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What Business Schools Can Do to Bridge the Theory-practice Gap: An Overview and Discussion

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Abstract:
Aligning management knowledge and practice has become a 'persistent and difficult problem' for management scholars and educators. In scholarship, more specifically, increasing attention is paid to a 'gap' between theory and practice in many professional fields worldwide. In this paper, we aim to address the conceptual space between theory and practice in management education by providing an overview of relevant techniques and practices used by business schools, namely, collaborative research, MBA programmes, and ethical education. We further reflect on issues highlighted in this overview and discuss its wider implications for management teachers, scholars, and practitioners, shedding light on future empirical research.

Keywords: Business schools, management education, theory-practice gap, overview, ethical education

1. Introduction

Aligning management knowledge and practice in higher education has become a 'persistent and difficult problem' for management scholars and educators (Van De Ven & Johnson, 2006; p802). In scholarship, more specifically, increasing attention is paid to a 'gap' between theory and practice in many professional fields worldwide, including management science (Banks, et al., 2016), research (Kieser & Leiner, 2009) and accounting (Tucker & Lowe, 2014), human resource development (Tkachenko, Hahn & Peterson, 2017), nursing and healthcare (Nuti, et al., 2016), and information technology governance (Ko & Fink, 2010). There have been more efforts devoted to management learning, education and development, and the literature has been picking up steam, which is becoming a field in its own right (Armstrong & Fukami, 2009). While this gap has been much recognised and debated, discussion on how to bridge this gap is still lagging behind (Bansal, et al., 2012).

In light of recent exogenous events, such as global financial turmoil, natural disasters and corporate scandals, management education has been increasingly placed under scrutiny, while business schools have been cautioned against producing 'people who can talk about practice rather than people who are competent' managers, in order to help organisations strike a balance between profitability and innovation, environmental challenges and corporate social responsibility (Armstrong, 2011, p182; Saks, Tamkin & Lewis, 2011). More importantly, despite a wide consensus among scholars and practitioners that business schools play crucial roles in 'transferring' management theory into practice, most notably through its Master of Business Administration (MBA) programmes, there is scant discussion focusing on business schools' practices in closing the theory-practice gap. In this paper, we discuss the trending business school strategies and practices in closing the theory-practice gap in management education.

While few would disagree that there is and should be a close relationship between theory and practice in management, there is a lack of clear consensus on how 'close' the relationship is or should be. From a learning perspective, perhaps managing is best described as a 'craft', a kind of profound and hard to articulate tacit knowledge, usually gained through implicit learning and personal lived experiences (Sadler-Smith, 2006). From this perspective, it would not be hard to understand why the practical side of management had been for the most part left with management development (as a function of human resource management), instead of with management education. This produces significant difficulties in

advancing knowledge on management education to bridge the theory-practice gap in management literature. This article addresses this issue by highlighting the current challenges faced by business schools regarding preparing future managers in the increasingly globalising context, by providing an overview of what business schools can do to bring the practical side of management into its education. We close this paper by discussing the wider implications and future research.

2. Industrial Collaborations

Argued to be a crucial part in the bridging theory-practice gap, collaborations between researchers and practitioners have become a common strategy for researchers to create practically relevant and scientifically rigorous knowledge (Hodgkinson & Rousseau, 2009). When scholars enter the field to learn actual conditions of business, they gain more informed insights and fresh perspectives in framing the questions they seek to answer and adapting methods of data collection, adding both depth and potential applications of theories and concepts (Murphy and Saal, 1990). In this light, several concepts have been put forward, such as engaged scholarship (Van de Ven, 2007), action research (Mills, 2000), knowledge co-production or co-creation (Berggren & Söderlund, 2008). and researcher-practitioner collaborations (Söderlund & Maylor, 2012). Building primarily on experiential learning theory (Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001), these notions seem to build on or around a simple idea of connecting academy and the world, by getting researchers 'out' or getting practitioners 'in', or both.

However, the claimed benefits of the co-produced knowledge from collaborative research between scholars and practitioners appear inconclusive in empirical studies. Based on the data collected from both public sector practitioners and academic providers, Fenwick and McMillan (2013) conclude research-practice collaborations may not necessarily produce creative knowledge or even represent consensual knowledge co-creation, although knowledge co-production is more likely to happen with long-term and trusting relationship between both parties. On creating a consensual practical knowledge co-producing relationship for executives, Anderson and van Wijk (2010) suggest that some intermediaries may help the cooperation of parties in achieving mutual goals, by matching the intellectual resources in academic institutions and practical needs in organisations. On the other hand, there is also evidence to show that neither action research or collaborative research produces successful outcomes which are both rigorous and relevant, suggesting that expecting practitioners and scholars to jointly produce research is a false hope (Kieser & Leiner, 2009). In general, the literature seems to suggest that while there are both theoretical grounds and conceptual arguments for the success of industrial collaborations in closing the research-practice gap, the results are difficult to be empirically verified and it is still at a trial-and-error stage in practice.

3. Aligning of MBA Programmes with Managerial Practices

MBA programmes in business schools have received increasing attention, especially in responding to critical concerns regarding the MBA graduates' abilities to apply management theory into practice (Mintzberg, 2004; Datar, Garvin & Cullen, 2010). Among a variety of factors influencing the effectiveness of MBA programmes (see Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013), course curriculum has been a major focus and has been found to be a key element for or the development of reflective practice in executive MBA programmes (De Déa Roglio & Light, 2009). However, empirical evidence shows there is a general lack of relevance of MBA curricula in relation to managerial competency requirements (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009) and of congruence between MBA curricula, current research and workplace practice (Roland and Hall, 2014). In light of this, several approaches have been suggested in aligning MBA syllabus and practical requirements.

From a humanistic perspective, Muff (2012) suggests business schools revise their MBA programmes' teaching contents based on insights gained from in-depth and personal interactions with business leaders for more effective knowledge transformation. Similarly, Datar, Garvin and Cullen (2010)suggest reconsidering the value proposition of MBA programmes to verge toward the pragmatic aspects, including practical skills, capabilities and techniques and attitudinal values and beliefs. From a different angle, Charlier, Brown and Rynes (2011) think evidence-based management (EBM) syllabi and teaching EBM principles may help cultivate practical awareness and mindsets. In general, although limited evidence shows a positive correlation between MBA qualifications of business leaders and their corporate environment performance (Slater & Dixon-Fowler, 2010), there seems to be insufficient empirical research to verify these suggestions while curriculum reform may be a challenging process for many stakeholders (Lyons, 2012). Perhaps in a more radical light, Varela, Burke and Michel (2013) suggest that mastering complex managerial skills is an overly ambitious goal for MBA programmes which are (or should be) designed with a primary purpose to 'trigger a sustainable learning process by equipping learners with transferrable knowledge structures and learning mechanisms that promote life-long skill development' (p447). Accordingly, the authors propose to reconsider learning goals and assessment procedures within MBA education in respect of managerial skills development (Varela, Burke & Michel, 2013), implicitly leaving the bridging of the theory-practice gap to the realm of practice in (further) developing managerial skills in later stages of the graduates' work lives.

4. Ethical Values in Management Education

A noticeable trend of the literature is that scholars have increasingly looked into the moral aspects of management and the role of business schools in developing socially responsible managers, especially after the financial crisis in 2008. Business schools are not only responsible for equipping the future managers with business and management skills, but also for helping them appreciate the dynamics in their future managerial decision-making whereby a wider network of stakeholders is likely to be affected. Therefore, management education must become more aware of its general tendency in creating a profits-first mentality without regard for ethics (Ghoshal, 2005) and improve moral and awareness and

reasoning in order to prepare students with a better understanding of an appropriate balance between economic, social and environmental considerations. Furthermore, several arguments anchoring in the course effectiveness are put forth in favour of emphasising business ethics in business school programme and course designs.

From a positive organisational scholarship perspective, May, Luth and Schwoerer (2014) suggest three important moral dimensions which will positively influence the business decision-making effectiveness; they contend that teaching ethical business decision-making will enable students to feel more confident in their ethical problem solving at work (i.e., moral efficacy), enhance the ethical influences in their work lives (i.e., moral meaningfulness), and become more courageous in pointing out (unpopular) ethical problems in workplace (i.e., moral courage). Similarly, the incorporation of courses on ethics and corporate social responsibilities could potentially better prepare graduates with 'job ready' skills in applying knowledge and add value to society (Jackson, 2009) and equip students with ethical integrity in taking up the challenges in real world (Giacalone, 2007). From the business schools' point of view, there is predications that there will be increasing demand for more morally and socially responsibly managers by the society (Schlegelmilch & Thomas, 2011) and thus management education should adapt its profit-oriented approaches in teaching. In summary:

> Management education, which has been severely criticized in the aftermath of the economic crisis, (should) include the need to shift cognitive, moral, and emotional levels of development, renewed emphasis on balance both individual and socially, a less is more sensibility, a holistic systems perspective, and shifting the purpose of the firm to encompass not just shareholder needs, but also societal, stakeholder, and ecological needs and interests (Waddock & McIntosh, 2009, p295).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

Business schools are undergoing transitions, while business school leaders seem to have similar expectations of the consequences in successfully or unsuccessfully taking up the challenges in today's increasingly complex and uncertain environments (Thomas, Lee & Wilson, 2014). While there is general discussion to urge business schools for reformative changes in teaching and research to give emphases to public concerns and practical relevance to society (Wilson & Thomas, 2012); Varela, Burke and Michel (2013), many questions remain unanswered and many areas under-explored.

The foremost question to ask is a straightforward one: should the primary purpose of management *education* be knowledge dissemination or management preparation? As shown above, this question has been differently framed in several lines of discussion addressing the theory-practice gap, directly or indirectly, spanning the past quarter of century (e.g., Cunningham, 1995). However, the existing discussion and debates have been centred around management education on two prevailing themes or discourses: the role of management researchand relatedly the role of business schools. On management research, it can be framed into asking to what extent literature does and should inform practice. Essentially, this is a question of the nature, which at its core concerns the very status, of management knowledge. Few management researchers would disagree management knowledge should be relevant to and preferably inform management practice, at least indirectly or at an abstract level. But perhaps even fewer would be immediately comfortable with the idea of management knowledge being 'expelled' from a scientific world to embrace a practical nature. This is not to imply that practical and scientific knowledge are mutually exclusive; and in an ideal world we, as management scholars and educators, should produce and disseminate only management knowledge which is both practical and scientific. But the existing debates and discussion seem to eventually, and inevitably, end up at somewhat of an impasse, or viewed optimistically as having extremely complex relationships (see Ireland, 2012). Presently, there is a scarcity of research on these issues which require urgent future scholarly attention. Understanding and having at least a degree of agreement on the nature of management knowledge is prerequisite to formulating effective approaches in bridging the theory-practice gap in management education and accordingly vital in providing insights on future business schools reforms. Following on from this, future research may extend the discussion by involving a reflection on the purpose of education (e.g., Klitmøller, 2016; Potgieter, 2016), especially given the fact that the existing literature has rarely addressed issues in this light relating to management education.

Another important issue when considering the future reforms of business schools concerns rankings and accreditations. Despite a number of critical concerns pointing out problematic data sources, measurements and implications of our existing system for constructing league tables and institutional settings (e.g., Noorda, 2011; Durand & Dameron, 2011), many rankings and accreditations are internationally recognised and have a significant implication on the increasingly globalised business education (Aggarwal & Scherer, 2013; Thomas & Cornuel, 2012). There are two themes which are worthy of further investigations in this regard. First, the trend of globalising education calls for more attention to the influences and/or implications from the traditionally less studied national contexts. For example, there is a growing importance from the East both as one of the strongest bases for supplying international students to education exporters in the Anglo-American world and in terms of their rising exposures and standings in the English scholarship. However, we still have relatively limited knowledge on international students' choices, learning experiences and evaluations in business schools (for an exception, see Bordia, Bordia & Restubog, 2015) and how these could be integrated into our agenda on improving our competitiveness in the global education market. Similarly, we have yet to explore and understand the implications of a growing dependence on international students as an important source of income on (Western) management education, management and development in general, and on reforming business schools in light of the globalising educational context in particular.

Moreover, and perhaps in a more remote light, there is also a need to attend to an issue of what the rising Eastern scholarship means to our traditional notion and wisdom of 'world knowledge', which has been primarily Western centric and considerably persisting to change. Second, future research may put a spotlight on how to take advantage of the

fact that business schools (over)value rankings and accreditations in pushing a favourable direction of their reforms, moving away from the existing focus on criticism. This is potentially fruitful direction of research, especially considering the preliminary evidence shows that the institutionalising effect of classification systems could potentially be used as a catalyst for changes in the business schools encouraging engagement from stakeholders (Cooper, Parkes and Blewitt, 2014).Pedagogically, we may ask ourselves how best we shall train management graduates who encounter undesirable and/or challenging situations at work: adapt themselves or change environments (or how to strike a balance or take a trade-off between the two)? In a more practical light, how would 'experienced' managerial practitioners interpret, tackle and resolve these issues in a more contextualised and nuanced manner? At an institutional level, future reflections and discussions are required to examine the role of business education, balancing between producing practically and pragmatically competent managers and building an integrated system of ethical, professional and personalvalue for the future of management (and our society).

In exploring these questions, Spender (2014) concludes that (practical) management is essentially about making situated judgements rather than a rational decision-making task. Following on from this, business schools should make efforts in bridging the theory-practice gap by training management students to be accustomed to the idea of unforeseeable changes (resulting from Knightian uncertainty) and the 'imagining and talking game' of managing (Spender, 2014, p439). Finally, in reviewing the literature, we observe a general neglect of empirical insights into how management professors and lecturers approach the transferring of theories to practices in classrooms. We contend that it matters how management teachers interpret management theories and convey their interpretations to students. For example, do they talk about theories as general sable and reliable 'truths'? Or are they explicit about limitations and boundary conditions particularly pertinent to the research processes, theories and knowledge being taught? Devinney and Siegel (2012) remind us that the management discipline is in itself a multidisciplinary field in the sense that it has rooted in at least four disciplines, namely psychology, sociology, economics, and political science. Management knowledge is complex, which may in turn require us, as management teachers, to interpret it in ways which allow our students to find better ways of materialising it in the workplace (Ireland, 2012). We suggest future empirical research to be conducted looking into these issues.

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