

## **Creating a Learning Community and Individual Meaning through Web-Based Conversation: The Electronic Fishbowl as a Pedagogical Device**

### **Introduction**

This proposal is the culmination of the remark of a prospective employer that “graduates from the College of Business Administration do great presentations on Business Strategy, but they don’t know what they *mean*.” This comment raised the disconcerting proposition that our teaching methods at the University, or at least within the College of Business Administration, result only in rote learning. As educators, we found ourselves confronted with the question of what pedagogical method we could implement to create meaning for our students, rather than simply rote learning.

Since one can only have knowledge of something if it has meaning for them, we take the position, as have many before us, that it is through *conversation* that we produce meaning and knowledge; it is not the case that a topic of conversation in-and-of-itself possesses meaning. Ideas and concepts such as business strategy, market share, leadership, competition, standards, ethical behavior, professionalism, success, failure, etc. exist meaningfully only within conversations about them. These ‘things’ can have a real, material existence in the world, but the practice of conversation as a learning device is not necessarily concerned about whether things “exist” but rather about the origin of their meaning.

Consistent with Socrates and other philosophers, the above assumption led us to focus on conversation as the pedagogical device for creating meaning. In the spring of 1999, to experiment with meaning creation through conversation within the context of a learning environment, we began with ourselves. In the fall semester of 1999 and the spring semester of 2000, experimentation moved into the classroom at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Based on our experiences, both as learners and teachers/facilitators, we believe that, in addition to creating meaning for our students as well as other participants in the process, the proposed Electronic Fishbowl will provide the following institutional/educational benefits: the creation of a community of learners; experiential learning; self-knowledge and understanding of difference through the “other”; and the transcendence of difference.

### **Intent**

The intent of the Electronic Fishbowl is to develop a diverse community of learners who create meaning among themselves through their conversations and experiences within the Fishbowl. Under such a scenario, the teacher becomes a facilitator of learning rather than the source of learning, and the responsibility for learning shifts to the students/participants.

In the Fall semester of 2000 and the Spring semester of 2001, each student from Multi-Paradigm Approaches to Organizational Analysis (MGT 638B, approximately 6 Ph.D. students), International Comparative Management and Cultures (MGT 657, approximately 20 MBA students) and International Dimensions of Business (MGT 453, approximately 120 BS students) will be randomly paired with another student from their course and assigned a web-based forum in which their conversations will take place throughout the semester.

## Conversation and Meaning

By the term “conversation” we mean a group of statements that constitute a language (i.e., a way of representing the knowledge) for talking about a particular topic at a particular moment in time. The conversation constructs the topic of discussion. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned.

Conversation influences how ‘ideas are put into practice’ and is used to regulate the conduct of others. Since putting any idea into practice entails meaning, and meanings shape and influence our conduct, all practices have a conversational component. It is important to note that the concept of conversation in our project is not purely a ‘linguistic’ concept. It is about language and practice. It attempts to overcome the traditional distinction between what one says (language) and what one does (practice).

*Whether laying on the beach, or riding on the ferry whenever I was thinking about the fishbowl it always reverted back to the ocean like a wave that is constantly crashing against the shore of my mind. I compare my experience to the fishbowl to the ocean, being different at all times each with its own meaning, my experience like the coming in and going out of the changing tides...*

*Which brings me to the story *The Old Man And The Sea* a story by Ernest Hemingway. The story has four characters, the old man, the marlin, the boy, and the sea, each being a symbolic part of the story. The old man has endurance from one on one confrontations, courage in the face of defeat, and personal triumph from loss. The characters symbolize mankind, helping hands or friends, a goal to accomplish, and the road we take to success.*

*This story is really about fundamental human values and in a few words creates images that carry the facts leaving the reader to perceive it’s meaning. I think our fishbowl is also like this. All of us are looking for that “big fish” to catch and the “sea” to guide us. But life, like my experience in the fishbowl, is filled with obstacles that I had to overcome to accomplish my goal. In the story the fish was the goal, the sharks the obstacles, and the sea, the road we must take. To me in our fishbowl understanding and self discovery was my goal, opening myself up and creating a bridge with my partner was the obstacle, and how I went about my participation in the fishbowl was ultimately the road I chose to take.*

- McAloon, 5/12/00 (student in spring 2000)

The topics of conversation will come from the course content and the conversation will be carried out on the website among fishbowl participants. The students will learn as much from each other, if not more, than they do within the classroom. The exact learning experience and meaning created for a student cannot be predicted; it will be unique and determined by the conversations in which students take part. Our goal is for participants to analyze how they understand themselves in relation to things like business strategies, etc. and, how their knowledge comes to be produced. As well as a the production of self-knowledge through conversation with the “other,” the intent is to emphasize shared meanings and cultural

understandings to create a more open system, connected in intimate ways with individual reflections on felt-experiences, emotions and mental images.

### **The Fishbowl at [www.dugal.net](http://www.dugal.net)**

The 'Fishbowl' is a pedagogical device that was developed over the last two years and was first implemented in the spring of 2000. Inspired by notions of meaning creation, engaged pedagogy and experiential learning, the fishbowl centers around the concept of learning through conversation. Participants enter [www.dugal.net](http://www.dugal.net) in randomly selected pairs, are placed into forums, and 'make-conversation' by creating "novel communication episodes;" their modus operandi for understanding the subject at hand. This technology allows us to create new types of conversations that transcend the traditional time space boundaries of the physical classroom. The learning community will be made up of graduate and undergraduate students, professors, university administrators, business people, and public servants. The intersubjectivity established in the fishbowl represents community.

*Before you started interacting in the fishbowl, I thought of our relationship as that of a mother and an alcoholic child. You kept apologizing on and on for not performing. At first, I thought that you meant it, but after the 2nd or 3rd time, it was like yeah okay whatever.*

- Mitchell, (student in spring 2000)

*Some support of my partner who we paint as a chameleon/actor/actress:*

*Through many of her postings, Laina writes about events that placed her within the ever-changing ROLES of being a mother, a single parent, a student, a daughter, and sister. Although I feel that everyone of us within the fishbowl could defend being an actor, Laina reflects, alludes, and laments what I term as learning her lines depending on the scene being shot. She has adapted by changing as necessary to better fit into her emerging environs. I have noticed that she is sometimes concerned with what others have thought about her in various situations (getting caught in the glare of the stage lights...and wanting to read the reviews). Of her relationship with her son's father, she relates that "We tried to fake it for awhile. Sometimes we would try to bring it back and have a meal together and talk but it was just surface, we really weren't feeling it." To me there is no starker stage and school of acting then that practiced by one or both partners in a relationship that is not working.*

- Wills, 5/10/00 (student in spring 2000)

The Fishbowl technology allows participants to transcend time and space – it allows learning to take place free of time and space restriction of the lecture format.

### **Structures of Differences in Felt-Experiences**

In the Fall 2000 and Spring 2001 Semesters, "different" students in MGT 638B, MGT 657 and MGT 453 will *structure* their felt-experiences through a process of self-reflection and disclosure around topics from an assigned text. For example, students would have a conversation around the topic of Leadership by disclosing their structures of perception and conception of Leadership.

Interacting and conversing in pairs, students will understand themselves, together and apart, with regard to their structures of differences, differences in their structures, position within their structures, and design of structure. In simpler terms, conversation about 'leadership' will produce a living-knowledge about what constitutes 'leadership'; meaning and knowledge about Leadership will be created by the conversation between two people.

*Without the fishbowl and the teachings of perception, conception, and knowledge, I am not sure if I would have been as strong as I am being to just take what they give me for grades because that is not the important issue. Would I like to get A's of course for then I could keep my scholarship and keep the burden off of my parents. However if I am re-conceiving the way in which I learn and treat my structures I am ultimately learning more for it by gaining the knowledge and keeping it with me, rather than simply getting by for the grade. Not only does this apply to my reinventing values on school, but to all of my life, this is just a snippet. I needed to have a new way of thinking in order to get to this and it couldn't have come at a better time. This is me in of and by the fishbowl.*

Delbarone, (student in spring 2000)

### **Viewing Differences**

Understanding one's differences as viewed on the computer screen is a catalyst for the production of knowing through language. However, meaning and knowledge (e.g., of leadership) is created in the fishbowl not by language alone, nor just by the idea of leadership, but by the felt-experience through conversation between two people.

The idea that conversation produces knowledge of something like leadership and that nothing which is meaningful about leadership exists outside that conversation is at first thought a disconcerting proposition which runs against the grain of most participants' common-sense thinking. By first identifying and then disclosing their perceptual and conceptual structures, participants enter the state of 'intermezzo' where negotiation for meaning and sense making takes place in a conversational mode. This is the "doing" part of the conversation, i.e., the practice of it, as opposed to the idea or language of it.

*Lauren you have a lot to say and an excellent way of putting your thoughts to words, I admire that. I found that process of thoughts to words to be the hardest thing in all this exploration of our minds called a fishbowl. You really pulled through in the end; I respect that. After we "talked" it made me realize what you were going through, and although I was never really angry (its not in my personality), I was annoyed at times. But your absence in the beginning helped me over come a few of my personal obstacles as well as the one's I faced in class.*

*As for our grade, I don't care I think we will do ok. I am more glad that I "got" something out of this class and I think I finally figured it out, to me that am more of an accomplishment than a grade. I realized that everyone's intermezzo in the fishbowl was different, none being more correct or the "right" way. There really isn't a "right" way when the things we wrote about were our experiences and perceptions and conceptions of things. The fact that in the end we did*

*communicate, sometimes not directly back and forth, like some whose posts intertwined and all went together, ours seemed like separate thoughts on one level but I know I put "us" together and although our bridge might not be a big sturdy one I like to think of it more like the one's on a playground in a Jungle-Jim. Do you know what I am talking about? The ones that moves, swaying back and forth making a lot of noise when you walk across. I think that's more our style.*

- McAloon, 5/12/00 (student in spring 2000)

### **Observer and Participant**

Participants come to understand the role of conversation in producing knowledge and meaning in their daily lives by experiencing being both observers and participants (i.e., the observed) at the same time. Generally speaking, an individual may occupy the space of 'observer' at one point in time, and the space of 'observed' at another point in time, but to experience both simultaneously is the simulated experience we accomplish in the fishbowl. Participants viewing each other in the fishbowl are in turn being viewed by each other.

The 'participants' grasp that nothing meaningful (inside the fishbowl) exists outside the conversation between members of the Fishbowl community. Meaning and meaningful practice is constructed within the participants' conversation, within their intersubjectivity. This is at the heart of constructivist theory of meaning.

Learning through conversation about a topic such as leadership in the fishbowl would include the following elements:

- (1) statements about leadership which give us a certain kind of knowledge about it;
- (2) the rules which prescribe certain ways of talking about Leadership and exclude other ways; rules which govern what is 'sayable' or 'thinkable' about Leadership;
- (3) 'individuals' who in some ways personify the conversation ---the Leader; which attributes do we expect these individuals to have, given the way knowledge about Leadership is constructed;
- (4) how this knowledge about Leadership acquires authority, a sense of embodying the 'truth' about it; constituting the 'truth of the matter'; and
- (5) the practices for dealing with Leaders whose conduct is being regulated and organized according to these ideas; and
- (6) acknowledging that a different conversation will arise at another point in time, supplanting the existing one, opening up a new perception and conception of 'leadership.'

### **Levels of Participation**

Within the academic structure, students enrolled in Mgt. 638b, Mgt. 657 and Mgt. 453 are working toward a degree in Management at doctoral, masters, and bachelor levels. Depending on the semester in which they take one of the above courses, students will be enrolled in Electronic Fishbowls that will be called fall2000 and spring2001. They create the core of the

Fishbowl and, ultimately, they are the raison d'être of the Fishbowl and will participate in all of the aspects of the Fishbowl mentioned above.

In addition to students, we will have participants from faculty (at URI and other institutions), staff (at URI), business people and public servants. The preliminary list of these participants is located in the appendix of this document. Their exact role, other than being "observers" of student interaction and having the opportunity for conversation with students and in their community forum, has not yet been determined. We hope that they become an integral part of our Fishbowl community and engage in conversations with each other as well as with the students. As well as our students benefiting from their participation in the Fishbowl, it is our intent to create a space that allows for the creation of meaning for them as observer/participants.

It is hoped that a social function for all participants in the Fishbowl may be held at the beginning of each semester at which the participants will get to know each other at some level.

### **Activities**

With the funding we hope to create a new and improved Electronic Fishbowl through the creation of an advanced discussion board. This discussion board will allow us to create forums as we have done in the past, but will also allow for the posting of images as well as text and real-time Internet conversation. Images will be used to stimulate conversation as participants impute meaning onto them.

Along with this new technology, based on what we have learned from our previous experience with the Fishbowl pedagogy and our further reading and research, we will be working to implement, improve and redesign our Fishbowl pedagogy and our roles as facilitators of this process.

### **Benchmarks**

Consistent with the opening sentence of this proposal, we are attempting to create meaning for our students, not simply rote learning. Under the above-proposed pedagogy, the meaning and self-knowledge created for each participant is unique. In this situation, meaning creation does not lend itself to a standardized quantitative measurement. Thus, meaning creation will be assessed through analysis of the texts produced by participants within the Fishbowl and through exit interviews that will be conducted at the end of each semester.

A survey will be implemented to assess the sense of community participants experienced within the Fishbowl. Also, during the exit interview we will inquire about the sense of community that participants experienced. Finally, in the exit interview and through surveys we will assess the students' success in transcending their differences.

### **Personnel**

The personnel required to complete the above project will include Dr. Sanjiv S. Dugal, Professor of Management, Matthew Eriksen, Doctoral Candidate and a web designer/web developer. Dr.

Dugal and Mr. Eriksen would handle the course design and content, pedagogical issues, and conceptual issues regarding the design of the web site. The only individual requiring compensation for his/her work would be the web designer/web developer.

### **Budget**

Web Designer @ \$50.00/hour for 10 hours	\$500.00
Web Developer @ \$33.00/hour x 5 hours/week for 24 weeks (12 weeks each semester)	\$3960.00
Advanced Discussion Board Software	\$500.00
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$4960.00</b>

### **Conclusion**

“Although the increased availability of hardware and connections to the Internet are making it possible for faculty to reassess the ways in which they teach and how students learn, they will need time and encouragement to make the transitions” (quote from the web site of Higher Education Foundation Grant). Simply stated, this is exactly what the grant would do: it would provide us with the encouragement and support to continue our efforts and generate the feeling that we are utilizing our time, energy, and resources in a productive direction. While we will continue to invest our time in developing the above pedagogy, we need to hire the technological expertise that will allow us to implement the above-proposed pedagogy into practice.

We believe the above-proposed pedagogical method has broad academic applications. Most notably in a courses like URI 101 in which it can be used as a tool to create community, facilitate self-understanding and of understanding of the “other” and the teach the skill of transcending difference through the creation of a common framework for understanding.

## Appendix

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