

# Business schools and lifelong learning: Inquiry, delivery or developing the inquiring mind

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'[V]irtually all public and private enterprises – including most successful corporations - are becoming dominantly repositories and coordinators of intellect' (Quinn, 1992: 241). University based management schools play a role in harnessing this intellect by supporting the development of leaders with the capacity to think critically, to make choice and to facilitate implementation. As centers working with a higher proportion of mature executives, management schools are forced to address the complex resource issues surrounding knowledge accumulation and knowledge dissemination. Enhancing the capacity of our future leaders to contribute to society requires gifted academics – academics that expand the desire for inquiry in their students and thereby develop their capacities for self-driven lifelong learning. Are such academics teachers, researchers or hybrids?

*'[We, researchers, should] not fall into the trap of answering questions of increasing irrelevance with increasing precision'* (John Gardner – cited in Davenport & Prusak, 2003: 87).

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## Introduction

Ever since the first management education programmes emerged, the hunting season has been open on management education curricula in general and MBA programmes in particular. Mast (2006) gives a fairly comprehensive overview of such critiques and focuses on the issues that have dominated the recently escalating critique from 'insiders', such as business school deans, programme directors and faculty. Over recent years, this group of writers has been exploring similar issues in the context of AACSB, EFMD and AMBA debates, as well as, in our own MBA curricula and policy reviews. The overarching questions business schools face are: What should our students be learning and how is this best achieved? How can business schools, particularly those offering MBA programmes to students with work experience, play a truly value adding role in facilitating management and leadership development to the benefit of society?

In reflecting on these questions, we feel the need to focus as much on educational process and learning environment as on specific output. In doing so, we find ourselves concentrating on two crucial elements in particular – the teaching-learning process and the nature of MBA faculty. We consider issues in the ongoing debate about teaching versus research, and business relevance versus academic rigor. We argue that by seeing these as over-simplistic dichotomies, management academics (and their critics) risk losing the best of what is essential to promoting and integrating lifelong learning and contemporary relevance.

From a business school perspective, turning the focus on learning is becoming more important. At times, the nature of employment practice seems to be at odds with developing learning organizations. Employers seem to ask for total commitment from their employees as a key ingredient of building a learning organization, while they simultaneously progress along the road of contract or limited life employment (Thite, 2001; Schein, 1996). They seem to expect transformational characteristics from employees while offering transactional employment conditions. Under these circumstances, education institutions that focus more on developing self-motivated lifelong learners play a much greater role in contributing to the business world and to society in general. They produce individuals who develop themselves in an inter-organizational rather than an intra-organizational way. Such individuals do not rely exclusively on the firm to develop them and, paradoxically, they thus become more valuable as lifetime employees.

If this contention is correct, then business schools that wish to remain relevant need to return closer to elements of the traditions of universities - not in a governance or even delivery sense, but in a mission sense. They need to revisit their educational paradigm and ask what type of graduates and executives they wish to – and need to – produce. Should business schools (a) produce graduates that know everything about current business practice and who return for regular 'refuelling' as practice evolves, or (b) should they produce graduates who think critically, who have decision making ability and who have the capacity for decision implementation? We would definitely argue for the latter.

It is our understanding that within the education domain a clear distinction has been drawn between teaching as an externally oriented approach to development and learning as an internally motivated approach to development (Kinman & Kinman, 2001). It seems to us that focusing on the internally motivated element meshes with 'lifelong learning' and makes it a far richer concept - one that sits much more centrally within the university domain (De Angelo, De Angelo & Zimmerman, 2005; Coolahan, 1998; Field, 2000)<sup>1</sup>. Such concept of lifelong learning is inextricably linked to self-motivation. Lifelong learners are individuals with a passion for inquiry. They are individuals who are proactive in searching for new and creative solutions or understanding. This interpretation focuses the concept on innovative learning rather than maintenance learning. It involves anticipation and participation. It presumes individuals can be motivated to anticipate change and make plans to shield themselves against the trauma of shock. It presumes individuals will voluntarily engage in co-operation and dialogue to test their assumptions against the opinion of others.<sup>2</sup>

Much criticism of business schools today and of the MBA market in particular stems from the fact that the industry has been guilty of selling the family silver. The huge growth of MBA offering institutions, including many somewhat suspect ones, may have turned the three letters into a commodity. This commoditization may even have been exacerbated by the revenue imperatives placed on some more serious business schools. This has induced them to offer the three letters in executive programs where form may be guilty of outweighing substance<sup>3</sup>. However, in spite of this negative perception, good business programs continue to focus on the 'right stuff'. They produce graduates with all the characteristics expected by a university - individuals with inquiring minds who are aware of self and environment.

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<sup>1</sup>Much of the popular literature on lifelong learning, particularly as it pertains to the corporate world, seems to turn very quickly to the need for continuous training (web searches on the topic indicate that the term is generally used to refer to a range of adult education and training courses, rather than an integrated philosophy of self-motivated learning through life). In this sense, the topic appears to have been defined within the realm of maintenance learning; Learning concerned with 'the acquisition of fixed outlooks, methods and rules for dealing with known and recurring situations' (Chan, 1994: 18). The argument suggests that individuals need to continually return to places of learning, or alternatively have on site interventions, that incrementally elevate skills levels. This training paradigm may have significantly curtailed a fuller debate about lifelong learning in the 'real world'.

<sup>2</sup>Perhaps some of the clearest exemplars of the concept of lifelong learning that we have witnessed are the traditional research academics that populate our leading universities. These are individuals who, through their continued questioning and research activities, learn and develop throughout their formal careers and even past retirement when all external motivators have been removed.

<sup>3</sup>A particularly bad example of this found its way recently to the desk of RSM Erasmus University Dean - Euroforum offers a 'Master of Human Resources (Crash course MBA in 8 hours)'. This advertising flyer cited academics from a range of top universities in the Netherlands.

A key question for policy makers, educators (and employers) is: How do business schools do this? We would venture to suggest that there are three core elements that contribute to the answer - research, teaching and the capacity for decision implementation.

## Research

We welcome the critical perspectives that have been brought to bear on business and management education (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Questions about the relevance of academic research per se and the relative benefits and disadvantages of research versus teaching universities are certainly not new (for an extensive overview, see Mast, 2006), and we suspect that they will continue to be asked for years to come. Nevertheless, excessive criticism of academic research as being too ivory tower can make the mistake of focusing too much on the output and insufficiently on the process and how it helps to develop the inquiring mind.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that we are not critical of some 'unconnected' research. However, the problem has been considerably overstated - particularly by institutions that offer management development sold as 'relevant, applied and immediately useful'. While it may be interesting to debate whether academic careers are becoming 'more and more about less and less', this detracts us from more important questions pertinent to business education and management development.

It is our contention that academic research provides significant output in terms of research findings, whilst the researchers serve as role models for questioning and systematic inquiry. Whatever the discipline, whether narrowly defined or broadly based, the rigorous process of questioning, investigating, reflecting and revising that all researchers put themselves through produces output and showcases processes that are vital for the evolution of business and management practice - local, national or global in orientation. Without this activity occurring within the business school, or within a network of associations from which the school can draw, it dooms itself to playing an increasingly marginal role. The school may continue as a center of maintenance learning, but it will not meet the need for discovering the new knowledge required by practicing managers in contemporary business. (De Angelo *et al.*, 2005; Mast, 2006).

## Teaching, learning and critical reasoning

This brings us to our second point. Good programs recognize that the role models of lifelong learners described above, are not necessarily the natural role models for executive students fully engaged in the cut, thrust and immediacy of daily business. Gifted teachers are needed to

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<sup>4</sup>A strong argument in support of our perspective is the corporate university. As far back as 1956, General Electric's Crotonville Management Development Center - the precursor to corporate universities - used Harvard professors to both design and staff its programs (Crotty & Soule, 1997). Much to the chagrin of many formal universities, corporate universities continue with this practice today - they use a significant number of 'moonlighting' academics to teach their employees. This would certainly not take place if these individuals were too 'ivory tower'.

seed and mediate the process. Stimulating someone else to inquiry is aligned with, but not synonymous with, having a personal desire for inquiry. In our opinion, gifted teaching is in large measure about inductively encouraging individuals to develop an understanding of theories and models, as well as, to see them as useful instruments for making sense of the environment in which they find themselves. Such an inductive approach may be considered useful in stimulating an intrinsic rather than extrinsic motivation for learning. We use the term intrinsic motivation because, like attitude, it has a cognitive and affective component (Kinman & Kinman, 2001). On the cognitive side we place self-determination and the drive for mastery, while on the affective side, we find interest, curiosity, excitement and the enjoyment gained from absorption and 'flow'<sup>5</sup>. Both of these elements are vital to developing the passion for lifelong learning that we have already described.

While one cannot transmit an enthusiasm for inquiry without oneself being enthusiastic about it, teaching executives to reason critically and to be passionate about the process is difficult. Most executives, like most other students, have been trained to look for immediate relevance. Sustainability and social responsibility, for example, are not new topics, they are just vogue! Because today's executives can see an immediate relevance – a natural 'urgency' in current events – they are becoming more open to such topics. But surely, nothing can be more important for sustainable business than the capacity for critical thought? Yet, critical thinking as manifested in philosophy, psychology, linguistics and history is certainly not vogue. Gifted teachers in the management disciplines have the capacity to come across as being authentic and as individuals that understand the world of the learner. This provides them with the capacity to use their discipline to both transmit knowledge about the field – that is often considered a skill requirement by the learner – and to stimulate an enthusiasm for the process that developed our current understanding of the discipline. It is this enthusiasm for the process that is the bedrock of lifelong learning and that can sow the seed of lifelong critical reasoning. It is also this enthusiasm that has the potential to enable graduates to overcome the inherent bias in our academic institutions that focus faculty on discipline-based careers at the expense of more integrative views of how firms operate and decisions are made.

Ghoshal (2005) argued that business schools have lost the taste for pluralism over the past 30 years. He drew on Boyer's notion of four different categories of scholarship: discovery (research), integration (synthesis), practice (application) and teaching (pedagogy) and suggested that the first (research scholarship) has come to dominate. 'Those with primary interests in synthesis, application, or pedagogy have been eliminated from our milieu or, at best, accommodated at the periphery and insulated from the academic high table that is now reserved only for scientists.' (Ghoshal, 2005: 82). If this has diminished the scope for

pluralism in scholarship, it has probably also had potentially limiting consequences for content.

We believe that criticism of business school programs for the continued, discipline-specific, silo approach is valid, but not necessarily because of the subject matter that is taught. The real problem seems to be that insufficient attention is paid to developing in the learner the critical approach that makes questioning across boundaries not only possible, but also unavoidable. The process of developing a more systemic approach to decision making in executives does not require that each and every management course be offered in an integrating cross-functional way. It requires skilled educators who are open to the introduction of other discipline based perspectives into the debate, and who actively encourage this as part of the development of critical excitement that embeds broader relevance into the core material of any course. Through their research and teaching skills, universities need to provide strong functional insight and broad perspectives – it is not a case of 'either/or', but 'and'. If the goals of companies and organizations that recruit our graduates are to improve sustainable competitiveness by designing new strategies and ways of thinking, then these businesses and organizations need people with critical thinking capacity and drive that extends well beyond the boundaries of their existing knowledge.

Extending Ghoshal's categories to the teaching and learning domain, we would argue that a good MBA programme needs to focus on at least two of these areas, whilst developing a respect for a third. That is, MBA graduates need the ability to draw confidently on the findings of research, to integrate across disciplinary boundaries and to apply these critical thinking processes in the real, messy complexity of living management problems.

The onus on business schools, therefore, is to source the right kinds of faculty within the right kind of curriculum. This requires a 'hybrid' approach both to faculty recruitment, what some have called a 'two-track' approach (see Mast, 2006), and curriculum development. Business schools need to draw on experienced business executives, rigorous researchers and those who can work effectively in teams comprising both. Similarly, MBA curricula need to retain the capacity to teach and explore some subjects in critical depth, as well as, foster a more integrative meta-perspective to deal with the dynamic complexity of living management issues.

## Decision implementation

Finally, leading business schools address head-on the challenge of contributing to their graduates' capacity for decision implementation. At first glance, this may seem to be outside of the university domain and something graduates should 'do afterwards'. However, once we recognize that decision implementation is increasingly a collaborative endeavor, the role of the education institution becomes clear. Employees, managers and leaders execute with others. In an increasingly internationalizing world, this means they need to navigate around the difficulties of diversity in all its forms. Educators who have the capacity to build a respect for diversity of opinion and approach, and who go even

<sup>5</sup>The term coined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) to signify a mental state of operation that entails full immersion in an activity which leads to feelings of energized focus. It has come to denote optimal experience that is linked to high levels of motivation, self-confidence, competence and enjoyment.

farther than this by developing an active desire to seek diversity as a means of enhancing understanding of self and others, play a substantial role in developing decision implementation abilities.

The success of education generally, and business education in particular, will be measured not only by the amount of knowledge gained and critical thinking developed, but also by the transformation that takes place to ensure that the graduates become 'comfortable with being uncomfortable'. Are they able to handle 'difference' and 'diversity'? Can they face the risks of committing to decisions? Do they have the flexible technical and interpersonal know-how to implement these decisions themselves or through others? Transforming businesses and societies requires individuals of courage who are prepared to test their boundaries and find creative and legitimate ways of moving those outwards - individuals who have been exposed to the best that our academic environment has to offer. Nurturing these approaches requires particular kinds of educators with qualities that are not necessarily easy to find.

## Conclusion

To conclude, we find ourselves taking the stance of a lawyer rather than a judge or member of a jury who is required to reach a definitive conclusion. As a lawyer, we reserve the right to use both hands, and possibly a third, in answering our own questions.

- On the one hand, we propose that placing lifelong learning at the center of MBA programme debates requires a significant investment in inquiry. In other words, an investment that both supports and encourages academics in their efforts to uncover new knowledge and to develop better ways of ordering and making sense of what may be called existing understanding. That research is placed so high on the agenda of top-level academic institutions is to be commended and encouraged.
- On the other hand, we believe that stimulating the enthusiasm for inquiry in others is also critical, if we wish to create a sustainable culture of 'self-driven' lifelong learning. Although not mutually exclusive by any means, gifted teachers are those who have the ability to inspire other individuals to seek information, to question their own assumptions, and to develop as self-motivated continuous learners. Achieving this objective clearly requires that the teacher has an inquiring mind, but he or she may not have as developed a personal research capacity as the academic we have described above.
- This of course, seems to bring up a third hand - making the case for the hybrid! Much has been said about the need for balance and for academics that are both active researchers and committed teachers. Some even suggest that there is a high correlation between teaching and research performance, although studies do not necessarily support this (Felder, 1994; Hattie & Marsh, 2004). However, most of us have to compromise when faced with the scarce resource of

time. Hybrid academics are no different. They make the choice to sacrifice some of their capacity for research in order to devote time and energy to improved teaching or vice versa. However, by choosing to operate in both domains, they may have a natural advantage in transmitting their own desire for inquiry to others and thereby planting the seeds for self-inquiry in the learner.

Having presented three hands, like a gifted lawyer, we find ourselves wishing to make the case for all three. We are convinced that lifelong learning requires that we invest in and support researchers, teachers and hybrids. Institutions of higher learning are no different from corporations in this respect. They require a portfolio of skills and need to recognize that multiple actors are required when it comes to the processes of inquiry and stimulating inquiry in others. While we certainly do not hold with the view that teaching and research are located at the opposite ends of the same continuum, it is equally wrong to assume that one needs to be a cutting edge international researcher to stimulate the minds of others. An inquiring mind is necessary for any teacher, but whether this mind needs, of necessity, to have a capacity for research at the level of a leading international scholar is another question.

Making the case for a career path for teaching oriented academics does not presume that the case for the research orientation is diminished. Business schools seek to produce graduates who are wealth creators - individuals who contribute to making the total worth more than the sum of the parts. This is not a zero-sum game and neither, we would argue, is the decision about multiple academic career paths. However, we do acknowledge that, like wealth creation, developing a system that accommodates and motivates the portfolio of academics is by no means a simple task - but it is a task worth facing.

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