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The “Finger Puppets”: Examining the Use of Artifacts to Create Liminal Moments in Management Education

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Introduction

The resource review we examine here is provided by the Unemployed Philosophers Guild (<http://www.philosophersguild.com/Finger-Puppets/>). On the company’s website they comment: “. . . we have discovered that people seem to really like the giants of our culture reduced to little finger puppets . . .” In particular, we consider the use of the “finger puppets” to generate a liminal moment (Hawkins & Edwards, 2013) in management education. Liminal moments have been described as “moments in and out of time” (Delanty, 2010, p. 31). A sense of “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony” . . . that allow for the “realm of pure possibility” (Turner, 1967, p. 95). We explore the use of this resource as a liminal tool and its value to management education.

Resource Description

The use of artifacts in management education is well understood (Page, Grisoni, & Turner, 2013). The range of artifacts used covers a range of visual methods including participant-produced drawings, photographs, and documentary film (Schyns, Tymon, Kiefer, & Kerschreiter, 2013; Ward & Shortt, 2013) and arts-based methods such as the use of a choir where participants play the role of conductor (Sutherland, 2013). Other well-known

methods include the use of props such as barrels, ropes, and planks in outdoor management education (for a review, see Buller, McEvoy, & Cragun, 1995). The use of artifacts can enable management education to move toward an “aesthetic workspace” (Sutherland, 2013), in which participants can creatively reflect and use alternative media to frame and analyze management experiences (Ward & Shortt, 2013).

The finger puppets are a small fabric toy. They represent a range of people, alive and dead from across the ages, who are well-known for a particular contribution (e.g., Charles Darwin, Louis Armstrong, Pablo Picasso, Marie Curie, Queen Elizabeth) and are recognized leaders or major contributors in their respective fields. The puppet characters are made of felt-like materials, richly decorated, and have recognizable sets of physical features such as Charles Darwin’s beard, Pablo Picasso’s blue and white hooped jumper, and defining artifacts such as a trumpet in the case of Louis Armstrong. Each puppet has an additional feature in the form of a small folded note that describes the key essence of the character represented by the puppet, putting it into an historical perspective with a date of birth and, where applicable, a date of death. In addition, each puppet carries a relevant and insightful quote. For example, Buddha’s character has a date of birth and time of death as c. 563 BCE–c. 483 BCE and his quote is, “Neither fire nor wind, birth nor death can erase our good deeds.”

What this collection of puppets creates is a diverse set of resources for working with groups. The facilitator of the learning event has, at his or her finger-tips (so to speak!), a wide range of characters that can be called into the room. The less well-known, such as Nikola Tesla, “rub” shoulders with the mighty and powerful, such as Winston Churchill, in a way that stimulates discussion and reflection. The puppets generate a sense of liminality as they carry with them ideas and concepts and enable a participant to “absorb” ideas and thoughts around abstract or distant ideas. The puppets appear to act as a conjoined input–output device (Miller, 2014). The puppets can be used to stimulate delegates to reflect on the depth or detail of a topic in terms that resonated to their lived experience.

Often management education sessions call on managers to think of leadership role models. Examples in programs can be restricted to routine examples of familiar people such as Hitler or Churchill or Nightingale or Merkel. Less prominent or well versed role models can promote the validity of drawing on everyday personally experienced significant others. Furthermore, the variety of different puppet figures and the variety of leadership narratives of the finger puppets can stimulate managers to connect with their own “heroes” within their lived experience that otherwise had not been brought to the fore (Kempster, 2006).

Use in the Classroom

Using the puppets allows a break from traditional PowerPoint slides, case studies, or perhaps outdoor physical problem solving projects. The power of imagination drawn into the simplicity of the finger puppets allows for a blend of fact and fiction, reflection, and curiosity. It both suspends reality and exaggerates possibility. The finger puppets allow for the creation of a liminal moment in which the exploration of possibilities and ideas can occur. We outline four approaches in which the puppets might assist management education.

Approach 1: Exploring Themes

The puppets can be used to explore thematic issues, such as power and authority. A bag of puppets is placed on a table, with the puppets hidden from view. Groups are asked to think about the relevance of power and authority to the topic of leadership and explore the bag. The puppets act as a prompt. We would expect other trainers to notice in this activity that groups will be very tactile with the puppets, placing them on their fingers, talking, if only for a few seconds, in the perceived voice or accent of the puppet. More often than not the puppets prove easy to sort out in many different ways with people seeking to categorize them into groups. Notwithstanding the ease of sorting of the puppets they also provide a great deal of debate and discussion—a “mental prod” to delegates to debate and discuss power and authority.

Approach 2: Aide to Feedback

Second, delegates can select puppets by passing around the bag. Once each group member has a puppet, they are asked to use the puppet to provide feedback to the group in relation to a specific piece of learning, to articulate a view of a day’s workshop, or, at the other end of the day, to help that person reintroduce themselves to the group or cohort assembled. The betwixt and between liminal moments (Hawkins & Edwards, 2013) of conversation generates intrigue, humor, and poignant insights. In this way, the puppet is useful for developing group cohesion. It also importantly enables quieter members of the group to find a voice—a liminal voice that is not necessarily their own!

Approach 3: A “Critical” Friend

A third use of the puppets is as a “critical friend.” For instance, puppets can be selected by delegates in a group from an open table of 30 to 40 puppets. This is usefully undertaken at the beginning of the day’s session, and particularly over the course of a 2-day workshop as the delegates are asked to keep the puppets with them for both days (even taking them home!). Choosing and keeping a puppet during a workshop can have a deep effect on group members. For instance, it has been observed how many delegates

are stimulated by their character to spend time in the evening to research the life of the character and return to the group the next day with information and reflections on that “person’s” contribution to leadership. Retaining a puppet also enables the facilitator to “call” the puppet into use, for example, in an action learning setting, to ask a question on behalf of the delegate. This can be effective in developing increased understanding of group members of questioning techniques and of highlighting issues from different perspectives.

Approach 4: A Mouthpiece

The puppets can be introduced (given or preselected) to the individual delegate who is asked to compare and contrast himself or herself with the puppet character. This can have the effect of making it easier for the delegate to speak with confidence. The puppet allows the person to reveal or moderate their thoughts through the puppet. We have seen groups work better together with the puppets by their side. The tactile nature of the puppets allows the individual to speak through the puppet. A sense of the individual speaking with an assertive tone by drawing from the status of the character of the puppet. Such assertion appears to allow confidence to opinions drawn from the puppet character; perhaps even liminal power drawn from the finger puppet as a mouthpiece.

Constructive Analysis and Comparison

In comparison to other popular resources and methods used in management and leadership development, such as outdoor management development activities, film, and texts, we have found that the puppets elicit a qualitatively different response from participants. With the puppets, participants can assume a different identity whereas artifacts—such as barrels and planks—used in outdoor management development activities remain objects. Unlike outdoor activities, the puppets are accessible to all participants, regardless of individuals’ physical capabilities and can be used with diverse groups. We outline further strengths and weaknesses in using puppets below.

Strengths

1. *Objectivity*: The puppets allow “other voices” via the puppets, to encourage delegates to take a “third person” perspective (techniques used in coaching, action learning and neurolinguistic programming [NLP]) and to surface implicit ideas about leadership. The puppets help create a safe space or distance, an object held outside the self.

2. *Creativity*: The puppets readily stimulate ideas through the voice of the puppet and “allow” for ideas to emerge related to the topic. For example, participants may find it easier to express alternative views through the identity of the puppet.
3. *Enjoyment, fun, and curiosity*: The puppets readily stimulate conversation; they provide a dual playfulness and bring an element of intrigue to the process, blending the character and contribution of the puppet to thinking about leadership experience.
4. *Promoting critical and in-depth dialogue*: The puppets can be used as a means to build capacity to communicate complex and ephemeral ideas. For instance, the puppets can free people from their own identity to be more critically reflexive and open about complex and sensitive leadership concerns including power, politics, and emotion (Vince, 2001). In accessing a different identity through the puppets, participants may also find it easier to express alternative views and ideas.

Weaknesses

1. *The puppets are toys*: This is both a weakness and strength. Using a toy with delegates can require a degree of confidence in facilitation and the ability to set up the process in a manner that causes delegates to be intrigued, open-minded, and willing to learn from such an artifact. The novelty aspect is also a strength if the exercise is set up correctly.
2. *Cultural transference*: Delegates in the United Kingdom have embraced the use of the puppets. Does the idea of the process we suggest transfer between cultures? Is it capable of a more universal use? This is as yet unknown.

This review of “finger puppets” has intended to illustrate the use of this resource to generate liminal moments in management education, thereby enabling participants to occupy alternate identities that can help them express often implicit and complex ideas about leadership. Resources for use in management education can often be complex to learn how to use, and limited in application. The simplicity and flexibility afforded by the finger puppets opens up a variety of uses for educators to employ in a range of situations: for creativity, reflexivity, curiosity, and critical thought. They also have the great benefit of generating enjoyment and fun. Yet we must remember they are a toy. As such, careful utilization of the resource in a thoughtfully designed pedagogy where the “finger puppets” are complementary to the theme of learning, rather than extraordinary, is likely to be better received by participants.

More information about finger puppets can be found at <http://www.philosophersguild.com/>.

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