

A Blow to the Idealistic

Critique of Hermeneutics for Online Management Education

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Abstract: This paper discusses an interpretive project based on online management education experiences and concludes that the teacher's task in relation to hermeneutics contains elements that contradict the implied sense of ease the simplified hermeneutic ideal presupposes. In the study of these problems, the struggle of theory with practice, this paper presents an applied perspective of the translation of theory into practice that may assist practitioners and theorists alike. The aim is to contextually critique hermeneutics in a terse but constructive manner for those involved in online management education and related fields.

Keywords: Critique, Hermeneutics, Pedagogy, Andragogy, Philosophy, Theory, Education, Management, Online

Introduction

IT IS NOT easy making an educational theory applicable. Those who believe it is easy may be recalling one of those personal, fleeting teaching moments when a serendipitous blend of environment, resources, technique, and student revelation creates a blissful show of educational idealism. Such moments do occur, but with far less frequency than most educational philosophies and theories should be credited with creating. This paper discusses an interpretive project based on online management education experiences and concludes that the teacher's task in relation to hermeneutics contains elements that contradict the implied sense of ease the simplified hermeneutic ideal presupposes. In the study of these problems, the struggle of theory with practice, this paper presents an applied perspective of the translation of theory into practice that may assist practitioners and theorists alike. The aim is to contextually critique hermeneutics in a terse but constructive manner.

Definition and Method

One description of hermeneutics is: *The theory and methodology of interpretation*. It should be noted the term has theological connotations in the sense that it originally applied to the interpretation of scriptural text. It has since been applied in philosophical fields, firstly in the interpretation of text and, lately, recognised for its value in approaching interpretation on a number of levels in educational environments. Wellington (2003, p.197)

Interpretive analysis of teaching experiences in online management education forms the basis of this particular study. The researcher has experiences as an undergraduate lecturer and online tutor at Deakin

University in Australia, and as a postgraduate online faculty research assistant at the University of Maryland University College in the USA. Qualitative analyses of personal experience are combined with theoretical models and analysis to suggest a new perspective on management teaching and the ways it articulates with the hermeneutic ideal. In a sense, hermeneutics is turned upon itself to question the applied features of the term in a particular field of information.

Hermeneutics is Easy?

Hermeneutics is one philosophical perspective of an educational experience. The hermeneutic cycle is a reasonably intuitive concept through which one can sense the gestalt-like and networked nature of teaching, learning, unlearning and starting over again. Hans Georg Gadamer in Shapiro & Sica (1984, p.55) reminds us that the earliest conceptions of hermeneutics dealt with interpretation of text and the transition from a predominance of rhetoric in the reformation era, to that of text in the Gutenberg era. What is happening now may be an era of digital information that brings hermeneutics to a position more in alignment with applied teaching and learning in the online environment. This may be most apparent in applied topic areas such as management education which is the scope of this study.

The education of organisation managers is a challenging scenario which has parallels with the training of artists or even primary school children, most of whom require a reasonable, practical context in which to translate theoretical ideas into real world practice. Theory, of itself, is not the satisfying thing for managers that it may be for philosophers, mathematicians and the like. The dichotomy between

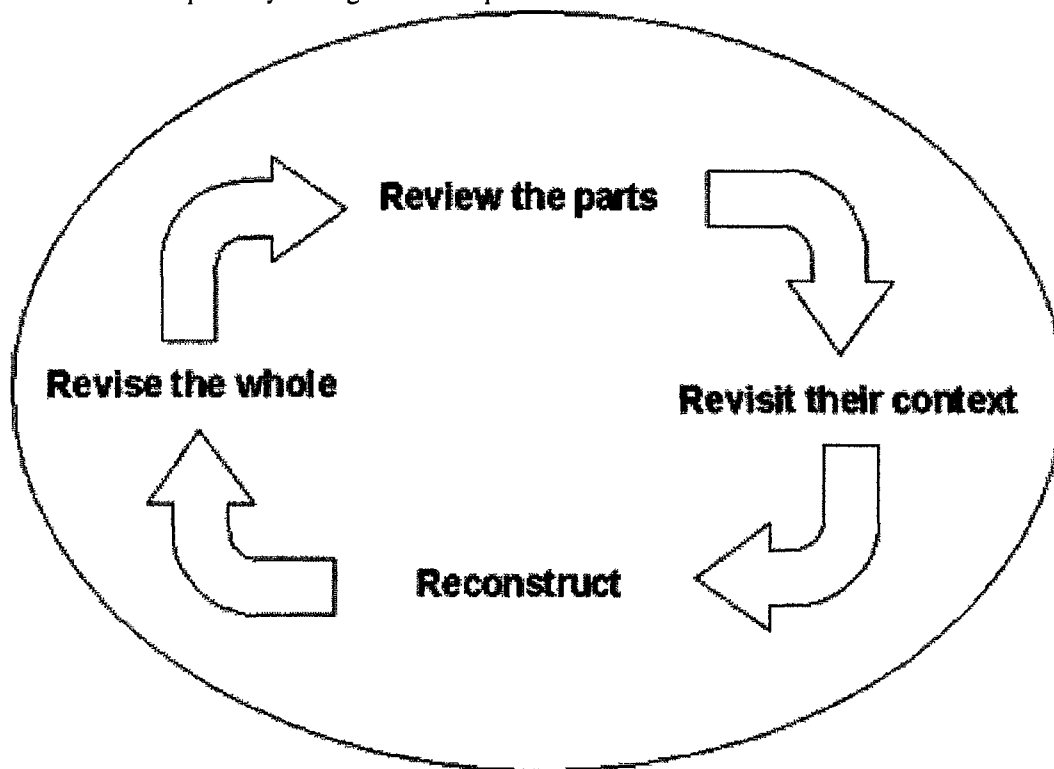


theorist and practitioner persists and experienced managers (practitioners), especially, are often wary of consultants and academics for espousing impractical solutions to practical problems. May (2004)

The hermeneutic approach to educational practise aligns with existing management ideas in the fields of quality improvement, systems thinking, and business communication. For example, in a seminal management book, which influences operations management to this day, Senge (1990, pp.73-77) writes of “circles of causality”, and encourages managers to develop not a linear view, but a language of interrelationships if they are to get a realistic pic-

ture of their actions. At the heart is an understanding of reciprocity, where a cause may lead to an effect which in turn feeds back to affect the original cause.

The feedback loop essential for organisational learning and success is not far removed from the cyclical representation of hermeneutics in education. The cycle can be graphically represented in a way which suggests a certain ease of online teaching and learning application. In those events where virtual classroom activities seem to go well, it is relatively simple to identify the appropriate quadrant in the model and explain in some depth how and why it worked.



A cycle of dialogue helps to negotiate contextual understanding greater than the sum of its parts and repeatedly reinterprets the material being provided to learners.

Figure 1: The Hermeneutic Cycle

Further, online management educators can analyse their actions in seamless justification of actions taken to assist students, since exchanges between teacher and learner may be interpreted under the model. Of course the point can be made that misunderstanding could just as easily be the outcome of one turn of the cycle as could successful learning of an important idea or practise.

Understanding equates to misunderstanding in the sense the same mechanism is utilized to arrive at

either conclusion. It is important to be realistic about the risks of the negative outcome. On the other hand, the hermeneutic cycle does not end with outcomes, per se. It is an ongoing process of interpretation and reinterpretation. Figure 2 makes the point that the process is the focus of the model more than the outcome, and the direction of frequent turns of the cycle ought to be toward improvement of understanding. It is proposed to view the cycle in its extension as a journey.

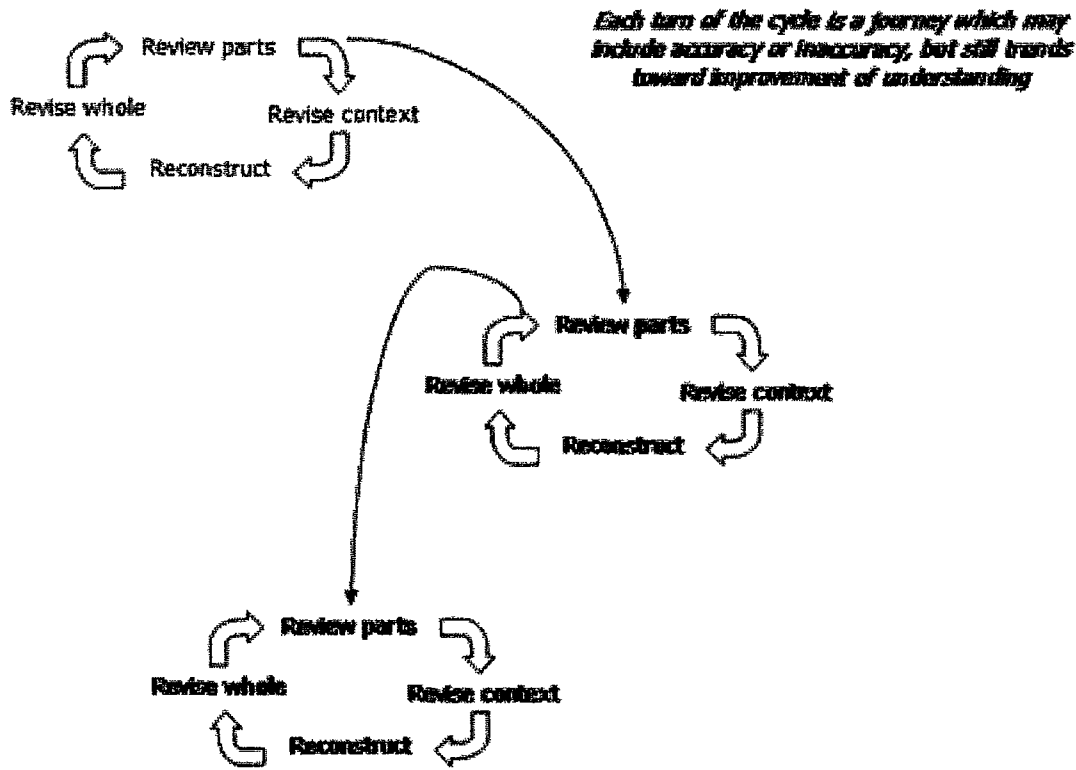


Figure 2: The Hermeneutic Journey

The Teacher/Learner Dichotomy

Working as a teacher of managers creates the imperative to translate theory into practise and practise into theory at comparatively high rates. When the hermeneutic cycle is taken to its logical extreme, the roles of teacher and learner are effectively reversed at various times during the educational process.

Most academics who have been consultants to industrial management will appreciate the sense of learning that comes from the experience, sometimes greater than any evidence that management might have learned as much in return. At a more fundamental level, object and subject need not be caught up in the “separation thesis.” Through a dialectic, interpretive process they are seen to be mutually constituted. Carr (2003). Such mutuality supports the concept of a journey taken through a series of interpretations toward improved understanding. This pendulous path positions teacher and learner in revolving roles but, like two travellers talking in the back seat of a car, the destination can be reached sometimes with the dimmest awareness of the journey taking place.

Left Brain – Right Brain, Masculine – Feminine, and Quant-Qual

Dialectic and dichotomy concepts, of course, are not limited to teachers and learners. There are significant

bodies of research into left brain – right brain juxtapositions, Vernon (1984), Nowak (2003), masculine – feminine counterpoints, Heilbrun (1965), Rychlak & Legerski (1967), and quantitative – qualitative distinctions, Conway & Christiansen (2005), Schneider & Roberts (2004), in information processing and learning. The aim at this point is to highlight these areas of potential further study in relation to hermeneutic principles. There is an intuitive sense of issues correlation between the interpretive learning journey of hermeneutics and the separation thesis highlighted by Carr (2003).

The Metaphor of Struggle

Some school administrators (non-teachers) would like to believe teaching and learning is easy, especially when hermeneutics is a reasonably simple concept, on paper. The steps are few and self-evident.... review, revise and reconstruct are the cornerstones of the philosophy. The words have a kind of facility, even beauty, which belies the inherent struggle the whole process imparts. People who have worked in design may be familiar with the hard work required to obtain something of simplicity.

“Simplicity is the ultimate sophistication.”
Leonardo Da Vinci.

Coal-face educators will know what DaVinci meant by this. For instance, it's easy to say we should dismantle a faulty object and reassemble it so it works better and, when it is done, it is easy to point out that it was the dismantling and reassembly that was the salvation of the object. What is rarely said is exactly how to do all this specialised demolition and creation. The art of teaching well becomes the practice of making directed learning look simple but this belies the hard work of design, training and rehearsal. There are many anecdotal tales of people drawn from industry, because they were successful there, and asked to teach, only to discover their teaching technique was ineffective. It seems axiomatic that those good at certain things will also be good at teaching, but it is not always so. When the online teaching environment is added to the mix, an even more complex set of variables comes into play.

Online technology is quite recent and may not yet have reached the learning facility of older, more refined technology. Consider the ease of using a book, for example. Writing upon material began millennia ago on the clunky fabric of rock and wood. It is only after countless iterations that the book as we know it today has evolved into such a user friendly device. Internet technology, it is reasonable to suppose, is a discontinuous innovation in the early stages of utilisation. There is every reason to believe it will also undergo countless revisions and emerge with increasing utility in a form we may not recognise. Our own educational facility with this technology will have to change as much as the media itself. Therein lies the struggle: With constant change comes constant inconvenience in the quest for continuous improvement. The hermeneutic principle is evident in this very process of revision and representation. However, the effort to achieve understanding is frequently underestimated.

The task of teaching is certainly fraught with difficulty, not to mention the problem of working with other people. Many who work in educational institutions can recount tales of funding problems, political restraints, administrative entanglements, and industrial relations issues that variously impede teaching practise. Ramsden (2003, p.133) discusses how common it is for courses to be designed around tradition and administrative convenience. It is difficult to see great change on this front, especially in large, established institutions.

In many cases the translation into online education has been a simple mirroring of traditional delivery. What was once a lecture is now a Powerpoint. What was once a tutorial is now a discussion thread. One view is the limited scope teachers have to restructure course delivery systems is limiting a truly hermeneutic approach to online management education. Another view may be the best educators can take

any delivery system and turn it upon itself in hermeneutic scrutiny. The latter takes a lot of creative effort and can be an uncomfortable experience for the educator, students and the institution when interpretive analysis reveals significant problems in the systems.

Cannon and Newble (2002, p.31) highlight the major concern many departments or schools have when proposals are tabled for a change to teaching practise. Such concern generally translates into delays over resources that are required for the practitioner to proceed.

Ian Birch and Don Smart, in Mitchell and Goertz (1990, pp.136-151) foreshadow the economic rationalist perspective that infiltrated Australian educational policy circles in the period following the late 1980's, and which is intensifying under the political dominance of John Howard's Liberal government in 2005. Signs are of increased nationalisation of curriculum which has resultant effects on the ability of individual educators to tailor classroom offerings. This event may be representative of cyclical policy shift in more countries than Australia, not necessarily at the same times. In fact, John Meyer in Fuller & Rubinson (1992, pp. 225-238) specifically discusses the centrality of the economic model of education, (ie; that good education boosts a country's GDP), amidst questions about the relevance of this view, but acceptance of its prevalence in many parts of the world. Implied is that teaching related only to aspects of the economy currently paying the most will be most favoured by policy makers.

The standardization of education than can be made possible by some technological applications is attractive to some policy makers and administrators. Hermeneutics in educational practice asks more of students than rote learning and more of teacher than moderation of assessment. On line technology can be utilised to standardise course delivery, but it can also be used to enhance a hermeneutic approach. It really depends on what is mandated by policy within institutions. One main point to take from this discussion is that of the struggle. Hermeneutics is not as easy as it might appear in online management education and even traditional learning environments. The work of the good teacher is yet cut out for them.

To colourfully summarise, the practice of making hermeneutics happen is a tooth and nail fight with bastards, bitches, idiots, bureaucracies, and shifting sands as foundations. That is the largest part of the reality and it is the focus of this paper, the aim being is to encourage exponents with a realistic appraisal of the situation rather than deter educators from the hermeneutic perspective. This may place hermeneutics on more credible grounds than, perhaps, a number of other educational philosophies. Failure to understand the fight, the struggle, of an interpretive process

is a failure to engage effectively with education. Optimistic realism is, perhaps, of more practical use as a teaching attitude than the opposites, or other combinations of these variables.

Signs of things Amiss

A review of research in management education, especially within the rising tide of digital media implications, reveals many pertinent areas of difficulty for practitioners. Education may be interpretive and sociological, it may be hermeneutic in nature, but it is insufficient to rely on this recognition without further thought about the difficulties of the position.

Seely Brown (2002) writes of a subtle sociological shift whereby technology once merely supported the individual, but now it is increasingly helping define relationships between individuals. If this is so, the entire context of hermeneutics in online education shifts to a digital foundation. Conceptually, this ought to be a good thing, after all, a digital process would play into the hands of a model that continually deconstructs and reconstructs. Perhaps one factor is the sociological juxtaposition of a world divided between digital and analogue, between old-fashioned educators and digital facilitators, or the very real political resistances that occur between old ideas and new?

Creed (2004), when discussing the fact that learning designs today depend as much, if not more, on technologists as they do educators, concludes, "There remain limitations on the convergence of the educator and the technologist."

This is an industry-based assessment of the difficulty of translating good educational ideas into practical learning resources. If it is so difficult to manufacture learning objects which function according to pedagogical design, why should not similar failings be present in educational praxis? What seems easy may not, in fact, be so.

Further observations by Creed (2004) include, "The limitations on responsiveness to students needs may be counter to some of the rhetoric about online resources. The critical bearing point and the central role of developers as technologists place a natural barrier to real time responsiveness." This reveals a real practical problem with the essential feedback mechanism of hermeneutics. This does not deny the relevance of the model but serves to highlight the fundamental difficulty of achieving the hermeneutic ideal, whether in classroom teaching or in creation of learning resources as part of the education process.

Creed & Swanson (2004) bring to light the learning potential of online classrooms, pointing out that... "It.. [online technology].. is getting fast enough to respond more effectively to the psycholinguistics

of what is now known as the writing process. Students can see what they think quickly and revise as rapidly as if revisions were nothing more than a second thought." This is in context, however, with the risk of information overload and the new epidemic of plagiarism that entices learners into reproduction of information rather than engagement and reinterpretation. Even aside from this is the teacher's challenge to get students to write more than a few insightful words on almost any topic. Anecdotally, SMS messaging and its comparatively verbose cousin, email, may have served to limit creative engagement and reinterpretation of the written word, in the sense it forces contraction into a narrow band of symbolic exchange with limited cognitive and emotional cues. This at times impacts on general academic expression in the ideal hermeneutic sense. How much student work now includes language abbreviations, such as, 4, UR, and so on?

Digital technology may create one set of problems in education, but politics might be blamed for many of the others. For example, Wain (2003) reminds that a "concern with schooling" is what first brought about the profession of philosopher of education. In practice, it is the school, the systems, the power bases, the people, who define daily the dissemination of education, far more readily than an individual who tinkers with the definition or description of a teacher. An illustration of this is the author's recent experience endeavouring to introduce a weblog (blogging) tool into an undergraduate course to assist learners to engage more directly with online research and assessment. It was quickly discovered the university could not provide direct technical support or resources to assist this. Alternative routes to achieve the objective needed to be devised. Educators reading this paper will have many such examples of barriers encountered in their quest to achieve a simple ideal of teaching praxis. What should be easy so often turns into a much harder road.

The Sources of Translational Problems

Having established that idealistic aspects of hermeneutics exist, the task becomes identifying probable sources of barriers, or restrictions to achieving those aspects. It is proposed by this research the problems fall into the following categories:

- Learner-initiated
- Teacher-initiated
- Media paradigm issues
- Bureaucracy and History

Table 1 summarises the key findings in relation to the four restrictive factors.

Table1: Sources of Problems

Restrictive Factor	Reasons
Learner-initiated	Not all learners agree with or understand a hermeneutic approach to learning. The absolutists, for example, will not tolerate ambiguity or reinterpretation of subject matter.
Teacher-initiated	Not all educators agree with or understand a hermeneutic approach to teaching. Some do not tolerate ambiguity or reinterpretation of subject matter and some subject matter may strongly support this view.
Media paradigm issues	The analogical tradition of the printing press and the linearity of precedent combined with the ideal of scientific advancement of knowledge conspire to challenge some reformative elements of hermeneutics for teachers and learners. Conversely, some fanaticism about the educational potential of digital media paradigms fails to lubricate the cycle in a realistic or sensible way.
Bureaucracy and history	The environment of teaching and learning is rarely as free-flowing and responsive to feedback as the hermeneutic cycle realistically requires, at least if teaching and learning is to occur in a timely fashion. Organisational traditions and a slow moving bureaucracy often haunt even the most progressive educators.

Learner-Initiated Problems

Education as reproduction or imitation of past ideas has merit in instructional design which, in its extreme, seeks to control the learning variables to engineer achievement of a discrete learning objective. Where fundamental principles of a subject must be memorised or experienced, such reproduction may be argued to be desirable for teachers and, more importantly, demanded by learners.

Education as transformation is not nearly precise enough for some learners who are familiar and comfortable with tightly designed learning objects. In management education, there are often learners questing for the one right way to manage, or the most precise way to measure. Some do not wish to entertain the ambiguity of the discipline. While hermeneutic interpretation can provide increasing deeper insights about the softer aspects of management, the learner themselves can erect perceptual and attitudinal barriers to the process.

Teacher-Initiated Problems

Some teachers do not wish to engage in much reinterpretation of subject matter. Education as reproduction or imitation of past ideas can be an attractive option. Some topic areas in management accountability and legal obligations imply the need to teach in strictly designed, imitative ways. Other areas, such as organisational behaviour, change and strategic management, on face value, require more interpretive

approaches. Teachers respond often to the prompts inherent in subject matter, but this can combine with preferred teaching styles to magnify the effect.

Proponents of education as transformation tend not to delineate soft and hard topic areas. When it comes to knowledge, they say, all points are up for reinterpretation. The fact that education praxis includes interaction with professionals, who decry interpretive teaching for the kinds of reasons suggested, makes the barriers to hermeneutic application more apparent.

Media Paradigm Problems

The analogical tradition of the printing press continues to influence human perception of information, interpretation and education. That we perceive the symbols of our language in progression on a flat page, and that electronic word processors continue the paper/page metaphor, albeit in an evolving context, means we are currently largely bound by analogism. McLuhan (1964, p.87) reminds of David Hume's assertions about the sequential being merely additive rather than causative. The slide show, the document and the book persist in education and these media, although assisting with transformation of ideas, are not central to it, and lend themselves strongly to imitation and reproduction of previous ideas.

In addition, the traditional linearity of precedent combined with the ideal of scientific advancement

of knowledge conspires to challenge some reformative elements of hermeneutics for teachers and learners. The natural science paradigm has a creative, transformative core, but popularisation of science has tended to focus on distillation of concrete facts more than interpretive exploration of new possibilities. In management fields research into marketing, for instance, is driven significantly by quantitative methodologies which seek to distil knowledge from past practices. Estrin and Perkins-Munn (2003).

As technology continues to impact upon management education, some fanaticism about the potential of digital media is evident. Whilst there are obvious correlations between the networked nature of online technologies and the emergence of synergy, creativity, serendipity and so on, there is a kind of fervour in this revolutionary atmosphere that fails to sensibly consider the relationship of hermeneutics.

Bureaucratic and Historical Problems

Some of the preceding discussion deals with the problems of tradition. The ways things have been done before tend to inform the ways things are done today. Paradigms may shift but usually slowly, and within the framework of the previous paradigm, for a large part of the shift. Crotty (1998, p.35). Small examples of the slow death of tradition in higher education include the shifting of lecture notes first from paper, copied onto transparencies, scanned into electronic formats, then posted into learning management systems, pretty much as a copy of the original textual format. The educational application of multi-dimensional digital learning formats has been somewhat bogged by the prevalence of the old media paradigm. Where hermeneutics was embraced, it came through face-to-face dialogue in established schools. The opportunities for using digital capabilities to enhance hermeneutic dialogue in online management education may have been undermined by people's preference to apply what worked before, thus missing the hermeneutic opportunities of the new medium.

Bureaucracy has played its part in this. The definition of bureaucracy at this point extends to the people, technology, systems, procedures and policies of large, long standing educational institutions. By nature, people protect their establishments, organisations strive for stability, and bureaucracy aims to be self-supporting. When a system-wide change is implemented, the tensions against that change can be significant.

Safe Passage Across the Abyss

If hermeneutics is an ideal worth pursuing, the educator then wishes to find a set of strategies for overcoming the kinds of restrictions to successful practice

revealed in this paper. Preliminary findings suggest some principles and techniques that may assist, however, there is no prescription implied. Whilst limited safe passage might be indicated, the purpose of this paper is to highlight the inherently risky nature of the task. The impediments are large and bold. The educator must be up to the task if the hermeneutic ideal is to be attained. A hidden path may be signposted by the following:

- Optimistic realism
- Networking in the bureaucracy
- Thinking locally rather than universally
- Learning while teaching
- Immersion in the paradigms

Optimistic Realism

A predisposition for finding a path to greater understanding of management in the online environment, as opposed to being negative about it, generally appeals to the applied perspectives of management students, especially working adults. Realism rather than fanaticism about the potential of online media to assist management education, especially in the context of increased globalization, pervades the discipline. So the optimistic realist as a trait descriptor in online teachers (and, conversely, learners) of management is recommended.

Networking in the Bureaucracy

Given the realities of educational institutional bureaucracies, the need to be connected properly through the formal and informal channels is elevated. To achieve anything near to the hermeneutic ideal, the simplicity of learner-teacher interaction, the full range of available resources must be accessible, and this is often only achieved by being politically astute, well-connected and approachable within the organisation, also knowing who else is similarly disposed.

Thinking Locally rather than Universally

Counterintuitive, at first, treating teaching and learning in the online environment as much as possible as a one-to-one interaction between educator and learner generally elicits positive feedback. In the same way that relationship marketing campaigns seem to be more effective at increasing the sense of need satisfaction in consumers, the fostering of direct local relationships in education can increase positive perceptions and improve learning outcomes. Conversely, the mass-production of online education, while having some pedagogical value (for example, limited use of multiple choice knowledge test, and so on), tends to have greater administrative value, and can, when overused, lead to perceptions by stu-

dents of teachers taking the expedient rather than professional road.

Learning while Teaching

The model of the hermeneutic journey accentuates the interrelated nature of teachers and learners. On-line management education is a poignant example of the way teachers learn much from students, who are often industry-based, experienced, and seeking an academic qualification for advancement. Academia itself is a reflective profession and the teacher as researcher is the epitome of the teaching/learning continuum. Perceiving of oneself as solely one or the other would threaten to short circuit the hermeneutic cycle.

Immersion in the Paradigms

The earliest conceptions of hermeneutics involved interpretation of text and the transition from a predominance of rhetoric in the reformation era, to that of text in the Gutenberg era. There is nothing to suggest this was not appropriate then or, indeed, today, given the right environment in which to pursue study of physically printed text. Teachers and learners who embrace this tradition in the interpretive process ought to be successful on their hermeneutic journey. Of course, in the context of the emerging era of digital information and the growing field of management education in a competitive globalising

environment where credentialism is, rightly or wrongly, pursued, to immerse teacher and learner in the digital paradigm can be equally appropriate. Hermeneutics in this context can assume a position well in alignment with applied teaching and learning in the online environment.

Conclusion

A journey through experiences in online management education has revealed the teacher's task contains elements that contradict the implied sense of ease the simplified hermeneutic ideal presupposes. Some broad categories of restrictions have been identified as learner-initiated, teacher-initiated, media paradigm issues, and bureaucracy and history. What might be perceived as a simple task by select educational administrators, in fact, includes a minefield of barriers for negotiation by teachers and learners alike. The interrelated nature of teaching and learning, and misperceptions about hermeneutics are just one aspect demanding a critical review.

The link between communication theory and the theory of interpretation is one area where the practical nature of the task of online management education is apparent. Attention ought to also be paid to the attaining of optimistic realism, networking in the bureaucracy, thinking locally rather than universally, learning while teaching, and immersing in the paradigms. This critique of hermeneutics may have relevance for other educational disciplines.

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