

11.965, Reflective Practice, Or, How to Give Global Relevance to Local Knowledge
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Lecture 6: Frames, Perceptions, and Interpretations

Review and looking ahead

Schon's idea is that the way professionals think as they are working is very important for tackling problems. What we did last week was, first, an overview of reflective practice. The second day was about reflection. Reflection is a kind of exercise we can do, and we get two main results: we can discover knowledge from our experience, and we can understand better how reflective practice works. We did an exercise about critical moments. The third day was about knowledge generation, and we did an exercise showing examples of knowledge generation.

Day four focused on the concept of theory in use. This is the way we organize our thinking and actions, usually in a tacit way. In most cases, we are not aware of these theories in use; we just use them. In our exercise we tried to describe theories in use, and we talked about espoused theories. The last day we talked about the mental models we construct in our mind. It is a form we give to our theory in use. We don't think with phrases in our mind, but usually with models. The exercise was about models of MIT, of the buildings, resources, and people. People make decisions based on this image in their mind.

In these classes, we gave you some elements of reflective practice. What we will do this week is try to use what we have learned, mainly in two ways. We will discuss framing and reframing. The first day will be about how we frame situations. The second day will be about assumptions – how to discover the internal logic of our frames, and what the key components are. The third day will be dedicated to the process of reframing.

The fourth day asks how we can be conceptually creative. We will do an exercise where we construct concepts and modify concepts. The final day will be about two things: the future of reflective practice, and reflection about the course. This is a brief course, just an introduction, so you can understand the main components of reflective practice.

Presentation – Framing: How we perceive, understand, and describe situations

In most cases, we are not working with problems, but with messy situations. The process of going from the messy situation to the problem is the process of framing. The names we give things are important – they determine how we will work with them in our mind. Then we organize, and once we have organized, we describe what the problem is.

In the same way that Schon talks about espoused theories and theories in use, he talks about rhetorical frames (espoused policies) and action frames (policies in use). This is an application of his first book on reflective practice. Rhetorical frames are weapons, used to attack other frames and convince people that our frame is a good

one. The frame that wins is the one that can expose the weaknesses in other frames, while hiding its own weaknesses.

Frames work with metaphors. When we create a frame for a situation, we always use a metaphor. Frames are not things that emerge from scratch; they are always connected to a metaphor. Changing the metaphor is a very powerful way of changing the frame.

The way we frame a problem affects how we perceive our interests.

It is difficult to discover the limits of our thinking – we always believe our framing is consistent. It usually is not possible to convince someone that their frame is inconsistent by giving them more information, since that information will be processed into the existing frame. The frame is able to digest information.

So basically, more data won't ever change frames, and we need to engage people at the level of their assumptions.

Yes, exactly, because the frame gives meaning to the information by its own logic. Most frames are tacit; we are not aware of the way we frame situations, or of the way other people are framing the same situation. The way to solve this difficulty is to try to make the frames explicit.

Finally, when we are discussing other frames, we need to be able to go to other frames and to bring their meanings to our own frame. We don't necessarily need to defend our own frame.

Presentation of Exercise – Caesar McDowell

We're going to provide a very short scenario, and we're going to have each of you frame it individually. Then you will go through another exercise looking at some of the assumptions behind the framing.

Frames are really tacit, inside of us – even once we've identified them, they are very hard to change. Sometimes one side can offer a reframing that gets the other side to think about what they're doing, such as the changes in South Africa and the truth in reconciliation process. There are other situations where one side is willing to reframe – it is an act of vulnerability.

Several times last week, we discussed the situation in Framingham, Massachusetts. We want you to listen to the situation, and then come up with one sentence that defines what you think the problem is.

There's a road going out of Boston, Route 9. As you go out, there's an industrial town called Framingham, with a vibrant downtown core. In the late 50s or early 60s, there was a mall built off of Route 9, and it started to pull economic activity away. Another mall was constructed, even larger, the Natick Mall. Business activity in downtown Framingham started to decrease for a variety of reasons. At the same time, a Brazilian immigrant community started to develop in Framingham.

About 15 years ago, the Brazilian immigrant community started setting up shops in downtown Framingham, and the area began to get revitalized. It wasn't organized in

a structured way, by a Chamber of Commerce. There was lots of activity, restaurants opening up, people became interested in revitalizing the downtown. The city was interested in how to invest in the city again. Property values are starting to go up, and who lives here starts to change.

While that's going on, some of the people who own property downtown start thinking about development. At the same time, the Brazilian merchants are starting to organize, and found themselves facing a plan to take the whole area and redevelop it. The developers and city are seeing a great opportunity for redeveloping the downtown.

What's really clear is that there isn't a common framing dialogue. So my question to you is, what is the underlying problem? The other part of the question is, why is it a problem?

Also, the MBTA has added a commuter train, and that's pulling a lot of people out there. And it's very diverse – there are ethnic groups other than Brazilians.

There used to be a General Motors plant in Framingham. After the GM plant closed down, the town went into an economic tailspin. Also, it is the largest town in Massachusetts, larger than many cities.

Participant Exercise

The participants were asked to write down the underlying problem on an index card, and to tape the card to the blackboard near cards focusing on similar topics. Further discussion was used to refine the placement of cards, grouping ones that had a similar focus.

Can we define one problem statement for each group?

Yes, but this will be the work of groups. At this phase of the process, we have a vague image of the situation. In the group, you may decide that your idea is not so similar to the others, so you may want to change from one group to the other.

We have three groups. Here are your tasks:

- 1) Define the problem.
- 2) Why is it a problem? (This is about your reasoning in defining the problem.)
- 3) What are the factors that contribute to the problem? We can talk here about causes, context, conditions that allow the problem to exist.
- 4) What do you see as the impact of the problem? Most people are concerned about a problem because they predict certain consequences.
- 5) Analyze for consistency and completeness.

The cards were grouped as follows:

Group A

Organized community structure/leadership within immigrant community: civic competency

Immigrant community lacks decision-making power to effectively participate in the physical and economic development of their changing community.

Limitations of a system for organizing political decision-making

Both groups should have been involved in the planning process to reduce resistance to change. Communications, leadership, and design plan.

Group B

The conflicting perspectives on redevelopment developed by different ethnic communities

The struggle to define whose town it is – longstanding predominantly white population on north side versus predominantly immigrant populations on south side.

Framingham and its business allies are imposing a plan that ignores and harms its Brazilian community.

The problem is who has the power in a community revitalization process and what is the contribution of immigrants to economic development.

Group C

The underlying problem in Framingham is a failure on the part of the multiple stakeholders to engage in productive dialogue and negotiation regarding the differences and similarities in their viewpoints regarding Framingham's current and future cultural and economic identities.

Weak relationship between stakeholders. Different view about reality.

The underlying problem is change. Lack of a common vision for the community.

Different conceptions of "value" between respective parties.

Brief Discussion

When we describe something as a problem, we have values behind that. The goal is to make those values explicit.

Homework:

- 1) Analyze your reasons for stating the problem in the way you did and the values behind those reasons (1 to 2 double-spaced pages).
- 2) Identify the assumptions that are embedded in the particular way your group framed the problem. (List at least 8 assumptions.)

You are analyzing the shared problem statement, but with your reasons and assumptions. It is very difficult to get at someone else's assumptions. The first activity tomorrow will be the presentation of your work.

Now we have a few minutes to receive feedback from you about this exercise. What are the main difficulties you faced?

It is challenging to synthesize the whole problem into one sentence, even though we were on the same page.

Also, we didn't have much time to develop a deeper understanding. It is not really possible to go into the deeper issues. If we had fewer questions to focus on, you would have been able to go more in depth.

I was struggling to find a way for the problem to answer my questions. I knew other people had other sets of questions. We were looking at different ways of participating in society. As long as I could see political stuff in there, I was satisfied. Can I fit my issue into that? Will it represent the way I am seeing this problem?

Looking at these sheets of paper, I noticed that there are a lot of similarities underlying the assumptions. Our conceptions of the problems are very similar, maybe because we have similar background and education.

I was struggling with what I think about power, who has power, who doesn't have power, what is power. What helped me get through that process – Rene began to ask probing questions about how people participate in the political process. Then I drew on experiences fifteen years ago, when people were creating the empowerment zone in Harlem. I was thinking in the present and past. Some of it was being able to explicitly state what I knew from the past, some of it was tacit knowledge.

Tomorrow we will enter into the process of discovering assumptions.