



## The holistic dilemma: Helping management students deal with risk



Dianne Bolton<sup>a,\*</sup>, Christopher Galloway<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Swinsburne University of Technology, Melbourne, Australia

<sup>b</sup>Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 8 February 2013

Received in revised form 29 October 2013

Accepted 3 January 2014

#### Keywords:

Holistic risk

Management education

Complexity

Stakeholder engagement

Social capital

Boundary objects

Trans-disciplinarity

### ABSTRACT

Accumulating evidence suggests that business recognises its success depends on managing increasingly complex environments. Management educators and other stakeholders need to respond. To this end, we argue that a shared understanding amongst stakeholders concerning complexity and risk is both urgent and mutually beneficial. Ideally it would lead to collaborative design of curriculum and pedagogy and avoid overly narrow specialisation. We use the notion of 'holism' to explore the difficulties in comprehending the span of change in contemporary business, presenting 'holistic risk' as a vital but aspirational construct transcending boundaries, functions and disciplines. Specifically we address implications for teaching and learning holistic risk, for related program goals and curriculum design, and for embedding critical analytical skills into curriculum, arguing that students engage with holistic risk throughout the entire spectrum of problem-solving. Thus, educators must grapple with helping students in this effort. In support, we offer examples of our own practice in curriculum design and pedagogy. We conclude that the concept of holism might provoke a better understanding between educators and industry stakeholders concerning knowledge and skills to deal with risks associated with dynamic shifts in business environments. Such collaboration could help students operate more confidently in fluid, unpredictable business settings.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

In an increasingly complex, integrating global business environment, single disciplinary approaches to identifying and resolving business problems may not only be overly simplistic, but also misleading. From the perspective of research, the nature of knowledge and learning in such a business climate highlights gradations of integrated thinking in multi-disciplinary, inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary research (Max-Neef, 2005; Stock & Burton, 2011) emphasising the value of synergising diverse perspectives when trying to identify and solve problems. From the perspective of teaching and learning, synergistic and holistic learning is also valuable. For example, Avraham points out that teaching cross-disciplinary studies is "one of the most important and complicated issues in pedagogy, [despite the fact that] ... there is a big need for courses that provide students with a wider view of the lateral connections between disciplines" (2006, p.1). Business scholars have acknowledged the significance of achieving holistic perspectives but they confront traditional barriers such as academic focus on in-depth mono-disciplinary knowledge, as well as a shortage of teachers with broad inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary skills, able to design and deliver relevant theoretical and practical content for integrated scholarship.

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +61 03 92144562, +61 0419307059 (Mobile), +61 0396969601.

E-mail addresses: [diannebolton@bigpond.com](mailto:diannebolton@bigpond.com), [dbolton@swin.edu.au](mailto:dbolton@swin.edu.au) (D. Bolton).

Nevertheless, as complexity and ambiguity increases for employees at every level of organisation, research is recognising emergent knowledge creation processes, including the value of shared understanding across diverse stakeholders through dynamic relationships, interactions and interfaces connecting different knowledge areas and functions (Eisenhardt, Furr, & Bingham, 2010; Stacey, 2011).

This paper seeks to contribute to the debate on how educators might design curriculum that: conceptualises holism more effectively in business operations; assimilates a practical and theoretical understanding of holism in knowledge production and in problem solving in complex environments, as well as draws attention to the skills required for engaging with shifting situations, and emergent realities, opportunities and risks.

## 1. Achieving a common understanding around competencies to deal with more holistic thinking

Eliciting stakeholder perspectives around what are deemed necessary business competencies in increasingly volatile business environments often results in, at best, transient agreements requiring continual reassessment or renegotiation. As in all complex tasks, this fluid reality is characterised by tension and paradox, which themselves demand new competencies.

It is widely accepted that mastering prescribed managerial competencies will enhance job performance (Jackson, 2009), and that employers and business schools need to achieve some agreement around what these competencies are, as well as “broaden their vision of what is required of a high performer” (p. 85). Jackson also expressed concern that business schools lack “substantiated guidance on industry requirements”, suggesting that this lack of firm guidelines “is further aggravated in Australia by the absence of an active management professional association operating accreditation controls and membership eligibility criteria” (p. 85).

However, *contra* Jackson (2009), we suggest caution in seeking overly firm boundaries and guidelines from industry around competency standards. Rather, we support the development of ongoing and shared understanding of complex multi-disciplinary, multi-functional and shifting realities around necessarily tension-ridden stakeholder concerns, many of which focus on risk perceptions. We further suggest there is a danger in seeking certainty through defining competencies as static and technical, as in higher education narrow vocational competencies will no longer meet academic standards that demand capabilities to deal with complex and ambiguous environments. Rather collaborative, adaptive and open thinking is required, to support judgement and decision making in context. The Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) specifies that graduates should develop cognitive skills reflecting mastery of theoretical knowledge, the ability to reflect critically on both theory and professional practice, and the capability to investigate, analyse and synthesise complex information, problems and theories (AQF, 2011). In identifying the need for students to acquire abilities to generate and evaluate complex ideas, it anticipates that students will emerge from their studies into a complex world where such capability will be a *sine qua non*. Jackson (2009, p. 85) embellishes this requirement by acknowledging that graduates are now expected “to add value to an enterprise, and ultimately the knowledge economy, entrenched in environmental awareness, social responsibility and effective diversity management”. Ottewill and Macfarlane (2005) note an added difficulty is helping management students achieve such capability, given that they often have practical knowledge but limited educational skills required to appreciate the value of broad conceptual understanding in the overall learning experience. We therefore argue that taxonomies of management competencies could expand to include cognitive and behavioural skillsets underpinning shared conceptualisations of business dynamism across multiple and diverse stakeholders. In this light, more holistic perspectives will be increasingly valuable in creating shared understanding of both opportunity and risk in complexity, even if a perfectly synoptic view is unattainable in practice.

‘Risk’ is a primary management focus, and with its basis in perceptions (Ansell & Wharton, 1992) its identification calls for holistic thinking and requires a shared understanding between business practitioners and academics, our society being arguably a “risk society” (Beck, 1992) in which a central project is the “risk management of everything” (Power, 2004). For example, in contemporary emergency services risk management, an “all hazards approach” (Blanchard, 2007) is gaining ground, subsuming risk mitigation focused on single hazards. This development might be indicative of the approach managers will need to adopt as they confront risk across a range of management fronts. Further, with risk management defined in ISO 31000 as the “effect of uncertainty on objectives” (International Organization for Standardization, 2009), it is not only hazards, but also failure to recognise opportunities in a global economy that can constitute significant risk. Students, therefore, need to learn how to build a sweeping perspective of risk – a more holistic view – and educators need to learn how to foster this development rather than persist in more narrow and functional approaches.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. It explores the nature of holism and its implications for knowledge creation that transcend boundaries, as a critical dimension of holistic thinking. Three interrelated processes seen as central to modern management, and supporting more holistic thinking in complex environments, are discussed, i.e. social capital building, integrating stakeholder perspectives, and applying psychological insights into collaborative action. On this foundation, the paper discusses the nature of critical analysis that might be effective in uncertain operating environments where holistic risk seems pervasive, before it moves to explore the implications for management education, exemplified through our own experience.

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/357422>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/357422>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)