

Exploring the Implicate Order: Learning from the Theater of Engagement

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Abstract

In *Wholeness and the Implicate Order*, physicist David Bohm argues that reality is the interplay of two orders—the explicate (manifest) and implicate (latent)—that operate simultaneously and interactively. We apply this conceptualization to engagement. In the explicate order—largely transactional and instrumental in nature—partners work together on projects to achieve valued goals and administrative leadership provides necessary institutional support. However, there is also an implicate order, often deeply held but difficult to express, that influences and is influenced by the explicate order. One way to comprehend the implicate order is to access the highly personal interpretations that emerge from experiencing engagement. In this paper, images of participants' memorable engagement experiences are used to explore the implicate order. Storytelling, metaphor, and isophor (experiencing one thing in terms of another) are shown to be valuable means for unearthing the implicate order of engagement.

Bohm asserted that totality could not be “understood solely in terms of . . . objects . . . or events. . . . Total order is contained in some implicit sense, ‘enfolded’ within it” (149). In *Leadership and the New Science*, Meg Wheatley (1994) urges leaders to think more holistically about leadership and change: “The more provocative view, expressed in Bohm’s work, is that at a level we can’t discern there is an unbroken wholeness. If we could look beneath the surface, we would observe an ‘implicate order’ out of which seemingly discrete events arise” (42).

Explicate and Implicate Orders of Engagement

How might Bohm’s interpretations deepen our understanding of engagement? Most of the written documentation of engagement is about the explicate order—what is done in the name of engagement; the obstacles faced and solutions employed; outcomes achieved; lessons learned; policy changes enacted; and recommendations made for improving practice

(*Fear et al. 2002*). The explicate order of engagement is largely transactional and instrumental; work done to achieve valued ends. As a cognate word suggests, it is “explicit”—manifest and tangible—visible through end products and understandable through description, analysis, and evaluation. Much of what is done in the name of organization development is intended to improve the explicate order.

The explicate order of engagement can be understood through two knowledge forms, propositional knowing and practical knowing (*Heron and Reason 1997*). Propositional knowing involves knowing in conceptual terms; it is “expressed in statements and theories that come with the mastery of concepts and classes that language bestows” (*Heron and Reason 1997, 281*). This knowledge form is highly valued because it helps advance the frontiers of knowledge and understanding. The second knowledge form, practical knowing, enables “doing something.” It is inherently instrumental, allowing for the competent completion of tasks. Practical knowledge is highly valued because it leads to desired, tangible outcomes.

The implicate order of engagement, on the other hand, includes dimensions and factors that constitute the subtext of reality beneath the veneer aspects. For example, we know that strongly held values are not always spelled out by participants but they influence what happens in the name of engagement. Likewise, any engagement experience—good or bad—is likely to influence a participant’s future engagement aspirations. To understand these and other factors associated with the implicate order, we must go beyond outward appearances and surface understanding to explore matters that are sometimes difficult to express, emotional, deeply held, and complex.

Such perspectives as Vygotsky’s (1978) and Rogoff’s (1990) provide us with a rationale for understanding that learning is more than building cognitive structures. Consequently, explorations of the implicate order of engagement are advanced by drawing on ways of knowing that include, but extend beyond, the logic of the rational mind. “Whole person” ways of knowing—head, heart, and spirit connected dynamically—are especially helpful. These include what Heron and Reason call presentational and experiential knowing. Presentational knowing is inherently expressive, manifested in artistic and language forms such as song, dance, art, poetry, metaphor, and storytelling. It is an evocative and creative form of knowing that by intention eschews literal interpretation,

is full of symbolism, is context-rich, and crosses meaning boundaries. For example, what engagement means to a participant might be more fully expressed in a song or in a poem than by using the logic system of an academic paper. Experiential knowing involves encountering the world directly and personally. It is learning by participation—direct contact by engaging actively in time and context. Each engagement experience has an effect on participants and the settings involved, including the community and participating institutions. What “residue” (the aftereffects) does engagement create? (See Table 1 for a summary comparison of the explicate and implicate orders of engagement.)

Table 1. Comparing the Explicate and Implicate Orders of Engagement

Explicate Order of Engagement	Implicate Order of Engagement
Transactional-Instrumental--text of engagement	Latent and hidden from view--the subtext of engagement
Working to achieve valued ends	The ambience-residue of working to achieve valued ends
Ways of knowing--explicit	Ways of knowing--tacit
From the head--analytic, strategic	From the heart--highly personal, defining
Forms of inquiry and discovery--description, analysis, evaluation	Forms of inquiry and discovery--imagery, storytelling, artistic expression
Systematic, tangible outcomes	Emergent understanding, "Ah ha's!"

The Implicate Order and Improving Engagement Practice

We suggest four interrelated strategies for improving engagement work through conversations about the implicate order. First, assist colleagues in bringing implicate reality to the surface. Second, engage colleagues in dialogue about what they are learning. Third, encourage colleagues to explore the dynamic connections between explicate and implicate orders. Finally, encourage colleagues to apply their learning to improve engagement systems, processes, and outcomes.

The first step is bringing implicate reality to the surface. Toward that end and in an earlier study, we solicited interpretations of engagement by asking campus colleagues to share their

stories about what it is like to experience engagement (Fear et al. 2003). Participants' stories revealed three insights about engagement. First, participants spoke expressively about what it is like to be and feel engaged. There were references to "seeing with fresh eyes," "learning and growing," and "helping to build capacity." Second, the stories were full of what the philosopher Michael Polanyi (1983) calls tacit knowing: highly personal and interpretive knowing that is deeply felt, rooted in experience, and often difficult to express—a blend of explicit understanding, ideals, values, intuition, and emotion. Third, participants' stories revealed a preferred leadership form, what we call engaged leadership, based on Daniel Yankelovich's (1999) concept of relational leadership. "The objective is not to get recalcitrant people to follow orders," Yankelovich writes; "it is to invite them to take ownership of a vision, a strategy, and a set of values" (173).

"Deepening of understanding can contribute to personal and organizational transformation."

That earlier work, as well as the work reported here, is being pursued by W. K. Kellogg Foundation grantees associated with the Leadership for Institutional Change (LINC) initiative. Each grantee oversees a project designed to advance their university as an engaged institution. The grantees—hereafter referred to as the LINC directors¹—formed a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder 2002), which is a special type of learning community composed of colleagues with common interests who do not work together on a regular basis. As a group, participants in a community of practice seek to advance shared understanding of a topic of common interest.

Over a period of three years, LINC directors gained insights about engagement by studying it as an "experienced" phenomenon, one that emerges in personal thought, feeling, and action from having experienced engagement. Findings from this exploration helped the LINC directors deepen their understanding of engagement. For example, a LINC director recognized that there may be "activity without understanding" about engagement on her campus. "Deepening of understanding can contribute to personal and organizational transformation," she observed. Another LINC colleague noted that seeking a more robust connection

between action and understanding has a rich tradition in liberation-oriented education, such as that reflected in Paulo Freire's work. Freire viewed praxis as a powerful method associated with education for social change. He defined praxis as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire 1970, 36). Those who work in higher education to enact change through engagement may not view themselves as liberation-oriented educators. Yet this LINC associate concluded that engaged colleagues "might benefit from drawing upon the same change perspectives and strategies."

Data Collection and Analysis

The LINC directors solicited memorable images of engagement as experienced by conferees attending Outreach Scholarship 2002—Catalyst for Change, a national conference organized and hosted by the Ohio State University and offered in collaboration with the Pennsylvania State University and the University of Wisconsin—Extension. First, the directors organized a luncheon plenary session for nearly three hundred persons. Second, they analyzed and summarized the outcomes of the luncheon conversation. Finally, they invited conferees to interpret their analysis in a follow-up session held the day after the luncheon session.

Luncheon Plenary Discussion: As conferees filed into the banquet hall for a plenary session, LINC directors and their associates (that is, colleagues trained to implement the ensuing tasks) positioned themselves as facilitators at the various luncheon tables. From the podium, a LINC director gave conferees an overview of what they would experience during the luncheon session:

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation has enabled the LINC project directors to have a space to engage in dialogue about leadership and change for engagement. Today is an opportunity for everyone here to have that same opportunity.

Each conferee was asked to think about a *critical moment in their personal journey associated with leadership and change for engagement*. Given that frame of reference, each conferee was invited to describe what that experience was like and, finally, to *portray one or more images of the experience that came to mind*. Table facilitators were available to answer questions about the assignment and to distribute materials for jotting down ideas and thoughts. Conferees talked in pairs about their compelling

engagement experiences, and these discussions led to full table conversations convened by the table facilitators. Facilitators took notes as the conversations ensued and collected conferees' written materials at the end of the session.

Interpretive Analysis of the Results: LINC directors met immediately after lunch to analyze the images that emerged during the table conversations. Example images, presented in the conferees' language, are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Selected Images of Engagement from Outreach Scholarship 2002

Images	Theme
Blossom	From small and simple beginnings
Looking in the rearview mirror	Leaving old ideas behind
Baking an apple pie	Bringing together diverse ingredients
Peoples' faces on Christmas Day	Anticipation and celebration
From running like John Cleese to running like Carl Lewis	Gaining capacity over time
Circle	A place to be invited into
Eyeglasses	Seeing things with a fresh point of view
Bridge	Access, connections, opportunities
Smokey the Bear	Only you can put out fires
Signboards	Going public
Walking in my shoes	Empathy
Kids on a playground	Developing norms of engagement
Geese flying in formation	Shared leadership
Window	Seeing a world of possibilities
Fish out of water	Crossing boundaries, new environments, "going to a new place" in thinking and action
Unknown	Risk
Lightbulb	Enlightenment
Game of chance	Not everything will work
Slap on the side of the head	"Street learning" in the real world
Needle and thread	Sewing things together
Taking a plane ride	Things look different from the air
Starting a journey without a destination	Trust emergence, have faith things will work out
Hitting a brick wall	Frustration
Punching bag	This is contested and tough work

The images presented in Table 2 suggest that *engagement experiences are full of meaning*. We find references to engagement as a maturing experience (e.g., looking in the rearview mirror), as nurturing (e.g., a blossom), as revealing (e.g., light bulb), as collaborative and participative (e.g., geese flying in formation), as deeply felt (e.g., walking in my shoes), as frustrating (e.g., hitting a brick wall), as risky (e.g., the unknown), and as scary (e.g., fish out of water). These interpretations correspond with a dictionary definition of engagement as an engrossing involvement that holds our attention.

To further explore this meaning, the LINC directors organized a more extensive analysis of the images. ii In tandem teams, the directors began looking for thematic connections across images. Each person in the team analyzed the output from several luncheon tables, sharing interpretations with his or her partner. The partner reciprocated. Team members looked for compelling points and common ground. When all the directors reassembled, the tandem teams shared their interpretations with the full group. A recorder transcribed the interpretations on newsprint in front of the room. After all teams finished reporting, discussion ensued guided by a question: *What do we think we have here?* A list of twenty compelling images, presented in Table 3, emerged in response to that question.

If the images in Table 2 represent meaningful interpretations of engagement, then *depth of interpretation* defines the images presented in Table 3. For example, “Looking in a foggy mirror,” “Waiting to exhale,” and “Misunderstanding sad faces” are complex

Table 3. Distilled Images of Engagement

1. Dancing across the bridge	11. Shooting stars over water
2. Looking in a foggy mirror	12. Baptism through immersion
3. Hearing aid	13. Communiversality
4. Mired in the old way	14. Misunderstanding sad faces
5. Practicing what you preach, living what you learn	15. Planting seeds
6. Jumping off the dime	16. Children at play
7. Running into a brick wall and finding it's not bricks	17. Growing a carrot
8. Walking a razor wire	18. Waiting to exhale
9. Coming to the table	19. Expanding the box, enlarging the circle
10. Freeing a chained child	20. Crossing boundaries, engaging the diverse other

expressions with myriad nuances. “Walking a razor wire” and “Running into a brick wall and finding it’s not bricks” portray engagement as a complex undertaking. There are also what seem to be rules of engagement, including “Practicing what you preach, living what you learn” and “Expanding the box, enlarging the circle.” We also find a vision of engagement in the image “Communiversality,” which suggests an organizational form with seamless boundaries.

Making Sense of the Interpretive Analysis:

The next day, LINC directors hosted a conference breakout session titled “What Are We Learning About Institutional Engagement?” The purpose was to share the directors’ interpretation of the imagery and invite conferee reaction to it. Those assembled ($N = 25$) first met in small groups of four to six

“We also find a vision of engagement in the image ‘Communiversality,’ which suggests an organizational form with seamless boundaries.”

persons. Each small group then shared its interpretations with the full group. Five images received attention in the large group discussion. This re-creation of the conferees’ dialogue is based on notes taken from the large-group conversation.

Looking in a foggy mirror. It’s difficult to see clearly. When you begin to see through the fog, it clouds up again. There’s always a need for a “burst of cold air” or for you to “turn on the fan.” Either dynamic requires thinking outside the realm of normal assumptions and, eventually, behaving differently. There’s a desperate need for double loop learning or learning how to learn.

Mired in the old way. We assume that we (and universities) want to change. But frequently, the more things change, the more they stay the same. We often talk as though we are transforming when, in reality, we’re not. We’re often stuck.

Running into a brick wall and finding it’s not bricks. Planning has its limits, and expectations can be like an albatross around your neck. You have to “learn as you do.” Problems are often opportunities; challenges are often portals to transformation. What appears to be a

brick wall in front of you may be a road behind you. Look around!

Communiversity. We struggle with trying to get current institutional arrangements to work in new ways. That strategy has limits. We need a new culture of engagement with a new language and new organizational arrangements that are seamless, dynamic, fluid, and organic.

Children at play. We often invite others into “our sandbox” to play with “our toys.” That makes engagement collaboration my play, not our play. This has dysfunctional consequences. We need to move beyond self-interest by creating truly shared norms that are cocreated and lived in practice by all parties.

The distilled images shared by the LINC directors enabled conferees to talk easily about difficult issues—about how they perceive, feel, and interpret engagement based on their explicate experiences. Their discourse embraced the working reality of engagement as they drew on personal stories to bring life to each image. As they talked about the various images, conferees’ commentary involved reframing, if not calling into question, seemingly conventional ways of thinking. In so doing, delicate questions were raised and considered, such as:

Don’t we often feel lost and confused in engagement? In other words, it’s not always clear what should be done, is it?

What does it mean to engage authentically with partners? Perhaps we sometimes give ourselves too much credit for being partners in good standing.

Are our institutions serious about engagement or are we just going through the motions? The engaged institution movement may have more symbolic value than real impact.

As the LINC directors reflected on the session experience, they noted how interactions like these can enable voice, making it possible to bring to the surface deeply held beliefs and perspectives that are often discussed in more private settings, such as over coffee with close friends. This public acknowledgment and consideration of engagement dilemmas, complexities, and challenges can help advance the quality of engagement work. As a LINC director noted, “Having institutional leaders state the importance of these matters can be an essential ingredient in moving engagement forward—for individual campuses and for the movement as a whole.”

From Metaphor to Isophor

What emerged from the conference interpretations was a portrait of engagement that is not an “it” to be described uniformly, understood mechanistically, and practiced routinely. Rather, engagement was interpreted as a complex, deeply experienced, and subtly nuanced phenomenon. Might the quality of the explicate order be informed by encouraging sustained, deep conversations about matters of the implicate order? If so, how might we enable such conversations?

From our inquiry, we discovered the strategy of focusing conversations around *metaphors of engagement*. Most, but not all, of the images associated with the campus stories of engagement (from our earlier study) and the images generated in this inquiry are metaphors. In their classic presentation, George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) define metaphor as “understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another”(5). Metaphor is evocative—a compact and graphic way to express a potentially complex phenomenon. For instance, generative dialogue might ensue from the assertion “Engagement is a window.” Where is the window located? Who sees in? Who sees out? What do they

see? How clearly? These are a few of the questions that might be explored in dialogue. Such discussions might allow topics normally neglected to be discussed freely and creatively.

“[E]ngagement was interpreted as a complex, deeply experienced, and subtly nuanced phenomenon.”

There is a companion strategy—*isophor*—that may be useful for exploring the implicate order of engagement.

Kathleen Forsythe (1986) and Richard Bawden (1991) define isophor as a language form in which words are used to convey what it is like to *experience one thing in terms of another*. Consider the metaphor “Time is money.” It is one thing to understand the connection in theory. It is quite another thing to understand the connection based on experience—to recall a personal episode and capture its meaning expressively by declaring, “Time is money.” Under that circumstance, “Time is money” is an isophoric expression.

Bawden believes that “isophor is the way the sense of wholeness is grasped” (2367), an interpretation embraced by the Governance through Metaphor Project. In isophor “there is no separation

between thought and action, between feeling and experience” (*Union of International Associations* 2002). Understanding without separation from a lived experience is a portal to the implicate order, we believe. It is also one strategy for enabling what Edward Sallis and Gary Jones (2002) refer to as the *knowledge conversion process*—taking one way of knowing and converting it into another way of knowing. In terms of exploring the implicate order of engagement, we are most interested in converting tacit knowing (as described earlier) to explicit knowing. In other words, we would like to help colleagues mine deeply held understanding—expressed as isophors—bring that understanding to the surface, make it public, and create opportunities for shared learning through dialogue. Bringing such understanding to the surface can enable learning that makes action possible. How might we proceed with these intentions in mind? The LINC directors engaged in a group exercise. At a gathering held several months following the conference, they filtered the list of images in Table 3 through their own personal experience. Each director asked: *Which images have I experienced directly?* In effect, individually and then collectively, the directors culled isophors from the list of metaphors. For example, “Engagement is looking in a foggy mirror” was the starting point for a conversation that opened with a comment about the importance of persistence: “*You just have to keep at it despite the fog.*” A condensed form of the ensuing interaction follows:

We need to keep in mind that we are looking at ourselves. Are we in the fog?

If the conditions stay the same, just wiping the mirror with a towel won’t work. The mirror will just fog up again. Foggy conditions won’t change unless the room conditions change.

That means the circumstances change or we take action, changing what we do.

Why aren’t we comfortable being in the fog? It’s always foggy, more than we might care to think.

Perhaps it’s because we don’t have faith in the idea. Do we have faith in the people with whom we’re working?

Is it because we’re afraid things aren’t going to work out? Is that why we need clarity? Why are we afraid of the fog?

We need to be more comfortable working in the fog.

As the conversation unfolded, it was clear that the group had moved “Engagement is looking in a foggy mirror” from metaphor to isophor. They were able to speak directly, expressively, and concretely from experience. The group treated the topic introspectively, questioning the reasons why fog is perceived problematically. Concern about the fog may tell us more about ourselves than about the circumstances, the group reasoned. Having faith and hope in ideas and people is critical. Reduce your need for certainty and clarity, they advise: Embrace the fog!

What might be the connection of this dialogue to the explicate order of engagement? Following this advice on a campus might mean being more forgiving and patient (less “freaked out”) when matters pertaining to engagement become less clear and apparent.

Fruitful explorations like this can help unearth deeply held understanding about direct experience and enable dialogue among interested parties. Accomplishing this goal would yield affirmative responses to questions like these:

- Did you gain insights by listening to others’ comments?
- Did the group conversation generate fresh perspectives?
- Were you able to understand your work in new ways?
- Will this perspective affect your relationship with engagement partners?

This process is similar to what Mezirow (1991) has described as transformational learning, that is, enlightenment prompted by a disorienting dilemma or experience. Engaging in dialogue about isophors of engagement may stimulate such understanding.

Reflections

There is a transactional and instrumental bias in the engagement movement that turns attention toward the explicate order. Those involved in engagement want to see more community-campus partnerships formed, want such partnerships to work more effectively, and want more colleagues and institutions to affirm and value engagement. Consequently, practical matters loom large: getting more projects up and running, providing more funding for engagement, changing the faculty reward system to better accommodate engagement, creating enabling campus structures for engagement, exposing more colleagues to engagement concepts and values, learning more about what works in the field. These are important matters—doing engagement and doing

more of it—that warrant our continued efforts. However, there is also the important matter of deepening our understanding of the underlying phenomenon of engagement. Not only do we believe that such understanding can enhance engagement practice, we also believe that insights associated with the implicate order can help institutional change agents envision and enact organizational culture change.

The inquiry process described and interpreted here—sharing stories of engagement, interpreting those stories through images and metaphors, and then culling isophors from images and metaphors—represents a rich and grounded way to encourage dialogue about engagement on our campuses. There is a practical dimension to our recommendation. We assert that there are always good reasons why the explicate order is the way it is. These reasons, however, are not always apparent. Exploring the implicate order can help uncover these reasons. Furthermore, conversations into the implicate realm can help liberate our campuses from the distortions and “spins” that almost always accompany organizational life. Colleagues often thirst for opportunities to discuss matters openly and authentically.

There is nothing mysterious about this process. We invite you to join us in this exciting and important work.

Endnotes

1. In this manuscript, “project directors” is used generically to refer to participants in the LINC learning community. Participants include the LINC project directors (Fields, Bruns, and Sandmeyer are directors); their designees who participate in meetings on their behalf; the foundation’s cluster evaluator for the set of LINC projects (Burnham); the foundation’s LINC program director; and a LINC consultant (Fear), who serves as a scholar-writer.

2. To engage in further exploration, LINC directors assumed a hermeneutic stance and used an abductive research strategy. Etymologically, hermeneutics is from the Greek, meaning to interpret or understand (*Crotty 1998*). In social science, the hermeneutic tradition involves analysis of social life as expressed in everyday language. It takes as point of departure the language used by people as they express themselves about a lived experience. Blaikie (2000) elaborates:

Advocates of this tradition argue that accounts of social life need to be derived, initially, from the accounts that

social actors give of their activities; the language used by the social scientist must be derived from everyday language. . . . second-order constructs must be derived from first-order constructs. This requires a hermeneutic process in which the researcher tries to grasp the meaning of everyday language . . . a matter of interpretation rather than translation. (138)

Hermeneutic analysis makes it possible to go “deeper and further than the author’s own understanding” through the analysis of language (Crotty 1998, 91). Although this is a potentially useful way to explore the implicate order, there is danger associated with analysts’ overlaying partisan interpretations on others’ interpretations. This is where an abductive research strategy is helpful (Blaikie 2000, 114–19). In abduction, social reality is not a thing that can be interpreted in multiple ways; rather, it is understood that there are multiple and changing realities. For example, there are multiple and changing realities (not just interpretations) associated with the metaphor “Engagement is a blossom.” An abductive research strategy thus seeks to move first-order interpretations of social life to second-order interpretations without portraying those analyses as “the truth.” In so doing, an abductive strategy should encourage meaningful discourse about a subject of shared concern.

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