



Emotions “out of the closet” and into the graduate classroom

Emotions “out
of the closet”

Carol E. Harris

University of Victoria, Victoria, Canada

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this end piece, framed in aesthetic and critical theory, is to review the author’s own approach with graduate students regarding the omnipresence and significance of emotion in organizational leadership, and to comment on the contributions to emotional theory found in this volume of the *Journal of Educational Administration*. The objective in the author’s own research is to assist students, through aesthetic awareness, in moving beyond “one-dimensional” thinking and the “iron cages” of organizational experience.

Design/methodology/approach – As personal affect and perspectives of meaning were of primary importance in the author’s research, she employed participatory action research methods. Qualitative data were drawn from students over a ten-year period as they responded to a question about connections between aesthetic presentations – given by their colleagues as short introductions to each class – and organizational life as they experienced it personally and theoretically.

Findings – Aesthetics, understood not only as appreciation, but also as action, brings to students the illuminating power of multiple forms of expression. Through expression, that is, students named feeling, affect, and begin to understand the nature of emotion. The arts provide ways of expression apart from, and including, the spoken word.

Originality/value – The arts, and an understanding of aesthetics, opens a rarely travelled route whereupon students may engage in organizational theory as a humane science.

Keywords Arts, Emotional intelligence, Organizational theory, Leadership, Graduates

Paper type General review

Introduction

The personal and the academic are intimately and perhaps inextricably intertwined. Our values show in the theories we defend, and our theories shape the lives we lead and the way we lead them. (Greenfield, 1978, p. 19)

As Greenfield points out, we choose our theories for understanding and acting in the world. My own choices call on philosophy (moral and aesthetic), combined with a strong dose of critical theory, both areas open to investigations of emotionality. As my experience in schools and government shaped a critical lens on arts and organizational reality, it was not surprising that my choice, when presented as a graduate student with various theories, was critical. In critical theory (Marcuse, 1968, 1978; Habermas, 1971; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1993), and the movement’s latter day spokespersons (e.g. Bates, 2002, 2006; Bourdieu and de Saint-Martin, 1974; Greene, 1995; Mills, 1969), I recognized the blend of aesthetics, ethics, and structure that helped me make the connections I had hitherto vaguely sensed. Moral philosophy helped me understand more about our predispositions – that is, the beliefs, attitudes, and values we bring to the class, school, or boardroom – where they originate, and why we feel strongly about the things we do. That branch of philosophy called aesthetics, dealing directly with sensory perception and artistic significance, helped me to differentiate among human responses such as impression, emotion, attention, memory, imagination, and creativity.



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Meanwhile, I accepted the unquestionably emotional message of critical theory that our purpose, as educators and citizens of the world, is to elucidate and rectify some of its societal, political, and economic imbalances.

For me, personally, two phases of my professional experience – the aesthetic, which through music until age 40 had been my lens on the world, and the organizational – began to flow together in the mid-1980s under four influences at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education: Thom Greenfield’s writing and teaching about the social construction of schools, symbolized liberally by film, plays, novels, and poetry, Gerry MacLeod’s impassioned presentations of critical texts and ideas, Richard Townsend’s proclivity to extend the scope of classroom practice through drama, visual art, debates, and collegial critique (Harris, 2008), and John Eisenberg’s classroom explorations of imagination which introduced me to the aesthetic ideas of historian and philosopher R.G. Collingwood (Harris, 2006).

These influences, together with a collective impulse among my feminist colleagues to change the way of theorizing and practicing educational leadership, led many of us women who joined university faculties in the early 1990s to search for our own ways to stimulate thought and action. Without doubt, we were aided also by the feminist insistence on “challenging the dualism of private-expressive and public-instrumental selves and worlds” that underlay the “crises of modern society” (Ferguson, 1984, p. 5). The spread of neo-liberal politics and global capitalism as the decade wore on made problems more transparent to students and, thus, eased our task.

Participatory action, a classroom experiment in brief

As a post-secondary teacher, attempting to introduce graduate students to a recognition and understanding of emotions, I found that aesthetics provided both a means and an end; a means to opening students to their emotional spirit, imagination, and expression and, as an end in itself, to enriching lives through new ways of seeing (Berger, 1977) and being (Greene, 1995; Heidegger, 1976). This enrichment came through an exploration of sentient action: hearing, seeing, touching, and moving and, relevant to this chapter, discussing links between the senses, ideas, and emotional response.

The point, clearly articulated in this volume, is that explorations of emotional content involve risk and may trigger fear. We are unused to “mucking about” with the affective side of our personalities. The following words by Collingwood, written some 60 years ago, reinforce the point made by authors here about the extent of emotional neglect in our society:

We are accustomed to attend [in everyday life] far more carefully to our sensations than to our emotions. [This] seems to be especially characteristic of adult and “educated” people in what is called modern European civilization; among them, it is more developed in men than in woman, and less in artists than in others [. . .] In children this is clearer than in adults, because they have not yet been educated into the conventions of the society into which they have been born. (Collingwood, 1958, p. 162)

My objective was that, in opening new vistas, students would move beyond “one-dimensional” thinking (Marcuse, 1968) and the “iron cage”s (Weber, 1978; see Milley, 2006, p. 80) of organizational experience they had encountered. In keeping with discovery teaching and learning in any field, I did not instruct students about aesthetics. Rather, I encouraged direct experience, and only then assisted with the naming of perceptual and responsive phenomena (Harris, 2006, 2008). In brief, students of

organizational theory once introduced to one or two artistic presentations, took turns sharing something aesthetically meaningful to them with the class. Each presentation took no more than ten minutes and then became a referent, a symbol, for other aspects of organizational life.

The first three years of my short academic career were spent in a music faculty where I was able to bring concepts of organization and qualitative research methodologies[1] to my graduate students and, the following 12 years, in an educational faculty where I approached leadership studies with a strong dose of aesthetic theory, encouraging students to make connections between organizations and their selected art forms. My faculty, at the time, provided fertile ground for experimentation through courses conducive to revealing emotional and aesthetic dimensions of experience: moral philosophy, values in policy making, organizational theory, and participatory research methods. The experiment with artistic presentations, described below, took place in classes of organizational theory only.

In each course, however, students were encouraged to question present organizational practices, explore the genesis and nature of their own values, attend to alternative political and social perspectives, and devise new and more inclusive ways of conducting research. As illustrated in this volume, such approaches are gaining popularity among critical and interpretive theorists. Aesthetics, understood not only as appreciation but also as action[2], bring to the graduate classroom, in addition, the illuminating power of multiple forms of expression. Collingwood (1958) has said it this way: “The expression is speech” (meant as words, or other art form) “and the speaker is his own first hearer. As hearing himself speak, he is conscious of himself as the possessor of the idea which he hears himself expressing” (p. 249). Through expression, that is, one can name feeling, affect, and begin to understand its nature. Aesthetics merely provides ways of expression apart from, and including, the spoken word.

Any claim of success in juxtaposing the aesthetic with organizational life must be supported by evidence. Apart from the literature of Greenfield, which perhaps presents the most startling, and successful, examples of this juxtaposition, I was curious to know the effect (and affect) experienced by students. In a recent paper (Harris, 2008), I outline the long, experimental road my students of organizational theory and I travelled before we arrived together at a “method” that seemed to work for most of us. From the outset, I realized one could not sensibly assign marks for an aesthetic presentation or for the identification of links between an art form and organizational reality. Instead, I questioned students, in formats that proved to be more or less effective, as to their perceptions of relevance. Eventually, in addition to classroom discussions of linkages, I posed on the first day of class a question that would appear on the final exam. Full marks were guaranteed:

Since September, we have started each class with an “aesthetic” presentation. These presentations have included music, visual art, dance, video clips, and school-based performances. On each occasion you have been asked to draw parallels between the aesthetic presentation and organizational reality. Discuss two aesthetic presentations that appealed to you, both for their beauty or interest, and for their organizational significance.

In the responses to this question, and comments made by former students, I was able to ascertain not only the success of the experiment but also the nature of students’ emotional involvement. In acknowledging the importance of aesthetics, I realize this is but my personal approach to teaching, and the natural way for me to engage in

organizational theory as a “humane science” (Greenfield and Ribbins, 1993). Any approach to successful graduate teaching must incorporate a rich and comprehensive body of critical understanding.

Recognizing emotion

Each paper of this issue advances the argument for greater attention to emotional expression in graduate teaching, and each author shines a fresh light on the largely neglected history of this omnipresent aspect of administrative experience. Four chapters, furthermore, suggest specific ways to rectify this neglect.

Bolton and English, remind us of the traditional practice, in decision making, of dividing logic from affect and focusing almost exclusively on the former. They refer to this as a logic/emotion tension whereas earlier theorists spoke of the fact/value divide. Bolton and English establish the case for emotions as a significant factor in all decision making and, as such, indispensable to university leadership programmes.

Experience with artistic expression and appreciation would reinforce for students Bolton and English’s contention that the “real world” abounds in emotional quality. A closer examination of emotions, however, would differentiate between rational and irrational expressions. As Weber (1978) points out, emotions can be either subjectively or reactively expressed, the former being rational (I feel, I reflect, and then I speak) and the latter non-rational (I hear and react impulsively, without reflection). When an emotional action results from conscious awareness and deliberate choice, it may be considered reflective and therefore rational. When behaviour is automatic or prompted by impulse, it is non-rational and simply reactive (p. 25)[3]. Students would do well to recognize, recall personal experiences, and speak about the difference. The route between recognition and coping with emotional turmoil is far from straightforward. But Bolton and English’s point, quite rightly, is that emotions exercised in the service of decision making are almost always of the rational kind and the sooner they are factored in as such, the more accurate will be our understanding of the process.

Wallace introduces us to her topic through a principal’s story of sleeplessness attributed to the emotional worry of her work. Many readers will identify with this and other principals who toil under the bureaucratic restrictions and regulations of their increasingly market driven and “greedy organizations.”

In her research, widely dispersed across Canada, Wallace finds that, although principals talk a great deal about the emotional aspects of their work, they have not met explicit “exploration of theories of emotion in principal preparation programmes.” She realizes, as do the other authors here, organizational theory’s long tradition of “shunning affect as subjective and non-rational while privileging the rational, instrumental, and measurable.”

The first mistake in this tradition, as I have explained above, is to equate subjective thought and action as non-rational. It may well be, but usually is not.

To begin another theoretical conversation about emotion and how it can, and ought to be, incorporated in graduate studies, Wallace provides examples of the efficacy of psychoanalytic, socio-cultural, and feminist post-structural analysis. Each approach is conducive to aesthetic understanding through an analysis of emotion, but I would particularly like to experiment with dramatic and bodily expressions by student/principals of such emotions as fear, disgust, shame, hope, pride, affection, and so on. These are emotions that, as Wallace points out, inhabit the “nexus of competing social,

political, economic, and cultural interests” in a principal’s work experience. Would an exercise in popular theatre depicting such emotions, followed by group discussion, bring such emotions more clearly into focus? This is not a rhetorical question; the answer can only be revealed in the experiment.

Zembylas brings advocacy to his theory of emotion, explicitly stating his interest in its intersection with the promotion of social justice. He claims, and the other authors imply, that the need to understand the nature of emotions is especially urgent for those who promote social justice. The reason for this is that workers for social justice disrupt and subvert the status quo, uncovering instances of inequity among children, their families, and school practices. Such uncoverings inevitably reap resistance, resentment, and hostility from the dominant order. Offering the case study of Principal Jonas whose major concern is for social justice, Zembylas delineates the anxieties, disappointments, and delights of the principalship.

The skills and knowledge advanced by Zembylas call for a shake-up of the administrative classroom as most of us experienced it. The knowledge, he implies, may be found in critical readings and classroom discussion. The skills, on the other hand, can be fashioned in more direct ways through new approaches to the emotional realm; e.g. the writing of autobiographies and life histories, taking part in workshops focused on emotions and social justice issues, and keeping reflective journals of critical incidents and controversial readings. Certainly, these activities should unearth emotional situations of personal import, an examination of which should ease for administrators their stressful circumstances. As Principal Jonas affirms, you “can’t completely abandon yourself to your emotions.” He is looking for ways to distance himself from becoming “too emotionally overwhelmed.” Perhaps in Zembylas’ next paper, we will hear how these techniques worked out.

Blackmore addresses the emotional world opened up by our increasingly diversified organizational contexts. Refreshingly, she focuses not on helping the “other” but rather on developing a sense of self-awareness among dominant groups – male and White leaders – about their own societal placement and inherited advantages; as well as their embedded prejudices, or “predispositions” as Collingwood would say. Blackmore, initially stating that leadership is “about fear and desire,” elaborates on these polar emotional responses, details routes in “learning to lead,” and proceeds with several “pedagogies of discomfort.” The pedagogical strategy of drama, in particular, touches on my own interest. Blackwood quotes Kana and Aitken’s claim that “in drama [as a individual and societal learning] experience, periods of action are followed by periods of reflection, so that participants are always making links between the fictional world of the drama and the world of their everyday reality” (Blackmore, 2010). Although Blackmore accurately anticipates a “two-way learning process,” where participants listen to and learn from the other, a closer glance at aesthetic response would delineate ways in which drama (or theatre) breaks down barriers. In methods finely tuned by adult and “popular” educators, participants find themselves distanced from the full impact of their personal and emotional links with the issue at hand. In this way, sensitive issues are approached in movement and words and, later, discussed reflectively in dialogue (Butterwick, 2002). An aside about emotions is needed here, to note that “distancing” of emotional response is quite distinct from the suppression of emotions, noted frequently in these articles.

The important issue raised by this example, and several others given by Blackmore, prompts me to question the divide between lifelong (or adult) learning and school leadership. The rare intersection of these disciplines reveals just how far administrative action resides from the communities it claims to incorporate. As Shore (2000, p. 14)/Hall remind us:

[...] if we want to modify [...] relations of power, and we're serious about improving the quality of life for people in communities, then we have to understand that learning needs to be centred in the lives of those people.

Samier and Atkins add to Samier's growing body of work on aesthetics and emotions (Samier and Bates, 2006; Samier and Schmidt, 2009), and extend her examination of organizational evil. Here, Samier and Atkins tackle the emotionally exhausting repercussions that befall anyone working, teaching, or studying with a narcissist. As in much qualitative research, the readers are asked to make connections between the rich description of narcissism and situations they have known. Each one of us has experienced the leader who is "wholly unsuitable for authority roles." Once narcissism is described in detail, we have in this chapter a course of action for those who would buck the system sufficiently to protect university students from narcissistic faculty. Also, the authors address the university's responsibility to take the time and trouble to weed out narcissistic students before they enter the university and, thence, move on to the teaching profession. Samier and Atkins suggest boundaries that can be erected around the narcissistic leader, once she has gained access to the academic setting, that can mitigate the worst excesses of her behaviour and lessen the emotional impact on others. In these boundaries, as in Blackmore's chapter, we are called upon to imagine an aesthetic distancing which will act as a protective cover against the narcissist's more exploitative behaviours and/or attempts to defame those who oppose his objectives. Samier and Atkins call for an empathy that urges readers, first, to identify narcissism where it exists; next, to reflect upon their responsibility to others (students, co-workers, and so on); and, lastly, to act.

Coda

Collectively, these articles reinforce the position that educational administration should include many other disciplines in its approach to teaching and learning. Although the number of courses taken by any one graduate student must be limited, the professorate has a responsibility to delve deeply into such areas as economics, sociology, psychoanalysis, and, I would add, philosophy. Although we talk latterly of emotions and values, philosophy – which could so easily illuminate both areas – seems to be neglected or omitted altogether from most university curricula.

Another worthy area of study that seems almost too obvious to mention is that of adult education. As educational administrators work daily with teachers and parents, the chasm between the two sub-sections of education is hard to understand. Adult educator Welton (1995) writes of the rich theory that exists in "two solitudes, as those who write about children and schools remain oblivious to important discussion on the learning of adults" (p. 2). To Welton and to me, this is "quite puzzling, particularly when we know that children do not change the world and that the powerful, formative curricular structures lie outside the walls of the classroom" (p. 2).

Recommendations from the authors of this volume, although not drawn from the critical literature of adult education – except for mention of Friere's pedagogy for

oppressed people – focus on adult student learning. To address the emotional component of leaders’ work lives, especially in this stressful time of high capitalism, one should look to psychoanalytic, socio-cultural, political, economic, and feminist theory, moral philosophy (apropos organizational dysfunction and the very nature of emotions), and discourse analysis to name but a few areas. The scope of enquiry would be enlarged to encompass autobiography, life history, and – although not named as such – participatory research. This comprehensive agenda is not unlike that put forward by Mills when he recommended to those who would understand the “larger picture,” the study of history, politics, religion, sociology, languages, art, and philosophy. The promise of a far-reaching sociological imagination, he contended, is that it allows us to “grasp history and biography and the relations between the two within society” (p. 6). Surely it is this sociological imagination that will assist us in understanding at a deep level why “emotional labour” has become the touchstone of our present era.

In preparing this end-piece for a journal issue on emotions, I revisited my own writing in aesthetics over the span of my brief, 15-year academic career. In 1994, at the 8th International Intervisitation Programme held at the Ontario Institute of Education, I spoke these words about researchers; I believe they apply equally to educators in the school and/or university setting:

One role of the [educator] is to provide the opportunity for those in schools, absorbed and, at times, weighted down by day-to-day practice, to express their values, impressions, fears, passions and in this way allow their latent understandings to become manifest. Another outcome of [teaching], pointed to by some as its *raison d’être*, is that assumptions once manifested will be reflected upon, and reinforced or altered. (Harris, 2003)

Faculty members and graduate students would, thus, be advised to reflect on the emotionally supporting, as well as the emotionally threatening, contexts in which educational leaders work. Equally important, however, is that we and they recognize and exult in the passion of imaginative learning, and devise strategies to distance ourselves from potentially dangerous emotions – our own, and those of others.

Notes

1. At the time (i.e. in the early 1990s), research in the arts, especially in music, followed a fiercely positivistic course (Harris, 1992).
2. The study of aesthetics has been criticized as a passive pursuit whereby students merely observe and appreciate the world of art. A much more comprehensive reading of aesthetics calls on participant listening (or viewing), performing, and creating (Langer, 1979). Understood thus, aesthetics involves action as well as contemplation.
3. Also see Hodgkinson’s (1991) extensive coverage of emotion as a significant contributor to decision making and political action.

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About the author

Carol E. Harris is a Graduate of the University of Toronto (1991), she joined the Faculty of Music at the University of Calgary in 1991 and, in 1993, the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria where she was, until 2006, a Professor of Leadership Studies. Her areas of teaching include organization theory, philosophy of leadership, and policy. Her research and writing forge connections between school and adult learning, schools and their communities, and philosophy and organizational theory. She began her career in adult education and published a book, *A Sense of Themselves: Elizabeth Murray Leadership in School and Community*, about a dynamic Nova Scotia school and adult educator. Harris book chapters explore philosophic and social dimensions of organizational life; her articles about aesthetics, restructuring and rurality appear in national and international journals including the *Arts Education Policy Review*, *Canadian Music Education Review*, *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *Educational Management Administration and Leadership*, *The Alberta Journal of Educational Research*, *The Journal of Educational Administration and Foundations*, and the *Canadian Journal of Education*. Since retirement in 2006, Harris has directed a community choir in Nova Scotia, served as a federal candidate for the New Democratic Party, and continued her research in rural studies with an emphasis on food security and community outreach. She is a Professor Emerita, University of Victoria, and is an Adjunct Professor at Acadia University. Carol E. Harris can be contacted at: harrisce@uvic.ca

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