



# Learning wisdom: Embodied and artful approaches to management education



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## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 24 February 2015

Received in revised form 22 June 2015

Accepted 19 August 2015

Available online 29 October 2015

### Keywords:

Embodied wisdom

Phronêsis

Phenomenology

Habits

Improvisation

Management education

Learning

## ABSTRACT

This paper argues for an explicit acknowledgement of the link between wisdom and learning in management education. Contending that an intellectual understanding of wisdom alone is inadequate, we adopt a phenomenological perspective and present reasons for the teaching of embodied wisdom in management education. In particular, we discuss the role of embodied, transformative learning with an emphasis on the critical role of habits for cultivating wisdom. Approaches to learning practical wisdom in management education are discussed with a focus on the role of improvisation.

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## 1. Introduction

The regression of reason in our time has led to societies, economies and corporations dominated by unreason, stupidity and madness. We are situated under the reign of forces and techno-human conditions (Allenby & Sarewitz, 2013) that show a lack of wisdom while facing an ecological, social and economic crisis of global proportions moving with great acceleration towards planetary limits (Steffen et al., 2015). Mainstream education, we argue, with its outdated content and approaches, is complicit. Conventional business education has arguably assisted in perpetuating a state of crisis in society, enriching some while impoverishing others, and squandering natural resources at a rate that puts future generations at risk (Shrivastava & Statler, 2012). Moreover, these approaches are being broadly institutionalized as education is increasingly standardized with national qualification frameworks emphasizing student learning outcomes and quantifiable measures (Bologna Working Group, 2005; OECD, 2009) and metrics including measures of quality (Pettersen, 2015).

What we believe is needed in management education is a reconsideration of wisdom and the development and nurturing of

wise learning practices or leadership-related wisdom (Yang, 2011) can lead to more effective and embodied management education and more prudent professional practice (Kinsella & Pitman, 2012).

In our understanding, wisdom and its learning do not reside only in language and intellect or propositional knowledge, but as bodily, experiential and situational action (Küpers & Pauleen, 2013). Understanding and developing wisdom as embodied practice can serve as an antidote or counterweight to thinking of wisdom as something strictly intellectual or cognitive or even worse, in instrumentalizing it as a faddish technique.

In this paper, we extend the case for embodied practice-based wisdom to management education, with a particular emphasis on the place of practice-based learning (Yakhlef, 2010). Management education significantly affects and influences managers' understanding of and dealing with organizational phenomena and subsequently team building, leadership, decision making, action taking and other management duties and tasks. However, management concepts and programs have been criticized for destroying good management practices (Ghoshal, 2005) and there have been calls for a critical reappraisal of business education (e.g. Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011).

Part of the critique of management programs and education concerns a failure to provide what is needed for developing an appropriate management style and practice. This deficit concerns a lack of integral orientation and embodied, artful learning or as

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Mintzberg (2004) put it, more art and craft and less science. Also missing, or often just given lip-service, is the place of applied and lived ethics in management education. As Nonaka and Takeuchi (2011: 59) lament, “The prevailing principles in business make employees ask, ‘What’s in it for me?’ Missing are those that would make them think, ‘What’s good, right, and just for everyone?’”.

What is needed are concepts and conditions in management education that enable an embodied wisdom to flourish. Management models that measure ‘success’ in purely financial terms demonstrate foolishness by conflating the means with the end (Baden & Higgs, 2015). As Baden and Higgs (2015) have shown, in cross-cultural comparisons with economies based on different value systems, business schools can adjust and update their curriculum to go beyond superficial inclusion of ethical issues including more pro-social management theories and a reprioritization of the goal of social welfare over individual business profit-maximization.

What can be observed is a shift in thinking regarding teaching orientation and epistemology of the business school education away from information transfer and towards the cultivation of practical wisdom (Nonaka & Toyama, 2007; Antonacopoulou, 2010; Statler, 2014). What is increasingly developed are models and frameworks that are illustrating how wisdom might be inculcated or learnt, notably as a subject of pedagogy (McKenna, Rooney, & Kenworthy, 2013; Intezari & Pauleen, 2013). Accordingly, Esbjörn-Hargens, Reams and Gunnlaugson (2010) have argued for an integral approach to education, which strongly correlates to a wisdom approach. Future management education, we argue, is well advised to incorporate wisdom (Pantzar, 2000) and its embodied ways of learning as part of a morally informed and integral form of education (Roca, 2008).

Bringing together embodied learning and wisdom is needed because this allows a more mindful learning and thus integral transformative forms of education (Esbjörn-Hargens et al., 2010; Ferrer, Romero, & Albareda, 2005) and management education in particular. Together they foster the co-creative participation of all human dimensions in the learning and inquiry processes beyond ‘cogni-centrism’, without falling into anti-intellectualism. Integrating embodiment and wisdom makes room for somatic, emotional, and intuitive knowing and non-discursive and aesthetic dimensions of learning, without debilitating intellectual standards of analytical rigor and rational criticism. Furthermore, integrating embodied learning and wisdom together allows a link to praxis, in all its materio-socio-cultural dimensions, as it emerges in situated sayings, doings, and relating (Kemmis, 2012: 150).

We understand embodied wisdom as a specific enacted capacity and competent practice in organizations that can be learned and developed (Küpers, 2013). However can management education, as Sellman (2012) asks, think of a wise practitioner and her capability as something beyond skills-based training or technically routine application or even intellectual competency in, for example, critical thinking? Or along with Fraser and Hyland-Russell (2011), we might inquire into how embodied learning and wisdom spaces in adult education can be created. This even more in spite of the aforementioned regimes and pressures to have measurable certainties and skill- and outcome-based imperatives that are limiting the potential for a multidimensional and qualitative learning of wisdom.

To respond to these issues and questions, in this paper we will introduce and relate a phenomenology of embodied wisdom specifically through the embodiment and role of habits. Habits and habituation are particularly relevant for a pragmatic understanding of wisdom learning as they constitute not only the basic involvement of how embodied responsive selves ‘inhabit’ and dwell in their life-world, but are as Dewey, (1922: 46) put it a “formation of intellectual and emotional disposition as well as an

increase in ease, economy, and efficiency of action”. Being themselves a form of embodied and practical understanding, habits constitute a complexly structured “store-house” that enable and transform practices and practitioner.

Our proposition is that through connecting learning with habits and improvisation, it becomes possible to create a basis for the development of wisdom and forms of relational and creative management. In the subsequent sections, we will introduce the concept of embodied wisdom and how it is related to learning, phenomenology, and habits. This is followed by some theoretical and practical implications for management education with a specific focus on the role of improvisation for wisdom learning.

## 2. Embodied practical wisdom for learning

As we will explain further, we understand embodied wisdom to be a critical part of *phrónēsis* or practical wisdom. Practical wisdom is a specific habituated disposition of responsible deliberation, and decisions leading to the capacity to act when and as necessary, i.e. to do the right thing, at the right time, and for the right reason as a matter of course. With its transformative potential the cultivation of practical wisdom becomes increasingly relevant for our times for both individual practitioners and organizations (Küpers & Statler, 2008).

Practical wisdom and forms of wise learning practice that integrate practical knowledge, reasoning and virtuous habits provide a medium for the pragmatics of everyday life, while also facilitating the cultivation of an art of living well, individually and collectively.

The question from a management education perspective is then whether such practical wisdom can be learned. In other words, is wise learning possible, and if so, how could it be taught (Ferrari & Potworowski, 2008; Hart, 2001)? The question of whether wisdom or other virtues are learnable and how they can be conveyed has been discussed for ages, from the Platonic dialogue *Meno* to the ‘psychological’ dialogues of today (Curzer, 2012; Sternberg, 2001). According to Trowbridge (2007), there are malleable, progressive and learnable qualities of wisdom or excellences requisite to *phrónēsis*. Wisdom can be seen as being itself a learnable capacity, especially developed through experience and passion (Bierly, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000) and from ideas and environments (Coy, 2005). Research on adult education related to the pursuit of wisdom – as a non-linear and dynamic practice and committed action for the common good while embracing paradox and uncertainty – further confirms possibilities for learning (Bassett, 2011a,b).

One necessary, but not sufficient, condition for learning and practicing wisdom is knowledge. However, having knowledge – including that of wisdom – is not the same as being wise (Intezari & Pauleen, 2013). While it is possible to teach about manifestations and characteristics of wisdom, formal education will only allow learners to have knowledge of wisdom rather than wisdom itself, especially as a practice. As it involves an experiential, living knowing that enables one to act and cope with real world complexity, practical wisdom cannot be learned as propositional, theoretical or technical knowledge (Hartog & Frame, 2004).

As *phrónēsis* is not a form of objective knowledge it cannot simply be handed from teacher to student in the direct form of lectures or textual knowledge. Wisdom can only be developed and learned indirectly through our own and others’ experiences and reflections: that is, in a situated praxis. In addition to specific practices, this praxis – understood as a mediated way of life and the integrating of bodily experiences, thoughts and actions – is the very condition for the possibilities of learning practical wisdom (Kemmis, 2012). The next section provides a phenomenological

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