

# Education for organizational and community self-management

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# BEYOND THE MARKET AND THE STATE

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New Directions in  
Community Development

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# Problem II

## THE EDUCATION- LEGISLATION PROCESS

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### CHAPTER 10

## Education for Organizational and Community Self- Management

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*William R. Torbert*

How is democratic self-management taught?

How could a university—or any organization dedicated to fostering personal, organizational, and community self-management—teach facts, theories, skills, and intuitive esthetic appreciations that increase students', or workers', or professionals' capacity for self-management?

Other chapters in this book describe changes in institutional structures that encourage a more democratic economy; this chapter concentrates on two issues: the skills needed to make democratic self-managing organizations work, and the way to cultivate these skills. Without such skills, a democratic economy is no more likely to integrate efficiency, effectiveness, and justice than market capitalism or state socialism.

To focus this chapter, I will restrict my comments to what MBA programs in the United States would have to look like in order to teach self-management. I believe that other organizations seeking to foster self-management face challenges similar to those facing MBA programs.

Stated most broadly, no current MBA programs are systematically orga-

nized to foster self-management. Today's schools of management are aptly characterized, in Schramm's phrase, as "schools of capital management" and can be contrasted to "schools of self-management."<sup>1</sup> What these two phrases mean will become clearer in the following pages. But, by way of introduction, "schools of capital management" are schools that treat financial capital as the central dynamic force in an economy and take market economic theory for granted as the basic framework within which management is taught. Such schools focus primarily on analysis of financial information and on cases about currently dominant business forms.

By contrast, "schools of self-management" would treat human vision, human capital, and human development as the central dynamic force in an economy and would explore the variety of ethical-political-economic theories and systems that can and do guide managers in different parts of the world. Such schools would focus alternately on three areas:

1. Theorizing about the normative end of human activity—the development of the capacity for, and the dignity of, democratic self-management at all levels of human endeavor, from the interpersonal to the international.
2. Learning by doing—encouraging development toward the capacity for democratic self-management in faculty, students, the school, and other institutions to which faculty and students may act as consultants.
3. Analyzing existing institutions and approaches to management in order to appreciate their variety, their relationships to the ends of human activity, and the features of organizing and managing that facilitate and that obstruct development toward a capacity for democratic self-management.

#### TEACHING SELF-MANAGEMENT FACTS

At the simplest level—that of teaching facts—the earlier chapters of this book have offered a wealth of information about democratic self-management. Obviously, a school of self-management would teach these facts, along with the facts conventionally taught today. It would describe a system of ownership based on stakeholding, not just stockholding.<sup>2</sup> On citizenship rights, not wealth.<sup>3</sup> It would describe how the three basic economic institutions of land, labor, and capital can each become self-managing and democratically managed by trustees, rather than managed by agents of absentee owners of capital. It would describe the accounting and legal forms consistent with self-management.<sup>4</sup> It would describe different ways of assessing social and ethical, as well as financial, costs and returns of investment for businesses.<sup>5</sup>

It would describe particular cases of self-managing organizations at all points along the path from supply to demand: manufacturers, wholesalers,

retailers, and consumers.<sup>6</sup> It would compare and contrast economic arrangements based on different assumptions—market capitalism, state socialism, and democratic self-management. And, given its mission of fostering self-management, such a school would pay special attention to cases illustrating the dynamics of moving from whatever form of political economy is dominant in a given locale toward democratic self-management.

Several schools around the United States have begun to teach some of these self-management facts, for example the Guilford College Democratic Management Program in Greensboro, North Carolina, the MS in community economic development offered at New Hampshire College in Manchester, and the PhD in social economy offered at Boston College.

#### TEACHING THE THEORY OF SELF-MANAGEMENT

Teaching theory at a school of self-management would be a much more complex, difficult, and subtle process. A school of self-management would have an overtly normative orientation. That is, it would be treating democratic self-management as a desirable end to be achieved. Normative theories that posit desirable ends, then develop and test maps of the paths toward those ends, are generally held in low repute in the academic sciences today. They are frequently dismissed as inherently ideological and political in nature, as subjective rather than objective, and as not open to inquiry about their assumptions.

The complexities, difficulties, and subtleties here are manifold. First, all theories of social psychology and political economy have a normative dimension, even though positivist theories pose as merely descriptive and neutral.<sup>7</sup> The phrase “schools of capital management” begins to suggest the normative drift of today’s schools of management, however neutral they may claim to be. One of the difficult theoretical tasks at a school of self-management would be to expose, and propose means of testing, the normative assumptions underlying the types of knowledge at the core of conventional management curricula, such as FASB (Financial Accounting Standards Board) accounting rules, the capital asset pricing model, and parametric statistics.

The second major challenge would be to teach self-management itself as a theory and not as an ideology. This would mean that inquiry should be encouraged about the radically incomplete image of an end state that theorists of democratic self-management have so far proposed. Also, the many barriers and failures that individuals, organizations, and nations have encountered in initial steps on the path toward self-management would be highlighted.

The third challenge would be to teach the theory of democratic self-management in such a way as to foster students’ development toward self-management. Put another way, the challenge would be to foster students’ abilities to use the theory to assess and improve their own practice of

self-management. This challenge invites increasing *commitment to* self-management, whereas the second challenge invited increasing *detachment from* self-management. Hence, the two challenges appear to be in tension with one another. They can be reconciled only if in fact there are modes of awareness and action that are simultaneously committed and detached, simultaneously decisive and inquiring. Such paradoxical modes of awareness and action are, in fact, the central skills required for the practice of democratic self-management, as will be discussed below. To teach the theory of self-management effectively—to teach simultaneous detachment and commitment—the teacher must teach and structure the classroom and the management program as a whole in a self-managing manner. One illustration of what this can mean, and how any given institution can approach self-management in an incremental manner, is offered in an extended case that constitutes the second half of this chapter.

How difficult it would be to master the three foregoing challenges can be emphasized by reference to the current tumult in legal education. A small number of “critical” legal scholars, centered at the Harvard Law School, question the assumptions of conventional legal theory, pedagogy, and placement practices. This small group of scholars is, in effect, taking up the first of the three challenges of teaching self-management theory.<sup>8</sup> Yet even this minimal effort has stirred up great animosity and polarization, particularly at the Harvard Law School, but also more widely within legal education. Or perhaps the effort has stirred up such animosity precisely *because* it is minimal, because it focuses primarily on rhetorical critique and less on the humility that attempting the practice of democratic self-management quickly breeds.

#### TEACHING SELF-MANAGING SKILLS

Teaching pragmatic skills at a school of self-management would be yet again more difficult than teaching theory. This is so for several reasons. Teaching the pragmatic skills of self-management would be difficult first of all because conventional schools of management do not systematically teach pragmatic skills at all (although isolated, usually low-status, courses may). They focus, as do university education and scientific research in general, on analytic skills.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, this analytic focus is particularly valued in schools of management at present because they have spent the past generation gaining higher status within universities by more rigorously adopting discipline-based scientific methods and eliminating the relatively undisciplined approach of having successful practitioners discuss “war stories” about current practice with students. Consequently, teaching pragmatic skills is widely viewed as an outmoded and discredited process at schools of management, and current faculty are often proudly untrained in the pragmatics of managing.

A second reason why teaching the pragmatic skills of self-management is difficult is that these skills are fundamentally different from ordinary craft skills and diplomatic skills. Some self-management skills are relatively well-defined skills that a student or organization can learn by imitating the best models of current practice. But self-management skills go beyond the pre-defined to transforming skills—skills for *nonviolently transforming* one's own and others' current practices.

Although there may be any number of techniques for accomplishing such nonviolent transformations, the essential dynamic is a process of collaboratively examining and correcting discrepancies among intuitive dreams or aims, theoretical strategies, actual practices, and outcomes *as these are occurring in real time*. Thus, self-managing skills can never be mere rote, external performances that neatly fit currently accepted norms of effectiveness. Rather, they require a fresh and extraordinarily alert attention to oneself and the environment *in the moment of practice*.<sup>10</sup> They require the analogical ability to move back and forth between abstract thought about ethical and political ideals and concrete instances of managerial practice *as these occur*. And they require the flexibility of behavior of an accomplished actor, so that one's speech and non-verbal actions simultaneously convey three things:

1. Constructive intent (not a "holier than thou" attitude).
2. Acceptance of and participation in the same reality as the other players in the setting (not rejection).
3. Simultaneous commitment to accomplishing predefined tasks and to redefining these tasks as inquiry with the others present directs (not unilateral control over others, or vacillating deference to others).

Only recently have these skills received systematic definition.<sup>11</sup> Only recently have pedagogical environments for teaching such skills been described.<sup>12</sup> (To my knowledge, there are only two doctoral programs in the United States at present where future faculty members can learn research and teaching methods consistent with the theory of self-management: the consulting program at the Harvard Graduate School of Education and the joint MBA-PhD in sociology program at Boston College.)

A third reason why teaching the pragmatic skills of self-management is particularly difficult is that to do so invites confrontation of the teacher and of the institution within which the teaching occurs. Focusing on whether self-management theory and the students' current political/managerial practice are mutually consistent leads naturally and directly to questions about whether the teacher's practices and the institution's norms and policies are consistent with self-management theory. There will inevitably be some degree of inconsistency—among the teachers or managers themselves, as well as between the insti-

tutional ideal and its actuality—and such inconsistencies will inevitably be controversial.

As they attempt to find a measured commitment to democratic self-management, students can ricochet back and forth between naive faith and naive cynicism with alarming velocity. What do inconsistencies mean—that the teacher or institution is a sham? Is the teacher or institution willing to change? How soon can one tell? Are students focusing on the teacher's and the institution's inconsistencies as a means of avoiding their own? Will focusing on inconsistencies reduce morale? Will outsiders exploit openness about inconsistencies to discredit the institution? In short, teaching the pragmatic skills of self-management puts the integrity and the comity of the institution at risk. These risks and dilemmas face a business trying to become a worker-owned cooperative, or a community development corporation trying to practice democratic self-management, just as surely as they face an MBA program trying to teach self-managing skills.

#### PERSONAL AND CORPORATE SELF-STUDY REQUIRED

Any organization—MBA program, municipal government, corporation, labor union, cooperative, or kibbutz—that seeks to foster self-managing skills faces the risks described in the previous section. Fostering self-managing skills puts the leadership and the organization as a whole in the position of conducting an ongoing self-study.<sup>13</sup> Such self-study appropriately clarifies the organization's and individual members' intuitive mission, rational strategy, actual practice, and outcomes, and also reveals and corrects inconsistencies among them.

Ultimately, the theory and practice of democratic self-management requires the development of self-systems (whether we think of persons, organizations, associations, or nations) that not only function, but can stand outside their own current functioning—observing, critiquing, and reforming themselves. In Christian religious language, the self-managing system must incorporate at once Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. In political language, the self-managing system must harmonize democratic legislative power, autocratic executive power, and aristocratic judicial review power. In economic terms, the self-managing system must digest short-term market feedback on the desirability of its outputs in such a way as to increase efficiency and profits, middle-term structural feedback (such as state regulation) on the desirability of its processes in such a way as to increase effectiveness and equity, and long-term historical feedback on the significance of its vision and mission in such a way as to increase its legitimacy and good will.

Developmental psychology finds that a very small minority of persons in today's society develop to a stage that welcomes the ongoing self-study necessary for true and effective self-management.<sup>14</sup> The politics of conducting an

ongoing self-study in the midst of ordinary organizational duties and crises is unfamiliar and counterintuitive to most persons and within most institutional cultures. In his magisterial work *Politics and Markets: The World's Political-Economic Systems*, Charles Lindblom shows that no existing social systems encourage, much less guarantee, full freedom of inquiry. Indeed, he clearly does not regard such thoroughgoing self-study as possible. He asks, "Can we expect . . . any society to debate its own fundamentals? Has there ever been one that did?"<sup>15</sup>

For example, the Chinese Communist revolution was explicitly dedicated to principles of self-management, communal self-study, and examination of inconsistencies between theory and practice. The Chinese Communist government of the late 1940s was in many ways successful in its initial efforts to generate a more just distribution of land and more just communal self-management in villages.<sup>16</sup> But these efforts foundered, first against an increasingly entrenched centralized state bureaucracy in the 1950s, and then, during the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s, on the question of what mode of education fosters self-management.<sup>17</sup>

#### ONE MBA PROGRAM THAT FOSTERS SELF-MANAGEMENT

As stated at the outset of this chapter, no MBA programs today are systematically organized to foster democratic self-management. The Boston College MBA program is one attempt to foster the practice of self-management and is therefore worth describing in some detail. It does not, however, systematically teach either facts or theory relevant to self-management. Only one required course and one elective out of the eighteen courses necessary for graduation focus heavily on the theory and practice of self-management (joint MBA-PhD in social economy candidates at Boston College *are* systematically exposed to self-management facts and theories). But a number of elements of the program's administrative and pedagogical infrastructure support the development of self-management skills. For example:

1. Weekly required but ungraded "integrative activities" alternate between workshops on action skills (oral presentation, group leadership, time management, and so on) and candid discussions with visiting executives and leading theoreticians about how they handle on-line dilemmas.
2. First-semester student project groups are heterogeneously composed and structured so that every student holds a leadership role (two project leaders, a meeting leader, a process leader, and an evaluation leader) and so that at least two internal evaluations are held, with feedback and discussion.

3. Second-semester consulting groups work with live business and not-for-profit clients, with responsibility not just for valid analyses of the client but also for whether the client implements recommendations and develops skills and commitments conducive to increased self-management in the future.
4. A course called "Perspectives on Management" asks students to develop their own philosophies of management in the context of other historical and current approaches, and to investigate how their own practice can become increasingly consistent with that philosophy; this last is partially accomplished by careful written descriptions and analyses of their own actions as they seek to exercise leadership in their first- and second-semester groups.
5. An oral presentation competition at the end of the first year, during which the consulting groups present their work with their clients, is judged half on the substantive credibility and effectiveness of the project itself and half on presentational effectiveness.
6. Second-year, volunteer student consultants are selected, on the basis of commitment to and competence at fostering democratic self-management, to help next year's students and groups become more effective; these student consultants take an elective course entitled "Consulting Theory and Practice" over the summer and meet for two hours weekly to critique their consulting work throughout the following year.
7. A rotating core faculty team that teaches all the required first-year courses is chosen anew every two years, reviewing the program and recommending changes prior to teaching in it, then meeting every other week during their membership on the team, participating in integrative activities, advising student consulting projects, and conducting the midsemester evaluations to be described next (faculty teach larger than usual sections and receive a one-section reduction to compensate for the added team duties).
8. A written midsemester evaluation of all courses and program elements is conducted each semester, openly discussed among the faculty as they determine how best to conduct a feedback process with students, then discussed with students, usually within one week of the initial evaluation.
9. A longitudinal research project explores whether and how students' developmental stage, managerial effectiveness, and responses to the program change from entry to exit; whether their capacity for self-management increases; and what it is about the program (if anything) that generates such change.
10. A series of self-study groups have arisen over the years to intensify the development of self-managing skills; these have ranged from an

alumni group that meets on a monthly basis to discuss on-the-job dilemmas, to a faculty group focusing on research methods that foster self-study and self-management, to a student group seeking to improve public speaking skills.

#### A CLOSER VIEW OF THE DIFFICULTY OF SELF-STUDY

The foregoing offers only a very distant overview of the self-study systems built into one MBA program to foster the development of self-managing skills. This distant overview does nothing to convey the liveliness, the subtlety, and the controversy that institutionalizing self-study demands and creates. A closer look at one of these self-study systems can show more clearly what is at stake: how self-study brings to the surface not only *secondary* data about other times and places to be analyzed reflectively, but also *primary* data about one's own effectiveness in, and about the very definition of, the ongoing situation in which one is currently participating. All of us implicitly and incompletely use such data to orient ourselves from moment to moment as we attempt to manage. But explicitly bringing such primary data to the surface and testing their validity can agitate us because such data can have a major bearing on our individual self-esteem, on our esteem for the organization, and on the eventual outcomes of the ongoing situation. One of the ultimate tests of a democratic self-managing system is whether it can nonviolently bring to the surface, manage, and creatively resolve the major internal conflict and mutual alienation that is inevitable in any human organization. Therefore, the following closeup view focuses on a messy, conflictual situation in this MBA program.

#### OPERATION OF THE PUBLIC MIDSEMESTER EVALUATION SYSTEM

After the first midsemester evaluation, both students and faculty changed their behavior in the one course that received a negative evaluation, and the learning environment in that course improved markedly during the second half of the semester. In the first eight semesters of its use, the midsemester evaluation served primarily to confirm the overwhelmingly positive response of students to the program as a whole, thus strengthening the faculty's confidence, while permitting numerous "fine tuning" adjustments that further improved collective morale. In particular, thirty-eight of forty-eight courses received predominantly positive evaluations. Of the other ten courses, the general consensus was that the learning atmosphere of five improved significantly during the same semester and of three more during the subsequent offering. Moreover, of the faculty members who stood for tenure in the first four years after the restructuring of the program, all those who were (or had been) members of the program's faculty team received tenure, while the only ones not to receive tenure had not been members of the program team.

These facts no doubt played a role in sustaining this organizational in-

quiry system, but they did not in any sense make it “safe” on every occasion. Consider the following series of events.

During one semester, the informal information network suggested there might be two generally problematic courses. Students were invited to fill out the midterm evaluations overnight, in response to a student request for more time to do the questionnaire justice. Less than half the class returned the questionnaires the next day. (Later inquiries indicated that some felt they were unimportant because they had not been thoroughly discussed the previous semester [when no program elements had been identified as problematic by a majority], while others felt that the faculty was treating them as unimportant by not allocating enough class time to fill them out.) Of the questionnaires returned, four of the thirty-nine responses could be interpreted as personally insulting to the faculty member with whom students experienced the most dissatisfaction, and all the responses were critical of this particular course. This faculty member, in turn, had the least experience with the program, had no previous experience with receiving and responding to data about ongoing activities, and had created a course with little predetermined structure.

This faculty member’s inclination was to dismiss the data on the grounds that it was not complete and that students had misused the evaluation privilege. A two-hour faculty meeting devoted to the question of how to treat this data seemed to influence him not to dismiss the data out of hand. But when he actually discussed the matter with his two sections, he chided them for their juvenile approach to the self-management demanded by his course structure and by the evaluation process. And he invited no discussion of the matter.

Result: Total mutual alienation! All student suspicions about the unauthenticity of this organizational self-study system, and about the unapproachability and incompetence of this faculty member, were instantly confirmed.

Three aspects of the action skills and systems interwoven throughout the program partially retrieved this situation. First, some students had developed enough trust in the program as a whole and enough action competence to be able to insist politely on continuing the discussion for just a moment, to apologize for the personal remarks, to verify that these represented only a small minority of the comments, to specify one or two concrete instances where they believed changes might enhance the achievement of the instructor’s goals, and to ask whether he would like to explore these possibilities outside the class session. This action dramatically changed the tone of the immediate setting, reinforced the sense of competence and empowerment of those taking the action, and eventually resulted in some helpful small changes in the course.

Second, over the next two weeks three other faculty members did use the feedback from the midterm evaluations, as well as other primary data as they occurred in classes, to explore more deeply into the roots of disharmonies and

invent creative, nonpolarizing solutions. In the mood of heightened alertness on the part of students (and faculty) about whether the program was "for real," these faculty actions more than counterbalanced the earlier event.

Third, as these events were taking place, students were simultaneously at the point in their consulting projects with business and not-for-profit clients where they were recognizing, in quicker or slower succession:

1. That there were serious differences in the ways they and their clients defined the business problems to be solved, despite earlier effort at consensual problem definition.
2. That clients tended to be unaware of how their own interactional patterns created and maintained the technical and strategic problems they knew they faced.
3. That the student consulting teams themselves by and large had yet to develop the alertness, courage, and skill to use both primary and secondary data to help their clients see and change the relationship among the technical, strategic, and interactional layers of their business problems.

In general, these insights served to increase students' humility about their own action effectiveness and to decrease their harshness in judging others' (similar) lack of effectiveness.

#### ELEMENTS OF SELF-STUDY SYSTEMS

This case within a case illustrates many elements of organizational self-study systems. Probably the central point is that, although they can have routine, bureaucratized features such as the regular timing and the regular questions of the MBA midsemester evaluation, the purpose of organizational self-study systems is to break through the routine and the preconceived to the unique reality of the present situation that is not being adequately addressed by participants' personal and institutional routines. A paradoxical corollary to this central point is that there is no way to guarantee the safety, efficacy, and justice of organizational self-study systems ahead of time. The best one can do ahead of time is to construct a mutually reinforcing network of such systems. But even such a network cannot guarantee appropriate and efficacious change ahead of time. All this network can do is provide more opportunities for individuals to exercise their self-managing skills once the net catches an undigested chunk of reality. In other words, the safety and efficacy of organizational self-study systems are totally dependent on the present alertness, commitment, and self-managing skills of the individual participants.

Thus, the turnback from the moment of total mutual alienation in the foregoing case was caused, first and foremost, by the very risky on-the-spot

intervention by several students just as the instructor was attempting to avoid discussion of the evaluation data. It was caused, secondly, by the risks that other faculty members took in the days following to work differently with students on the data about their courses. Unless managers in an organization realize that taking such risks and landing temporarily in such messes are inevitable features of practicing self-management, and unless they welcome this challenge, individuals and organizations will retreat early from any attempts to develop self-management.

#### DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND SELF-MANAGEMENT

As already mentioned briefly, developmental theory can help to explain why self-study and self-management are so difficult to institutionalize.<sup>18</sup> According to developmental theory, only persons who develop beyond the point of taking existing structures for granted as just, are systematically attentive to possible inconsistencies among principles, current structures, and day-to-day practices. Only such persons begin to develop a taste for self-study, nonviolent restructuring, and democratic self-management. But prior empirical research suggests that only a small minority of persons develop to this point and that each developmental transformation is a long, painstaking process. For example, only 2.5 percent of the students graduating from the MBA program just described during the first three years when the longitudinal research was being conducted (1980–1983) measured at the point of development conducive to self-study and self-management.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, few students have developed to this point during the program (no student has ever been measured as moving more than one developmental stage during the two-year program). Interestingly, almost every student who *has* developed to the point of valuing and exercising self-study and democratic self-management has been among those who chose to become a consultant during the second year, thus doubling their exposure to self-study and self-managing settings as compared to other students.

These facts suggest that any organization seeking to cultivate democratic self-management in its own affairs must expect a years-long struggle of transformation.

Another interesting finding of the MBA program is that project and consulting groups with members who value and exercise self-management have performed better in terms of course grades and various measures of group effectiveness than other groups.

This fact suggests the enhanced performance and consequent social rewards that may be in store if we do more to cultivate democratic self-management in our organizations. Yet another interesting finding is that, more recently (1984), the ego demographics of the entering class changed dramati-

cally, with 25 percent rather than 2.5 percent scoring beyond the point of development where self-study and self-management become attractive possibilities.<sup>20</sup> Building on the other facts just presented, this fact suggests that early organizations that cultivate democratic self-management while operating successfully in a predominantly market economy will attract highly effective participants.

## CONCLUSION

In short, few people today, whatever their ideology may be, have the skills to support democratic self-management, and few organizations, whatever their formal structure, in fact cultivate democratic self-managing skills in their members. Each organization that commits itself to a self-managing process should recognize that it is committing itself to a process that is fundamentally educational in nature and fundamentally unknown as well.

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