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What are business students taught about farming: Do textbooks paint a negative picture?

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ABSTRACT

This paper interrogates the construction of the farm, farming, and the farmer in the Business School. The text of several hundred textbooks used in North America is analyzed to surface the presentation of the farm. Through this the social and power status of the farmer is described and the potential impact of the students' perspective on this primary industry is discussed. It is found that business and management textbooks portray farming as a low status occupation and the industry as requiring government support in order to persist.

1. Introduction

Taking a constructivist approach (Boje & Henderson, 2014; Boje, 1995) to networked power relations (Latour, 2005; Machiavelli, 2004), this paper investigates the story told about farming in business textbooks. This enquiry provides a means of evaluating how management scholars [within an actor-network] construct farming in the understandings of their students and by extension impact society's perspective on agriculture as an industry. Implied in the act of construction, regardless of intent, is the relative power to influence students' perceptions that instructors and their chosen texts wield. The impetus for the research is the author's experience when moving from a traditional Association of Advanced Schools of Business (AACSB) accredited business school to teaching in a university program in agricultural business and discovering that agribusiness employers were having difficulty filling open business-focused positions. This observation is supported in the literature (Lehberger & Hirschauer, 2016). The question this raised is "Why don't business students apply for jobs in agribusinesses?". Using a digital archive of more than 500 general business textbooks accumulated from another project, examination of the discourse around farming was undertaken to see if there was a plausible link between what is taught in business schools and the job search behavior of graduates. One could posit that the problem could be related to the necessity for agribusiness to recruit production workers from less developed countries (Escalante & Luo, 2017); however, other industries that suffer shortages of front line workers are found attractive by management candidates.

This paper is about the recent past, but to understand the phenomenon one must examine the historical relationship between academia and agriculture since the early 1900s. Ironically, food played an important role in the election of Herbert Hoover as he helped mobilize the Belgian Relief Missions (Gaddis, 2005). After World War One, the food shortages in Europe established primacy of the United States (U.S.) bread basket. Once agricultural production in the war devastated areas resumed, the market for U.S. exports shrank, contributing to the need for government intervention - farming was very important politically. The high point of collaboration between scholars and farmers may have been the New Deal (Foster, Mills, & Weatherbee, 2014); however, that cooperation faded after World War II (McDonald, 2016). Rather than being central to all forms of research including cultural, organizational and philosophical, food became near-exclusively a scientific and industrial priority. In the 1960s and 1970s, science journals were writing about automated farms (Davis, 1968; Nelson, 1970; Pohjakas, 1972; Rushing, 1968), where cows were deciding

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when they wanted to be milked and trundling over to the computerized robotic milking system. By 2005, such systems were commonplace, as were self-navigating tractors and smart watering systems. Every aspect of food production has become computerized, modernized and better organized; however, what we teach business students about farming may not be in line with (or have kept pace with) the reality of the industry. In the business world, agriculture is seen as an industry that needs government assistance and support. Perhaps this perception is due to the high level of government involvement in the preservation of U.S. food power (McDonald, 2016). This involvement included protectionism and subsidies, which have weakened in the U.S. but have continued under the discourse of “food security” in many northern countries (Zhang, 2004).

To assess the question posed above, several hundred business textbooks were analyzed for their depiction of farming. Contextually, the word *farm* in any form (such as farms, farmer and farming) was searched and the nature of the discussion interpreted. Through this means it is possible to describe the implied privilege (or lack thereof) of farming as a profession as taught to business students. It is proposed that the manner in which *farm* is depicted in these general business textbooks plays a role in the dismissal of agri-business as a potential career by the students taught under the modern regime. This analysis contributes a better understanding of the role of the textbook in what is discussed and taught in the classroom. It also demonstrates the unintended impact that the materials chosen to illustrate some aspect of an organization has on the perception of that industry. For both authors and instructors this should be viewed as a cautionary exposition.

2. Literature review

A logical flow from what is contained in textbooks and taught in the business schools to societal (particularly business society) perspectives on an idea, field of study, group of people, or occupation has not been specifically explored, but each piece along the path has been investigated. This idea follows the nature of communication as an integration of source, process, channel, and effect (Krippendorf, 1980, 2008). If we investigate the content of the message and the social relations of the source-recipient dyad it is possible to surface the effect. This effect repeated and reconstructed entrenches a routine understanding (Thrift, 2005). This routine becomes durable extending well beyond the university experience.

Research has shown that the business school plays a significant role in the understanding of the modern world and the way that role is prosecuted is highly contested (Cooke & Alcadipani, 2015; Khurana & Spender, 2012). Further to this point, the training of management students not only provides the tools to execute the role of manager, it simultaneously reshapes their worldview (Vaara & Fay, 2012). Teaching is a multifaceted practice often involving the use of textbooks. As a part of the social construction that occurs in university, textbooks produce the understandings of students who use them (Ferguson, Collison, Power, & Stevenson, 2009; Imada, 2012; Price, Hartt, & Pohlkamp, 2015). The task of business textbooks is to provide students with the opportunity to become familiar with many of the situations and ideas they will face in the workplace (Sloan, 1979). Through the written word with the force majeure of *truth*, a student experiences the content as established *fact*. The shaping power of these texts is enormous. Textbooks may create a perceived hierarchy of professions from the lauded Wall Street financier to the lowly salesperson. Inherent in this hierarchy is a sense of power; and power is an important controller of decision making (Helms Mills, Thurlow, & Mills, 2010). The intent of this analysis is to locate the power position of the farm and agriculture in the hierarchy created at the business school.

There are many actor-networks in society (Latour, 2005) and power plays an important role in the formation and relations of those networks. A *power structure* is a network of organizations and roles within a city or society that is responsible for maintaining the general social structure and shaping new policy initiatives (Domhoff, 2005). The structure dictates the priority and nature of relations. Social order is created and maintained by the power structure (Hunter, 1953); however, those with power cannot control the whole of the system - uncertainty and a desire to reconcile that uncertainty remain. Like other means of influence, the presence of such uncertainty becomes a means by which actions are constrained (Thrift, 2005). Scripts, structures and influences interrelate in the discourse of social and the minds of actors. These construct the sensemaking of individuals (Weick, 1988, 1995). Elites, atop hierarchies, control actions and history through their public decisions and the reenactment of the ideas behind those decisions by those who respect their roles (Hartt, Mills, Helms Mills, & Corrigan, 2014; Mills, 1956; Unger, 1988). The elites construct the scripts, build the structure and wield the influence.

Power and related ideas were discussed by Italian Renaissance philosopher Machiavelli and 20th century French philosopher Foucault. Machiavelli saw power as a tool and a resource to be accumulated and multiplied through careful use (Machiavelli, 2004). Foucault argued that power is accumulated through knowledge and the reification of only some knowledge, as *truth* silences, oppresses and discounts other sources of knowledge (Foucault, 1977, 1997). Therefore, a power system that privileges one industry or profession, or gives power to one and takes from another in a not-quite zero-sum game. Following Machiavelli through Foucault and into Latour and Weick, power is created through social structure, expressed through privileged knowledge, entrenched in the network of actants and prosecuted by sensemakers. Thus, the power of the textbook is a plausible impactor on the actions of job seekers from business schools.

Education normalizes, and through the complex networks of the discipline and prescriptive technologies, power implied is reified and operationalized (Diamond, Quinby, Benhabib, & Cornell, 1990). If we believe that knowledge is socially constructed, and that it becomes embedded in the culture of what we do and how we do it, then business textbooks not only represent what we want our next generation of business people to know and what we want them to accept into the culture, but also guide them in how they should engage within the business system and introduce them to what and who to expect in that system.

Undergraduate texts tend to employ the storytelling technique to support theories, which have survived rigorous study or appeal to the sensemaking of authors, publishers, faculty and students. Ideas that have been discredited, but have proven popular in earlier texts, tend to survive revision (Weatherbee, Durepos, Mills, & Hartt, 2012). New textbooks tend to include the same theories as old

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