Drucker: On Learning (to Learn) Management

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Executive Summary

This paper argues that there is an intrinsic link between the concepts of "learning-to-learn" and the "knowledge worker" in the work of Peter Drucker. This is because the increasing life-span of knowledge workers and the decreasing life-span of organizations in the contemporary world have changed the underlying nature of the "social contract" that has hitherto governed the relationship between workers and organizations. Furthermore, these changes are forcing all stakeholders to confront the demands of learning-to-learn and self-management as the necessary modalities of professional and social mobility for knowledge workers in the global economy. Drucker therefore argues that formalizing an ethic of learning-to-learn will provide both knowledge workers and organizations, by implication, with a competitive advantage in "the next society."

Understanding the importance of learning practices and knowledge management will also make it possible for knowledge workers and knowledge-based organizations to continually renew themselves despite the intensity of competition and the relentless demands for individuation, differentiation, and innovation in the global economy. Drucker cites his own career as an example of such a possibility by demonstrating that "intellectual omnivorousness" can serve as an emotional and intellectual reservoir of possibilities for knowledge workers over a long life span. What knowledge workers need then is a "method of study." In addition to spelling out a possible model of study based on his own formative experiences, Drucker also cites the sources from which he initially learnt the modalities that he calls for in a general theory of learning-to-learn in knowledge workers and organizations.

The essential modality in making knowledge "actionable" for Drucker is "feedback analysis," a practice that he identifies with the Jesuits and the Calvinists in Europe. In other words, decision-makers must have the confidence and patience to write decision reports and check to see if they have been able to anticipate the consequences of a given decision through feedback analysis. They must also develop a high degree of self-awareness on what constitutes their cognitive style by deciding whether their style of information-processing demands the style of a "reader or listener" and act accordingly. This relates to the larger necessity of acting from strengths rather than from weaknesses in Drucker's thought. And, finally, the knowledge worker must be willing to learn from the experience of artists, musicians, and scientists on the possibilities of creativity in old-age and internalize the moral obligation to pursue perfection whenever or wherever possible. ❦

What does make a business distinct and what is its peculiar resource is its ability to use knowledge of all kinds – from scientific and technical knowledge to social, economic and managerial knowledge. It is only in respect to knowledge that a business can be distinct, can therefore produce something that has a value in the market place.

- Peter F Drucker [1]

What is the link between the concept of learning and the knowledge worker? Why is this link an interesting point of entry into Peter Drucker's theory of knowledge work? In order to answer these questions, we will have to *translate* Drucker's theory of learning into the language of subjectivity. In other words, a theorist can either dig into Drucker's arguments to understand what *presuppositions* about the nature of subjectivity are built into his theory of learning or invoke a theory of subjectivity from elsewhere, such as Freudian psychoanalysis, to come to terms with his theory of learning. I will try to do a bit of both in this essay, but I will start with the presuppositions in Drucker's work on the theory of the learning subject. In other words, I argue that Drucker, like Aristotle, works on the assumption that the subject has a spontaneous desire to learn. Furthermore, the real pay-off in learning, and in learning-to-learn, will manifest themselves in the career of the knowledge worker through the modalities of "self-management," since the knowledge worker takes, or will have to increasingly take, responsibility for not only managing his work but for managing his relationship to the modalities of work as well.

The need to manage the self, as opposed to merely getting to know the self through analysis, introspection, and other forms of spiritual exercises emerges from the fact that organizations are either not willing to or are not in a position to manage knowledge workers through an entire life-span for a host of reasons including the decline in corporate life-spans, the changing nature of the social contract between employers and workers, the demands of innovation in all spheres of socio-economic production, the emergence of disruptive technologies, and the pressures of globalization. Furthermore, Drucker argues that even if knowledge workers postpone entering the labour force to get advanced degrees, they may still wind up living longer than the organizations to which they are attached. This seems to be *counter-intuitive*, at first sight, since we tend to think of knowledge workers as fragile in the larger scheme of things while companies seem to go on and on. "The average working life," writes Drucker, "is likely to be fifty years, especially for knowledge workers. But the average life expectancy of a successful business is only thirty years – and in a period of great turbulence such as the one we are living in, it is unlikely to be even that long...Increasingly, therefore, workers, and especially knowledge workers, will outlive any one employer, and will have to be prepared for more than one job, more than one assignment, more than one career."[2] But, in a larger sense, "self-management," has an independent history in the United States starting as early as colonial times, where the two elements at stake – learning to learn and an entrepreneurial approach to the self—are manifest in the lives of the Founding Fathers; but, most specifically, for our purposes, in the life of Benjamin Franklin, who did not partake of the fashionable contempt for commerce (as opposed to living-off captive labour in large-scale holdings of the agrarian communities in the South). For Franklin, success was something that was linked intrinsically to learning; and learning, in turn, was about managing the self that sought growth in more ways than one. While Drucker does not invoke Franklin directly, it is worth asking, if only in passing, what the similarities are, if any, between Franklin's Yankee ways of self-management and the more European tone manifest in Drucker's notion of managing oneself.[3]

While there isn't sufficient room to develop a full-fledged comparison between Drucker and Franklin here, there are a few obvious similarities that are worth mentioning. Both lived fairly long lives and were able to internalize complex forms of knowledge in their respective careers. It must not be forgotten that in addition to his work as a revolutionary patriot and as the leading philanthropist in Philadelphia, Franklin was also a scientist who did interesting work in the theory of electricity and is therefore an important figure not only in the political history of colonial America but in the history

1 Drucker, Peter F (1955). "Business Realities," in *Managing for Results*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, An Imprint of Elsevier, Indian Reprint, New Delhi, 2004, 5.

2 See Drucker, Peter F (1999). "Managing Onself," *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, New York: Harper Business, 163.

3 For a description of Franklin's experiments with learning to learn, self-management, and the acquisition of material wealth (which in a sense is a reward for being able to handle the first two successfully) and for an account of his attempts to incorporate the necessary virtues of temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility, see part two of the memoirs of his life in colonial America in Franklin, Benjamin (1982). *The Autobiography & Other Writings*, New York: Bantam Books, 65-85.

DRUCKER: ON LEARNING (TO LEARN) MANAGEMENT

of science as well. Like Drucker, he too was characterized by "intellectual omnivorousness" and desired to be a polymath. However, amidst all that learning, both Franklin and Drucker were pragmatic souls who wanted to make knowledge as "actionable" as possible and are therefore of interest to an audience in business studies. The long list of virtues is not external to the pursuit of success for Franklin; and, I suspect Drucker because they were defined as the prerequisites necessary to work-through the success and make it sustainable. Franklin and Drucker were not only long-term players in their respective domains, but became thought leaders as well. I invoke them here as the patron saints of learning in the context of not only management, but also in the management of the self.

The advocacy of learning in Drucker's work however requires to be contextualized since learning has today become a routine requirement for both individuals and organizations. Nevertheless, learning practices will continue to be both a competitive advantage and a unique form of individuation for knowledge workers in contemporary organizations provided, of course, organizations realize this to be the case and do what they can to foster a learning environment.[4] The act of individuation through the learning process however is not just for the advanced scholar, but, for all those who work under the rubric of "knowledge-work," or who identify themselves as "knowledge workers."[5] And, there is, admittedly, a wide-range of workers who operate under this category though the best known examples are that of the highly mobile IT worker and the management consultant. The most important twist in the tale of knowledge work however comes from the problem of the knowledge worker's longevity compared to that of the manual worker. For Drucker, the lengthening life-span of the knowledge worker is interesting for several reasons since he is a thinker who is much influenced by demography.[6] Furthermore, the problem of knowledge worker longevity gives a unique spin to Drucker's argument because he juxtaposes this problem *vis-à-vis* the declining life-span of the major corporations. The mobility of the knowledge worker then is not reducible to the changes in the nature of the social contract between corporations and their knowledge workers, but is complicated by the decline in the life-span of the major corporations due to a whole host of complex reasons that have been studied in the literature on corporate life-spans.[7] However, since the knowledge worker is increasingly outliving the major corporations, all the traditional socio-economic arrangements between organizations and knowledge workers will have to be rethought in the context of "the next society."[8] Both corporations and knowledge workers then are forced to re-define themselves as not just economic agents, but as learning subjects since intellectual capital has become the primary form of competitive advantage, especially in the knowledge-based industries and learning becomes the key modality for keeping pace with the developments in the economy.[9] These developments also mean that knowledge workers should not depend on the traditional promise of permanent employment in an organization and do what they can to keep themselves valuable for other potential employers. Even in those situations where there is a long-term relationship between the employer and the knowledge worker, increasing life-spans and the knowledge explosion will pose their own set of demands that may be difficult to anticipate. Hence, for Drucker, the ethic of learning-to-learn is the only competitive advantage that will matter to knowledge workers over increasing life/

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4 Greenewalt has argued that while it is important to make sure that workers are put through executive development programmes, "too much codification in training procedures often results in perpetuating facsimiles and freezing rigid patterns of thought." And, that furthermore, "not only the organization, but society itself suffers when people are allowed to sacrifice identity in the damp laundry of mediocrity." Therefore the solution, according to Greenewalt, is to understand that "individual accomplishment marks the beginning of a chain reaction extending its influences far and wide; it is a catalyst which awakens desire in others and crystallizes effort which might otherwise lie dormant." See Greenewalt, Crawford H, (1959). "Freedom, Individuality, and Conformity," *The Book of Business Wisdom: Classic Writings by the Legends of Commerce and Industry,* edited by Krass, Peter (1997). New York: John Wiley & Sons, 317-319.

5 The term, "knowledge worker," was invented by Peter Drucker and went on to become one of his most engaging concepts especially in the context of the need to change the traditional practices of management in the knowledge economy, where the ability to generate "intellectual capital," becomes the fundamental requirement for the worker making it possible for a much larger number of workers to move from a labour theory of value to an exchange theory of value. Drucker is also a pioneer in the growing literature on what is at stake in leading managing workers. See, for instance, Drucker's "Managing the Knowledge Worker," in Drucker, Peter F (1976). *People and Performance,* Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, Indian Reprint, 2004, 271-275. For questions pertaining to the differences between manual and knowledge work and the contributions of the knowledge worker to the organization, see Drucker, Peter F (1999). "Knowledge-Worker Productivity," in *Management Challenges for the 21st Century,* New York: Harper Business, 133-159. See also Glen, Paul (2003). *Leading Geeks: How to Manage and Lead People Who Deliver Technology,* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

6 See Drucker, Peter F (2002). *Managing in the Next Society,* New York: St. Martin's Press, 242-251.

7 The most important book in this genre of management literature is, of course, Arie de Geus (1997). *The Living Company: Growth, Learning and Longevity in Business,* London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

8 For an account of the rudiments of the knowledge society and the forces that have brought it about and will continue to influence it in the years to come, see Drucker, Peter F (2002). "The Next Society," in *Managing in the Next Society,* 235-299.

9 See Stewart, Thomas A (1999). *Intellectual Capital: The New Wealth of Organizations,* New York: Doubleday.

work spans in the knowledge economy. This is something that organizations, especially those in IT and management consultancy, have started to formally recognize since their ability to compete depends on building in the conditions necessary to enable their knowledge workers to contribute effectively to the generation and deployment of knowledge.[10]

THE ETHIC OF LEARNING

Drucker is primarily preoccupied with the *ethic of learning* and the role that it can play in the theory and practice of self-renewal in the career of the knowledge worker. This is because Drucker does not set much store by formal education as an end in itself. It can be rightly said of Drucker that, like Mark Twain, he could clearly differentiate between schooling and education and did not allow the former to come in the way of the latter.[11] But this was not just an epistemological affectation on his part since Drucker realized early on that a content-based model of learning is condemned to obsolescence given not only the pace of growth in knowledge, but also in technology, i.e., in the storage and delivery mechanisms that this knowledge is dependant on and in the contexts in which this knowledge can be deployed or invoked as a form of value-addition. The knowledge worker will therefore have to focus on learning-to-learn rather than make a fetish of some form of computer programming or a specific scientific domain that he or she can own and/or dominate.

Furthermore, the increasing role of knowledge management in learning organizations means that knowledge workers will be expected to document knowledge practices within the nervous system of the organizations that they work for making it more and more important for them to be able to continuously innovate in order to be ahead of the learning curve of their competitors. But what does it mean to learn-to-learn? Furthermore,

what are the self-created barriers that prevent knowledge workers from partaking of the process of self-renewal? Are there any privileged discourses that will hasten the pace at which knowledge workers can invoke or deploy knowledge in order to recreate their identity as knowledge workers? What are the forms of knowledge in addition to those in the university curricula that knowledge workers must pursue? These then are some of the questions that emerge from the need to work out what forms of knowledge are relevant in the different phases of the knowledge worker's career and in the different parts of the organization to which they may work or belong.

I will start with the ethic of learning as practised by Drucker himself in a wide-ranging career as educator and consultant in the domain of general management. Drucker, simply put, set himself a rigorous routine of learning not just the elements of management, but the modalities needed to synthesize this knowledge from several sub-domains in the arts, the humanities, and the social sciences. Drucker's methodology was simple and straight-forward. He would set himself the task of learning the rudiments of a new area or discipline every three years. The idea was not to master this domain but to learn it well-enough to be able to think about the problems that characterized this domain and explore what exactly was involved in importing from this sub-domain into general management; and, reciprocally, see if there is something that could be exported from general management to any of these sub-domains.[12] That is why it does not make much sense to read Drucker's work as a mere set of managerial or leadership techniques. Drucker's insights into management are always embedded in a broad-based situation analysis that encompasses the demands of society and not just the economy at any point in time. In other words, Drucker is always animated by the problem of context and contextual thinking and would like to see his readers do the hard work of understanding managerial practices as those which arise from the demands of and in response to social problems. Understanding the ways in which economic and/or organizational problems are embedded in the context of social reality is one of the challenges that Drucker sets out for himself.[13]

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10 Davenport and Prusak, who specialize in knowledge management, have argued that "McKinsey & Co is perhaps the most knowledge-oriented firm in a knowledge-oriented industry. The consulting firm has several roles with the job of managing knowledge, either creating it or storing and distributing it…Consultants are expected to contribute to the firm's knowledge capital and to use it in client work. Line consultants write books and articles as frequently, if not more so, as specialists in industries or functions. Research and practice development projects are typically staffed by regular consultants, who thereafter go back to client service. McKinsey is a model of the organization in which every practitioner is a reflective one." See Davenport, Thomas H and Prusak, Laurence (1998). "Knowledge Roles and Skills," in *Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know*, Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 108. See also Edersheim, Elizabeth Hass (2004). *McKinsey's Marvin Bower: Vision, Leadership, and the Creation of Management Consulting*, Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

11 See Beatty, Jack (1999). "A Singular Education," *The World According to Peter Drucker*, New York: Broadway Books, 3-18.

12 See Drucker, Peter F (1997). "Reinventing the Individual,"*Drucker on Asia: A Dialogue between Peter Drucker and Isao Nakauchi,* Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 105.

13 Drucker argues that while the primacy of society over the economy is taken for granted in countries like Japan, a case can be made for this in

LEARNING TO WORK-THROUGH

It was through a model of intellectual trade then that Drucker set out to educate himself. Therein we will find a clue to his ethic of learning. This process of trading however is not synonymous with knowledge production, but is also a method for coming to terms with a plurality of research methodologies. The plurality in contention here goes far beyond a simplistic notion of tolerance for ambiguity, ambivalence, change, uncertainty, etc. It has to do with being able to maintain the attention span necessary over a long life-time in order to incorporate knowledge(s) in the plural through a wide-ranging notion of "intellectual omnivorousness," without falling prey to cognitive dissonance. Drucker, in other words, had what has been described as "negative capability," in the literature of organizational and change management.[14] Though this is not a term in Drucker's work *per se*, this is certainly an ability that he would like to see his readers cultivate given the model of learning that he goes on to advocate.

A person capable of negative capability is one who is characterized by the ability to "hold and contain," not just knowledge but the affects attached to knowledge or a situation. The ability to hold and contain, in other words, are the psychological mechanisms presupposed in the Freudian notion of "working-through," as well.[15] The notion of working-through, however, is not just a safety mechanism in the sense of a safety valve in mechanics; but, more fundamentally, the ethic of psychoanalysis itself insofar as it is has effects on the subject's notion of not just what happened to him or her in the past, but represents the subject's willingness to take responsibility for his or her identity through the recon-stitution of memory in order to prevent the repetition of a primordial trauma. The Freudian subject, in other words, must "remember," and articulate the trauma so that the dangers of repetition can be kept at bay. The articulation of a traumatic situation however is not therapeutic in itself; it demands to be worked-through so that the affects attached to the "letters" that dig into the patient's psyche can be sorted out, if not exactly rearranged, in a manner that is easier for the subject to handle in the present.[16]

LEARNING AND TRAUMA

The argument that I want to make in the context of the learning ethic represented in the work of Drucker is that learning in itself can be defined as traumatic insofar as it makes demands not just on the mind, but on the psyche. The knowledge worker or scholar has to hold and contain the knowledge acquired in the context of a learning situation, which is by no means uncomplicated unless one is looking at a trivial form of learning that works mainly through thematic indexing. Any form of learning, which involves a higher level of complexity than thematic indexing, involves a traumatic encounter with the underlying affects; hence, the need to be able to hold and contain without seeking recourse to ego defences. In Drucker's model, the learning orientation, by exposing the manager continually to what he does not know, keeps this form of egoism in check.

This also means that the scholar is willing to learn to think temporally rather than stay put with spatial constructs and mere mapping processes, however tempting it may be to do so. The affective challenges in the learning process will make their demands on learners mainly in the context of temporality rather than through conventional typologies, which is the usual structure for modeling knowledge since the time of Aristotle. Drucker is not very explicit on this theme since this is one of those moments when he feels that the knowledge worker ought to be interested in learning even if he, in fact, is not. This is partly because Drucker's identity as a knowledge

the United States as well. Drucker, needless to say, is taking the position of the heretic here since it is precisely this type of non-conformism, of going against the grain of current orthodoxy, which makes it possible for him to generate socio-economic insights in his work. And, after all, if even contemporary liberals and social democrats have started to advocate the primacy of the economy over society after the exciting spell of the "roaring nineties," it is important to remember that "in the United States, the primacy of economics in public life and policy is fairly recent, dating no further back than World War II. Until then, the United States, too, tended to consider society first. Despite the Great Depression, the New Deal put social reform well ahead of economic recovery. America's voters overwhelmingly approved." See Drucker, Peter F (2002). "It's the Society, Stupid," in *Managing in the Next Society*, 222.

14 This is a concept that was first thought up the English Romantic poet, John Keats, but imported into organizational theory by Robert French. See French, Robert (2001). "'Negative Capability:' Managing the Confusing Uncertainties of Change," *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 14 (5), 480-492.

15 For an account of "Working-Through," see Laplanche, J and Pontalis, J-B (1988). *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Smith, Donald Nicholson, London: Karnac Books and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 488-489.

16 I do not invoke the term "letter" in the sense of a document that is communicated through the postal system, but rather the literal notion of a letter as in the letters of the alphabet that dig into the psyche of the subject or which generate a bodily or psychic symptom through some form of dysfunctionality. Following the precepts of Jacques Lacan, one of his earliest disciples, Serge Leclaire worked out precisely the role of such "non-sense" sequences in the psyche in order to generate a non-hermeneutic model of psychoanalytic interpretation. For clinical examples of such letters and the role of letters in constituting a theory of the symptom, see Leclaire, Serge (1998). *Psychoanalyzing: On the Order of the Unconscious and the Practice of the Letter*, translated by Kamuf, Peggy. Stanford: Stanford University Press, *passim*.

worker demands a form of "projective identification" with the knowledge worker at this point. Furthermore, Drucker is primarily interested in the learning process and not on the presuppositions about subjectivity that can be unpacked from models of learning.

Drucker, unlike Freud, is interested in subjectivity only to the extent that the knowledge worker can take himself or herself as an object of knowledge. In other words, subjectivity is only a means to access knowledge or participate in the joys of the learning process for Drucker. Freud, on the other hand, is interested in a theory of learning only to the extent that it can throw light on metapsychology and the implications of that for a theory of subjectivity. In other words, in psychoanalysis, what the subject desires and resists simultaneously is knowledge of the self. It is in the process of learning about the self and its constitutive link to the unconscious that the subject resists most acutely his or her own epistemic endeavours. It is not that the Freudian self will not learn or does not desire knowledge; it is rather that the Freudian subject cannot come to terms with the fact that the unconscious will teach *only on its own terms*.[17] In other words, the disclosures of the unconscious are not within the conscious control of the knowing subject; it is rather that the knowing subject must be willing to constitute itself retroactively in relation to the disclosures of the unconscious. Therein lay the trauma of learning.

KNOWLEDGE VS LEARNING

In either case, the real puzzle in Drucker's work is the presupposition that the subject, by definition, is one who is preoccupied with the possibilities of learning. This runs contrary to the Freudian theory of the subject, which is marked by repression, i.e., a refusal rather than an acceptance of knowledge.[18] Of course, knowledge is not the same as learning and a refusal of knowledge is not necessarily the same as a refusal of learning. Nevertheless, insofar as we can invoke a continuity between

the terms *knowledge* and *learning* (knowing fully well that the former is a *product* and that the latter is a *process*), we will have to situate the epistemic subject in the locus that animates this conflict between the quest and the refusal. The subject is neither one nor the other; but, instead, the ambivalence that marks the trauma of the learning subject which must address the underlying resistance to the fruit of its own endeavours, i.e., knowledge. But, interestingly enough, Drucker and Freud seem to agree on one thing: the goal of learning and/or analysis *is the renewal of the knowing subject*.[19] In other words, for them, there is something inherently therapeutic in the act of learning; though, needless to say, there are no guarantees in the act of learning.

The significance of their work to theorists of management, in the context of this essay, arises from the fact that in a world marked by "creative destruction," and ever increasing levels of competition, the onus on both the individual knowledge worker and on organizations is to ask whether learning can indeed be a conduit to the process of individual and corporate renewal and in working out the necessary modalities involved in doing so.[20] For Drucker, the secret of renewal for the knowledge worker is "intellectual omnivorousness." And, interestingly enough, Drucker's theory of learning is spelt out in the context of the longevity of the knowledge worker while Freud was to argue that there is no such thing as time in the unconscious.

While Drucker and Freud may not necessarily have the same notion of time, it is still worth examining how time mediates the act of learning, especially what in psychoanalysis is known as the truth of one's desire, since having some handle on this can help the subject to understand the significance of his acts. After all, one of the questions that is asked by students and answered routinely by the instructor in the context of adult edu-

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17 See Felman, Shoshana (1987). *Jacques Lacan and the Adventure of Insight*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, *passim*.

18 The term repression is being used in a structural sense here. In other words, there is no subject who is not subjected to primary repression. The subsequent refusal to accept knowledge pertains to secondary rather than primary repression since repression is both a primeval event and a continual process that is linked to the structure of the subject's libidinal economy and psychic expenditure. See Freud, Sigmund (1915). "Repression," in *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Strachey, James, edited by Richards, Angela. London: Penguin Books, 1991, 139-158. See also Lacan, Jacques (1979). "From Interpretation to the Transference," *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis,* translated by Sheridan, Alan, edited by Miller, Jacques-Alain. London: Penguin Books, 251-52.

19 The idea that individual and corporate renewal is linked or can be linked to the process of learning is the core hypothesis in the theory of learning organizations. There is now a huge literature on this theme. The central problem here though is on working out the modalities for the two notions of the subject that seem to be in conflict at first sight (the economic subject versus the learning subject). Academic scholars have taken great delight, for example, in the fact that some business leaders have redefined their organizations as essentially one that can be modeled on the university. Both the theory of the learning organization (that is set out in the work of Arie de Geus and Peter Senge) and that of the managerial theory of the firm (in the work of Christopher Bartlett and Sumantra Ghoshal) are obsessed with the possibility of the link between learning and renewal. See, for instance, Chapters 6 and 7 of *Sumantra Ghoshal on Management: A Force for Good*, edited by Birkinshaw, Julian and Piramal, Gita (2005). London: FT Prentice Hall, 131-184. See also Chapters 4 and 5 of Ghoshal, Sumantra and Bartlett, Christopher A (1999). *The Individualized Corporation*, New York: Harper Business, 69-137.

20 Foster, Richard N and Kaplan, Sarah (2001). *Creative Destruction: From Built-to-Last to Built-to-Perform*, London: FT Prentice Hall.

cation is this: *Is it too late to learn?* The students are then reassured that it is never too late to learn! This is of course meant as a form of emotional reassurance and it is not necessarily the case that the instructor has given the problem of temporality in learning any amount of thought. For Drucker, then, learning is the object of desire; while, for Freud, desire is the object of learning. The Druckerian subject desires to learn; the Freudian subject learns to desire. The renewal of the knowing subject, i.e., the fate of the so-called knowledge worker, depends then on knowing *when* to invoke one and/or the other.

But, before doing so, it is worth asking what Drucker understood to be the relationship between knowledge and desire. Though Drucker did write a chapter on Freud, it is more of an attempt to situate Freud as a physician in the Vienna of his time rather than a reading of Freudian psychoanalysis *per se*. Drucker is basically preoccupied with those elements of Freud's personality which he felt escaped his self-analysis rather than with what concepts, if any, in psychoanalysis are of relevance to the study of either management or organizations. The relationship between management and psychoanalysis is simply not developed in Drucker – at least not as a formal exercise given that Drucker had taken the trouble to read Freud and was Viennese by extraction. The highlight of the article though is the depiction of Drucker's childhood encounter with Freud at the age of eight or nine at a restaurant near Freud's residence at the Bergasse in Vienna.[21]

Drucker's theory of desire, if any, therefore has to be reconstructed by examining the seven experiences of his early manhood, which he calls attention to in an essay on the need to reinvent the individual. I will set out these seven experiences and then examine what, if anything, they have in common and summarize the lessons that these experiences have for the knowledge worker. Drucker, in other words, is focused not so much on an application of psychoanalysis, but in situating it in the context of Freud's Vienna though it appears from his passing comments on the need to analyse Freud or apply

Freudian mechanisms to Freud's life that he recognized psychoanalytic interpretation as an important tool of clinical and cultural interpretation albeit one which he felt "can only maintain the synthesis between the world of Cartesian rationality and the world of the dark night of the soul by ignoring all inconvenient questions." Nonetheless, he found psychoanalysis "a more fascinating and more revealing theory, and a humanly moving one."[22]

LEARNING FROM VERDI AND PHIDIAS

The first experience was learning from Verdi's *Falstaff* that Drucker attended at the Hamburg opera as a student. Drucker decided to study this opera in detail since it made a deep impression on him. What struck him as absolutely incredible about this opera was the fact that Verdi had composed it at the age of eighty, when he could have been taking it easy. In his defence, Verdi is known to have remarked that despite his best efforts, perfection had always eluded him as a musician and he therefore felt obligated to make another try. Verdi's work ethic of striving for perfection then became Drucker's ego-ideal. "I then resolved," writes Drucker, "that… Verdi's words would be my lodestar. I then resolved that if I ever reached an advanced age, I would not give up, but would keep on. In the meantime, I would strive for perfection even though, as I well knew, it would surely, always elude me."[23] The second experience also relates to the pursuit of perfection. The person from whom Drucker learnt this lesson, however, was Phidias, an ancient Greek sculptor, who carved the statues that adorn the Parthenon in Athens. When Phidias submitted the bill for the work that he had done, he was told that he could have saved the trouble of carving the statues in the round and should have focused only on the front since the statues were to be placed on the roof and on the top of a hill making it impossible for anyone to see them. Phidias responded by saying that while it was true

21 See Drucker, Peter F (1979). "Freudian Myths and Freudian Realities," in *Adventures of a Bystander*, London: William Heinemann, Indian Reprint, New Delhi, 1980, 83-99. The idea that Freud himself was not psychoanalysed, but underwent only a self-analysis is a matter of enormous theoretical interest to those who came in his wake. Lacan, in a discussion of hysteria, has argued that "hysteria places us, I would say, on the track of some kind of original sin in analysis. There has to be one. The truth is perhaps simply one thing, namely, the desire of Freud himself, the fact that something, in Freud, was never analysed." See Lacan, Jacques (1979). *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 12.

22 See Drucker (1979). "Freudian Myths and Freudian Realities," *Adventures of a Bystander*, 99. Readers who would like to situate Drucker's reading of Freud's Vienna and the confusions engendered by the medical vocabulary that was foisted on Freud's conceptual structure by his translators, should see Bettelheim, Bruno (1982). *Freud and Man's Soul*, London: Penguin Books. Bettelheim, a contemporary of both Freud and Drucker, addresses some of the cultural anxieties on whether Freud will be remembered as a doctor or as a writer and the epistemological consequences of such a debate on the theoretical foundations of psychoanalysis. It is surprising that Drucker does not pick up on any of the themes on translating Freud that Bettelheim addressed in the book cited above given that both are German speakers from Vienna and went on to distinguished careers in their respective areas of specialization in the United States.

23 See Drucker (1997). "Reinventing the Individual," *A Dialogue between Peter Drucker and Isao Nakauchi*, Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann, 103-104.

that humans visiting the temple would not be able to see his handiwork, the Gods would be able to see them!

These two stories then embody the lessons that Drucker learnt about the pursuit of perfection. In both these stories, the creative artist is preoccupied, not so much with his audience, but with his sense of obligation to the big Other, which serves as the locus for his ego-ideal. This is not unlike Nietzche's contention that certain discourses can only be addressed to the distant Other.[24] For Verdi, the distant Other is posterity; for Phidias, it is the Gods themselves. No amount of learning or effort then is enough in addressing the distant Other since the striving of the artist is to be conceived on the plane of the aesthetic rather than on the functional. The first element in Drucker's notion of desire then is that of the creative artist striving for perfection in an attempt to reach out to the distant Other. The object of desire then is situated in the locus of the *sublime*, a tradition that has a long history in European art, literature, and philosophy from Longinus to Žižek.[25]

A METHOD OF STUDY

Drucker developed an innovative method of studying as a young newspaper man at Frankfurt in 1929. Though he was to cover financial and foreign affairs, Drucker realized that in order to be successful, a journalist needs to be widely read. He therefore picked up the habit of reading widely in other disciplines as well. This is the real clue to his sense of intellectual vitality later on as a management educator and thinker. This is also the strategy of self-renewal that he is implicitly advocating for his readers. The essence of Drucker's method is to pick up a new area and study it for three to four years until he had a robust understanding of the discipline. By doing this for about 60-odd years, Drucker had managed to amass an extraordinary amount of knowledge. It also forced him to be open to methodological pluralism since he understood early on that different disciplines had different assumptions about what is methodologically acceptable. Some of the areas that Drucker managed to cover using this method included the following: art, economics, finance, history, international relations, law, etc. This method of study also provided him with the intellectual foundations necessary to consider the possibility of envisaging management as a synthetic discipline and/or as a liberal art that can be systematically learned, unlike most other management educators who are only interested in the elements (as opposed to a general theory) of management.[26]

LEARNING FROM JOURNALISM

While the method of study given above may be described as learning *for* journalism, the next form of learning that Drucker describes is an instance of learning *from* journalism. Drucker's learning curve shot up as a young journalist because many young people had to staff editorial positions during the 1930s due to the vacancies created by the war effort. What this meant was that these young journalists had to be trained as thoroughly as possible to staff these senior positions. Drucker's Editor-in-Chief (at the newspaper that he was employed in at Frankfurt) had the energy and the will to see this training through with as much alacrity as he could command. The training took the form of a thorough feedback of a trainee journalist's work twice a year over long-weekends. It was only later (as a management professor in the United States in the 1940s) that Drucker realized how invaluable this training in journalism had turned out to be given his aspirations as a management educator and writer. He therefore decided to review his work once a year in a manner that was not too different from what he was exposed to by the Editor-in-Chief as a young trainee at Frankfurt. The essence of this critical process was to make a list of the things that he had done well and a list of things which he felt required further improvement. Like many American novelists during the war years, Drucker, too, learnt to learn and write because of the demands of journalism. Not surprisingly, he continued to write for the business press till the very end of his life.

LEARNING FROM THE SENIOR PARTNER

In the 1930s, Drucker moved to London where he worked first as a securities analyst in an insurance firm, and, later as an economist and executive assistant in a private

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24 As Lacan puts it, "there is a danger in public discourse, precisely in so far as it is addressed to those nearest – Nietzsche knew this, a certain type of discourse can be addressed only to those furthest away." See Lacan, Jacques (1979). "The Freudian Unconscious and Ours," *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 23.

25 See Zizek, Slavoj (1989). *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso Books. For an application of the sublime in the context of business studies, see Jones, Campbell and Spicer, André (2005). "The Sublime Object of Entrepreneurship," *Organization*, 12(2), 223-246.

26 Drucker, Peter F (1997). "Inventing the Individual," *Drucker on Asia: A Dialogue between Peter Drucker and Isao Nakauchi*, 105. See also Drucker, Peter F (1994). "Management as Social Function and Liberal Art," *The New Realities*, New York: Harper Business, 221-231.

bank. This is where he met the senior partner to whom he credits his next piece of learning. This senior partner called Drucker to his office one day and told him that while Drucker continued to do what he had done well in his previous assignment (as a securities analyst), it would be a good idea if he could make the transition to the assignment that he now found himself in. This was an interesting insight for Drucker who went on to construct a theory of "the failed promotion," later on in his career. Promotions sometimes fail, according to Drucker, because the beneficiary continues to function as though he were still in his old assignment for a complex set of reasons, including possibly the fact that no one had bothered to pull him up like the senior partner did in his case.[27] Drucker even wrote an interesting management case on this theme later.[28] Furthermore, Drucker argues that when he asked his clients to what they owed their effectiveness, they often cited "a long-dead boss, who did what the old gentleman in London did for me: force me to think through what the new assignment requires."[29] This process of refocusing in itself is not difficult, but it sometimes requires an external agency to cut the employee's symptom and push him forth onto a new trajectory. Most bosses do not do this for fear of making themselves unpopular; but if the employee is willing to take the feedback, the results can be both formative and spectacular.

LEARNING FROM DECISION REPORTS

The next form of learning that Drucker calls attention to relates to a practice that is followed by both the Jesuits and the Calvinists in the modalities of decision-making. This is the habit of writing decision reports to think through the possible consequences of a given decision and checking the consequences and/or results after a period of time. This practice quickly helps the decision-

maker to understand what his strengths are and what he must do to improve his decision-making skills. Drucker claims to have followed this model of decision-making for fifty years. The pay-off from this model of decision-making is that it helps the decision-maker to understand what is it that he must do in order to embark on a project of "continuous learning."[30]

LEARNING FROM SCHUMPETER

Drucker's seventh experience of learning relates to a meeting that he and his father, a retired, albeit senior civil servant from Vienna, had with the economist Joseph Schumpeter at Harvard. The Druckers remembered Schumpeter as "flamboyant, arrogant, abrasive, and vain," from his tempestuous youth in Vienna. However, as Schumpeter approached his last year as a teacher at Harvard, he had become someone other than what the Druckers either remembered or expected him to be. Drucker's father playfully reminded Schumpeter of what he aspired to be as a young man and wondered whether Schumpeter had any recollection of those early memories from their years together in Vienna. Schumpeter is reported to have laughed on being asked this question and was willing to confess that while it was indeed true that as a young man, he had aspired to be a great lover of beautiful women, a great horseman, and a great economist, he had however, of late, realized that what he really wanted to be remembered for was as a teacher "who converted half a dozen brilliant students into first rate economists."[31] Furthermore, Schumpeter had come to the conclusion that it is important to go beyond "books and theories," when he realized that "one does not make a difference unless it is a difference in the lives of people."[32] The learning that Drucker derived from this encounter with the ageing Schumpeter at Harvard relates to the problem of what one wishes to be remembered for and how the process of ageing changes the structure of this aspiration without, of course, forgetting the need to make a difference in people's lives.

What all these experiences of learning really boil down to for Drucker is the fact that the individual knowledge worker must take responsibility for his

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27 In the course of a remarkable analysis on the problem of the failed promotion, Drucker poses the following question: Why does someone who was consistently competent "suddenly become incompetent?" The reason according to him is that "they continue in their new assignment to do what made them successful in the old assignment and what earned them the promotion. Then they turn incompetent, not because they have *become* incompetent, but because they are doing the wrong things." See Drucker (1997). "Reinventing the Individual," *Drucker on Asia: A Dialogue between Peter Drucker and Isao Nakauchi*, 107-108.

28 See Drucker, Peter (1977). "The Failed Promotion," in *Management Cases,* London: William Heinemann, Indian Reprint, 1979, 106-111. I would like to thank the members of the WAC team in the Communications Area at IIM Ahmedabad (2004-2006) for introducing me to this remarkable collection of cases by Peter Drucker, including the one cited above.

29 See Drucker (1997). "Reinventing the Individual," *Drucker on Asia: A Dialogue between Peter Drucker and Isao Nakauchi*, 108.

30 See Drucker (1997). "Reinventing the Individual," *Drucker on Asia: A Dialogue betweenPeter Drucker and Isao Nakauchi*, 109.

31 See Drucker (1997). "Reinventing the Individual," *Drucker on Asia: A Dialogue betweenPeter Drucker and Isao Nakauchi*, 109-110.

32 See Drucker (1997). "Reinventing the Individual," *Drucker on Asia: A Dialogue between Peter Drucker and Isao Nakauchi*, 110.

education, development, and placement. While this may seem to be a "novel" conclusion, it is nonetheless one that Drucker's career as a knowledge worker has embodied very effectively. Taking responsibility for these things then is what Drucker understands to be the emerging ethic of knowledge work in the new millennium. This is also the notion of individuation that goes to the heart of what other writers have taken up following Drucker's example, the most prominent being the work of Charles Handy.[33] This then is Drucker's theory of learning, which, as should be obvious by now, is related to desire via the modalities of sublimation either through the invocation of an aesthetic object in the locus of the sublime or through an existential intervention in the lives of others. In the second part of this essay, I will attempt to translate this theory of learning and the notion of desire that it presupposes into a theory of subjectivity. It is not however necessary to turn to psychoanalysis, in the first instance, in order to do so since Drucker has an inbuilt theory of subjectivity in his notion of self-management. I will only invoke psychoanalysis, if necessary, to help situate the relationship between the two theories in Drucker, i.e., the theory of learning *vis-à-vis* the theory of subjectivity.

THE SUBJECT OF LEARNING

The primary clue to the subject, for Drucker, is cognitive style, or, more specifically, the style of learning. The specific instantiation of the subject of learning is the knowledge worker but these terms are not necessarily synonyms; there is, however, sufficient overlap between the two for us to proceed as though the two terms function as synonyms. The challenge of learning and/or learning style begins to matter insofar as the knowledge worker is called upon to manage himself in addition to the other responsibilities that he may have in the organization. But this demand to manage the self has a certain novelty factor to it since it is linked to the question of mobility. If it is the fate of the knowledge worker to outlive the average organization, then he will have to prepare for a working span that is more than twice as long as that of the manual worker in the traditional forms of employment in industrial communities. Furthermore, knowledge workers have many more

opportunities than traditional workers did forcing them to continually think through options in different domains of life. In other words, the average knowledge worker is called upon to do only what leaders were expected to be able to do in previous generations. Given then the demands that will be made on knowledge workers, they will have to ask themselves questions pertaining to their identity, their strengths, the modes of work that they feel comfortable with, the places where they have a sense of belonging, the range of contributions that they can make in organizations, and learn to take responsibility for not only managing relationships, but also plan ahead for the second half of their lives. A rudimentary structure of what Drucker means by the individual knowledge worker can be arrived at by looking into these themes.

FEEDBACK ANALYSIS

The idea of finding out what an individual's strengths are is relatively new in the history of work. In traditional communities where sons inherited their social roles through membership in a caste or community, there really was no choice in terms of what they could or should do. The existential dice was already cast in terms of their life choices. It therefore did not become necessary to find out what their individual strengths were since there were no socially acceptable outlets for these strengths if they belonged to a domain other than the one into which they were born. But the moment there are options, it becomes important to know what an individual can do well. The only way to find out, according to Drucker, is to use feedback analysis where the individual will write down the rationale for decisions and see if he has got it right at a later point in time. Furthermore, the individual should focus on what he is particularly good at without being dismissive of what he does not understand or cannot do since "it takes far more energy and far more work to improve from incompetence to low mediocrity than it takes to improve from first-rate performance to excellence. And yet most people – and equally most teachers and most organizations – try to concentrate on making an incompetent person into a low mediocrity. The energy and resources – and time – should instead go into making a competent person into a star performer."[34]

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33 For an account of Handy's experiments with knowledge work, theories of corporate and individual growth, the role of knowledge workers, portfolio careers, and other such themes, which echo Drucker's example as a pioneer in the theory and practice of knowledge work, see Handy, Charles (2006). *Myself and Other More Important Matters*, London: William Heinemann.

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34 See Drucker (1999). "Managing Oneself," *Management Challenges for the 21st Century,* 168.

READER OR LISTENER?

The knowledge worker should try to figure out whether he is primarily a reader or a listener. These are two different forms of cognitive processing and very few individuals are able to do both in good measure. Drucker cites the example of General Dwight Eisenhower who did not know that he was primarily a reader. Eisenhower, he argues, was very good at press conferences when he was the Supreme Allied Commander in Europe because he got an opportunity to read the questions that he would be asked to answer later on. Furthermore, Eisenhower himself was a brilliant speechwriter for General MacArthur and therefore had a feel for the written form. But, when he became the President, he experienced difficulty in handling press conferences since he did not harness his abilities as a reader and tried to conduct his official communications as though he were primarily a listener. This is because he succeeded two Presidents who were listeners – Franklin D Roosevelt and Harry S Truman. These Presidents were used to being briefed orally on a whole range of issues and when Eisenhower took over, he did not realize that there was nothing sacrosanct about whether or not a Presidential briefing should be in the oral as opposed to the written form. Roosevelt and Truman had merely done what they felt comfortable doing and there was nothing inherently official about it for other Presidents to follow in that particular style.

Lyndon Johnson, on the other hand, made the opposite mistake. He was a listener at heart, a skill that stood him in good stead as a Senator, but conducted himself as a reader in the Oval Office since his predecessor, John F Kennedy, had assembled a number of writers like Arthur M Schlesinger Jr. and Bill Moyers to write memos and reports for him, and briefing the President in the written form subsequently became the *de facto* ritual in the White House. Johnson overlooked the fact that Kennedy was a legendary speed reader and that there was no reason for him to subject himself to written reports if he felt more comfortable with oral briefings. While these are extreme examples where readers behave as listeners and *vice versa* even in the absence of coercion, it is not necessarily the case that knowledge workers should be either one of these to the total exclusion of the other. Nonetheless, Drucker's example is interesting insofar as it reminds us that we should not only work with our strengths but also understand the source of our key strengths as knowledge workers. It is therefore important for all knowledge workers – and not just Presidents – to work out whether they prefer to read or listen and take corrective action, if necessary, to do the bulk of their work in the form that they are more comfortable with in order to increase their productivity.

LEARNING STYLES AND THE SYMPTOM

Again, learning styles differ and it is important for knowledge workers to quickly come to terms with their style of learning. Some learn by taking notes, some by writing letters, some by lecturing, etc. If knowledge workers take the trouble to find out what their cognitive and learning styles are and decide to work further on improving it, they will see not only a considerable increase in productivity, but a tremendous sense of ease in the act of working. What Drucker is pointing out here is that the act of communication, cognition, and learning are subject to symptomatic impediments and having an understanding of what these are will help the knowledge worker to perform better. There are several examples of such symptomatic interruptions in Freud's work.[35] The pattern of interruptions then gives us a clue to the notion of cognitive style that Drucker calls attention to in his theory of self-management.

Other forms of work style of interest to both knowledge workers and managers pertain to preferences like individual versus team work, superordinate versus subordinate roles, structured versus unstructured work environments, decision-maker versus adviser, etc. Drucker is also keen to emphasize that the criteria of evaluation in choosing between options in decision-making situations often emerge from differences in value systems within and between organizations and that the knowledge worker must therefore work out the criteria which are closer to his value system in order to have a greater sense of belonging. In Drucker's own case, he felt that he had an enormous preoccupation with people issues; this eventually forced him to quit the job he had as an asset manager and turn to a career as an educator. Drucker, it must be remembered, is neither advocating his choices nor his value system for his readers; but rather the need to be clear about what choices they are making and their underlying rationale. It is only after coming to terms with a given set of strengths and the modalities of performance and the value system to which

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35 See Freud, Sigmund (1901). *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, translated by Tyson, Alan, edited by Richards, Angela. London: Penguin Books, 1991.

they are related that knowledge workers will be able to figure out where they belong and what sort of a contribution they would like to make. And, finally, knowledge workers must accept responsibility for managing relationships and communications in the workplace since the maintenance of trust in organizations demands nothing less.

CONCLUSION

The modalities of learning spelt out above have become necessary because the knowledge worker must maintain a long work span without succumbing to boredom, burnouts, and the other forms of neurasthenic afflictions that are in store for him if he does not arm himself with strategies of self-renewal. Learning then is what is advocated as the way ahead for the knowledge worker, and Drucker uses terms like "the second half of your life" and "parallel career," to emphasize that it is going to be as important as the first half or the first career. It would not be unreasonable to argue that Drucker is a theorist of the second career and that, in a larger sense, the first career is but a form of preparation for creativity in old age. Drucker cites a number of examples in addition to Verdi (including Claude Monet, Pablo Picasso, Pablo Casals, and Max Planck) before concluding with the sociological contexts of knowledge worker mobility. He compares the United States, which permits and even demands knowledge worker mobility with the countries that prefer life-time employment with a single employer. He leaves it to the reader to decide whether they prefer "stability," or see too much of that as a form of "immobility."[36]

It would not be an exaggeration then to say that for Drucker, the prototype of the subject is that of the knowledge worker and learning is the essential modality in the project of mobility. He does not by any means see every subject as necessarily being interested in such a project and recognizes the fact that economies which encourage an apprenticeship model of training or which prefer "organized immobility" are valuable in their own way. Again, it is quite likely that not all workers can make it to the ranks of knowledge work, but for those who do make the transition the challenges are more than they possibly realize since "the emergence of the knowledge worker who both *can* and *must* manage himself or herself is transforming every society."[37] Drucker's account of the knowledge worker and the theory of desire implicit in that account, however, must not be conflated with a form of epistemophilia. The translation of knowledge work into forms of social mobility is very much at the heart of his understanding of the destiny of the knowledge worker. The mobility of the knowledge worker, in a larger sense, is an epitome of the underlying social changes in the international economy, which is collectively known as globalization. ⩗

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36 For an account of the problem of knowledge worker mobility/immobility in the context of globalization, see Srinivasan, Shiva Kumar (2007). "Please Work from Home: The Immobility of Labour in the Age of Globalization," *Vikalpa: The Journal for Decision Makers*, 32(1),1-13.

37 See Drucker (1999). "Managing Oneself," *Management Challenges for the 21st Century*, 195.

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