10 On solutions to the crisis in management education: can business schools improve the effectiveness of managers?

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In this chapter I want to explore the management educator’s nightmare. Imagine the following scenario. A manager knocks on your office door. You cordially invite her in. She takes a seat and, after some pleasantries, says the following: ‘I’ve just had a poor performance review and have got to get better quickly or I’m going to lose my job. You’re a professor of management. Please help me become a better manager.’

To me, this scenario is a nightmare because it exposes the enduring problem in management education. In many, probably most, universities, the subject is taught at all levels from a theory-driven perspective rather than developing practical managerial skills. This dichotomy separates most academic teaching from most in-company training. In universities, the material that is taught is primarily generated from decades of studies into the nature of management. Study after study has built up a body of knowledge that is translated into the best current advice for managers. But such advice is, initially, theoretical and generic, and must be applied by students to their own specific environments. Unfortunately, helping students with this application is rarely given the same attention that the explanation of theory is given, thereby leaving many students dangling, unsure of the utility of their learning.

In contrast, most in-company training aims to address the specific issues confronting managers and designs and delivers training to help them with these challenges. Often this will be grounded in the best advice from academic studies where company trainers have worked out the practical and cultural conversion of theories into the specifics of the organisation, but the purpose is different. It is not about the general development of managers; instead it is intended to change and embed new behaviours that will improve performance in the particular environment in which managers are working. However, although this is the intent of most in-company training, it must be noted that there is a substantial literature on the failure of such programmes to achieve these goals as the challenges of analysing
specific management problems and translating best practice are too difficult (e.g. Bauer et al., 2014; Grossman and Salas, 2011; Johnson et al., 2012).

So when I am confronted by a manager wanting 'here-and-now, real-world improvement with their particular managerial effectiveness', I am being asked to do something that is currently outside my remit. My theoretical approach addresses general managerial development across situations and environments. It provides insights and understanding, but remains more theoretical than practical, although, obviously, I hope it offers insight into how to solve real managerial problems along the way. So, faced with a manager requesting immediate help to make her a more effective manager, I might refer her to a training provider or her HR department, to the local technical college, or even offer her a place on our MBA. The one thing I am unlikely to be able to do is to provide her with the immediate practical help she wants.

In this chapter, I want to explore various aspects of this dilemma that management educators find themselves in. I shall begin by examining what has become known as 'the crisis in management education' that addresses the teaching dilemma described above. Following this, I shall look at various ways of reconceptualising management education that attempt to make it more practical and relevant to the immediate effectiveness of managers. These include action learning, the competence movement, an intertwining of liberal arts and business education as embodied in the Carnegie Report, and evidence-based management (EBM), which might offer a bridge across the theory–practice divide. Importantly, one approach within the EBM movement known as the 'little c' approach appears to offer a solution to the crisis in management education.

The chapter in this volume written by William Lightfoot (Chapter 11) is an interesting companion piece to this chapter. William reviews the history of business education and, like me, focuses on the crisis in management education. We diverge after this starting point. Whereas I take a teaching-centric perspective, William takes a business-centric one. These different lenses provide very different analyses, with the biggest divergence being that, while William's analysis relates to organisational needs, mine addresses the individual learner. Although my approach is perhaps more out of step with conventional thinking about MBAs and business schools, which are traditionally thought to develop the skills necessary to run organisations, I believe that business schools should instead develop people to help them survive and thrive at all levels in organisations. For me, a successful business student is not necessarily one whose organisation thrives, but one who functions well regardless of the success or failure of their employer.
THE CRISIS IN MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

There has been more than a decade of criticism of management education and our ability to develop managers (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2013). Although such criticism had been around for a while (Leavitt, 1986, 1989; Mintzberg, 1996; Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Mintzberg and Lampel, 2001; Porter and McKibbin, 1988), it gained a platform with the introduction of the journal Academy of Management Learning & Education in 2002 that contained Pfeffer and Fong’s (2002) article in its first issue, an article that has become seminal in this debate.

Pfeffer and Fong (2002) pulled together various findings, observations, and arguments to critique the business school offering, especially in regard to the MBA and the development of people in executive roles. They argue that, despite the dramatic growth of business schools and the increasing importance of the financial strength of universities, ‘Neither possessing an MBA degree nor grades earned in courses correlate with career success, results that question the effectiveness of schools in preparing their students’ (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002, p. 78). Further, their analysis of business school research leads them to conclude that ‘there is little evidence that Business school research is influential on management practice’ (ibid.). If true, this assertion would jeopardise the theory-driven approach to teaching in business schools because it would mean that much of the typical management curriculum is addressing matters of interest more to academic researchers than to practising managers. Pfeffer and Fong (2002, pp. 89–90) are not all doom and gloom; they offer an alternative way of conceptualising management education that brings the academic teachers closer to practice. Synthesising from others, they suggest that the following four features may improve the experience offered by MBA programmes:

1. Business schools should teach experienced and practising managers, which should help faculty confront the relevance of their teaching.
2. Programs should be multidisciplinary thereby recognizing more closely the nature of managerial work.
3. Programs should change the way that managers think about business issues rather than fill them with concepts and techniques. This is a call for deeper and transformational learning in place of the quickly forgotten concepts and techniques.
4. There should be a clinical or action component to programs to help make them relevant to managers’ jobs.

Pfeffer and Fong’s (2002) work had the effect of framing the debate about the crisis of management education around the ‘relevance gap’, suggesting that business schools are out of step with practice and perhaps
ignorant of it as well. This issue was followed up by many scholars (e.g. Barker, 2010; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Birnik and Billsberry, 2007; Cummings, 2007; Ghoshal, 2005; Gosling and Mintzberg, 2004; Podolny, 2009; Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009, 2013; Rynes, 2007, 2012; Spender, 2007; Starkey and Tempest, 2008; Tushman and O'Reilly, 2007), perhaps most notably by Henry Mintzberg in his much-cited book, *Managers, Not MBAs*, in 2004.

Within this debate, there is the argument about whether management is a science (Taylor, 1911), or an art (Lilienthal, 1967; Mangham, 1990; Spender, 2007), or a craft (Carroll et al., 2008; Mintzberg, 1987), or a profession (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004; Trank and Rynes, 2003; cf. Barker, 2010) or something else. This is a crucial issue because the way that management is regarded influences what management educators believe can be taught, how it should be taught, and the nature and impact that teaching might have on managerial effectiveness. In its broadest terms, those who think that management is a science believe that managerial decision-making should be rational, systematic and objective. When viewed as an art, it is constructed and subjective. Mintzberg (1987, p.66) describes management as a craft, as something that 'evokes traditional skill, dedication, perfection through the mastery of detail'. When viewed as a profession, it is implied that management has an established and codified knowledge base, a professional ethos, and training in functionally oriented schools (Billsberry and Birnik, 2010; Khurana and Nohria, 2008).

Consequently, a manager looking for 'here-and-now' advice to improve her performance will receive markedly different help depending on the philosophical stance of the management educator she asks. If the management educator believes management is a science, the teaching is likely to involve many tools and techniques. In contrast, a 'management-as-art' person will offer insights and perspectives, whereas 'management-as-craft' and 'management-as-profession' educators will try to embed management development in workplaces rather than in classrooms (Fenton-O'Creevy et al., 2006; Hawkins and Winter, 1995). The bottom line with these different philosophical and definitional perspectives on management is that the discipline is unsure how to define 'management' and this uncertainty means there is no clear advice on how to develop managers. Interestingly, though, in recent years the reaction of management education scholars has been to move away from destructive breast-beating and towards new perspectives offering solutions to the 'crisis'. 
ACTION LEARNING

Action learning was an early reaction to traditional business school practice. Pedler et al. (2003, p. 49) describe how Reg Revans, the man usually credited with its introduction, set it up in opposition to the management ideas that were arriving in the UK from the USA:

Revans resigned his Chair at the University of Manchester in 1965 following negotiations over the new Manchester Business school, where he describes the victory of the 'book' culture of Owens College over the 'tool' culture of the then Manchester College of Technology, later UMIST (Revans, 1980, p. 197).

He favoured the latter as being closer to the needs of industry and objected to the importation of US Business school practice, describing the MBA as 'Moral Bankruptcy Assured'.

Action learning is described differently by different writers on the subject. MacNamara and Weekes (1982, p. 880) succinctly describe a version that gained some traction in the 1980s and 1990s:

Action learning is a term which describes a management education model that emphasizes self-development and learning by doing. The heart of the action learning model is the action learning 'set' – a group of about five participants meeting at regular intervals. In the set, the dynamics which emerge in small groups draw out the experience and practical judgment of the participants while they are developing and implementing solutions to real-life management problems.

Revans (1982, p. 65) adds to this definition:

Action learning differs from normal training (education, development) in that its primary objective is to learn how to ask questions in conditions of risk, rather than to find the answers to questions that have already been precisely defined by others – and that do not allow of ambiguous responses because the examiners have all the approved answers.

Raelin (2006, p. 152) defines action learning more simply as 'reflection on real-time work experience dealing with unfamiliar problems'.

Although a reaction to US business school practice, which is usually perceived as rational and objective, Revans (1967, 1971, 1972) also adopted the scientific method himself. He envisaged five stages to solve managerial problems:

1. Observe the state of the environment.
2. Develop a hypothesis about the nature of the environment.
3. Test the hypothesis by experimentation.
4. Audit the results.
5. Monitor and review the results, revising the theory if necessary.

As noted by MacNamara and Weekes (1982), this method mirrors Kolb’s (1974) learning process, which it pre-dates, with the main difference being ‘experimentation’ in Revans’s model compared to the more general ‘experience’ in Kolb’s approach. It is a simple process of having an idea, testing it, learning from it, and trying out a fresh idea in a culture of continuous development. It ‘attempts to highlight the practical knowledge that is on the doorstep of the learner but for his or her systematic examination of it’ (Raelin and Coghlan, 2006, p. 673).

The action learning perspective has maintained a small body of supporters, often masquerading as experiential learning, service learning or project-based learning, but it has never become the mainstream teaching philosophy in business schools. Revans (1982) himself sees the approach as high risk, as action learning requires altering real business processes, which may have an impact on people, products and profits. Action learning has this clinical core in which academics become management consultants guiding their students to address and learn from real-world problems. As noted earlier, such an approach aligns poorly with much of the faculty working in business schools (Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; cf. Kezar and Gehrke, 2014). It is one thing for business school academics to advocate changes in behaviour, process, or strategy in a classroom setting based on generalised research findings; it is something quite different to embed teaching inside the complexity, multidisciplinarity, and specificity of students’ own work challenges. It requires advanced practical consultancy skills allied to facilitation skills and a broad and deep subject knowledge, which is completely the opposite of what business doctorate programmes, the source of most new business school academics, produce with their narrow focus on tightly defined research questions (Khurana, 2007; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Rynes, 2012; Shapiro et al., 2007; Starkey and Tiratsoo, 2007).

Vince and Martin (1993, p. 214) are concerned that the scientific and rational underpinnings of the action learning approach have poorly integrated psychological and political components, thereby creating a ‘self-limiting perspective on learning and change for individuals and organisations’. Raelin (2006, p. 164) sees action learning as a possible solution to the individualism in North American culture: ‘we seem to value, even revere, individualism, although we may preach teamwork’. He believes that the approach can bring people together and encourage collaborative leadership. Therein, he identifies another concern with the adoption of action learning in business school settings: it is poorly adapted to the prevailing culture of individualism in organisations.
Despite such concerns, action learning has a faithful following. There is something appealing and necessary in locating learning in managers’ jobs. As Mangham (1990, p. 115) says,

"to learn, managers must be given the opportunity to perform, to be involved with and responsible for the solution to a business problem; a messy, inchoate, emergent text where the manager has to be given the opportunity to step out from the chorus."

But, as described, if such an approach is to become mainstream, there are many practical problems to solve first.

**MANAGERIAL COMPETENCES**

The competence movement builds on a long tradition in management studies of attempts to discover and categorise the nature of managerial work and the skills that managers need to possess in order to perform well (e.g. Drucker, 1974; Fayol, 1916; Mintzberg, 1973; Stewart, 1963). It rose to the fore in the late 1980s and 1990s, mainly in the UK, as a way to bridge the relevance gap. At the heart of the competence movement was an attempt to identify the core behaviours of managers and to link these to performance (Salaman, 1995; Woodruffe, 1992). The competence approach differed from the skills approach because it focused on the activities to be done (competences) rather than the abilities needed to do them (competencies). It assumes that there are generic activities that all managers do and that managers have the required abilities to tackle them: ‘The generic nature of the Management Standards reflect what most managers, in all sectors of the economy, should be able to do’ (Watts, 1990, p. 1).

In the UK, the approach was championed by the Management Charter Initiative (MCI; now the Management Standards Centre), which set out a detailed categorisation and hierarchy of managerial competences. It splits the manager’s job into four key roles: managing operations; managing finance; managing people; and managing information. Each of these was split into multiple units (e.g. create, maintain, and enhance effective working relationships), and these contained multiple elements (e.g. monitor and control the use of resources). Further complicating the approach, each of the elements contained criterion-referenced standards against which a manager’s workplace performance could be assessed (Baker, 1991), and there were different standards for different levels of management. The MCI had a great deal of impact in the UK, with more than 1000 organisations signing up in quick order (Baker, 1996; Frank,
1991) and universities and colleges adjusting their curricula to incorporate the MCI approach.

Boyatzis (1982) advanced an alternative approach to competences. His approach is based on personal characteristics, rather than abilities required to accomplish generic activities successfully. He argues that years of research into the nature of managerial work plus his own endeavours in which he analysed over 2000 managers have resulted in the identification of tasks common to most managers. His approach involves surfacing the distinctive personal characteristics of competent managers, differentiating between threshold competences that all managers require and differentiator competencies that distinguish high-performing from average managers. His competency framework contains 13 competences, which he groups into six clusters: goal and action management; leadership; human resource management; directing subordinates; focus on others; and specialised knowledge.

The competence approach, particularly that of the MCI, quickly drew a great deal of criticism. First, there was a sense that the managerial competences approach has a remedial tone. As outlined by the MCI, it seems to provide a set of base-level competences that all managers may possess, but these do not translate well into higher-level sensibilities and forms of decision-making. Currie and Darby (1995, p.14) illustrate the issue thus: 'Keey's, Personnel Director of Prudential Insurance Company, was reported as regarding competences as an excellent, but very low, starting point for a conversation about a person's learning.'

Another common criticism of the approach questions the generic nature of managerial competences (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1997). Chong (2013, p.345) highlights the problem: 'Competency differences are apparent where the work environment differs.' Jubb and Robotham (1997, p.173) also describe the problem of the context-independence of management:

A particular industry or company may actually place greater emphasis on, for example, the achievement of short-term corporate goals, and so require managers to adopt appropriate short-term-oriented behaviours. These behaviours may only be effective or applicable within a corporate environment that sets a short-term horizon. Where the strategic direction of the organization focuses on the longer term, a portfolio of different management behaviours may be more appropriate. Unless there are truly generic management skills, to identify a manager as being competent per se may be incorrect, as that individual may only be effective within a particular corporate environment, i.e., certain competences could be regarded as being situation-specific.

Despite the scientific and objective appearance of competence frameworks, scholars have been concerned about whether they can be measured. Robotham and Jubb (1996, p.28) ask,
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If management is sub-divided and classified to permit measurement, in the manner suggested by proponents of the competence approach, is it still management or the ability to manage that is being measured? Given that many of the management behaviours typically to be found in the competence lists are interdependent, can those behaviours be measured or assessed in isolation?

Interestingly, when managerial competences have been measured, 'subordinates, peers, and supervisors have distinct perspectives on the managerial competences that are relevant for effectiveness' and 'specific managerial competences differ in terms of their predictive validity respectively for managerial and organisational effectiveness' (Semeijn et al., 2014). Bolden and Gosling (2006) argue that, despite their large and unwieldy nature, competence frameworks still only capture a fragment of the abilities required for performance – a view supported by Cheng et al. (2003).

These technical objections hide the bigger issue, namely that the competence approach is firmly wedded to a management as science approach. Mangham (1990, p.110) argues that management cannot be broken down into discrete competences and 'involves the reading and interpretation of events and circumstances and the expression and embodiment of that reading in action on the part of the manager'. He sees managerial success as individual, coming from interpretation and performance. 'A knowledge of finance, accounting, marketing or whatever may help the Iacocca and Harvey Jones' of this world, but it does not suffice to make them great performers' (ibid., p.114). In essence, from this perspective, management is so much more than the sum of its parts; it is something qualitatively different (Ruth, 2006; Salaman, 1995).

The competence approach has now largely disappeared from management education teaching in business schools. Partly that was based on the criticisms described above, partly because the frameworks were so cumbersome, partly because they just did not work in real-world applications, but just as importantly because our fundamental understanding of competences evolved. Several studies have shown that the curricula of business schools align poorly with the competences that businesses value (Abraham and Karns, 2009; Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009). Instead of the static frameworks described by the MCI and Boyatzis (1982), strategic management scholars began talking about dynamic capabilities and competences (e.g. Helfat et al., 2007; Helfat and Martin, forthcoming; Kor and Mesko, 2013). Initially, this was directed at the organisations, but more recently researchers have addressed dynamic managerial competences. 'Dynamic managerial capability' refers to 'the capacity of managers to purposefully create, extend or modify the resource base of an organization' (Helfat et al., 2007, p.24). Helfat and Peteraf (forthcoming) have expanded the focus of competence scholars to 'involve the capacity
to perform not only physical but also mental activities’. From this perspective, competences are ever changing according to the needs of people, resources and organisations.

CARNEGIE REPORT

The US-based Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Carnegie) conducts research and advises on policy in the field of education. One of its activities is to conduct studies into particular fields of education, which usually carry a great deal of weight. Their first report into business education, entitled *The Education of American Businessmen: A Study of University-College Programs in Business Administration*, was published in 1959 (Pierson, 1959). It came out in the same year as Gordon and Howell’s (1959) report, *Higher Education for Business*. Both reports were critical of business education in universities and called for change. In particular, they wanted a broader base to business education, with the inclusion of liberal arts and sciences and research-active management educators. Despite these calls, over the following 50 years management education became more specialised and moved away from liberal arts as described earlier. Statler and Guillet de Monthoux (2015, p.3) describe the resulting epistemological paradigm as one

that embraced logical empiricism as an account of the relationship between knowledge and the world, rational choice as an account of how people exercise knowledge in practice, and agency theory as an account of how people in organizations relate to each other.

In 2011, Carnegie published another report into undergraduate business education that echoed some of the calls from the earlier report. In particular, it called for a double-helix-style intertwining of liberal arts and business education as a necessary reaction to the ‘blind trust in an exclusively economic view of business and the world’ (Colby et al., 2011, p.29). As noted earlier, the Carnegie Report emerges at a critical juncture in the story of business education. Obviously, it is too early to assess what impact it might have, but it has already generated a great deal of discussion (Statler and Guillet de Monthoux, 2015). Interestingly, it reasserts that business education is caught in a bifurcated crisis between rigour and relevance, between art and science, between hard and soft, and between objective and constructed. Within these dichotomies, it adds weight to the relevance, art, soft and constructed sides of the argument, but rarely are linear paradoxical trade-offs solved by overwhelming weight of argument (Birnik and Billsberry, 2007). Instead, they tend to be resolved by
ies'. From this perspective, the needs of people, the requirements of teaching, the field of education, and particular fields of study. Their first report, *Educational Administration: A New Year as Gordon Hines*, both reports called for change. The active management of the organization management of liberal arts as described earlier. How people exert influence is often the subject of critical juncture to assess what it means to discuss. It reasserts the need for evidence and adds weight to existing arguments, but rarely weight of argument be resolved by

EVIDENCE-BASED MANAGEMENT

If the approaches described in the previous sections seem to be dead-ends, I want to conclude by looking at the latest great hope for the salvation of management education, evidence-based management. As a coherent and integrated set of ideas, this approach was advocated by Denise Rousseau in her 2005 Presidential Address to the Academy of Management. In short, evidence-based management borrows from medical science; the core idea is to base management practices on the best available evidence (Rousseau, 2006).

Rousseau (2006, p. 258) launched evidence-based management with a broad concept of practice: 'Evidence-based practice is a paradigm for making decisions that integrate the best available research evidence with decision maker expertise and client/customer preferences to guide practice toward more desirable results.' She included the example of Ignaz Semmelweis, who, in 1847, discovered the role that infection played in childbirth fever. He argued that physicians were contaminating patients by transferring germs between dead bodies and those they were treating and should wash their hands with chlorinated lime solutions. He was vilified for this assertion for many years and his ideas became accepted only many years after his death. This example is particularly revealing because Semmelweis was an informed and curious practitioner who made his own careful observations.

There are different ways of interpreting the evidence in evidence-based management, and Rousseau (2006, p. 260) teases out two contrasting versions: 'Big E' Evidence and 'little e' evidence. 'Big E' Evidence 'refers to generalizable knowledge regarding cause-effect connections ... derived from scientific methods' (ibid.). 'Little e' evidence, in contrast, 'refers to data systematically gathered in a particular setting to inform local decisions' (ibid.). Most writers taking an evidence-based approach have explored the 'Big E' route and considered the generalisable knowledge that we have gathered over the years and how this might be disseminated (e.g. Briner et al., 2009; Briner and Walshe, 2014; Charlier et al., 2011; Erez and Grant, 2014; Goodman et al., 2014; Trank, 2014). The 'Big E' approach runs into many of the problems discussed earlier in the chapter related to weaknesses in management research (Kepes et al., 2014; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002), our lack of understanding of management, and the difficulties in generalising from and applying management theory (Rynes,
2012). Therefore, while there are major advantages in helping management students locate, analyse, and understand bodies of knowledge, it is unlikely to be a solution to the crisis in management education.

The 'little e' evidence approach has not been forgotten completely, and Dietz et al. (2014) combine 'Big E' and 'little e' approaches by teaching an evidence-based problem-solving cycle that allows their students to tackle business cases. Through this approach, their students 'use and produce scientific evidence through literature searches and the design of local, experimental tests of causal hypotheses' (Dietz et al., 2014, p. 397). It is an interesting example that has the 'little e' approach at its heart, even if 'Big E' asserts itself powerfully. First, the evidence gathering is prompted by 'the questions, problems, and issues faced by managers and other organizational practitioners' (Briner et al., 2009, p. 20). Students then look for solutions in the literature to inform their own investigations before conducting their own studies to inform their practice. The authors argue that such in vivo teaching is highly motivating for students who are fully engaged in the issues, the method and the solutions.

The 'little e' approach is particularly interesting because it seems to transcend the dichotomous arguments by integrating both standpoints as it can conceive of management as both an art and a science, as objective and subjective, and so on. This seems an extraordinary claim, so some explanation is needed. The 'little e' approach implies that the central learning objective of any management education course is to make managers skilled investigators of their business environments. They need to be able to identify and understand the issues and problems that they face, develop and conduct investigations into these matters, analyse and interpret the results, and, finally, develop and implement solutions. This is reminiscent of action learning and standard learning models, such as Kolb (1984), where learning is a student-centred phenomenon (Marton, 1975, 1986) and replicates many experiential approaches to business education. But it differs in that the 'little e' approach seems to prescribe a curriculum of organisationally relevant research skills, which are not necessarily required in action learning and standard learning models. For example, in a 'little e' approach management students would need to understand the nature of data and information, so content on research philosophy, ontology, epistemology and research design would appear necessary, although such material would need to be packaged to make it relevant to the target audience. Following this, research methods (e.g. interviewing, observation, archival analysis, questionnaire design) would be taught as well as the ethical, political and sensitivity issues surrounding empirical research. Then, the main body of such a teaching paradigm would be a series of 'live' in-
company investigations perhaps identifying issues, exploring the nature of those issues, and implementing solutions.

The 'little e' approach described above hints at curriculum overhaul and major change to programmes; it could also be conceived on a more micro-level. Over the past 20 years, my colleagues and I have been experimenting with a 'little e' approach within management programmes by changing the nature of assessments. With adult learners, it is possible to situate assignments in the workplace utilising a range of research methods to help the students gain insight into the challenges they face. So, we have asked managers to keep a diary at work for a day to help them understand the nature of their managerial roles, asked them to interview people about what motivates them, invited them to observe their environment to understand its culture, asked them to analyse documents to understand the history of an organisation, arranged for them to run focus groups to understand staff or customers, and required them to conduct a questionnaire survey into a current concern. Such assignments require a great deal of preparation, but they help management students appreciate the relevance of their studies and mean that they come away from their courses with generic skills that they can use elsewhere.

Both these macro and micro 'little e' approaches offer a generic solution that not only develops managers regardless of their situations; they also help them directly in their own specific environments. The graduating students should develop research-related skills and use them to gain insight into their work. As such, the 'little e' approach is an emphatically applied approach to management education, as it develops a transferable skill that empowers managers to tackle work-related matters. Crucially, instead of teaching business students 'about' management, it helps them to 'be' managers, equipping them with inquiring minds and empowering them as critical thinkers. They should become critical managers who are able to look for or gather data and understand it appropriately to inform their decisions.

As mentioned earlier, the 'little e' paradigm may be able to transcend the dichotomous arguments at the heart of debates over the future of management education. It can just as easily accommodate those who see management as a science or as an art, since more objective or subjective research approaches can be emphasised in the way the research philosophies or methods and decision-making are taught. It also solves the problem associated with the training of management academics. Suddenly their research training becomes central to the core of the teaching curriculum, although it would suggest that they develop a broader set of research skills across different ontologies and epistemologies, with faculty able to operate in positivist and constructed worlds and with qualitative and quantitative data.
The ‘little e’ paradigm also addresses Pfeffer and Fong’s (2002) two remaining concerns. As the students’ investigations are located in their real-world situations, they are likely to be complex and multidisciplinary, or at least as multidisciplinary as managers’ work. Also, the research element will help managers form new understandings and insights into the nature of their work. It should help managers cross a threshold with regard to the nature of data and information, permanently changing the way they think about business issues.

CONCLUSION

The strange thing about management education is that it is commonly regarded as the most vocational of all courses in universities. Ironically, on closer inspection, this is a misapprehension and it might be argued that management education is one of the least vocational courses around. If you want to be a doctor, you take medicine, law if you want to be an attorney, history of art if you want to be a gallery curator, or geography if you want to be a surveyor. Those gaining management degrees learn about the nature of business and organisations akin to an anatomy course for doctors, but do so in a contextual vacuum. As such they rarely enter business and go straight into management roles. Instead they languish with the political science, sociology and economics graduates in the doldrums of management trainee programmes of large faceless corporations, learning about the specific nature of the business and ‘how’ to be a manager. Suffice to say, management is not the vocational degree it is commonly thought to be. Even in MBA courses that usually feature experienced and practising managers, much of the learning is still about ‘what’ management is, rather than developing management skills.

As noted, the separation of management academics from the practical day-to-day experience of managing compounds this problem (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). Whereas in many other disciplines, university professors may have ongoing clinical or commercial roles where they practise, it has been noted that many management professors have never managed in commercial settings:

We cannot imagine a professor of surgery who has never seen a patient, or a piano teacher who doesn’t play the instrument, and yet today’s Business Schools are packed with intelligent, highly skilled faculty with little or no managerial experience. As a result, they can’t identify the most important problems facing executives and don’t know how to analyse the indirect and long-term implications of complex business decisions. In this way, they short change their students and, ultimately society. (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005, p. 103)
Further, Mintzberg (2004) has commented that the students who take postgraduate management qualifications are typically quite young and inexperienced in terms of management. The combination of these factors led Birnik and Billsberry (2010, p.174) to call management teaching 'the blind leading the blind'. In terms of syllabuses, the combination of these factors means that management degrees teach people about management and organisations, rather than how to be an effective manager.

To be fair, it must be acknowledged that management education is a greater challenge than education in many other disciplines. A surgeon, for example, may have people’s lives on the line when he or she cuts, but the surgeon’s trainer at least has the benefit of knowing that, to all intents and purposes, every patient’s anatomy is the same. In management, every single situation facing a manager is different, meaning that it is impossible to teach by explaining solutions. The ‘little e’ response is to teach skills that help managers disentangle and solve the idiosyncratic issues and problems they face. If every situation is different, managers need to be taught skills to help them cope.

The issues that I have outlined have frustrated management educators around the world. They have sought a solution that will make management a vocational course where undergraduates exit with pronounced or enhanced practical managerial skills, able to perform well in managerial jobs and Master’s students are helped with the problems they confront.

In this chapter, I wanted to look at the different solutions that have been proposed to see if there is a positive answer to my desperate student. I began, though, by looking at the nature of the ‘crisis’ and at the various solutions that have been advocated. The problem with most of the solutions that scholars have advocated is that they have underpinning philosophies that put them on one side of a bifurcated argument. The ‘little e’ approach appears to offer a paradigmatic shift that transcends and integrates previous arguments and gives us a new and applied way to design our teaching.

In writing this chapter, I have been on a personal journey. I started out by surfacing my own concerns about the nature of management education through a manager’s fictional challenge to help her improve her effectiveness at work. This sort of request gets to the heart of issues in business schools and the weaknesses in our teaching. By teaching from a theoretical perspective I tend to teach ‘about’ management, rather than ‘how’ to manage. In my darker, more cynical moments, I find myself using words like ‘smokescreen’ and ‘witch doctor’ to describe our teaching, and I often wonder whether I make any positive contribution to the world. But in writing this chapter, I find there is hope and I am struck by the idea of transforming management education into a generic applied research.
skill-based approach that helps curious people make excellent decisions based on their own careful investigations. I find this to be an exciting prospect.

But, sadly, I do not have an immediate solution for my desperate student. I know that I should not refer her to a training provider or her HR department, or to the local technical college, or, worse still, offer her a place on our MBA. I also know that, regrettably, the type of solution that 'little e' offers is not currently available. If I were to recommend one of the currently available research skills courses, I know it would be designed for large academic investigations and too decontextualised for her. As a result, the relevance of such a course and its applicability to her real-life managerial circumstances would be weak. It would also take far too long for her immediate predicament.

Instead, I think there are three stopgap remedies that might help while we wait for a 'little e' solution. First, I would encourage her to take a short course in critical thinking. I hope that this would make her more curious, more thoughtful, more reflective, and more knowledgeable about the dynamics in her workplace while also giving her the tools to find solutions to her problems. Second, I would engage in some active listening to explore her poor performance and attempt to tease out the root causes. Although this approach is limited by being a one-sided analysis, often people have trouble ‘seeing the wood for the trees’, and reflective exercises can help. Third, and I hate this solution as it is the ‘flavour of the month’ and massively overused, I would help her find a coach or mentor who, crucially, knows her environment well. Such a person can be an effective sounding board and suggest context-specific ideas that might turn her performance around.

NOTE

1. I have adopted Le Deist and Winterton's (2005) distinction between competence meaning a functional categorization and competency meaning a behavioral ability. Original quotes have been left unedited.

REFERENCES


On solutions to the crisis in management education


