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A Theory of Action Perspective on Faculty Development

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I am proposing that a theory of action perspective offers faculty development a powerful framework for analyzing and understanding specialists' efforts to assist faculty in improving the quality of teaching and learning in post-secondary education. I plan to suggest the reasons such an approach seems necessary, describe briefly some theoretical work of Argyris, (1974, 1976, 1982) and finally outline one way I have used this approach.

Why A Theory of Action Perspective?

I have argued elsewhere (Smith & Geis 1980), (Geis & Smith 1979), that faculty members and faculty development specialists have different perspectives on teaching and teaching improvement. These perspectives influence our very definitions of good teaching, the variables we attend to as critical for success, and the degree of control we feel we have over changing our situations. These different perspectives may very well account for the relatively poor response of faculty to our best designed efforts to help them. Faculty, if they see any problems see them differently. They may not even see their problems as being solvable, let alone see us and our services as part of the solutions.

Significant improvements in teaching will probably involve a perspective change for faculty. They need to look at their situation

differently. Mann (1970) and Axelrod (1973) talk about teacher roles. Does improvement require a change in their definition of their role as a teacher? Does it require considering learning from the learner's view point? Recognizing learning styles (Kolb 1975)? Does it require a reconceptualization of teaching, as well as faculty development, in terms of human development? The work of Chickering *et al.* (1981) suggests many different perspectives and explores their implications for individual disciplines and university support services. Mezirow (1978) suggests that significant adult learning requires a perspective transformation.

I am suggesting that faculty members hold perspectives or frameworks about teaching and learning which limit their effectiveness. They are probably unaware of the impact these have on the daily activity. Similarly, faculty development specialists have perspectives about their work which limit their effectiveness. We need a method for becoming aware of our own perspectives and aware of the influence of those perspectives on our actions. Ideally, this method should help faculty with whom we work become aware of their perspectives and their limitations. Next, we need some method for changing our perspectives to increase our effectiveness, if necessary.

Theories of Action

The theory of action approach suggested by Argyris and Schon (1974) offers such a method and model. People hold theories of action about how to produce the consequences they intend. The effectiveness of people's theory of action is the degree to which they are able to produce their intended consequences.

People rarely focus on their theories of action. Daily situations are usually so complex and behavior so rich that many of a person's actions are not subject to reflection or analysis. Individuals rarely slow down their real life situations to attend to the specific pieces of their theories of action. They are likely only to do this when they feel they are not being effective. Judging from the data on student evaluations and faculty self-evaluation, faculty may think they are doing quite well, or at least as well as can be expected given the circumstances, while students assess the situation differently.

Argyris and Schon (1974) add a second piece to this theory of action. They suggest that people have a “theory-in-use,” a kind of executive program that actually directs their actions; but, they also have an “espoused theory,” a theory of action that they talk about or write down if asked to explain their actions. When confronted with difficult situations people often do not act in congruence with their espoused theory. Moreover, they are usually unaware of the discrepancies.

Argyris (1982) suggests some reasons why people are unaware of the disparities between what they do and what they say they do. He argues that people have built into their theory-in-use features that prevent them from becoming aware and from learning beyond the confines of their theory-in-use. He develops a Model II theory-in-use which he says is necessary for “frame-breaking,” for “double loop” learning, but argues that most people are stuck with Model I theories-in-use, and can only accomplish single loop learning; they cannot get beyond their framework or perspective.

Implications for Developers

Before describing Model I and Model II theories-in-use I want to suggest that if faculty members or faculty development specialists have Model I theories-in-use, they will be unaware of their perspectives and their impact on their effectiveness. Consequently, we may be able to see “problems” with faculty, but we will not be able to see “problems” with our approach to helping faculty. We will be unaware of discrepancies between the theories we espouse and the theories we practice. Argyris offers a method of intervention, embedded in a model, which confronts us with these discrepancies and our ineffectiveness.

Many writers on adult learning have suggested that the identification of a problem, a disconfirming experience and a challenge to our sense of competence, is a powerful and essential stimulus for learning. A “failure” experience will motivate us to slow down our behavior, to carefully analyze our actions and to discover our theory-in-use. Argyris (1982) describes in some detail how he has worked with individuals

and groups to help them to develop a more effective model of action or theory-in-use.

Model I Theories-in-Use

According to Argyris (1982) a person with a Model I theory-in-use, (see figure 1):

behaves in ways that are consistent with four governing values or variables: 1) achieve the purpose as actors define it, 2) win, do not lose, 3) suppress negative feelings and 4) emphasize rationality...the primary behavioral strategies are to control unilaterally the relevant environment and tasks and to protect oneself and others unilaterally. The underlying behavioral strategy is control over others...These behavioral strategies have consequences...(they) tend to make people defensive and closed because unilateral control does not usually produce valid feedback. Moreover others may see unilateral control as a sign of defensiveness...(this) will tend to create a particular kind and quality of learning that will go on within the actor and between the actor and the environment. There will be relatively little public testing of ideas (especially those that may be important and threatening). Consequently, the actors will not seek feedback that genuinely confronts their actions, and those controlled will tend to play it safe (they are not going to violate their governing values and upset others—especially if the others have power). As a result, many of the hypotheses or hunches that people generate will become self-sealing or self-fulfilling. Moreover, whatever learning people develop will tend to be within the confines of what is acceptable. This is called single-loop learning because the actor learns only within the confines of his or her theory-in-use. Few people will confront the validity of the goal or the values implicit in the situation (such confrontation would lead to double-loop learning).

To what extent does this describe faculty or faculty development specialists? Do we, or they have a Model I or Model II theory-in-use? I assume all of us like to think that we can “double-loop” learn and are “programmed” with Model II theories-in-use. Model I would predict that we would be unaware of the discrepancies between our actions, our theory-in-use, and our espoused theory. Confronting that awareness, and learning Model II, if necessary, could be the most powerful learning in improving our own effectiveness and in helping faculty to improve teaching and learning.

The X-Y Case

One of the methods developed by Argyris to help people to learn Model II also provides a deceptively simple test of your theory-in-use. I have adapted Argyris's X-Y case to a situation involving a professor talking to one of his students. I have used this case with a group of college faculty taking a course on "managing learning systems" as part of a professional development program. After reading the case, they are asked to 1) "write a short analysis and critique of the way Y dealt with X; and 2) any recommendations or advice they would give Y to make his performance with X more effective".

Background:

Professor Y has talked to one of his students, X in order to help him improve his performance. He wants to keep X in his course and help him pass, but this is his final warning. If there is no improvement he will have to fail him.

Here is a transcript of some of the professor's statements to X. These statements represent the entire range of meetings that Y communicated to X.

X, your performance is not up to standard, (and moreover) you seem to be carrying a chip on your shoulder.

It appears to me that this has affected your performance in a number of ways. You seem lethargic, uncommitted and disinterested. My students cannot have those characteristics.

Let's discuss your feelings about performance. X, I know you want to talk about the injustices that you believe have been perpetrated on you in the past. I do not want to spend a lot of time discussing something that happened several months ago. Nothing constructive will come from it. It's behind us.

I want to talk about you today, and about your future in my class.

The responses of faculty to this case are similar to the responses Argyris (1982) reports that he has found with thousands of clients. I want outline very briefly the sequence of events that participants go through.

First their responses are analyzed. Their general evaluation of Y's performance was negative. He was "overly judgmental," obvious lack of consistency, "ignored the emotional aspects," "very authoritative," "insulting tone," "not encouraging," "made assumptions about X," "labelling," "did not want to listen," "wanted to preach," etc. Comments can be grouped into three broad categories: attributions of Y's motives, evaluations of Y's action, attributions of Y's impact.

The participants are asked to verify that the college of statements represents the group's diagnosis. Then, they are asked why they framed the diagnosis in the same terms that they considered ineffective for Y. Considerable discussion follows during which participants deny that's what they did, or claim that they were set up by my questions. They finally acknowledge their diagnostic frame, but state that they would not talk to Y that way. They would "produce" a different behavior.

The second task they are given is to "invent" a conversation with Y. They are asked to:

Assume Y came to them and said "How well do you think I dealt with X?" In answering this question assume Y wants to learn.

They are told to divide a sheet of paper into two columns and: "On the right side write exactly what they would say, how they would expect Y to respond, and how they would respond to Y's reply. Write up an actual conversation with Y."

"On the left side write any concurrent thoughts or feelings they would have that, for whatever reasons, they would not communicate with Y."

After analyzing their "inventions" the participants become aware of the difficulty of getting out of Model I behaviors.

"I felt you were not as successful in your attempts as you could have been because you assumed too much as to what you thought X was feeling."

But there is no discussion of how Y might be feeling. Some were more direct.

"Could it be that your intolerance and high standards are causing you to fail?"

But some felt this would lead only to a negative outcome. The alternative was an "easing in" approach.

"Y, I think you showed X that you were concerned about his progress in your course and felt that he needed to work. Do you feel that his attitude will change?"

This approach often began with the participant saying something positive (although maybe not true!) to Y, and then asking a long series of questions. Usually these were designed to permit, encourage, or force Y to see the "error" of his ways.

In the "inventions" that participants wrote and the role plays that they generated, they inevitably produced the same results. It didn't seem to matter whether they were direct ("blunt") or "eased in," Y inevitably felt frustrated and unhelped. Participants were making unillustrated attributions about Y's motives or impact, or untested evaluations about his actions. These attributions and evaluations inevitably lead to problems of misunderstanding; the "consultant" felt Y didn't care, didn't really want to change, etc. Y felt unlistened to, or manipulated. Yet, most of these errors were either unrecognized in the conversation or undiscussable.

The participants in this course came to be able to diagnose their own inventions, to see their own "problems," and begin to analyze their own logic, their own theory-in-use. Argyris (1982) provides detailed examples of such analyses of people's attempts to produce Model II responses.

The major results of these activities for the participants was an awareness of some serious limitations in their theory-in-use, a high degree of motivation to slow down and analyze their own productions, and some considerable degree of frustration at being unable to produce more effective responses.

Argyris (1976) indicated how difficult this task of changing your theory-in-use really is. He stated:

"(a) that human beings may not only be unable to double-loop learn, but also that (b) they tend to be unaware of this inability; therefore, (c) becoming aware of the unawareness is a crucial first step in reeducation; but, if successful, such a step (d) tends to be threatening;

and (e) this threat can act to inhibit the very learning we are trying to produce.”

He also suggests that double loop learning cannot be acquired in days or weeks. Months or years may be a more appropriate time frame since the process is iterative and on-going. With the right attitude and strategy you can gradually increase your understanding of your theory-in-use and improve your effectiveness.

Model II Theories-in-Use

But what is this theory-in-use that increases “double loop” learning? Argyris and Schon (1974) have called this Model II (see Figure 2). Argyris (1982) states:

The governing variables, or values, of Model II - valid information, free and informed choice and internal commitment - are not the opposite of those of Model I, and the behavior required to satisfy these values is not behavior opposite to that of Model I. For example, Model I emphasizes that people be as articulate as they can be about their purposes and goals and simultaneously control others and the environment in order to ensure that their purposes are achieved. Model II does not reject the skill of being articulate and precise about one's purposes. It does reject the unilateral control that usually accompanies advocacy because the typical purpose of advocacy is to win. Model II couples articulateness and advocacy with an invitation to others to confront one's views, even to alter them, in order to produce action which is based on the most complete, valid information possible and to which people can become internally committed. This means that the actor in Model II skilled at inviting double-loop learning.

Every significant Model II action is evaluated in terms of the degree to which it helps the people involved generate valid and useful information (including relevant feelings), solve the problem in such a way that it remains solved, and do so without reducing the present level of problem-solving effectiveness.

The behavioral strategies of Model II involve sharing power with anyone who has competence and who is relevant to deciding or implementing the action. Definition of the task and control over the environment are now shared with relevant others. Saving face is resisted because it is a defensive, nonlearning activity. If face-saving actions must be taken, they are planned jointly with the people involved.

Under the conditions just described, individuals will not compete to make decisions for others, to “one-up” others, to outshine others for the purpose of self-gratification. Individuals in a Model II world seek the people most competent to make the decision. They seek to build viable decision-making networks in which the major function of the group is to maximize the contributions of each member; when a synthesis is developed, the widest possible exploration of views has occurred.

Finally, if new concepts are created under Model II conditions, the meaning given to them by the creator and the inference processes used to develop them are open to scrutiny by those who will use them. Evaluations and attributions are minimized. When used, they are coupled with the directly observable data that led to their formation. Moreover, the creator feels a responsibility for presenting evaluations and attributions in ways that encourage open and constructive confrontation.

If the governing values and behavioral strategies just outlined are used, the degree of defensiveness in and between individuals and groups will decrease. Free choice will increase, as will feelings of internal commitment.

The consequences for learning are an emphasis on double-loop learning, in which the basic assumptions behind ideas or policies are confronted, in which hypotheses are tested publicly, and in which the processes are disconfirmable, not self-sealing.

The end result should be increases in the effectiveness of decision making and policy making, in the monitoring of decisions and policies, and in the probability that errors and failures will be communicated openly and that actors will learn from the feedback.”

But It's So Hard to Change

In spite of knowledge of the limitations of our current theories-in-use, and in spite of the attractiveness of Model II Argyris (1982) adds:

“without help, people are unable to produce action congruent with Model II even if they espouse it, value it, wish to learn it, and practice it.”

It is so difficult that Argyris and Schon (1974) addressed directly the issue of dealing with a cycle of failure: you cannot diagnose situations, you then cannot invent solutions, then you cannot produce them. They say that their students,

“soon realize that 1) understanding and believing in Model II is not sufficient; 2) the feelings generated during the early stages of learning are counterproductive to experimentation; 3) to overcome these problems, they must begin to behave contrary to their socialization; 4) their colleagues, even though they mean well, will not be able to help them very much; and 5) these factors produce fears that inhibit learning. Under these conditions, practice is the recipe for failure.”

What does this imply for our work with faculty as well as for our own personal development? One must devise a learning environment where participants' fears and frustrations can surface and be discussed and where strategies for dealing with “real world” complexity can be developed.

Heller (1982) suggests that the hardest task in learning Model II involves altering the “interrupting behavior patterns that occur automatically and bridging the gap between insight and action.” He proposes mini-programs or heuristics that can control a segment of our behavior; they have three components. A “flag” which alerts us to when they should be used, a “recognition” of what is really happening in the situation, and a “prescription” of what to say or how to act in the situation. The heuristic can be very powerful because the individual can go beyond the recognition of ineffective or counter-productive behavior to follow through with more effective action.

Participants in my course have found the heuristic most helpful in beginning to invent Model II responses. Unfortunately, the course was not long enough to get to the production of Model II responses in real time.

Conclusions

I have argued that our theory-in-use has a powerful influence on our actions. Unfortunately, we are often unaware of the discrepancies between our theory-in-use and our espoused theory. I have also argued that it is essential for faculty development specialists to become aware of our own theory of action, our theory-in-use as it influences our actions with faculty. I have presented brief pieces of a method, adopted from Argyris, that I have used in working with a group of faculty members. I believe this is the most powerful intervention I have made

with these faculty. I think such a method applied to developers would be just as effective.

This method provides one way of checking our theories-in-use and challenging our sense of competence. This disconfirming experience, this real challenge to our sense of personal effectiveness, provides an incredibly powerful motivating force for examining our practice and increasing our effectiveness.

Figure 1
Model I Theory-in-Use

1 Governing Variable for Action	2 Action Strategy for Actor and Toward Environment	3 Consequences for Behavioral World	4 Consequences for Learning	5 Effectiveness
Achieve the purposes as actor perceives them	Design and manage environment so that actor is in control over factors relevant to him	Actor seen as defensive	Self-sealing processes	
Maximize winning and minimize losing	Own and control task	Defensive interpersonal and group relationships	Single-loop learning	Decreased effectiveness
Minimize eliciting negative feelings	Unilaterally protect self	Defensive norms	Little public testing of theories	
Be rational and minimize emotionality	Unilaterally protect others from being hurt	Low freedom of choice, internal commitment and risk taking		

From Argyris (1982)

Figure 1
Model II Theory-in-Use

1 Governing Variable for Action	2 Action Strategy for Actor and Toward Environment	3 Consequences for Behavioral World	4 Consequences for Learning	5 Effectiveness
Valid information	Design situations or encounters in which participants can be origins and experience high personal causation	Actor experienced as minimally defensive	Disconfirmable processes	
Maximize winning and minimize losing	Task is controlled jointly	Minimally defensive interpersonal and group relations and group dynamics	Double-loop learning	Increased effectiveness
Internal commitment to the choice and constant monitoring of the implementation	Protection of self is a joint enterprise and oriented toward growth Bilateral protection of others	Learning-oriented norms High freedom of choice, internal commitment and risk taking	Frequent public testing of theories	

From Argyris (1982)

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