DOOR'. This is used as a mnemonic, and also metaphorically and literally as a means to 'open' doorways to understanding. The 'D' in DOOR stands for 'Design', The First 'O' stands for 'Operate', The second 'O' stands for 'Observe' and the



'R' stands for "Reflect". This then forms the first iterative cycle.

At its elementary level the 'DO' stands for 'doing' and like most Leaders I am immersed well in truly in the Doing paradigm, and for me 'doing' at its most robotically unconscious level. The 'OR' stands for 'or else' which includes divergent thinking, creativity, play, Questioning, challenging, meta reflection and being present in the moment.

Both 'Doing' and 'Or else' thinking can be linked to a cyclic cosmology, including the ancient yin-yang symbol. The diagram of the 'Supreme Ultimate' consists of the Yin and Yang. Yin is the name given to the force which produces expansion, and is considered the feminine principle (Black in diagram) which I correspond to 'OR' . Yang is the name given

to the force which tends to make things contract, and is the masculine element. (White in Diagram) Which I correspond to 'DO'.

'The yin yang principle is simple. These two forces are always opposite and antagonistic, and yet at the same time they are complementary, for they are forever combining

and co-operating. The principle is one of "dualistic monism". This is quite different from dualism in the western context, which describes opposites without an integrating harmony.

My research documents my own learning gained from designing and facilitating (Action Research based) Leadership Development programs (that utilise the iterative application of the DOOR) with senior managers within a number of organisations, including Mars a global food business, BHP Billiton, a global mining company, Bunnings, Australia's largest retail hardware chain and The Guild Group a mid-tier insurance and financial services business.

The research includes a comparative analysis of the DOOR framework (utilising a circumplex) with key theoretical frameworks in the field including (Revans, 1980), (Kolb, 1984), Boud & Walker, 1998) and (Mezirow, 2000). This analysis highlighted a gap in what I have titled the Zones of Deep Reflection and Design as it corresponds to the DOOR model.

See Appendix for a diagram of the circumplex.

This short paper does not allow me the scope to elaborate on the circumplex or the gaps apart from commenting that both deep reflection and design are integral steps towards the unfoldment of practice.

Organisational and leadership practices pay scant attention to reflection. Review is compensated for reflection and even this is done in a cursory fashion. Also, review like the post Implementation review in project management framework fits comfortably within established business practices, it rarely challenges the status quo or the deeper underlying issues. It survives because it upholds the current paradigm. Learning in this

context is single loop, incremental and fragmented from the context.

Reflection on the other hand is the vital ingredient that incubates and illuminates new ideas. Deep reflection challenges current mental models or world-views and can change the game altogether. It is uncomfortable, but without it we are likely to achieve no more than trivial change.

Design plays a key part in transforming our lives. Leaders who spend time designing and planning the future, intentionally create better outcomes. Recent research on the brain also highlight the critical need to engage the forebrain in designing and creating the future and to do this collectively, if we don't, this part atrophies and we get locked into the daily grind.

Observation and reflection are linked to our world views and the meta models we hold in our head. Leaders with myopic self centered world views who are unaware and non-reflexive impact disproportionately on the lives of individuals.

The current global financial crisis highlights how blatant disregard for proper corporate governance and leaders fixated with greed and maximising profits created the crisis with dire consequences for people with the least ability to deal with it. More importantly, the impact of a myopic, self-centred approach to the consumption of resources is having an impact on our future survival as a species.

Deep reflection does not occur by happenstance, given the pace and demands of life it needs to be designed, fostered and embedded systemically in organisations. I

have found that The DOOR framework encased in Action Research Leadership

programs provides the fabric for deep learning and generative change.

Autoethnography

In this segment I discuss how Autoethnography and other situated processes have helped me in my journey to 'Deep learning' and better understanding of the self.

'Auto-ethnography is a genre of writing and research that connects the personal to the cultural, placing the self within a social context (Reed- Danahay, 1997), These texts are usually written in the first person and feature dialogue, emotion and self-consciousness as relational and institutional stories affected by history, social culture and culture (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Reed-Danahay explained that auto-ethnographers may vary in their emphasis of graphy (i.e., the research process), ethnos (i.e., culture), or auto (i.e., self). Whatever the specific focus, authors use their own experiences in a culture reflexively to look more deeply at self-other interactions' Holt (2003, p2)

Autoethnography promotes the notion of the researcher as "I" standing immersed within the action and action research promotes the notion of "We" standing within the action. This fundamental difference strikes at the core of how we engage with the research question. In my case there is both, the notion of the unfoldment of my understanding and being part of a community of learners in co-creating the journey.

Ellis sees important interconnections between auto-ethnography and social practice. She states that, "Increased self-understanding may provide a quicker and more successful route to social change than changing laws or other

macro-political structures". Ellis (2002, p.402).

This is an important statement as it deals effectively with one of the paradoxes of leadership, in Hegel's terms the notion of 'dialogical logic' i.e. my latent evolving understanding about my practice influences whilst at the same time is being influenced by the system in which I operate in, likewise, my contradictions are also inherent in the contradictions and conflicting ideas within the macro- political structures and systems in organizations and in society at large.

Self and society are intertwined. Auto-ethnography validates a more intuitive, experiential way of knowing and challenges the rational positivistic interpretation of events. Auto-ethnography relies more on the literary language of metaphor, irony and meaning. Foley states that, "Using a much more robust, embodied, situated language allows auto-ethnographic interpreters to engage more fully the intractability of life. It allows them to evoke the richness and complexity of everyday life through complex symbolic language and dramatic, personal stories. As various auto-ethnographers have explained, the act of writing itself becomes a way of being and knowing". (Foley, 2002). Also, we come to know ourselves through Introspection and reflection.

Be the Change

As Gandhi has expressed "be the Change you want to see in the world".

We teach what we most need to learn has a lot of resonance for me. The hardest journey is to practice what you preach and more so when you have been fortunate enough to have access to all that knowledge. I along with most within my profession sit at the top of the pyramid relative to the rest of humanity. I have access to the knowledge and the wealth of

kings. If I take into account the whole of human existence, my way of life in terms of Quality of existence and utilisation of resources surpasses over 95% of all those before me. ¹

My opportunity stems from a decision by my parents to migrate to Australia. Their whole life's savings going on airfares and a vague offer of a job at the other end. If this was a game of poker then I was dealt a royal flush.

The opportunity was there for me to study both the external and internal landscape. The Latin origin of the word reflection is; flect, that is 'fold' and reflect is to re-fold, when refolded the surface faces itself, likewise my research has an external face wherein I am assisting others to improve their capacity for reflection on their practice and it has an inner face, where I am reflecting and turning my attention to the activities of my own mind.

To take this metaphor further, in seeking to work on both sides of the fold, I need to probe beyond this dualism and look at the conversation between myself as a participant and as an observer and at a Meta level to observe the conversation and interaction between the participant, the observer and the whole environment.

Deep reflection and Learning challenges many notions in organisations, including power, authoritarianism, the notion of economic growth and the economic engine that drives it. It also concerns itself with inequality in all its guises and it peers behind the mask and peels away the layers to surface core issues.

To illustrate this with an example from my journal- Working with a group of senior managers on an action research program,

¹ Based On earning a salary of over 50 thousand Australian Dollars per year.

comprised of four action research sets. This was a meeting half way through the program. I noted and commented to the group about 'The thoughtful and insightful manner in which the group were able to surface uncomfortable issues about diversity in the workplace and the effective process of dialogue they adopted in problem solving the issue.

The insight for me included the affirmation, that by letting go of control (managing my fear of derailment) and letting the group manage the process of disagreement, allowed individuals and the group to reflexively look at their behaviour and manage their state. This was a visible demonstration of an emancipated and empowered learning set and a sign that the group had moved to living the values that they previously only espoused. It was also a continued demonstration to me to have faith in the group processes and to validate my now unconscious and tacit way of working with groups.

So the idea here of deep reflection has a criticality to it, it challenges some of the operating norms and sacred cows and peels away surface layers to reveal some of the core issues or operant paradigms. It is an activity not done in isolation but gestates and blossoms within a community of learners.

Reflexivity plays a key role in deep reflection. Being reflexive is linked to how aware we are of the source and types of knowledge we use and how we go about creating our knowledge and world views.

Pictoems

Stories, metaphors narratives, poems and writing are embodied in Auto-ethnography and are important means to enable deep reflection.

For e.g. I append the following dialogue to this pictoem.



*Caress gently
Lightbuds of awareness
Reclaim the cycle
Of awakening*

At a recent workshop I asked people for their interpretations of the pictoem above. One of the participants stated that- "It kind of says to me about awareness and its fragility at its early stages of growth before it becomes robust. I can relate to awareness at that early stage and how it can easily be snubbed out in my own self. It is about bringing awareness to your awareness and allowing it to grow a bit"

I was particularly thrilled by this explanation and in particular the notion of bringing awareness to your awareness. I thanked the audience and added to the comments, which included stating that to me it was about a reawakening and a reclamation of conscious awareness.

I like many leaders are locked in an unconscious mode of operation and it is the notion of awakening ourselves to the moment. The awakening of the self fits into the broader context of the sociological self. It is the individualised 'I' and the socialised 'me' sitting

with others the 'we', embarking on the sharing of meaning and the unfolding of our practice. There is emergence and interconnectivity reflected in living in the present moment.

This Pictoem also demonstrates that there is no specific gene that transmutes awareness and consciousness from us to our offspring, there is no genetic download of our insights and learnings.

There is however the hard yards, as part of the socialisation process, through the development and enhancement of the environment for individuals to grow into their awareness.

See appendix for a pictoem on the DOOR.

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Observation- What did you notice? What did you pay attention to?



Reflection- What connection do you make between what you notice and what you feel?



Design- What would you like to do?



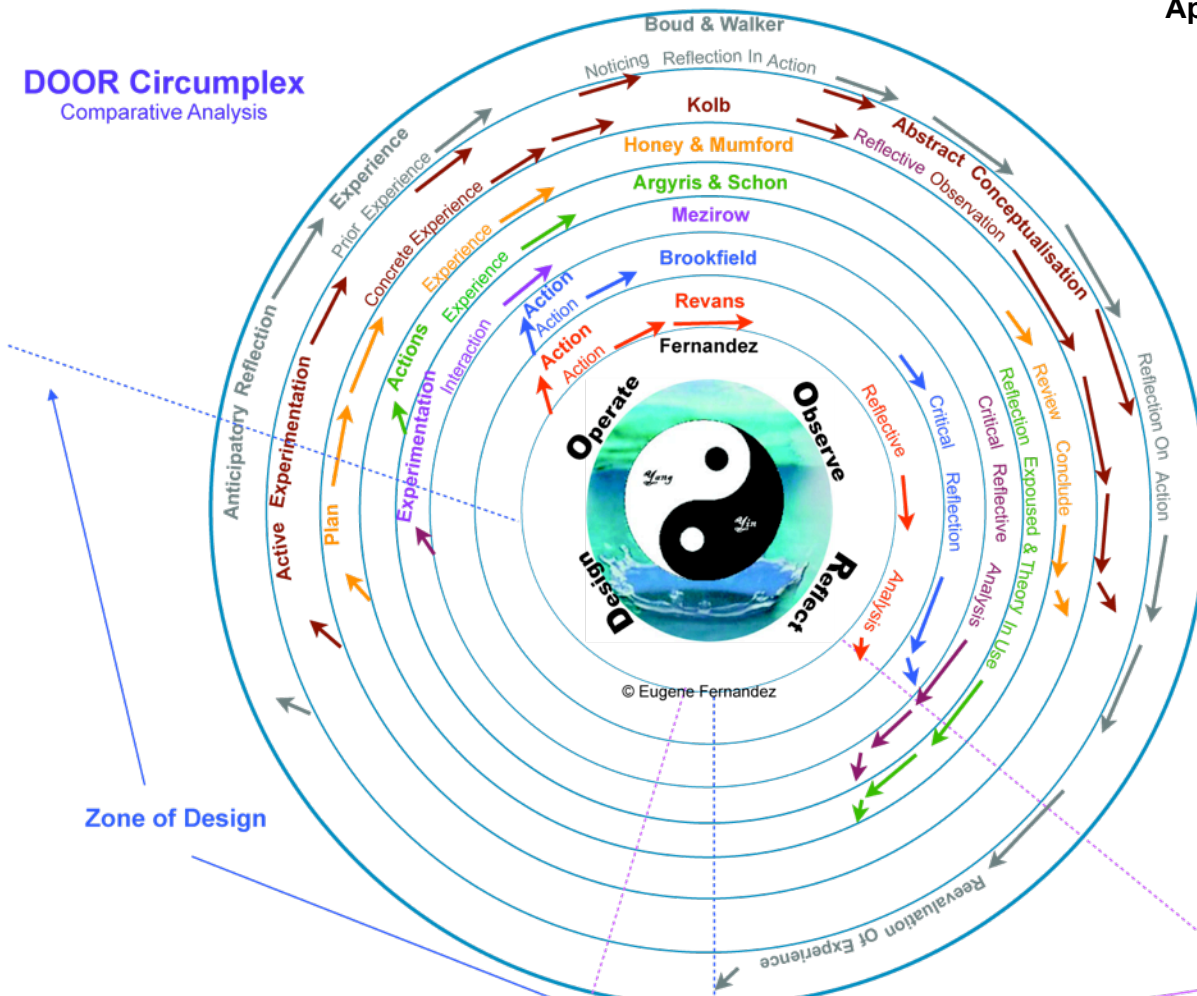
Operate- What are your action steps?

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DOOR Circumplex
Comparative Analysis



Zone of Design

Zone of Deep Reflection

DOOR Pictoem



The flow in and within
Consciousness awakened
The DOOR
Ancient, familiar, etched with time
In the flow
Know the key
Enter deeper into your awakening

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