

lecture #4

DYLAME

Social Constructivism in Action

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Introduction

What happens when people interact with people? How do they convey contents, values, goals and perceptions? Language is a very error-prone communication instrument. When we look closely, we see that it works somehow but also somehow creates a different picture to each of us.

On the one hand it can be quite scary how quickly we can get lost in confusion, and on the other this also increases the opportunity to actively and responsibly shape our world.

The DYLAME experiment

A facilitator writes the word DYLAME on a flipchart for a group of any size. He then asks the participants to make a note of the definition of the word DYLAME. He then collects the notes and puts the vast array of ideas on the flipchart too. When the group is very large, a small selection is sufficient.

DYLAME is an artificial word that does not have a particular meaning in any commonly known language. Therefore it is unknown to all participants. What could it mean? Spontaneous notions we heard often are:

- die lame (an ironic notion towards the famous Bruce Willis Hollywood movies “die hard”)
- some kind of meditation exercise
- a flower

The Interpretation

The experiences from many DYLAME sessions show that the more people are involved, the more varied the interpretations are. What is the reason for this? Why does nearly every brain have a different reaction for the very same stimulus?

This experiment can also be done with presumably precise and commonly known definitions. The result is the same kind of spread in the interpretations. The word “father” evokes fears of authority with one participant, sorrow for the loss of the own father with another participant and happiness over the joys of fatherhood for a third participant. What does this mean?

From reaction to creation

In fact, the definitions DYLAME or father are signs, representations or placeholders. From childhood we are accustomed to filling these placeholders with individual contents in the process of speaking languages. These can be concrete memories or consist of symbolic or imaginary content. From the abundance of possibilities, everybody creates their own concept of the definition. When 30 people listen to a speech, 30 different concepts of what has just been said are created. This ambiguity is irreconcilable in human communication and we have become somewhat complacent to the differences to the extent that we tend to even forget them.

The structural philosophers of the 20th century, for example Jacques Derrida have researched this phenomenon systematically with very interesting results. As soon as we are confronted with an external stimulus, we project our own concept of it. In other words, we end up in a world, which is not factual at all but projected and thus newly created by us in every instance. Our brain does not process a mere reaction to the stimulus. It creates its own reality. Thus we cannot keep the “real” reality separated from our own projections. Paul Watzlawick outlines this idea with the notion “reality, a knife without a blade where the handle is missing.”

Self-responsibility

On the one hand this can be quite scary, because we might feel lonely and misunderstood in this process. If my counterpart is seemingly living in a different realm of perception than I am, and misunderstandings constantly dominate the scene, it means that there is no congruent understanding for the world and for each other. The rather romantic idea of total unity is diluted by the unbridgeable trench of differences.

On the other hand, it opens a chance to completely influence our reality through our observations and projections. That way we can even control reality around us to a certain degree.

Second order reality

When we can manage to see ourselves in the same way as we see the world (first order reality), we can start to influence our observation and projection of the world (second order reality). The second order reality will change, simply by training ourselves to perceive the world differently. And we do not have access to the first order reality, since everything we perceive goes through our perception. Or as Heinz von Foerster puts it: "Objectivity is a subject's delusion that observing can be done without him." This might sound trivial but has some remarkable consequences.

Self-induced neuroplasticity

Modern neuroscience has proven that important parts of our brain change and rearrange under the influence of repetitive activities. It takes on another physical shape, a change in hard-wiring of the brain, even if the repetition is merely cognitive. According to the psychobiologist, Donald Olding Hebb: what fires together, wires together. This is not only relevant for psychotherapy but for every kind of conscious way of living. If we lead ourselves, we influence our brain with a lasting effect on our perception and thus the world around us. This is called self-induced neuroplasticity.

Cybernetics

Cybernetics is the science of the steering principles of (social) systems. The definition goes back to the cox (κυβερνήτης) in the Greek saga of Homer. When the cox of a social system is able to steer through the creation of his reality by carefully being aware of his observations and perceptions, then he is capable to better steer the systems itself. This is one of the primary goals of the DYLAEME experiment: to increase the steering abilities of leaders.

Reduce suffering

Two people in separate cars are stuck in the same traffic jam. One is a manager on his way to the airport with a lot of time pressure because she is heading for an extremely important meeting in another city. She sweats and has breathing problems. The other one is a man in the car in front of her. He has three kids at home but by chance his wife is home to look after them. He enjoys the free moment and listens to an interesting radio programme. Both people are in the very same traffic situation. The manager however, agonises. She does not observe her observations. She is stuck in her second order reality. In extreme cases, this lack of self-leadership can eventually be life threatening through a somatic heart attack or other stress induced physical manifestation.

Usually such situations of stress are created through fear. People see themselves in future social situations of which they are scared. The situation is neither real in first nor the second order reality as it lies in the future. It is a mere projection. Changing this projection is enough to reduce the fear. A good step forward to do so is to stay in the here and now.

Changing roles

Social relations always have the notion of role patterns. The actors assign roles to themselves and to their counterparts and act them out. Leaving these patterns can be frightening. Will I still be accepted? Do I attract negative attention without it? Those who want to lead have to clearly define their own role. The more self-understanding is based on an external role assignment, the more we will be led by those doing this assignment. Through questioning our fears derived from our second order reality, our observations, we can take on full control over our role in the social system and lead ourselves.

Recognizing and overcoming implicit agreements

Fears are a good indicator for implicit agreements. When an actor is scared to take a certain step, he is often scared of potentially breaking the rules or a commitment. But what rule, what commitment? Which potentially implicit agreement will be broken? Fears can be an intuitive steering signal. They are often triggered by prevalent moral assumptions. They supposedly show us what we are allowed to do or not to do.

Often there is a pre-emptive obedience reaction, to be in conformity with implicit moral norms. Those who want to lead have to be able to recognize and overcome such implicit agreements as they are often obsolete but are tabooed to talk about. The precise analysis of what agreements cause fear for example with colleagues or friends can open up interesting courses of action while reducing obstacles and discomfort.

Happiness equations: if-then = happiness

Another apprehensive side of projections into the future are so called happiness equations that follow the principle: if state X comes true then I am happy. That often means in reverse that if state X does not occur I am not happy or even unhappy. If I let myself be guided purely by such equations, I make myself susceptible to blackmail by these very equations. Between the here and now and the potential coming of age of that state, there are so many imponderables and obstacles that one's happiness should not depend on such error-prone constructions.

Choice

It is much more helpful to analyse happiness equations and, if necessary, change them through self-observation. Heinz von Foerster has even formulated the following ethical imperative: "I shall act always so as to increase the total number of choices." In the light of our

argument this means that if there is a desired state X in the future, it should never be the only potential option to make us happy.

Every step we make today should contribute to maintain as many options as possible or even increase them. The if-then equation is then replaced by a contextual understanding of happiness to do the right thing in every instance while having many options to be happy. Happiness then takes place in the here and now and does not depend on future projections.

Tyranny

If I have only one single option to be happy, I might turn into an unpleasant contemporary who follows this one goal over-ambitiously and rigidly. In case this option is not in line with the goals of others I am likely to alienate myself from the respective social system or try to impose my goal onto others in a tyrannically way, expecting others to follow blindly. Such actors usually cannot maintain such a state for long time even if granted with great powers. Through the very limited amount of options they provide, they become irrelevant for a social system sooner rather than later.

Diversity

Actors with too few options tend to make a monster out of other people as they are presumably standing in the way of the actor's rigid goals and become a threat. Johann Wolfgang Goethe once said you can even turn the stones in your way into a beautiful structure. The same is true for the sometimes challenging perspectives of other people. The marvellous diversity of people fertilizes a social system and is a well-proved driver for creativity and innovation.

When I identify an enemy in such a system, I can ask myself several questions: Is it possible that I have too few options to pursue happiness? Are my equations too rigid? How could I integrate other perspectives so that in our social system everybody's options increase, including my own?

Gratitude in the now

Through questioning of the second order reality, I can detach myself from limiting projections into the future. I discover the power of now as the real scope of action. Only now is the moment where happiness unfolds and the now is not even a single step away: it is already there. As the master of our own second order reality, nothing stands in our way to be immediately happy. This is a delightful situation: Gratitude for living in the now.

When I succeed in accepting this mind-set, I increase my self-assertion in everything I do. All character traits attributed to a charismatic leader stem from this focus on the essential: the power of now as the true source of our energy.

Love it, change it, or leave it

Uncle Joe: grin and bear it!

The following story shows what happens if I do not question and clarify my attitude towards a situation.

Friday afternoon: Coming home after an extremely demanding week, I wish nothing more than to get behind closed doors and spend a quiet relaxing evening with my spouse. However, just as I step in the doorway my anxiously waiting wife excitedly asks me “Do you know who is coming over for dinner tonight?” Expecting the worst, she confirms my fears by answering: “Joe!” . Joe is my wife’s uncle.

In my opinion, Joe is an arrogant and grumpy fellow. He believes that he is a superior social being with a better family background than most. I also think that he did not approve of his niece’s choice when marrying me. Therefore my relationship with him was always somewhat tense.

After the initial shock, I start to consider my options. I could just cancel the evening. This would definitely result in numerous unpleasant discussions throughout the weekend. Or I grin and bear it, while trying to get his visit over as quickly as possible. My two choices are:

- a) an unpleasant weekend
- b) an unpleasant evening

I chose the latter. By the time uncle Joe arrives, I am in a bad mood already, which gets me the first prickly comment from him, which only serves to increase my anger. I do not really react and try to avoid the conversation as much as possible, which leads to further comments from him. While having our dessert, when presumptuous questions about my financial and professional status kept being mentioned, I had had enough. Not very politely I ask Uncle Joe to leave the house.

This finally leaves me with both of the two bad options: an unenjoyable evening, plus a spoiled weekend.

Through my construction of reality, my second order reality, I had to choose between two options that were seemingly without alternative. I had to bow to my projections. However, if I stepped back and reassessed my projections I might come up with different options. The following three different, more strategic options in observing my second order reality are worth taking a closer look at. They help to analyse recurring problematic situations and making better decisions.

I have already assessed that Uncle Joe already is a loser. Not because he is a mean person

but because I did not give him any chance. My fundamental assumption was that this would become a terrible evening, a classic self-fulfilling prophecy. Through my decision to sacrifice the evening in order to avoid any unpleasant discussions with my wife, I rendered myself a victim. When I question my second order reality, I can escape this situation through wholeheartedly making a decision that leads to more happiness.

I can:

- a) love the situation as it is
- b) change it
- c) or leave it