

Thoughts on learning and taking action

Karthik Suresh

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the nature of learning and its relationship to taking action and puts forward a model that can be used to understand what we should do when trying to understand and improve a problematic situation.

1. The invisible models in our minds

*“Yesterday I was clever, so I changed the world.
Today I am wise, so I am changing myself” —
Rumi*

Life is a series of events and experiences and we often find ourselves in situations that are problematic. These aren't clean, clinical situations. Instead, they are part of the messy, convoluted and intricate experience of life itself. They range from the challenges of bringing up children to the issues of professional development and relationships with your bosses and colleagues. Many of them, in fact, have to do with other people.

For a long time we had religion tell us how to deal with such situations. Religions gave us commandments on how to behave in society and what you should and should not do. Authoritative and hierarchical societies had the same effect, locking people into social structures that defined their lives. The reasons for this probably have much to do with dogma — that people were taught that such things had always been true.

Then a better religion came along, the religion of science, that put the forces of traditional religion and authoritarianism on the defensive. The scientific method has been such an effective way of thinking that it has transformed the world around us with its ability to deconstruct, understand and adapt the physical world.

You could look at religion and science as two different ways to explain existence, and think about what they are good and bad at doing as a result. Religion is good at telling us how to live. “Thou shalt not murder”, for example, has no real equivalent in the natural world, where killing is part of life. Science, on the other hand, is good at telling us how things work. Where the two bodies

of knowledge get into trouble is where they try and do each other's work, as when religions try to tell you how the world was created and scientists tell you how to order societies. The results are sometimes catastrophic. The thing we often don't see is that the models in our mind, ones we take for granted and are so much of what we are that they might as well be invisible, can often be traced back to one of these two ways of thinking.

2. The trouble with thinking

The word “theory” captures the collection of ideas we use to explain the world around us. This theory is held in the published material around us, in books, papers and other media. And this is where we often make our first mistake.

Books seem like such permanent things — the words in them like stone monuments or eternal principles. This is particularly the case in societies that place a high value on the “word”, that insist on the exact and most basic way of understanding a line of text. In such societies wars can be fought over what words in a book say. The best example is any religion that says its god is the only god because then, by definition, all others are worshipping false gods and are inferior and must either change their minds or lose their lives.

In less dramatic situations a literal interpretation of words can still cause trouble. Bureaucracy thrives on this as the written expression of an idea changes what happens as people read and act on what is written, and do and justify acts that seem ridiculous when looking back later. A camel, as the saying goes, is a horse designed by a committee.

So, the mistake people make is taking theory and applying what it says to a situation directly and expecting things to improve. Take social media, for example. One approach to growing your traffic is to reach out to several influential people, ask them some questions, package up the resulting material, and then distribute it again, asking the same influential people to promote it to their audience. For people that used this idea when it was new, it worked well. Now that you know what the idea is and a few million others do as well, the situation is different and you end up with a situation like the Fyre Festival, where Billy McFarland used Instagram to promote a festival that ended up with allegations of fraud and broken promises.

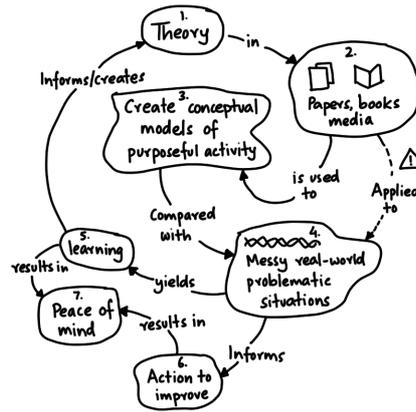
3. Making models visible

The first step to improving the way we think must then be to make the models that underpin our thinking visible. But what does that mean?

It means that we need to take a mental leap from thinking of the world as something outside us to realising that a big part of it is actually constructed in our minds. We can assume that many things exist independently of our thoughts. Trees, rocks and pandas out there right now, for example, will continue to be there right now whether you think of them or not. Your social reality, on the other hand, is created in your mind through the conversations and thoughts you have with others and yourself. It's hard to tell when the reality that's in your mind ends and the reality that's out there begins.

A friend asked me once what I thought was the difference between people and I replied that I thought I ended where someone else began. It's almost like while our physical limits are defined by our bodies our mental limits are defined by the communications we have with others, and the space covered by those communications is increasing all the time.

We therefore have this distinction between the reality in our heads and the reality outside and the first step in making a mental shift is making that distinction visible. One way of doing this is to realise that what's inside our heads can be called "models". These are models of ideas and concepts — conceptual models and one way of expressing them is through diagrams, as in the example below that underpins this paper.



Points 1, 2 and 4 in this diagram have been explored in the first half of this paper. These are the ideas that theories that people have come up with are captured in books, papers and media. We often apply these theories directly to real life, often causing more problems. What we should do is use this knowledge to create conceptual models that make what we think visible so that we can then do something useful.

4. Doing something useful

If social reality is something we create in our minds then it follows that to change social reality we have to change our minds. That's something that more than one person has to do, and the way we do that is through communication and debate, through talking and discussing things. So, why can't we just go ahead and do that?

The answer is we can, and that's what we've been doing for a very long time. The structures and institutions around us have been created as a result of such talk and debate. Everything from how politics works to how housing planning is executed is a result of processes of debate and discussion, face to face or on paper. The difficulty is that it's very hard to get across an idea in your mind to someone else when you talk to them or write it down. There is usually some information lost in the process of transfer.

One way to reduce the information loss is to transfer information at a higher resolution than text or speech. The best approach is to do a drawing or picture. If you draw a model that tries to show what's in your mind, you can talk about that with others, discussing the points, asking questions and making changes as you try and come to a common understanding. The purpose of the drawing is not to show external reality but to help you see the the internal reality of what's in your

minds and compare that to the reality around you. This can be a difficult thing to appreciate. After all, why bother making this distinction. Surely it's academic and whether you jump straight to agreeing an action or spend time trying to understand each other's point of view, you end up in the same place?

The fact is, in reality, you don't. A solution that is obvious to an engineer may be completely unacceptable to an accountant. Actions that may seem obvious to a human resources consultant may be unthinkable for a command-and-control oriented manager. These are all situations where how you try and understand the mental models in play can be as important as the decisions you make, especially if you want to actually make meaningful change.

This approach is very different to one that takes a literal approach to words on a page. It recognises that words are like shadows on wall, an expression of reality but not reality itself. Arguing about words is like arguing about shadows, and what we have realise is that we are trying to approach something bigger than the words themselves, and trying to appreciate the purpose and intent of the words rather than the words themselves. And then we can talk, rather than argue and fight, and perhaps even make some progress.

5. Why bother with this at all?

Comparing a model of what should be with what is — comparing a conceptual model with reality results in two things: learning and possible actions. As you talk and debate with others you learn more about the situation and how different people see it. It's common to be frustrated when people don't get your point of view. You must remember that they probably feel the same way. When you are able to talk about these things you might learn something new and that will go on to inform or create theory that you can use the next time. The discussions you have will probably also come up with approaches you can take to improve the situation you're in. This isn't an approach that works for everyone across time but one that works for you and the people you're working with in the situation you're currently in. And that's the point, nothing works without change in every situation because even if the things involved are exactly the same, the people aren't. So, if you learn some things and decide to take some action how do you know when you're done, when things are better?

6. The whole thing is peace of mind

Robert Pirsig in *Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance* writes about a set of instructions that came with a bicycle kit. "To assemble Japanese bicycle, one must have great peace of mind." Peace of mind is the end result of everything. The learning you get by working on a situation means you feel better about what you know, you are less worried, more calm about what you're doing. The actions you take result in an improvement that people can see, something that you feel good about.

All these outcomes, learning and action, lead to one thing — peace of mind for you. And that's the whole point of doing work, any kind of work. You do it for a number of reasons but at the end you know it's done when you're at peace with the work.

About the author

Karthik Suresh is a Management Consultant who helps customers with energy, utility, sustainability, research, innovation and knowledge management projects. His experience includes working with large and small organisations to select and implement strategic decision systems, improve and develop management capability and deploy risk management, IT, communications and information systems projects.

Please feel free to connect on LinkedIn or read more at www.karthik-suresh.com