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Missing Components of Management Education

Katalin Illes¹

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Abstract

The paper critically examines the standard content of management education in business schools. It is argued that the curriculum in most places is still based entirely on instrumental, scientific rationality. The non-linear is labelled as 'out of order', chaos, abnormal or 'exception'. Yet when students leave academia they meet primarily exceptions.

Why do we not teach how to deal with chaos; how to integrate chaos and order, and how to use them as equally important and continuously present components of our reality?

The author's interviews with young graduates reveal that students rely primarily on intrinsic personal values, on networking skills, on diplomacy, on negotiation and communication skills when they start working. This is the education that students do not necessarily acquire during their years of formal education.

By including philosophy, ethics, values and wisdom into the curriculum of business education we might enable students to make the shift from competition to collaboration, from knowledge hoarding to knowledge sharing, from exploiting opportunities to contributing to the overall well being of humanity.

Key words: management education, change, business education, curriculum, chaos and order

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Introduction

The books and articles on management related subjects would fill the shelves of a library. The volume of publication suggests that we know so much about these issues that students in business schools will find answers to all their questions. However, when we look at the current state of organisations, we soon realise that there are many unknown areas and even if there are suggested solutions in the textbooks they are not necessarily helpful in the complex daily life of corporations.

When we try to find answers to simple questions like: Why is it that there are so many problems in organisations? Why have the so-called magic formulae like pyramids, matrixes, TQM or ISO 9000, followed so enthusiastically by some organisations, failed to give satisfying answers or long term solutions? Why is it that some leaders can manoeuvre organisations through waters full of icebergs whilst others only succeed in sinking Titanic size ships, even in calm waters? We realise that our inquiry often leads to even more questions and there are no simple answers or universal solutions. The ideal organisational success is not defined by higher profits any more. It is more to do with sustainability, life-work balance, care for the environment and the overall development of the individual and of the community.

In 1988 Peter Drucker described the organisations of the 21st century in the following way:

"Twenty years from now, the typical large business will have half the levels of management and one-third the managers of its counterparts today. Work will be done by specialists brought together in task forces that cut across traditional departments. Coordination and control will depend largely on employees' willingness to discipline themselves. Behind these changes lies information technology. Computers communicate faster and better than layers of middle management. They also demand knowledge-able users who can transform their data into information. Clues to what the new, information-based organisations will require come from other knowledge-based entities like hospitals and symphony orchestras. First a "score", a set of clear, simple objectives that translates into particular actions. Second, a structure in which everyone takes information responsibility by asking: who depends on me for what information? On whom do I depend? Information-based organisations pose their own special management problems as well: motivating and rewarding specialists; creating a vision that can unify an organisation of specialists; devising a management structure that works with task forces; and ensuring the supply, preparation, and testing of top management people. Solving these problems is the management challenge for the rest of the century". (Drucker, 1988, pp 1-2)

Drucker's vision is still based on a subject object rationality but he also suggests that a higher level of consciousness and responsibility will be required in the workplace. When we look at the current state of organisations, we can readily acknowledge the level of technological improvement. However, we can hardly fail to notice that organisations in general are still far away from the harmonious, supportive and responsible culture where information flows freely and people work in co-operating teams. There is a considerable gap between 'ideal' and the reality.

Articles from the 'critical management school' started to bring chaos and systems theory into the discussion adding further aspects to the complex picture of

organisations. Vinten for example argued as early as 1992 that “Chaos theory is about to invade the thinking and vocabulary of practising managers and management academics. It will mark the major breakthrough in the 1990s, just as systems theory represented the great step forward three decades ago. Indeed, it may be regarded as a natural extension of systems theory.” (Vinten,G 1992, p.22) He provides an explanation of what chaos theory means in the light of some important scientific developments which may now be viewed as superseded. He explores the connection with management thinking through a number of major management writers who display an implicit awareness of chaos and considers the interrelationship between order and disorder, and the significance for creativity and leadership in organizations. Vinten suggests that managers need to thrive on chaos, and to revamp some deeply entrenched attitudes if they are to succeed in the midst of an operating environment that is less stable and predictable.

What can management educators do to support the transformation of organisations? How can we aim to reduce the gap between the ideal and reality? How can we inspire students to work towards the ‘ideal’ rather than conform and put up with the current state of organisations? How can we make them the change agents that initiate and implement processes that will enable the shift from competition to collaboration, from knowledge hoarding to knowledge sharing, from a ‘successful career that ends in burn out’ to a meaningful and harmonious life? How do we, academics, need to review ourselves and what we teach to contribute to the change that is so badly needed?

The author of this paper has almost 25 years’ experience as an educator. She has first hand experience of teaching in market, command and transitional economies. She has taught students from all over the world including ethnic groups and cultures that would not necessarily mix outside the classroom. She has 20 years’ experience of management education in the UK and internationally. This paper is primarily a personal reflection on the current state and future possibilities of management education.

It gives examples of current practises and makes suggestions for change. It draws from the body of knowledge in organisational behaviour, philosophy, psychology, leadership, culture and sociology. The paper also integrates the view of some like-minded management educators, ex-students of business schools and a selection of employers.

Methodology

The paper does not follow the standard scientific method of enquiry. It is a personal reflection that draws on personal experience and uses primarily the narrative method. “The social sciences are concerned with humans and their relations with themselves and their environments, and, as such, the social sciences are founded on the study of experience...” (Clandinin and Connelly, 1994).

The author is aware of the dominance of the scientific method of enquiry in business and management research and consciously chooses to move away from this method.

Foucault argues that disciplinary power draws attention to the fundamental role that knowledge plays in making aspects of existence thinkable and calculable and therefore the object of conscious action. “Power and knowledge directly imply each

other; ... there is no power relation without the correlative construction of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same power relations” (Foucault, 1977). We move away from the power / knowledge construction, which is so readily apparent in most social science research, and take the risk of working with and representing experience.

The discipline of cognitive psychology has discovered different ways of looking at the world. Bruner (1986, 1990) identified two modes of cognition, which he termed ‘paradigmatic’ and ‘narrative’. In the paradigmatic mode, cognition is viewed as an information-processing phenomenon in which concepts are coded in memory and manipulated by cognitive operators. Situations are represented as concepts to be ‘solved’ by rational analytic thinking procedures, making computations, comparisons and substitutions in a form of scientific reasoning. The model dominates cognitive psychology, as it dominates other cognitive sciences and other social sciences, and indeed our everyday understanding of cognition. (Boland and Schultze, 1996). Bruner (1986, 1990) has suggested that this has suppressed the recognition of another, more powerful and universal cognition: the narrative mode. Here, events are selectively isolated in experience, events populated with actors with their own histories and motivation, and stories are told by setting the actors and events in a meaningful sequence (Illes and Rees, 2004). Bruner argues that, as a means of making sense of ourselves and the world we live in, this mode is ubiquitous but consistently ignored.

This paper will use the narrative as a method and will offer personal observations about the current content of management education. It will suggest a number of new approaches that would enhance both the teaching and learning experience, and would prepare students for life rather than only for exams.

What we do teach in Business Schools

For illustrative purposes I selected one of the top European Business Schools’ MBA programmes to highlight the key areas of management education. INSEAD is a trend setter and a highly regarded brand in management education. Business Schools all over the world use INSEAD as a bench mark when designing their own programmes. When I looked at the offerings of other business schools across Europe, I noticed that the content and structure is very similar with only minor differences in the labelling and order of modules.

The programmes are divided into cores and electives. On a one year MBA programme the first stage is the Foundation stage. In INSEAD it consists of core modules such as Statistics, Micro Economics, Finance, Marketing and People Management.

The Second stage focuses on functional skills. The core modules are: Corporate Financial Policy, Management Accounting, Process and Operation Management, Leading Organisations, Foundations of Marketing and Strategy.

The third stage is Global and IT Challenges in Management with the following compulsory components: Information System and Management, International Political Analysis, Macroeconomics in the Global Economy.

The elective modules that the students can choose from are: Accounting and Control, Asian Business and Comparative Management, Entrepreneurship and Family

Enterprise, Economic and Political Science, Organisational Behaviour, Strategy and Management.

These modules are all underpinned with the relevant scientific theoretical frameworks of their specific field. Looking through the various course outlines took me back to Edinburgh where I decided to do a part time MBA over 2 years in 1992. I had intended to get an internal perspective of management education and gain a personal insight into the learning experience in a business school. The modules that I studied were very similar to the ones listed above. During the course I read a lot and memorized the theories, the formulae and passed my exams successfully. In the classroom I started to believe that there were straightforward answers and replicable, successful solutions to the problems of the business world. We worked through many case studies of companies who made it and looked at some who did not. TQM was a novelty at the time and companies were keen to sign up and get the certificate for “Totally Managing Quality”. My course-mates were all working full time so they brought lots of ‘real world challenges’ with them to our Thursday and Friday classes. Almost all participants were financially supported by their employers and they were studying for a promotion or for a change in career.

My experience as a student and also as a lecturer in various business schools has led me to realise that we teach subjects rather than a way of life. Methods, approaches and techniques have not changed a lot over the past 12 years. We aim for the common denominator of standardised input that can be measured by learning outcomes and fitted neatly into module reference forms. Achievement is measured by predetermined ways and rubber stamped by the award giving authorities. The process, with its ever increasing targets and decreasing level of job satisfaction, reminds me of the mass production and the inhuman ways of Taylorism that we so readily criticize in the classroom, yet continuously apply in our bureaucratic institutional procedures. What is missing from our management education is the individual attention, the human face, the opportunity and time to develop a dialogue and learn the names of all the students who come to our classrooms to learn from us. What is missing is the appreciation of the unique process that each student should go through in order to become an intellectually, emotionally, physically and spiritually developed person who can make the right choices and decisions in all circumstances, and can make a difference in the workplace and in society.

What is missing from Management Education?

In one of the recently published International Human Resource Management textbooks, there is the following vignette to illustrate how global managers need to make the right decision for the company, even when they are in a remote subsidiary far away from the headquarters.

Holding the Roman Empire Together

The geographical reach and longevity of the Roman Empire can be regarded as a prodigious feat of international management. Rome expected those in charge of even the most distant part of the Empire to be more than just representatives – they had to make the right decisions on behalf of Rome. One of the binding forces of the Empire was the careful attention paid to the selection, training, and socialisation of Rome’s

expatriates, the generals and governors, entrusted with governance of far-flung provinces.

Such positions required a long apprenticeship in a highly trained and organized army. Governors were selected exclusively from consuls who had held high state office. By the time they were dispatched abroad, the ways of Rome were so ingrained in their minds that they would not need policy guidance – nor had they means of getting such advice. They were “centralized within”.

This policy of administrative decentralization coupled with tight socialization of the local decision-makers created strong, self-contained provinces or “subsidiaries”. A tribute to their robustness was that the Roman Empire survived even the fall of Rome (a sort of involuntary divestiture) when the centre of the Empire moved east to Byzantium.

Quoted from: Evans et.al (2002) The Global Challenge, p.117

The key sentence of this little story for an educator is: “They were centralized within”. What did the Romans do that we do not do in our education?

They prepared for life. They made people to look at the general nature of the world, the justification of belief and the conduct of life. They were encouraged to find out who they were, what they stood for and how they wanted to make a contribution. They were encouraged or perhaps even forced to look inside and find the values, the beliefs the principals that are so timelessly important for the human development. These became the solid core, the rock that the individual could depend on for life, regardless of the alien nature of the environment. In our society and factory-type education system, there is no time for soul searching. There is no time for experimentation and self-discovery because we are pushed towards targets and measured from an early age. We are injected with the competition virus, so it is not surprising that collaboration does not come easily. We are drilled by the “Knowledge is Power” slogan and treat knowledge as a weapon, rather than a gift that needs to be shared.

Executives, who competed to get themselves to the top often burn out, get depressed, start asking questions and set out to find meaning in life. Some go to counselling; others leave the corporate world and pursue a childhood dream. Philosophy is becoming popular because it has a long history of asking the most difficult questions in human life. Philosophy was a way of life, almost a religion for the ancient Greeks.

It is useful to remind ourselves that the word ‘school’ derives from the Greek word ‘scholé’ meaning free space. Originally a school was a retreat where people could reflect together with others on how the world weaves into a whole, what we and others ought to do, how the good life may be defined, attained and lived. School is a place where, for a while, we are relieved of the task of making a living, or taking care of others, or serving specific interests. Schooling is: making use of this free space to inquire into ideas that guide our doings, to remind us of our initial intentions, to explore the meaning of words and concepts that inform our activities. An inquiry, schooling intends to update our practice. It is a joint effort, since our words and ideas need to be ‘honed’ by those of others. In the progression of inquiry a team is forged in which participants can develop their own understanding, their personal view of

excellence in action. And this in turn opens the way towards a vision shared by all. (Kessels, et.al. 2004)

Schools in their original sense have played an important role in the formation of character over the centuries. So perhaps it is timely to go back to the roots of education re-introduce some aspects into our business schools so that students would get an opportunity to ask themselves the soul searching questions before they set their foot on the corporate ladder.

If we gave student an opportunity to think about change in the spirit of Marcus Aurelius than change would become a natural part of daily life rather than a shock.

“Is anyone afraid of change? Why, what can take place without change? What then is more pleasing to the universal nature? And canst thou take a bath unless the wood undergoes a change? And canst thou be nourished unless the food undergoes a change? And can anything else that is useful be accomplished without change? Dost thou not see then that for thyself also to undergo change is just the same, and equally necessary for the universal nature” (Marcus Aurelius Antonius)

Perhaps it is time to remind managers and future managers that “All is flux, nothing stays still” (Heraclitus, 6th century BC), that “Nothing is accidental, all things happen for some reason or necessity”. (Epicurus, 5th century BC), that “You cannot explain everything to everyone” and “No man is free who cannot master himself” (Pythagoras 570-500 BC.) But first of all, perhaps we need to remember and remind our students to use and build on the available collective knowledge of previous generations.

Although there is a growing interest in philosophy, it has not yet become an integral part of our management education.

The Oxford Companion to Philosophy defines philosophy as:

“rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief (epistemology or theory of knowledge) and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value). (Honderich, 1995)

There is a growing popularity of philosophy in counselling. Philosophical practitioners began to help individuals use philosophy in counselling, management and education settings. (LeBon, T.2001)

LeBon outlines the following five philosophical methods that he found useful in both the theory and practice of counselling:

1. *Critical thinking* – involves testing whether arguments stand up to critical investigation and seeing whether we have good reason to accept them.
2. *Conceptual analysis* – a way of becoming clearer about what we mean. It involves a careful investigation of language and usage and includes searching for definitions and drawing distinctions.
3. *Phenomenology* – ‘a philosophy arguing that events and objects are to be understood in terms of our immediate experience of them as they appear to us’ (Felthman and Dryden, 1993)
4. *Thought experiments* – experiments carried out in the minds rather than in laboratories.

5. *Creative thinking* – complements critical thinking and helps us both to find ‘the best problem’ (Weston, 1997) and ‘win-win’ solutions to problems (Covey, 1992)

To be fair to our current management education, we need to state that there are opportunities to practice these philosophical methods. The terminology might be different and we might say ‘scenario planning’ instead of thought experience, or ‘brain storming’ instead of creative thinking. What we do not address is the HOW. How do you develop critical thinking? How do you increase creativity? We talk more and more about knowledge management and knowledge creation but we actually do not give active support to students, in order to allow them to figure out how to manage their own knowledge and how to increase their individual creativity.

When we critically examine the standard content of management education that is currently taught in business schools at undergraduate and postgraduate level, we can conclude that the curriculum in most places is still based entirely on the Newtonian, linear logic of education. Yet when students leave academia they meet primarily exceptions. Their personal experience does not seem to resemble the logical step-by-step approach that they were taught to follow through the various modules of the BA, MA or MBA programmes. There is clearly a growing need for rethinking the content of our curricula and adjusting the content and delivery to support, rather than hinder, the inevitable change. It is necessary to equip students with a more rounded and broader educational experience that enables them to development their character and personality.

“We are at the very point in time when a 400-year-old age is dying and another is struggling to be born – a shifting of culture, science, society and institutions enormously greater than the world has ever experienced. Ahead, the possibility of regeneration of individuality, liberty, community and ethics such as the world has never known, and a harmony with nature, with one another and with the divine intelligence such as the world has always dreamt.” (Hock, D. 1999)

So why do we not focus on this historic transformation? Why do we not teach how to deal with chaos; how to integrate chaos and order and how to use them as equally important and continuously presents components of our reality? The author’s simple answer is that it is difficult to teach what we have not learnt ourselves. The majority of lecturers in higher education are the product of single-discipline based education. The underlying philosophy of subject and logic based knowledge is Newtonian. Lecturers attempt primarily to pass on factual knowledge and encourage students to research and find further facts and evidence. The evidence is then tested and compared to existing formulae and the hypothesis is either confirmed or rejected. In higher education, including management studies, we teach subjects rather than prepare students for life. This gap in education is becoming more and more apparent in business schools.

What do our customers say?

Once I noticed the strong need in my own students for personal guidance, life and career planning, personal development I set out to put together a simple questionnaire to get a feel of how ex students of mine who have been through the education that business schools offer reflect on the experience and value of their education. Through telephone and personal interviews and an online questionnaire I got the views of 35 young graduates from BA, MA and MBA programmes.

It is not a representative sample by any means. The objective of the exercise was simply to get an initial confirmation or rejection of my idea that there is an imbalance between theoretical and practical input, and that there is a need for preparing students for life rather than simply for exams. The interviews revealed that some of my students had a traumatic experience of “how to survive the real world” after graduation. They joined the workforce and very quickly realised that the neat textbook models did not help very much in decision making, did not help in conflict resolution and did not contribute to career advancement. The students I spoke with relied primarily on intrinsic personal values, on networking skills, on diplomacy, on negotiation and communication skills. This is the type of education that currently does not come from schools. This is the education that students do not acquire directly from and through their courses.

The key points that were received for the Missing Components of Management Education Questionnaire are summarised in the following table. These are for illustrative purposes and I do not intend to analyse the statements in this paper.

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 What are the subjects of your business education that you find most helpful in your working life? | Subjects on working with different cultures, communication and negotiation skills, International Business, Entrepreneurship and foreign languages. |
| 2. What are the areas of your education that do not seem to add value (be relevant) in the workplace? | A high number of students mentioned a quantitative subject, others did not specify but made comments like: “exams on theories that have little relevance to real work.”, “theories that are never going to be used in the ‘real business’ world “, “irrelevant legal issues”, “ all purely theory focused subjects” |
| 3. What were the 3 most useful lessons that you learnt in the classroom during your university years? | How to write, reports and assignments How to work in teams “Close” and supportive relationships are possible between lecturers and students The importance of networking Life is change, Time planning Prioritising tasks Coping with pressure / time constraints |
| 4. What are the 3 lessons that were | How to manage emotions, |

| | |
|---|---|
| <p>missing from your education and you had to learn it outside academia?</p> | <p>How to develop empathy Presentation skills Personal development How to interact with people Psychology Philosophy Real work experience Communication skills Practical experience Flexibility Interpersonal skills Networking Relationship with companies How to think holistically Distinguish between theory and reality and to see the limits of theory Politics Sociology Create a personal vision</p> |
| <p>5. If you could add to the curriculum of business education what are the 3 most important issues that you would add?</p> | <p>Psychology- understanding the mind Less theory more practical Basics of philosophy Communication Management and leadership focus Internship A foreign language Intercultural issues Developing motivational skills Networking Make cultural issues compulsory Time Management More practical aspects of business processes The job content of various management positions Practical business skills A placement to support what you learn at university Team work Presentation skills More 'real life' experience</p> |

The comments are not organised into any order of importance. They are only intended to give an indication to the reader about the general feel of 35 British and international students who had been through an undergraduate or post graduate course in Ashcroft International Business School in Cambridge.

For me personally the responses appear to support the hypothesis that there is a need for bringing business education closer to real life, equipping students with more practical skills that are necessary in the workplace and giving more time, importance and attention to the personal development of the individuals.

One of my students has recently completed a BA dissertation with the title: German Business Education in an International Context. The dissertation includes a small survey about the expectations of employers of business education in Germany (Boehner, J 2004). This small survey summarises the views of 32 German organisational practitioners. They distributed the most valuable skills for managers as follows: Aptitude, an ability for co-operation 31%, practical business experience 29%, strategic thinking 21%, leadership skills 19%.

When it comes to the question “where should most emphasis be placed in business education?” 70% of the respondents voted for practical training, 25% for personal development and only 5% thought that the theoretical, specific knowledge input is needed to be increased in management education.

Conclusion

This paper set out to give a snapshot of management education. The camera was in the hand of one academic so the reader was invited to look at her subjective picture. We all have our own pictures and some reflect a sunny, others a cloudy view. There are no identical pictures. However, it is perhaps useful to look at each other’s snapshots and periodically improve our technique or refocus our cameras so that our students would not only have a surface smile but an expression of inner knowing on their graduation photographs.

This snapshot focused the lens on the missing components of management education. However, the author is aware of many novel initiatives and innovations that are used by colleagues in different business schools. There are new methods of assessment, such as the patchwork that enables deeper learning (Winter et. al 2003) and unusual techniques and interdisciplinary approaches in management and business education like the superb initiative of Birgit Wildt in the European Business School. There, the students study psychology, management and leadership together and in their groups fundraise, prepare and publicly present a short film. These and similar examples show academic creativity, renewal and change. At present, these initiatives are not widespread. They are fuelled by individuals who have an unstoppable drive to make a difference in management education. They are not always supported by their institutions but their success and popularity will hopefully attract further academics that will take on the challenge and positively respond to the need for change in management education.

Our philosophy for the future needs to be based on the acceptance of change, on finding meaning for individuals and organisations and on putting into practice the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of mankind.

*“We do not, it seems to me, require one penny more spent on fundamental research into the ‘unknown’, but to understand why we are so bad at putting to use what we know already.” (Mant, 1979 *The Rise and Fall of the British Manager* p. 207.)*

Business education needs to fully utilise the available knowledge in organisational behaviour, psychology, culture, sociology, leadership, management studies, philosophy, history, literature and the arts to assist the transformation of the workplace into communities that create and share knowledge freely. These communities will not conform to predetermined forms and values. Their forms, rules and structures will evolve and change through the growth and interaction of the members.

Academics in the business world have the opportunity to support or just observe this change process.

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