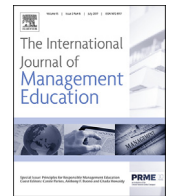




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Developing imaginers not managers – How to flip the business school model



Sonal Minocha ^{a, *}, Martin Reynolds ^b, Dean Hristov ^a

^a Bournemouth University, Talbot Campus, Fern Barrow, Poole BH12 5BB, UK

^b Birmingham City Business School, Birmingham City University, The Curzon Building, 4 Cardigan Street, Birmingham B4 7BD, UK

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ABSTRACT

This experiential paper is written to provoke debate amongst deanly colleagues around the world—our location is the 130 business schools in the UK (and the 3500 plus in the world!) about how to ‘flip’ the academic model of their business schools. We make a case for this flipping by revisiting Henry Mintzberg’s thesis presented in ‘Managers not MBAs’ in its tenth anniversary year. Ten years on we argue the case for the ‘flip’ is stronger than ever yet our progress toward it disappointing. The criticism of business schools is ever persistent and the argument for their irrelevancy seems to be strengthening. Our paper seeks to argue that much of business school practice and pedagogy is still rooted in content rather than context, where priority is given to academic knowledge in favour of practice intelligence. The ‘flip’ as we define it shifts the emphasis to the latter and helps restore business schools to the status of being relevant to business. Within this context, we provide key features of the flipped business school model for curriculum design and delivery and introduce key enablers of the flip, and we argue that deans are well placed to take this agenda forward.

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1. Setting the scene

We are celebrating the thirteen-year anniversary of the publication of Henry Mintzberg’s *Managers Not MBAs*. In 2004 Mintzberg presented what is still arguably the clearest articulation of what needed to be done to flip the management education model of the 21st century business school and why (Mintzberg, 2004). Mintzberg’s arguments resonated with a broad theme of the last 20 years of critiquing business school programmes and research for their lack of relevance to real world management practice. Mintzberg specifically expressed the flipping agenda in relation to the MBA course arguing that the dominant model of the MBA is too focused upon presenting ‘limited’ experience managers with scientific knowledge (academic theory) in relation to management. Flipping the model, Mintzberg argued involves shifting the focus onto the practice of management and bringing experienced practising managers into the classroom. For those concerned with the practical relevance of management education Mintzberg’s ideas made a great deal of sense and his book presented insights into what and how it could be done with a detailed example of an International Masters in Practising Management programme.

Despite the clarity of Mintzberg’s thesis, there have been many articles in management journals and the quality business press over the last decade that go beyond the dominant model of the MBA and continue to re-state the business school

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: sonalminocha@yahoo.com (S. Minocha).

problem – the irrelevance of business school courses and research to shaping management practice in organisations (see Beck, 2013; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). Warren Bennis in writing for Bloomberg Business, reflected upon this in ‘How Business Schools Lost Their Way’ and argued that “the orthodoxy hasn’t changed very much since the ’05 article, except perhaps to have gotten worse” (Bennis, 2012). Indeed, long standing critics of business schools will perhaps not be surprised by the persistence of the irrelevance point of management education and research. They point to deep-rooted cultural issues and the history of business schools, the importance of ivory tower research in the business school model, a faculty model built around traditional career academics, a narrow focus for competition amongst top grade business schools and the reality of on-going success of business school recruitment. Whatever the reasons – and they are many and varied – it doesn’t appear by any reasonable assessment that much flipping of the business school model has taken place since 2004. In a Financial Times commentary Beck (2013) goes even further by arguing “I don’t believe there is a really good business school anywhere on earth. But I am holding onto the hope that there could be – someday”. Beck goes on to argue that the model for management education needs a real world mindset that offers programmes that prepare students to make improvements in practice.

Part of the problem may be that the debate tends to focus on the flagship MBA programme in business schools and its ability to prepare graduates, who can confidently navigate through complex and uncertain organisational contexts (see David, David, & David, 2011; Mondalek & Rogers, 2013). That is, the problem is really limited to the MBA programme when in fact the issue is with the fundamental values of a range of business school activities. The ‘MBA tail’ flipping the ‘business school dog’ was for us not the central thesis in what Mintzberg was arguing but he did go to some length to narrow his discussion to the MBA programme. In a period where, for a number of business schools, the MBA programme has been in decline (see the 2014 Graduate Management Admission Council Application Trends Survey reporting a drop in demand for traditional one-year MBAs among 60% of their sample), the ‘Managers Not MBAs’ theme might be argued to be peripheral to the core of mainstream business school activity. We should acknowledge the fact that the overarching management education domain goes well beyond delivering its flagship course, as business schools and their programmes evolve through the prism of inter-disciplinarity in order to respond to recent calls for developing a cadre of global calibre in the age of uncertainty and rapid globalisation of markets and organisations. This resonates with what Roos (2014) debates in a Harvard Business Review, where he contends that business school leadership is also called upon the need to embed “cross-disciplinary thinking” in line with embracing a more practice-led and perhaps, experiential approach to delivering management education.

This experiential paper re-presents the case for mainstreaming the flipping of the broader management education model for business schools and not just the model for the MBA. Our flipping narrative is focused upon the interplay between ‘Practice Intelligence and Academic Theory’ – two opposing paradigms, yet encompassing both sides of the same coin called management education. Practice Intelligence is a new term and relates to management practice and the effectiveness of management practice in context. Practice Intelligence was first introduced by Sternberg and Wagner (1991) in their discussion on developing a framework for promoting individual and organisational productivity through Practice Intelligence. The term was then cited in *Rethinking Business Schools* – a management education contribution by Sulej (2015). Yet, both contributions have not attempted to define more widely what Practice Intelligence might mean in relation to management education. We define it as the outcome, yet an on-going process of blending professional practice, knowledge and business organisation context as a response to the perceived irrelevancy of traditional management education models of business schools to business contexts. The essence of Practice Intelligence is the capability of managers to analyse, make sense of, reflect upon and shape a response to complex problem contexts. Core to this capability is the role of problem-based learning (Coombs & Elden, 2004; Sherwood, 2004) and the importance of creativity and imagination in defining action and reflecting upon action (Chia & Holt, 2008; Gundry & Kickul, 1996).

Our headline is the need to give greater emphasis to Practice Intelligence rather than academic theory in the management education model. The exact blend of Practice Intelligence and academic theory can clearly vary within any course design but the key point is making explicit the nature of the Practice Intelligence to be integrated into the course design. To convey the strength of this shift in the business school mindset we refer to it as a call to develop ‘Imaginatons not Managers’. What do we mean by ‘imagination’? We use the term to describe leaders and practitioners who not only manage the present, but imagine and shape futures – individual and organisational. Imaginatons make sense of, help shape and make happen future contexts. At the heart of this point is the view that leadership and management practice is continually challenged by rapidly changing contexts and an effective leader and manager needs to be regularly focused on changing their mindset and also that of their team and employees to bring about required change in behaviour (e.g. see Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Muff et al., 2013).

One such example of a challenging context is the rise and adoption of Artificial Intelligence (AI), robotics and big data in the corporate world and on strategic decision-making level (Mirza, 2017; Parry, Cohen, & Bhattacharya, 2016). This provides one example of how technological disruptions are poised to reshape organisations and organisational thinking.

Such contexts are challenging current organisational practice and will continue to do so in ways that we may not be able to imagine nor control currently and as such, it provides a fertile ground for the development of innovators alongside managers. Imaginatons, alongside managers, are needed to take organisations in new directions and respond to disruptions that call for reshaping the orthodox organisational model, vision and mission. Not only do managers need to keep abreast of these developments but also be able to ‘imagine’ future organisational contexts.

We see this shift as game changing because so few university business schools make explicit their integration of Practice Intelligence into programmes and as a focus and outcome of their research. In his book *Rethinking Business Schools*, Sulej (2015) calls upon the need to embrace and further develop such Practice Intelligence as an integral part of existing

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