

London School of Economics Department of Information Systems

Professor Chris Argyris, Research Seminar, LSE 27 November 2001

Chris Argyris addressed a packed Department of Information Systems Research Seminar on 27 November. Professor Argyris, famous for his work on Organizational Learning and on Action Research talked about the need for social scientists to pay attention to implementable validity as well as to their usual concerns with internal and external validity. If we are to succeed in our ambition to promote effective performance rather than simply understanding then, he argued, we must concern ourselves with causalities as well as understanding. He said "If we accept the ideas in good currency we will limit the learning that we produce for the world." He stressed the importance of the research process being seen as one for promoting learning and change within the organization studied. He further emphasised the role of the research supervisor as one of active support for research students in their difficult task.

To illustrate his themes, Professor Argyris cited the example of his review of the literature on trust. He discovered much good research with high internal and external validity, but nothing that would tell him how to create trust. Our presupposition as social scientists is that if we study trust rigorously enough, we will eventually help human beings to create trust. "That's impossible, that's a daydream we have in order to protect ourselves from having to take initiatives". Our social science findings are in the form of correlational designs, but the human mind acts on the basis of causal designs and there is no obvious route from one to the other. The scientific knowledge produced by social science is useful for helping us understand and explain, but this is not enough.

Professor Argyris drew from his experience of working with the top executives of large corporations and of a recent study of the difficulties experienced with the Capability Maturity Model, a widely advocated model for managing software development projects. He argued that researchers must intervene in the production of enacted theory-in-use if we are to go beyond description and understanding to double-loop learning where the purpose of organizational behaviours are challenged and changed.

In the lively debate that followed Professor Argyris made clear that only human beings learn, organizational learning is a term he uses to describe the enactment and reinforcement of that learning in an organizational setting. Organizations are not actors or learners, they are the controlling environments for human actors. In reply to a question about the use of tools such as the Myers-Briggs test he told the seminar about recent work with the senior management team of an organization who had undertaken this test. All the executives reported that they had found the feedback from the test illuminating and believed that it would change the way they understood other's viewpoints and thus alter, for the better, the way interacted with colleagues. However at the next meeting the good intentions held only for a few minutes before the patterns of behaviour they had expressed the wish to improve reasserted themselves powerfully.

These behaviours he stressed are part of organizationally defensive routines that people adopt to manage the conflicts and contradictory demands of organizational life, they are anxiety reducing but also anti-learning. Professor Argyris told the seminar that he was optimistic about Information and Communication Technologies enabling changes to make organizations more transparent and thus better able to engage in productive double loop learning and change.

In order to reinforce his advocacy of implementable validity, Professor Argyris concluded the seminar by recounting Jurgen Habermas's visit to Harvard to address students who saw themselves as his disciples. All Professor Habermas's understanding about the necessity for authentic communication did not prevent him from engaging in behaviour that was far from consistent with this. When challenged, Professor Habermas said that, "this was necessary because the students were causing this".

A videotape of the seminar will shortly be available on the Department of Information Systems website at <http://is.lse.ac.uk/events/argyris.htm>.