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The Practice Turn-Away: Forty Years of Spoon-Feeding in Management Education

Abstract *This article takes a whimsical look at the state of pedagogical delivery in management education over the last 40 years, and concludes that the long tradition of what the author refers to as ‘spoon-feeding in management education’ is unlikely to end anytime soon. His case is built on neo-institutional theory, which posits that the pressures to conform to standardized classroom teaching are highly resistant based on deep-seated and long-standing consensual beliefs and traditions. The principal alternative of employing practice-based and critical approaches has been diluted in favor of the promotion of reductionist and mythological active learning strategies which, though useful, are unlikely to lead to the acquisition of prudential wisdom. **Key Words:** action learning; critical theory; institutional theory; management education; MBA education; pedagogy; practice-based education; resistance to change; training and development*

The most critical issue in management education and development over the last 40 years is actually a non-event. I speak of the rather dramatic non-use of practice-based pedagogical strategies, particularly in formal academic programs of management, in spite of significant theorizing and evidence of the value of such strategies. For example, the case method is still very much alive and highly practiced at the expense of action learning or even of project-based approaches.

In this article, after providing a glimpse of my contention of the reproof of practice-based pedagogies, I will attempt to explain why there is resistance to such methods using a neo-institutional perspective. I do so in the hope that once a proper diagnosis can be made, there might be a greater chance to effect change toward methods more in keeping with a practice orientation which, many critics such as myself, believe to be far more effective in preparing managers for the assumption of useful leadership roles in 21st-century organizations. By practice orientation, I refer to the dynamic social process—the actors, actions and interactions, activities, structures, language and other cultural artifacts—through which learning can be elicited. In practice-based learning, we attempt to study

this process (and its contingent dynamics) both in conjunction with but also apart from the classroom, and pay attention to both its institutionalized as well as emergent nature.

The 'Practice Turn' in Social Theory and Practice

Distinct from the more fixed world of classic academic scholarship, which has long been viewed as being accessed through reason and intellect rather than through experience, the practice-based pedagogies have embodied the 'practice turn' in social theory and practice. Using language as an ends, not as a means of transference, practice-based apologists contend that planned engagement and collective reflection on that experience can expand and even create knowledge while at the same time serving to improve practice.

Aside from its face validity, practice-based learning has been found to have salutary effects at multiple levels of experience: individual, group, project, organization, community, and network. It is a form of learning that resists closure because it is usually based on real-time inquiries rather than exclusively on a priori conceptualizations. It also responds to the need for critical reflection about work and organizational processes that concurrently enhance self-awareness and political consciousness. It thus considers knowledge as a process to encourage its use in service of, and often in the midst of, action. Through the interplay between action and feedback, learners acquire more valid social knowledge, more effective social action, and greater alignment among self-knowledge, action, and knowledge-of-other. Finally, while promoting learning across a range of outcomes in such domains as academic, personal, career, and professional/work skills development, it can more than incidentally create fairly significant returns on investment especially at the project level.

Spoon-Feeding Education

Although *Management Learning* has dedicated itself to critique and to a view of knowledge that is provisional and contested rather than permanent and totalizing, management education provision, particularly in the USA, has turned away from this shift by sustaining the longstanding institutional practice of spoon-feeding education. This form of education, seeing knowledge as tangible and permanent, requires it to be transferred from the mind of the knower into the mind of the current or future user. Its epistemology is based on a representational model that parses management practice into a set of detached, predictable, and teachable categories that can capture and explain management in spite of its inherently messy, fluctuating, and accidental nature (Chia, 2006; Raelin, 2007).

It is also an epistemology in the tradition of the Enlightenment that seeks to create subjects who can ultimately control their own destiny by embodying a range of values and dispositions regarding how one should 'act' in the world. To be educated, in this view, is not necessarily to possess knowledge as much as it is to assume one's position in the social bureaucratic order normalized and rationalized through discursive practices. Cases of successful businessmen and women

demonstrating the application of the critical principles and practices underlying the field reifies the knowledge delivery mechanism. In Alvesson's words (1993), knowledge becomes 'credible stories'.

As a reaction to the passivity of the student in submitting to lecture-based classroom education, so-called 'active learning' methods have been designed to augment lectures with so-called discussion teaching (Christensen, 1991). Using a variety of techniques, such as case studies, problem-based learning, and simulations, these so-called 'experiential' activities attempt to simulate real life experience in order to give students and trainees a taste for the use of concepts in action. The popularity of the case method in particular is quite striking in its incidence. The Harvard Business School, the clear instigator and the most prominent disseminator of business cases sells about 7 million copies of cases a year and the volume is rising. Fast on its heels is the Ivey School of Management whose sales of cases top 1 million copies a year, with the Asian market becoming increasingly significant (Anders, 2007). Meanwhile, cases have become almost *de rigeur* as either primary curricular vehicles or as supplements to standard textual resources. McGraw-Hill's custom publishing division, known as Primis, for example, sold nearly 300,000 cases in 2007 (Golden, 2007).

However, simulated experience, be it from cases or from actual simulations such as in-box exercises, is just that—simulated, not real. It allows students to observe and discuss how others act in real situations, or to have them observe and discuss how they have acted under simulated conditions. It is a useful way to begin to apply theory into practice but it is not sufficient as a holistic form of learning, which can take account of such real-time and relational contingencies as unplanned disturbances, non-deliberate coping strategies, defensive routines, or just plain failures and surprises.

A Neo-Institutional Account of Resistance to Change

I submit that institutionalism, particularly neo-institutional theory, may be a useful lens in which to view the resistance of higher educational organizations to alternatives to standard classroom approaches, such as practice-based pedagogies, no matter their benefit to students and to the learning process. Institutionalism holds that such forces as habit, history, and tradition create value congruence among organizational actors, producing a rule-like status that leads to resistance to change (Berger and Luckmann, 1967; Hinings and Greenwood, 1988). Neo-institutionalists (e.g. DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 1977), using such concepts as 'structuration', contend that pressures to conform within an organizational field are so strong as to highly constrain any form of organizational change. They point to such factors as inertia, persistence, and isomorphism as the basis for continuity in organizational practices that persist as 'rationalized myths' (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). They are rationalized in the sense that particular organizational practices, such as classroom education, may be defended as a superior process on the basis of deep-seated consensual beliefs and longstanding traditions rather than on the basis of empirical verification. Where empirical verification does exist, it can be circular and self-sealing. To cite an example, Stewart and Dougherty (1993) found that the use of case studies

in accounting education, compared to a traditional textbook approach, resulted in higher essay exam performance by students because they were better able to 'identify the *right* (italics added) questions to ask in approaching and solving a process cost essay question'. In another example, the Harvard Business School Press (HBS, 2007) on its web page, dedicated to answering the question whether the case method is effective, explains that 'the best measure is the extraordinary success of our alumni. HBS graduates have gone on to positions of leadership in an exceptional range of ... organizations around the globe. And many of them have maintained that their experience with the case method at HBS has been crucial to their success'.

As a parallel to institutionalization, a process known as 'deinstitutionalization' has stipulated that some institutional practices within organizations under certain conditions may erode, may be extinguished, or may even be reinstitutionalized (Greenwood et al., 2002). If the conditions in which deinstitutionalization occurs are predictable, we might be able to forecast what it might take to become more successful in introducing practice-based forms of pedagogy in the near future, if we truly believe it to be more beneficial to students.

Let's consider then the three mechanisms, as per Oliver (1992), which may lead to a modification of classroom pedagogy in favor of more practice-based and critical approaches.

Political Pressures

There are a number of political conditions that may precipitate an erosion or displacement of the dominant pedagogical paradigm, such as mounting performance crises, growing criticism of the status quo, increased pressure for innovation, or a reduction in conformist behavior. Of these forces, the one condition that appears to be most promising in fostering change on the management education agenda is the issue of performance. Ever since the Hayes and Abernathy (1980) critique, there has been a growing chorus of critiques contending that our MBA students come out of school overly analytical, narrow, short-term-oriented, hyper-technical, and uninterested in life-long learning. Nevertheless, that the critique has lasted for over 25 years without material change in the methodology of the curriculum serves to endorse the robustness of the current institutional infrastructure.

The response to the critique has come in the form of a mythological solution based on one form or another of active learning. In my own college, for example, in order to display dedication to a practice orientation, the faculty will often point to its liberal use of guest speakers and case studies. Unfortunately, these solutions are not adequate responses to a need to expose students to an embedded, local, and practical intelligence required of them if they are to profoundly apprehend the often intangible components of keen observation, integrative sensemaking, and generous interrelating that characterize the craft of management.

In addition to the increasing use of active learning strategies, there have been increasing calls to 'professionalize' management education. By assuming the trappings of a real profession, for example by ensuring that management teachers engage in a full-scale research program and by immersing management students in a protracted period of study prior to entering the profession, it is asserted that

management would be in a better position to assert its legitimacy. The field, as a profession, could avail itself of scientific tools to gradually organize its knowledge into a universal abstract theory ultimately convertible into a core curriculum. The core curriculum, once sanctioned by an accreditation body, would be able to ward off the commercialization and commodification of professional knowledge and the resulting vocationalism (Donaldson, 2002; Trank and Rynes, 2003).

Unfortunately, the proclivity to break up management into component parts in order to teach the parts, to advance research specialization as a method to augment the reputation of faculty, and to equip students with advanced knowledge of management prior to engagement in management has backfired, at least if we are to judge the value of theoretical coverage in enhancing critical judgment and performance in practice. Other than its penchant for screening students who can contend with competitive conditions to be faced in corporate life and who can display a commitment to the task—however conceived—there is concern whether the professional model has truly been an advance over atheoretical premodern methods. Premodern management education consisted of craft-like methods such as trial-and-error, on-the-job learning, and the passing on of accumulated skills and abilities from one generation to another.

Meanwhile, an accreditation body was created to sanction management education, initially in the USA, though its reach has now extended to the global community operating in some 70 countries. I speak of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International). The AACSB considers itself to be the professional association for college and university management educational organizations and the premier accrediting agency for bachelor's, master's, and doctoral degree programs in business administration and accounting. As an advocate for management education, AACSB International represents the combined influence of more than 1000 member universities, including more than 30,000 faculty members and 700,000 students majoring in business (AACSB, 2007).

While the AACSB has been outspoken in its support of rigorous standards in management educational provision, in its commitment to overcome industry-wide strategic challenges, and in its endorsement of particular themes to enrich the curriculum, such as ethics or international studies, it has given little priority to practice-based pedagogical experimentation. In one of its most heralded reports in recent years, *Education at Risk* (AACSB, 2002), there is only one mention of 'experiential education', and the focus was not on delivery mechanisms as much as it was on the need to consider recruiting nontraditional teachers since presumably they would be the ones most capable of accommodating a 'clinical' model of education. Confirming this perspective, former longstanding AACSB managing director, Milton Blood (2007), noted:

AACSB has taken a hands-off policy toward any use of accreditation standards to prescribe methods of teaching. Accordingly, it has never taken a persistent position, nor has it made development of experiential teaching a focus of professional development (for faculty members) or organizational development (for schools).

From an institutional perspective, one can surmise that the field of management education has implicitly interpreted this lack of emphasis as de-emphasis of any form of practice-based epistemology.

There is another perspective on why institutional influence has had a role in sustaining the current pedagogical structure in spite of the seeming ineffectiveness of classroom training, in this case in the management development context. The adoption of formal training is normally planned by elite gatekeepers of the diffusion of management knowledge. However, the knowledge that gets produced and disseminated conforms to a world view that is often disparate from the locus of its implementation—operating management. Although well-presented by instructors and consequently well-understood by trainees, the new knowledge may be strategically concealed by these trainees for fear that its use would be punished if practiced in their organization. Moreover, there is a well-known tendency on the part of operating managers, at various levels within their organizational hierarchy and representing different sub-units that compete for resources, to intentionally distort information passed down from the top.

Functional Pressures

Deinstitutionalization can result from reduced legitimacy due to functional or technical instrumentalities as well as due to transitions in political interests. There may be a reduction in economic utility, criteria for success may begin to conflict, or the effectiveness of the endeavor can be called into question.

Within the corporate sector, the critique against standard classroom training because of assessment considerations seems to have been taken seriously. In fact, measurement or *metrics* seem to be the rage among high-level learning officials, such as chief learning officers. Unfortunately, in spite of attempts by some providers to provide standard measurement devices, such as Six Sigma, which provides a rigorous process to eliminate defects in any process, there has not yet been agreement on any universal criteria to evaluate training. For example, an executive briefing by *Chief Learning Officer Magazine* (Whitney, 2006), one of the leading publications in this sector, confessed:

C-suite executives almost universally value ROI when they look to the CLO to account for not only where learning dollars go and to whom, but also to know that learning investments have a significant impact on the business. Learning dollars must be justified and results clearly illustrated to warrant future investments and to establish the correct direction learning activities should take in order to elicit the greatest impact on the enterprise. How exactly senior learning leaders can do that is not so well defined, particularly because all learning returns are not equal.

Part of the difficulty in producing accurate measures is that management training tries to make neat an activity that is normally messy. Knowledge work, such as management, is a complex practice since problems change from one setting to the next. Further, using the scattershot approach to training, in which learners are exposed to a wide array of functional applications, may waste resources when learners are mostly interested in a provision that is timely and dispensed in the right dose to help them 'learn their way out of trouble!' It is also beginning to dawn on training managers that practitioners, who travel off to residential training experiences, though personally transformed by the training, find it almost impossible to influence their organizations in the 'transformed' way when

they return. The problem is that the transformation is individual in scope. The individual may have been transformed, but the organization and its departments and divisions have remained in their familiar patterns while the manager was away. This condition was acknowledged by former chief learning officer at GE and at Goldman Sachs, Steve Kerr, who once quipped that 'it's Organization Development 101. You never send a changed person back to an unchanged environment'.

Social Pressures

Social forces precipitating deinstitutionalization arise from the social environment surrounding the network in question and may constitute such factors as a loss of cultural consensus on meanings or interpretations attached to particular tasks and activities, disruptions in the organization's historical continuity, changes in state laws or societal expectations, or structural changes that disaggregate collective norms.

There has been some dissension in the learning communities within higher and adult education regarding what constitutes learning itself. Situated learning theorists have argued, for instance, that learning involves active engagement in the action at hand. One does not become 'learned' by simply spouting formulas or proofs. Citing prepared answers to standard questions does little to establish one's expertise. Learning occurs not only within the classroom but within a community of practitioners involved in contested interaction about the real questions of practice.

There has also been growing apprehension among a key stakeholder group in the educational delivery enterprise regarding the effectiveness of traditional textbook teaching, namely among teachers themselves. I speak here of the longstanding historical practice again of spoon-feeding information to a captive and passive student body. Although this practice has been met by more objectors within the management development community, even the professoriate has voiced some concern that the lecture mode of presentation neither seems to stimulate students nor produce the desired results (Jaffe, 1998). A pervasive complaint among faculty has been the problem of teaching to the 'silent classroom', in which students write down everything that is said while at the same time sitting quietly, disengaged, without anything to contribute (Gimenez, 1989).

The logic of this process of teaching student passivity is reflective of contradictory institutional forces. On one hand, we have educators, whether in formal university classrooms or in corporate training facilities, intent on teaching effectively about their subject, whereas on the other hand, we have students or practitioners appearing to go to great lengths not to learn what is taught. This contradiction by no means suggests incompetence on the part of university or corporate instructors; in fact, both make every effort to make their sessions active and practical.

Unfortunately, an implicit theory of passivity guides the foregoing pedagogical approach: students and practitioners are considered (and consider themselves to be) passive learners under the assumption that they cannot take charge of their own learning and cannot use conceptual knowledge unless it is reinterpreted for them and delivered using carefully reconstructed methods. The passivity of

learners is reinforced by the longstanding assumption that the role of the teacher is to rescue learners from their state of 'not knowing'. This condition, referred to as the 'empty vessel' approach or 'learning as commodification' calls for teachers to fill the vessel with the knowledge that they possess and that the students (or their parents) are paying good money to procure. Thus, a form of isomorphism occurs based on three simple stipulations:

- (a) everyone else is doing it
- (b) customers of knowledge are demanding it, and
- (c) it has become accepted practice.

Teachers collude in allaying learner anxiety by structuring the curriculum to minimize unexpected or anxiety-provoking occurrences and by controlling the class to prevent destabilizing dynamics, be they irrelevant discourses from students, emotional outbursts, or even silences. The last thing expected from teachers is to confront students with their own state of not knowing and to help them face the fears that such not knowing can produce (Raelin, 2008). Otherwise, such a practice would be akin to abdication of one's responsibility as a teacher to meet students' dependency needs.

The lack of utility of classroom teaching, nevertheless, is not a sentiment leading to universal calls for change among faculty who face countervailing pressures to produce visible evidence of scholarship in the form of rated publications. Such pressures lead to offsetting institutional forces that sustain the status quo of passivity in order to cause minimal disruptions in the faculty member's schedule so that he or she can continue to turn out the necessary publications to retain employment and possibly tenure. Engaging in practice-based provision involves a fair amount of time and effort. For example, in internships programs, there is a need to establish external contacts to provide real-time experiences. There is also a need for faculty to develop a degree of efficacy in orchestrating this pedagogical alternative. Further, if the instructor wishes to upend the tradition of passivity, he or she can always turn to the more orderly active learning strategies which, as noted earlier, can only go so far in exposing students to the less controlled but more realistic lessons of experience afforded by real-world practice.

Conclusion

Given the foregoing account, there is not necessarily a lot of room for hope if we aspire to change the current paradigm of management educational delivery. The classroom textual model is alive and well and the deinstitutionalizing pressures suggested earlier are not potent. For those like myself who aspire to see our students and practitioners learn from lived experience in a deliberate and reflective methodology that can lead to the acquisition of prudential wisdom (Grint, 2007), I would point to a few leaks in the dike:

1. Criticism against the surface nature of MBA education is likely to continue until such time that the corporate world take a stand against hiring people who

only offer technical skills which can as easily be acquired on the job. Recruiters may ultimately see the light in developing people who understand the meaning inherent in the current organizational context rather than exporting young visionaries from the outside. Henry Mintzberg's recent book, *Managers Not MBAs* (2004), has galvanized sympathies along these lines in a manner not seen before.

2. Although it is important to support the use of experiential activities by lecturers to 'actionalize' management education within the classroom, instructors themselves may see value in expanding their teaching beyond classroom experimentation to live action learning. The challenge would be to find ways to prepare them and to enhance their pedagogic self-efficacy while ensuring their release time to continue developing their research portfolios.
3. There could be a rebellion on the demand side as new generations of learners seek alternatives to a stagnant product in a much more crowded market. For instance, millennials, who have been increasingly involved in community-based service learning experiences and internships, may begin to question the ultimate value of standard classroom instruction in helping them not just understand but wend their way through the social-political morass of organizational life. They may also begin to resent their lack of preparation when faced with instances of subtle coercion from their managers that impedes their voice, producing in some cases an unanticipated exposure to issues of personal and social consciousness. Part-time students may also begin to resent, rather than tolerate, the spoon-feeding of information devoid of contextual appreciation of their workplace problems.
4. Finally, as increasingly heralded cases come into the limelight (such as those of Michael Dell, Richard Branson, and Bill Gates, who never attended business school), entrepreneurs and intrapreneurs might begin to acknowledge that there is no substitute for the school of hard knocks in preparing oneself for management, with one exception. Can management education indeed use the school of hard knocks as a partner in preparing aspiring managers to assume productive and compassionate roles in readying our organizations for life in the 21st century?

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