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Tom Brown

Locating Practical Wisdom in Boisot's Information Space

Abstract

In their 2011 report for the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, the authors argue that schools of business produce graduates who are adept at manipulating abstract knowledge but are neither self-aware nor well-prepared to deal with the ill-defined, ambiguous problems they are likely to encounter in the world. This paper describes how I use Boisot's Information Space in my business ethics class to provide a framework that transcends the dichotomy between what we understand in our minds and what we experience in our bodies. This framework allows students to approach the concrete complexity that is life from their comfort zone of formalized simplicity, and locates practical wisdom in the zone of overlap between the two.

> *It is quite a simple framework. Actually, I'm embarrassed that I spent so much time developing it because people look at it and say: "It's that simple? What have you been doing with the rest of your time?" – Max Boisot (2010)*

1. Introduction

I've been using Boisot's "simple framework" to teach business ethics for the last five years. The framework seems so obviously suited to such a purpose that I imagine it must by now have been widely adopted by others, yet I have found no journal articles that cover similar material in the way that I do.

Boisot combined three orthogonal dimensions of knowledge—codification, abstraction and diffusion—to create a cubic Information (I) Space bounded by three planar regions: the Culture (C) Space, determined by codification and diffusion; the Utility (U) Space, determined by abstraction and diffusion;

and the Epistemology (E) Space determined by codification and abstraction (Boisot, 2013:1995, p. 159).

I-Space, as a conceptual framework, is scale-free; it provides an account of the movement and transformation of data, information and knowledge at the largest scales and the smallest scales. Boisot and others have applied the framework at the macro level to make sense of such diverse phenomena as the evolving economy of China (Boisot & Child, 1999) and the collaborative efforts of thousands of dispersed researchers in the creation of the ATLAS detector at CERN (Boisot, 2010). This paper describes how I use I-Space at the level of the classroom and the individual student.

In teaching business ethics, I am not concerned with knowledge diffusion beyond the classroom and so use the simpler two-dimensional E-Space organizing framework for: 1) classifying knowledge; 2) categorizing and discriminating between ethical theories and codes of ethics; 3) unifying other knowledge classification systems within the same schema; 4) providing an epistemological bridge between the experiential, the narrative and the abstract symbolic; 5) locating reflection in relation to critical thinking at opposite ends of a continuum; and 6) understanding practical wisdom as the intersection of embodied and formal knowledge. Because of space limitations this paper will focus on the last three of these applications; for simplicity I confine my discussion to the knowledge dimensions of abstraction and codification: E-Space.

1.1 A Classroom Example

Let me begin with a simple and practical example from the classroom. Remembering the salient differences between ethical approaches is an act of memorization that students find tedious. Mapping the major ethical theories onto E-Space (Figure 1) is an exercise in codification/abstraction, revealing a pattern that would not otherwise be obvious and the diagram itself serves as a mnemonic device. Requiring teams of students to decide where to position each theory on the diagram can be structured as a team-based learning

(TBL) exercise. If teams complete the exercise on sheets of clear plastic, these can be stacked on an overhead display to demonstrate the degree of consensus among teams and open a space for discussion about differences in interpretation.

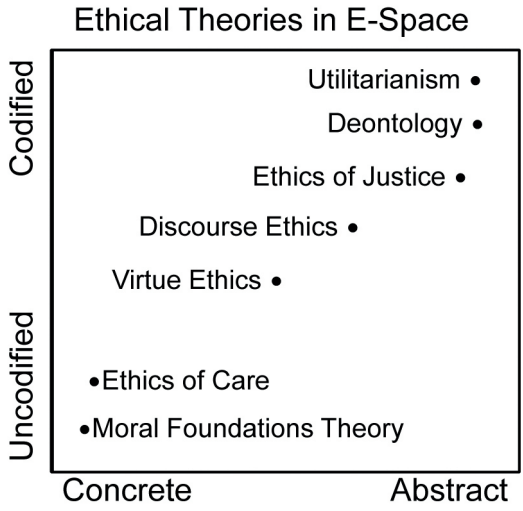

Figure 1: Ethical Theories in E-Space

2. Bridging the Gap Between Intuition and Reason

E-Space provides a formal framework for distinguishing between embodied (intuitive) knowledge—knowledge that we know without necessarily knowing how we know it—and sophisticated, formal knowledge.

Formal Knowledge, located in the top-right corner of E-Space (Figure 2) includes facts that are objectively known, theories, algorithms, principles, and laws--whether they arise from discoveries in the physical sciences or through the deliberations of government. Formal knowledge is "explicit" versus "tacit" (Polanyi, 1967); it is "know what" rather than "know how" (Ryle, 1949). Formal knowledge is accessed and manipulated through "System 2," the reasoning mind, rather than "System 1," the intuitive mind (Kahneman,

2011), although that does not, of course, preclude us from having an intuition about how we might proceed toward a resolution of a problem framed entirely in the language of formal knowledge.

Embodied Knowledge is located in the bottom left corner of E-Space (Figure 2). Such knowledge is highly personal in nature. In its most fundamental form it arises from perceptual information that is apprehended by our senses without conscious intervention of our rational minds. Embodied knowledge allows us to respond automatically to inputs from the physical (concrete) world; it is pre-theoretical. We may "know how" to ride a bicycle, even in the absence of a theory of bicycle riding. Embodied knowledge includes our beliefs, rules of thumb, analogies, and norms that unconsciously guide our behaviour. Such knowledge is subjective and tacit and arises in System 1, our intuitive mind.

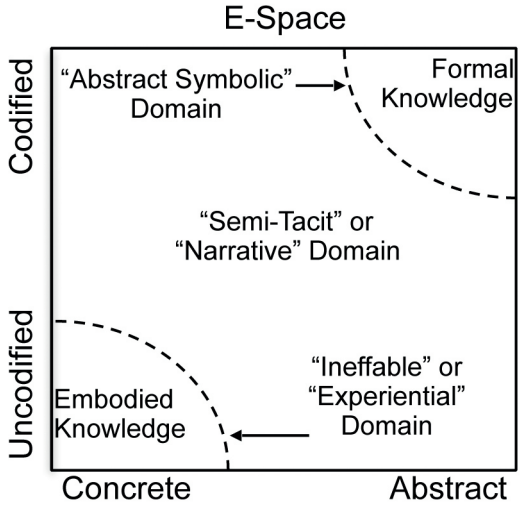

Figure 2: Classifying Knowledge in E-Space

Boisot refers to the zone of formal knowledge as "the domain of sophistication" and the zone of embodied knowledge as "the ineffable domain". Thinking in the domain of sophistication depends upon the manipulation of pure text or symbols. In this domain "novel modes of thought become possible […] and often result, paradoxically, from the capacity of our abstract symbolizing skills to outrun our understanding" (Boisot, 2013:1995, p. 62). In the ineffable domain thinking occurs unconsciously, intuitively and internally, and at the limit, "whatever limited communication is possible […] is achieved by simple gestures such as pointing or by force of example" (Boisot, 2013:1995, p. 62).

Between the ineffable domain and the domain of sophistication is the "semi-tacit domain" (Boisot, 2013:1995, p. 62) where a basic repertoire of shared cultural artefacts, similar life experiences, language, and gestures make communication possible. Boisot's terminology evolved and by his final public presentation (Boisot, 2010) he was referring to the three zones as the "Abstract Symbolic", the "Narrative" and the "Experiential". In this article I present the material as I have used it in my teaching to date, thus diagrams are labeled with the embodied-formal knowledge distinction.

3. Reflection vs Critical Thinking in E-Space

Modernist educational systems concentrate on developing those capacities associated with the top-right quadrant of Boisot's I-Space (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011; Kincheloe, 2008), and students become very adept at manipulating formal knowledge in its various abstract forms: text, mathematical symbols, schematic diagrams, computer code and so on.

In the hard sciences this intense focus on the top-right corner of E-Space can be largely credited with the extraordinary technological advances of the scientific age. However, in the social sciences an exclusive focus on the abstract symbolic is effectively a rejection of the accumulated wisdom of our evolutionary heritage: the neo-cortex, the site of reasoning, is a relatively recent addition to our cognitive toolkit, a software patch on a much older

operating system that still does most of the back office work. In the domain of ethics Jonathan Haidt's research into how we typically make ethical decisions shows that: 1) most of our ethical decisions are based on intuition, not reasoned judgments; and 2) formal reasoning typically (but not always) occurs *after* the decision has been made and serves primarily to justify our intuitive response rather than to discover the truth (Haidt & Keseber, 2008; Haidt & Joseph, 2004; Haidt, 2007; Haidt, 2012). Reason it turns out contributes much less to ethical decision-making than those who have followed most closely in the footsteps of Kant and Bentham would have us believe.

Already in the 17th century, Blaise Pascal anticipated the role of intuition: "Le coeur a ses raisons, que la raison ne connait point" (Pascal, 1852). Pascal's observation can be unsettling news for anyone raised in the modernist paradigm, which is to say most citizens of Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic (WEIRD) countries (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010) who have been trained from an early age to listen to their heads, not their hearts or their bodies. It should not be a surprise that my students typically struggle initially to understand what a reflection entails and whether or not a particular sustained cognitive effort on their part actually represents a reflection.

Reflective capacity is underdeveloped in business graduates, at least in part because reflective thinking is not emphasized in the business curriculum (Colby et al., 2011). But reflective thinking is a necessary link between analytical thinking and "practical reasoning," the ability to apply analytical reasoning and multiple framing to the messy problems of the world beyond the classroom (Colby et al., 2011).

My strategy in building the reflective capacity of students is to tease apart the difference between reflective and critical thinking. I begin by presenting E-Space as a formal framework because students equate "formal" with "scientific" and therefore with "true" and "valuable". E-Space reveals and reinforces the dichotomy between formal and embodied knowledge. It allows us to notice the differences between intuition and reason (as we did

above) and between reflective and critical thinking (as we will do below). At the same time the E-Space reveals the continuum between "the ineffable" and "the abstract symbolic" and the range of possibilities for partial understanding that lies between the two extremes. I proceed below, as I do in class, by first clarifying the notion of critical thinking, which students have encountered in prior courses. The discussion of critical thinking in turn becomes a template for how we will discuss reflective thinking; thus we approach the ineffable by way of the familiar and the comfortable.

3.1 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking means different things to different authors and is sometimes taken to subsume reflective thinking as well; Elder and Paul, (n.d.) consider learning to think reflectively as the first of six stages of critical thinking. For the purposes of my ethics class I stipulate that "critical thinking" is the manipulation of formal knowledge while "reflective thinking" is concerned with deliberate cognitive efforts to understand information that may be variously described as concrete, physical, tacit, or ineffable, information that arises in the bottom-left corner of E-Space. Thus E-Space provides a framework that distinguishes between critical and reflective thinking and provides a point of purchase for students grappling with a way to discriminate between a traditional academic essay and a reflective learning journal, which is one of the main exercises I use to hone their reflective thinking skills.

Theory is of value to managers when it is applied in the real world. Through such an encounter with reality a theory or framework advances by degrees from the purely formal zone of abstract symbolic knowledge into the semi-tacit domain of narrative. Each successive advance from t1 to t3 in Figure 3 entails a loss of theoretical precision, as exceptions and approximations are imposed by reality. Thus it is through incremental experience that managers learn the limits of theory: when to be guided by theory, and when expert judgement is required to modify expectations or temper actions. Finally

there is some limit beyond which embodied knowledge must remain forever inaccessible to formal ways of knowing. Here we might invoke Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems; however, I will defer to the wisdom of my late wife's doctor, who captured the essence of the problem for all practical purposes: "We are only plumbers. We have no idea how the body works."

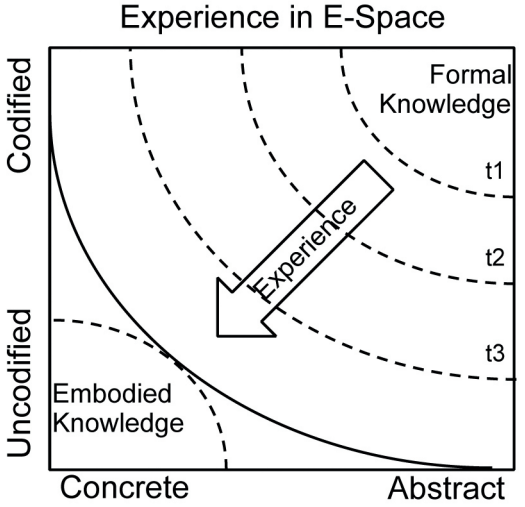

Figure 3: The Role of Experience in E-Space

3.2 Reflection

Reflection is conscious (System 2) thinking applied in an effort to make sense of the unconscious (System 1) thinking that acts on our unarticulated beliefs, values and assumptions to guide our actions in the world. Reflection is a deliberate process of codification/abstraction of which the goal is to make explicit our tacit knowledge by putting it into words. Successive processes of reflection move our embodied understandings further into the narrative domain from t1 to t3 in Figure 4, yet there is a limit beyond which symbolic abstract knowledge "outruns" our capacity to internalize it: "No one really understands quantum mechanics" (Richard Feynman in Boisot & McKelvey, 2010).

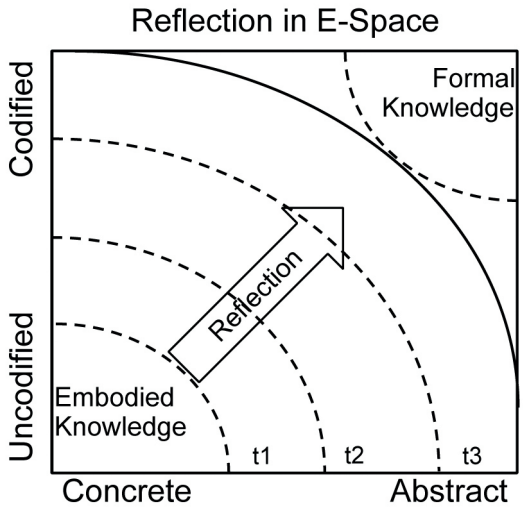

Figure 4: The Role of Reflection in E-Space

Another way to think of reflection is the following: a reflection is an investigation by System 2 into what System 1 was doing while System 2 wasn't paying attention. In this formulation we are thinking about action. For students this generally means trying to make sense of events after the fact, after they have already occurred.

In class I invite students to notice when they find themselves surprised. The surprise is an embodied response indicating they were expecting something else to happen. Why? Perhaps it is because their response to an ethical quandary is quite different from that of another student. Why? Reflection is presented as a way of systematically thinking about the values, beliefs and assumptions that inform their unconscious expectations about reality.

Through this process of reflection we surface our embodied or tacit knowledge and make it more explicit and more formalized. In doing so we seek to understand our intuitive responses, to make them accessible for critique and to justify to ourselves and to others, the positions that we have taken.

Through reflection embodied knowledge may be confirmed or through repetition eventually changed. In becoming aware of the reasons for their own decisions students can evaluate the appropriateness of their unreflective response, both compared to those of their classmates, and against the prescriptions of normative ethical theory. Adopting Jonathan Haidt's analogy of the elephant and rider (Haidt, 2006), where the elephant is System 1 and the rider is System 2, we might refer to this process of reflection as using the rider to train the elephant.

4. E-Space and Practical Wisdom

We can use Boisot's model of information space to think about practical wisdom from the joint perspectives of formal and embodied knowledge. We begin in the top-right quadrant of E-Space.

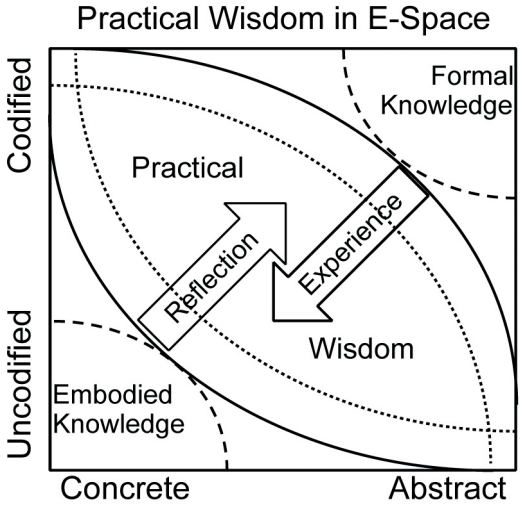

Figure 5: Practical Wisdom in E-Space

The world of ideas is comprised of formal knowledge and these ideas are typically highly condensed models or representations of reality. When we apply

these models in the world, we begin to discover the limits of their accuracy, the ways in which the world does not quite align with the predictions of our models. As our experience grows we learn to make suitable adjustments to our models and thus extend the limit of what we understand in a formal way. Even so there will be a limit beyond which our theoretical understanding fails us, a point beyond which what we know in a concrete or embodied way is not accessible to our conscious minds.

Combining reflection and experience into one diagram (Figure 5) creates a zone wherein that which we understand via the mechanisms of System 1 and System 2 overlap, a zone wherein that which we know in a formal way and that which we have internalized or embodied lead us to the same place of understanding. To take an example from the world of sport, an expert cyclist would perform at a peak level without the need to consciously think about when to shift a gear or how much to lean into a turn. However, if called on they could provide reasons for the decisions that they have made, and they would also understand and be able to discuss bicycle riding from a formal, theoretical perspective. In this zone the concrete and the abstract symbolic come together.

As managers and leaders we need to work in this zone between the formal and the embodied, first because we make better ethical decisions when we do (Moore & Tenbrunsel, 2014) and second because we must be able to communicate why our ethical decision is worthy of respect and compliance. Reason alone is seldom enough to persuade someone to act contrary to the preferences of their elephant (Haidt, 2006; 2012). Nor is an appeal to intuition persuasive without an explanation why the intuition is well founded. Our rider and our elephant respond to different logics. Pascal was noticing exactly this difference when he talked about "the heart's reasons." In *Defining Moments* Joseph Badaracco explains why: "These reasons" he writes, "are written in a language different from the formal, explicit, logical one with which our minds operate. Discerning how one's instincts define a situation is a matter of translation. It is an interpretive art, and a difficult one" (Badaracco, 1997, p. 72).

A difficult art, yes, but if mastered, a powerful tool for individuals to safely navigate a changing and unpredictable landscape, and a powerful tool for managers and leaders who must find ways to convey not just the compact easy formulations of ethics, but the concrete examples that can become "the warm and breathing truths" (Charles Pierce in Badaracco, 1997, p. 39) that animate their organization.

This zone where the heart's reasons and the mind's reason are in harmony is the zone of practical wisdom. Here one might suggest that I am only talking about a certain kind of practical or instrumental judgement and that this is very different from what Aristotle intended by *phronesis*, "the combination of moral skill and moral will" (Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010). Indeed the E-Space can be applied in just such an instrumental way, to discuss and understand instrumental problems. However, in ethics class, problems are framed in ethical terms and in the E-Space practical wisdom is revealed as the zone of overlap between ethics that derive from our evolutionary moral foundations (Haidt & Joseph, 2004) and ethics that derive from the idealized world of philosophical codifications and abstractions. Making an ethical choice is not about trading off one approach against the other; it is about locating the zone where right actions are embodied, unconscious, and spontaneous, and where these right actions can also be framed in terms that are supported by ethical theory. This zone is found within the narrative domain where ethical problems can be and *ought to be* discussed in the normal language of business and everyday life because ethical problems aren't something ineffable or esoteric: they are as (un)remarkable as being human and as fundamental as living and working together.

5. A Few Final Words

Is there a conclusion? Not really. I will continue to use Boisot's "simple framework" in my ethics teaching and some who read this article may do so as well. I circulated the first draft of this article to several colleagues who were not previously familiar with Boisot's work. One who has been teaching

clinical counselling for decades reported back that he has since incorporated the framework into "everything he does". One will incorporate it into his leadership training. The third asked permission to share the draft with a colleague in Europe. Boisot would explain the voyage of this abstract idea into new domains as an example of the Social Learning Cycle in I-Space. And that would have to be the subject of another paper.

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The way we lead and organise ourselves in collectives is reflected by what organisations, larger social structures and ourselves as parts thereof have become. Freedom and structure do not pre-exist in organised communities but are relationally constructed in the common space to which its (more or less) equal members bring their uniqueness and create something of (more or less) lasting value such as an organisation or larger organised structures. Leadership is momentous for supporting development and meaningful creations beyond known forms.

Reaching beyond is neither a result of will power nor sheer mental excellence, nor can it be made to happen. Such attempts tend to result in forms of mind-body splits, bringing forth unwelcome symptoms or rigid, "more-of-the-same" patterns in the relation of the body and its organised, interactional environment becoming powerful limiting patterns. Changing these realities largely depends on our ability to intentionally bring somatic intelligence to the creation of new larger structures.

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