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Can business schools increase student employability by embedding scholarly-practice into management education?

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Scholarly practice, management education, employability, higher education

Abstract

Management education is at a pivotal crossroads. In an increasingly globalized world, where change is the only constant, business school graduates who are leaving university are faced with ever increasing competition and complexity. Universities have responded by increasing their emphasis on teaching “employability skills” to graduates. However, undergraduate management curricula still often focus on Programmed Knowledge, which does not adequately prepare graduates for the labour market they inevitably will find themselves in. This paper asserts that integrating Questioning Insight and a scholarly practice approach into management education will better equip graduates for the world of work. A Future Search exercise was implemented to help conceptualize new visions of the future of management education, considering the question “to what extent does management education impact on management practice?” This paper uses Kotter’s 8-stage model of change to outline a pathway for change and action for business schools to adapt a scholarly practice approach to education into their curricula.

Introduction

On January 30, 2018, a diverse group of UK-based scholarly-practitioners came together to “explore the integration of research, teaching and management practice,” at a workshop entitled “Visioning the Future of Scholarly-Practice Research: crossing the academic and practitioner divide.” The workshop was organised as a modified Future Conference, “wherein a space is created to connect academics, current students, employers and alumni, in order to develop the scholarly-practice research community.” Conference participants were guided by an expert facilitator “to enable people to work in participation on what matters to them towards a common purpose” (Gold, Jeff 2018). The key issue posed to participants was “To what extent does management education impact on management practice?” Participants were asked to work in groups to complete the following tasks:

- 1) Consider: “What are the key issues for scholarly-practice and scholarly-practice research? And what changes are going on that are significantly affecting how research relates to practice and vice-versa in business and management?”
- 2) “What have been the success stories and causes for celebration? What have been the downsides? What is working well and what needs to improve? What do you want most?”

What would you keep, drop, create? Where does scholarly-practice research need to go next? What is your vision for a desired future and what is the vision for a likely future?"

- 3) "Based on the visions created in Task 2, what are the options for action in relation to scholarly practice over the next 5 years? What actions do [you] propose to advance and what are the objectives? What are the key questions we must now answer in response to options for action?"

The authors of this paper worked together to explore these questions, bringing insight and experience from various stages of their careers in practice and scholarly-practice research. For clarity, the authors focused their exploration, as well as this paper, on management education during *undergraduate* education.

During the remainder of this paper, the authors took their product developed during the Future Search exercise, and expounded upon it, using the Kotter 8-stage model of change (Kotter 2002).

A vision for the future of undergraduate management education

According to Kotter's 8-stage model of change (Kotter 2002), institutional or systemic change occurs through the following eight steps:

1. 'Create a sense of urgency so that people start telling each other "Let's go, we need to change things!"'
2. 'Pull together a guiding team powerful enough to guide a big change.'
3. 'Create clear, simple, uplifting visions and sets of strategies.'
4. 'Communicate the vision through simple, heart-felt messages sent through multiple channels so that people begin to buy into the change.'
5. 'Empower people by removing obstacles to the vision.'
6. 'Create short-term wins that provide momentum.'
7. 'Maintain momentum so that wave after wave of change is possible.'
8. 'Make change stick by nurturing a new culture.'

In the spirit of Future Search methodology, which emphasizes creating visions, strategies and actions (Gold, Jeff 2018), we use the 8-stage model for change to frame our approach to the issues and questions posed during the Future Conference. As the change proposed is still a work in progress, earlier stages of change are clearer than later stages of the model, where we can only make suggestions from our own past experience, along with that of others.

1. ***'Create a sense of urgency so that people start telling each other "Let's go, we need to change things!"'***

When considering the questions in task 1 of the Future Conference, the authors agreed that some of the key issues facing scholarly-practice in the context of management education include the fact that traditional methods of teaching and assessment, coupled with very large cohorts, often lead teachers to focus largely on the Programmed Knowledge element of learning. This Programmed Knowledge serves to prepare students to some extent for the world of work, as the

theories imparted are often well-established, uncontested, and largely settled (Revans 1971, 1982, 2011; Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne 2012).

However, there is increasing concern that graduates are lacking the critical, analytical skills required for a world of work where knowledge is situational in nature, and where change is often the only constant (King 2003); Yunus and Li, 2005). A thematic analysis of interviews with graduates and faculty, carried out by (Andrews and Higson 2008), identified three key skills and attributes crucial to “employability,” or a set of knowledge and skills that lend themselves to being successful in the workplace, and found that these were similar across a variety of European countries (including the UK). The authors assessed the three key themes and drew parallels with the “l,” “p” and “q” of action learning (Brook et al. 2016), as outlined below:

- Business-specific issues (Programmed knowledge),
- Interpersonal competencies (Questioning insight), and
- Work experience and work-based learning (Scholarly practice)

Andrews and Higson concluded that business schools,

“need to make sure business graduates are equipped with more than hard business-focused skills and competencies...” and “have a responsibility to promote the employability, work readiness and mobility of their graduates.” (2008, p. 420).

In the United Kingdom, efforts to increase graduate employability have been driven, in part, by the incorporation of employability into the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which in turn impacts University rankings. The TEF framework guides Universities to track measures such as the Destination of Leavers of Higher Education (DLHE), a measure generated by universities themselves on the destination of their graduates and total employment at 6 months post-graduation (Department for Education 2017). A variety of other measures of graduate employability are generated through other sources, such as the Global University Employability Ranking published by Times Higher Education, based on information gathered from top graduate recruiters. These metrics and their influence on ranking systems have increased the pressure on institutions of higher education in the UK to ensure that their graduates are prepared for and successful in finding gainful employment.

In response to this mounting pressure to ensure employability among graduates, Universities have made significant investments to ensure that students are ready for and competitive within the world of work. For instance, the University of Luton conducted a curriculum assessment to understand the degree to which job-related skills were embedded into all undergraduate courses. After a University-wide debate, taking into account student and faculty views, the University implemented an assessment process which outlined the skills expectations at every level of undergraduate education, defined where gaps existed in teaching job-related skills, and led to a validation process by which individual modules were recognized for their skills content. Although the study was not able to determine long-term impacts and benefits of this engagement, assessment and validation process, the authors of a study of the initiative reported an increased awareness among students of their responsibility for their own learning, as well as an active re-imagining and updating of curricula across the University, led by faculty (Fallows and Steven 2000).

Despite the growth of these techniques and changes to management education, employers still struggle to find employees who demonstrate skills that are more consistent with the “q” and “i” of action learning and scholarly-practice. Between the 2013 and 2017 CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Surveys, while employer satisfaction with graduates’ numeracy skills (Programmed Knowledge) increased by 7%, satisfaction with skills such as “self-management/resilience,” “teamworking,” and “analysis skills” (Questioning Insight and Scholarly Practice) held almost constant, where about a quarter to a third of employers reported dissatisfaction among graduates’ skill in these areas (CBI 2013, 2017).

The authors of this paper recognize the gap in employability skills among graduates, and hypothesize that this is, in part, due to a gap in University efforts to enhance the “Q,” questioning insight, and scholarly-practice, of their students, which detracts from graduate employability. Therefore, our sense of urgency is centered around advancing scholarly-practice in undergraduate management education.

2. ‘Pull together a guiding team powerful enough to guide a big change.’

In the Kotter model, a powerful team must be assembled to drive change. In the case of embedding scholarly-practice into management education to enhance graduate employability, some of those stakeholders could include:

- Representatives of employers of graduates, who have first-hand practitioner knowledge of the nature of graduate jobs;
- Action Learning experts to build capacity in this area of teaching in business schools;
- Pedagogic experts who can help to navigate the processes of teaching and assessment, and who will provide reassurance that improving insightful questioning will not damage the acquisition of programmed knowledge, but rather enhance it;
- Other academic partners who already have experience doing this work, for instance those at Brighton University business school, who have embedded scholarly-practice into their MBA programme (O’Hara, Webber, and Reeve 1996).

Additional actors that have a stake in this problem include: students, Vice Chancellors, and leaders responsible for teaching, assessment and employability within universities.

Scholarly-practitioners engaged in this work might consider an “outside in” and “inside out” approach to driving change (Reinholz et al. 2014). An outside in approach would involve engagement with administration, to shift university incentive structures and resources toward the change they want to see. At the University of Luton, the University-wide drive to ensure employability skills were integrated into the undergraduate curriculum was led by an outside in approach, where a strategic decision at the most senior levels of University management was made to prioritize these efforts (Fallows and Steven 2000). An inside out approach requires a more grassroots approach, where faculty members would engage in collaborative processes to change the approach to teaching and learning.

In the case of embedding scholarly-practice in management education, with the ultimate goal of increasing graduate employability, both an inside out and outside in approach are appropriate and useful. It will be critical to understand the degree of support for change that exists within business schools from the top down (outside in) and bottom up (inside out). Decisions whether to work through an outside in and/or an inside out approach will depend on where support for change naturally exists, or can be encouraged and created.

3. *‘Create clear, simple, uplifting visions and sets of strategies.’*

We hypothesize that scholarly practice, embedded into traditional education, is a missing link between practice-based learning and traditional management education to enhance graduate employability. Therefore, the vision for this work is to alter the way that students are taught and assessed, to value insightful questioning equally with programmed knowledge. We envision a future where scholarly-practice is embedded within teaching at business schools.

Although this work will be challenging, there is evidence that scholarly-practice is already being embedded into management school curricula. At Brighton University and the Bradford University School of Management, action learning has been incorporated as a central feature of their MBA programs (O’Hara, Webber, and Reeve 1996; Johnson and Spicer 2006).

There is also evidence that incorporating scholarly-practice can increase employability among students. In one case study at a UK-based business school, postgraduate management students took part in a novel business simulation during the last year of their course. The simulation was designed to facilitate critical reflection and help students explore the application of theoretical concepts in the practice scenario. Alumni of the program were surveyed one year after graduation and reported the business simulation increased their confidence during their interview and onboarding process into jobs. In addition, students reported the positive effect of the experience in that it gave them a competitive edge during the job application and interview process, as they had more practical experience to refer to than other new graduates with little to no job experience (Avramenko 2012).

However, the evidence is only a starting point – scholarly-practitioners must work to understand the strategies employed to embed scholarly-practice into management education and leverage the experience from other universities to develop their own plan of action.

4. *‘Communicate the vision through simple, heart-felt messages sent through multiple channels so that people begin to buy into the change.’*

Once vision/messages are formed, scholarly-practitioners should look to channels of communication that are effective in their institutions. Within individual institutions, there are likely unique formal and informal “outside in” and “inside out” channels of influence and communication, and scholarly-practitioners can leverage those existing networks. Scholarly-practitioners may also consider forming action learning sets among peers in their business schools to advance change processes as part of an inside out approach. Alternatively, or additionally, change makers in this context could consider leveraging social media. These could be used in traditional ways to enhance the reach of their messages, or in more experimental

ways, as with “generative learning communities,” which go beyond knowledge transfer and use social media for learning co-construction (Lewis, Pea, and Rosen 2010).

5. *‘Empower people by removing obstacles to the vision.’*

Often the biggest barriers to change exist because of fear that there is no solution or that the proposed solution will not work. However, the University of Luton demonstrated that system-wide movements for change are possible (Fallows and Steven 2000). Brighton University and others have demonstrated that it is possible to embed action learning and other methods of scholarly-practice into curricula (Avramenko 2012; O’Hara, Webber, and Reeve 1996). Therefore, the evidence exists that these solutions do work in practice. However, additional organizational work may also need to occur to remove barriers and so pave the pathway for curriculum re-development.

6. *‘Create short-term wins that provide momentum.’*

The scholarly-practice community as a whole, or guiding teams at individual universities, can draw from the strategic planning community to create medium to long term plans of action, interspersed with appropriate assessment/evaluation to help mark progress. Like (Avramenko 2012), scholarly-practitioners can use survey methods to assess the benefits of novel educational approaches at varying lengths of time post-graduation, and use their channels of influence and communication established at earlier stages of change to communicate interim progress and results.

7. *‘Maintain momentum so that wave after wave of change is possible.’*

The authors hypothesize that short term wins in this context will lead to positive momentum. There is already a lot of pressure for universities to support the employability of graduates. Once positive benefits start to be seen by graduates and their alma matters, there will be ample evidence to maintain momentum.

8. *‘Make change stick by nurturing a new culture.’*

This last stage of the Kotter model, by definition, will require a cultural shift in Universities, including in business schools, to move beyond programmed knowledge and incorporate a scholarly-practice approach to education as a means to enhance graduate employability. We are seeing signs that this is happening. At Sheffield Hallam University, a Venture Matrix approach was used to test student engagement in their own employability. The approach, which allows students to set up and lead their own “companies” through an online platform, was found to change behavior: students demonstrated increased reflectivity and confidence (Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough 2009). As more and more students are exposed to novel methods to drive their curiosity, reflection and engagement around their career journeys, and increase their competitiveness in the job market, more and more Universities will engage with the kinds of approaches and methods discussed in this article. The scholarly-practice community can help to ensure these methods are promoted, and cultures continue to shift, by continuing to advocate for, develop and study novel approaches to embedding scholarly-practice into management education, and sharing the results in publications visible to University administrators.

Conclusion

The current situation could be classified as a “wicked problem”, having “multiple stakeholders with competing perspectives and by an absence of obvious solution” (Brook et al. 2016, 369).

While action learning could be identified as a means of encouraging insightful questioning in graduates, this level of criticality of reflection and learning could equally be identified as a means by which higher education institutions can develop their focus on and renew their priority for developing scholarly practitioners, and therefore employable graduates.

We have developed a vision and set a strategic framework to assist teaching professionals and University stakeholders in the advancement of embedding scholarly-practice in management education, with the overall aim to increase employability among their students. Although the change process is unfinished, this paper suggests ways forward, and we hope it acts as a catalyst for change. In suggesting a framework, this paper forms a basis that other scholarly-practitioners can use as a starting point for change within their own institutions to continue to embed a scholarly-practice approach in management education, with the ultimate goal of better preparing graduates for the increasingly competitive, global labor market.

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