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Changing times for management educators: Rethinking engagement with participatory forms of knowledge production

Research Article

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Abstract: Oscar Wilde once quipped, 'Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught.' Whilst business scholars have challenged this premise, debate rages concerning what elements are most worth knowing. Specifically, the value of rigorous academic research is often weighed against the merits of specific student experiences that may have more immediate value in the marketplace. Within this changed context, academics are challenged to embrace collaborative forms of research activity and re-imagine the nature of the academic–practitioner exchange and accompanying knowledge transfer. We explore this changing role of the business school with an eye towards outlining potential bridges between academic knowledge and benefits of interactions with practice. Specifically, we consider the academic–practitioner interface in the context of the wider debate on 'rigour and relevance' in management education and research. Participatory modes of knowledge production are discussed, and current ideas on the 'management practice' gap are discussed. We conclude that more innovative forms of research engagement are required to encourage academic–practitioner collaboration. To that end, we discuss a number of potential approaches to help foster co-learning and discovery and debate their student, educator and broader instructional implications.

Keywords: Management education • management practice gap • research engagement

Introduction

The environment of the business school has changed radically in recent years with new demands on faculty and increased competition from existing and new providers of business education (Cornuel, 2008). At the same time, business schools have also experienced increased demands from the business community for their services in supporting attempts to institutionalise innovation and enhance competitiveness (Hughes et al., 2008). Despite the considerable changes that have taken place within business schools in recent years, substantial debate continues within the management education literature with calls for more widespread change, innovation and redirection. Several contributors have questioned the impact that these institutions have on their graduates and on the profession of management (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). For example, Burgoyne et al. (2004) noted that 'there appears to be some tensions between the very largely positive feedback from students on their learning at Business Schools and how easily this can be linked to improvements in their performance at work' (Burgoyne et al., 2004, p. 53). Others provide more scathing criticism, stating that 'the business school has not only failed to deliver knowledge that enhances firm and national competitiveness, but has also been a major source of the wrong sorts of knowledge for management and fostering a short-term, risk-averse orientation' (Starkey and Tempest, 2005, p. 72). It would appear that management educators have not fully embraced the tensions surrounding the need to provide application of management knowledge derived from academic research with the practical needs of graduates in an increasingly competitive economic environment.

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This conceptual paper assesses the changes underway in business schools generally and more specifically in the Irish context, to examine the nature and implications of these changes for academic–practitioner exchange for business schools, academics, students and practitioners. We review a number of potential approaches of participatory knowledge production and highlight the primary issues surrounding their successful implementation, namely, establishing the relevant context for inquiry and the design of innovative pedagogical approaches suitable for the acquisition of personal and professional skills and competencies in practice-based work environments. We explore the history of these issues in the broader Irish context, and with an eye to the future, we present some potential ideas that might enhance the academic–practitioner interface.

The account will also incorporate work completed by the authors as part of the report of the Irish Management Development Council (2010) and consider the recommendations made and their wider implications for educational institutions and academics.

The challenges for management educators

The role of management educators in fostering the knowledge and professional competencies of graduates is well established within the literature (Christon, 2002). Management educators strive to develop management knowledge, understanding, and competencies; educators have a responsibility to equip graduates with the relevant management competencies which will help them transition into the workplace (Christon, 2002). Educational institutions similar to any other type of institution exist in what DiMaggio and Powell (1991) term an *organizational field*: 'By *organizational field* we mean those institutions that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organisations that produce similar services or products' (pp. 64–65). The business school amid the broader educational institutional arena includes industry, accreditation agencies, government organisations, commercial institutions and the broader society it engages with directly or indirectly. Within this context, academics help shape the attitudes and behaviour of business leaders through business education, research, management development programs, training and other pervasive, but less tangible, activities, such as the spread and advocacy of new values and ideas (Abell, 2008).

Owing to the changing needs of industry, management education aims to provide graduates with the insight, execution skills and attitudes to confront complex leadership challenges (Abell, 2008). However, there is some debate on the extent to which business schools are successfully achieving such goals. Business schools face the challenge of developing innovative potential across a diverse group of students who number the traditional undergraduate, part-time and full-time post graduate, the unemployed and the social entrepreneur, among others. Simultaneously, national and supranational institutions are arguing the importance of the development of innovation in students as a potential for future entrepreneurial activity (Turnbull and Eickhoff, 2011). Many argue that the current structure and models of management education are narrow, over-specialised and 'do not provide students with the ability to relate to realistic management problem-solving situations' (Khurana, 2007; Kieser and Leiner, 2009, p. 516). Management education is viewed appropriately as science based, where it represents a key factor in the development and delivery of successful management and executive education programmes (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009). These writers suggest that instead of a problem of too much science informing the business school curriculum, the real issue is the 'inability of many management educators to teach the research evidence effectively' (Hodgkinson and Rousseau, 2009, p. 535). This narrow focus has lead to the questioning of the legitimacy of business schools and their role in developing the leadership potential of graduates (see Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Khurana, 2007; Abell, 2008; Allen and van der Velden, 2008). Other commentators express concern on the possible negative impact of business schools on their graduates and on the organisations where these graduates practice management (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Khurana, 2007). In 1963, the Dean of the Graduate School of Business in the Michigan State University, Alfred Seelye (1963) stated that in the face of change and uncertainty, the focus for the business school should be to develop the minds that will generate and regenerate the practices of business, not to provide descriptions of normative practices. Regrettably, we have not always lived up to this challenge. Management education has been criticized for limited theoretical perspectives producing 'critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts, and shrunken souls' (Leavitt, 1989). Unless the strategic narrative of the professional and the social science perspectives changes, there is little hope of improvement (Galavan et al., 2009).

In the current business context, educational institutions have a key role in preparing graduates for positions that extend beyond those of subject specialist or technical expert; these institutions also have a role in supporting graduates to make a smooth transition to the workplace, bringing new ideas to the business and demonstrating an appetite for ongoing professional learning (Hynes and Richardson, 2007; Starkey and Tempest, 2008; CBI, 2009). These concerns were highlighted in the report '*The Flexible Professional in the Knowledge Society' (2008)*, which recommended graduate development in five key areas, namely, professional expertise, functional flexibility, innovation and knowledge management, mobilisation of human resources and international orientation. However, the report noted deficiencies in graduate preparation and development, highlighting student concerns about the relevance of their educational experience for industry needs. These findings suggest a requirement for a greater exploration of the notions of *'employability'* or *'industry readiness'* of graduates and an assessment of the attributes required of graduates in ensuring that they are equipped to perform multifaceted roles in the workplace. One interesting observation made in a report concerning '*Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work' (CB1, 2009)*, is that which underlines graduate development as the *'set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy'* (CBI, 2009, p. 8). The report further highlighted the importance that employers place on skills such as self-management, team-working, customer awareness and problem solving, communication, information communication technology (ICT) and enterprising skills. In the Irish context, similar issues resonate for employers as described in the report published by the *Expert Group on Future Skills Need (EGFSN) (2007)* and Forfas (2009) where emphasis was placed on competency development in the following areas: innovation and creativity for generating and evaluating business opportunities; generic management practices; resourcefulness and competences in ICT.

A subsequent Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) report, published in November 2009, reinforced Ireland's need for skills in creativity, design and innovation. Capabilities in these areas were viewed as key drivers of productivity improvement and considered integral to the Government's wider strategy for economic renewal, as reflected in the plan *Building Ireland's Smart Economy – A Framework for Sustainable Economic Renewal (2008) and the Innovation Task Force Report (2010).* Equally, the report of the Management Development Council, *Management Development in Ireland (2010)*, concluded that improving management capability within small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (who constitute 97% of firms in Ireland) through management development can lead to significant returns to the State in terms of increased gross value added, increased employment, better business survival rates and a more skilled workforce. These stakeholder expectations establish the context within which management educators will be required to initiate the new ideas, innovations and strategies that will support graduate development in a much changed business and competitive environment.

Such expectations also underpin the reconsideration of the traditional methodologies of teaching and learning in educational institutions. Whilst the role of higher education is increasingly to educate students by enhancing their subject specialist knowledge, a stronger emphasis is now placed on transforming the mindset of the student through the development and application of skills, attitudes and abilities whilst simultaneously empowering them to be lifelong critical, reflective learners (Hynes and Richardson, 2007; CBI, 2009). For example, in the context of teaching innovation, there is a requirement for a fundamental reappraisal of existing teaching methods and the use of new ones. Belski (2009) in an extensive survey found that students who participate in creative problem solving modules not merely exhibit greater confidence in their capabilities to solve the problems but also show greater willingness to apply and leverage their capabilities.

The combinations of knowledge and co-evolution of new management ideas often come about as academics observe practice and formulate popular ideas in ways that are inherently attractive to and accessible by managers in terms of their preferences for the nature and format of information (Fincham and Clark, 2009, p. 513). Kieser and Leiner (2009) in their review referred to notions of academia and practice as 'closed systems and self referential' and pointed to the requirement for studies which would allow for a stronger evaluation of academic-practitioner knowledge exchange communities of practice, networks and collaborations. As Hodgkinson and Rousseau (2009, p. 538) remark, there is a requirement to 'develop deep partnerships between academics and practitioners supported by appropriate training in theory and research methods which can yield outcomes that meet the twin imperatives of high quality scholarship and social usefulness'.

Notwithstanding the above, how this epistemological change is best achieved is less debated in the literature. The challenge for business educators is in distinguishing the right type of knowledge graduates require and how best to deliver it to make it relevant to the context of the changing workplace. The components of knowledge are elaborated

upon as the epistemology of '*possession*' and that of '*practice*' (Cook and Brown, 1999, p. 387). Yanow (2004) suggested that knowledge is distinguished into two types: one definable as *'expert'* and the other as *'local'* (Yanow, 2004, p. 12). The 'expert' dimension comprises the accumulation of explicit, theory-based, academic, professional or scientifically based, abstract and generalisable knowledge and techniques. The 'local' dimension on the other hand comprises the complex array of forms of knowledge and ways of doing which are tacit and practice based and which derive from experience and interaction in a specific context. Within wider managerial and organisational learning debates, knowledge is not depicted as a static embedded capability, 'but rather an on-going social accomplishment, constituted and reconstituted as actors engage in the world of practice' (Orlikowski, 2002, p. 249).

Academic and practitioner interface

The key question then becomes how do we operationalise these ideas and begin to fuse cognitive and practice-based theories of learning. How we connect the 'knowing' to the 'doing' to create ideal contexts for teaching and learning and create the classroom 'as the Petri dish of innovation and experimentation' (Tushman and O'Reilly, 2007). The aim being to capture the multi-processes of knowing in practice as social firm actors interact (Easterby-Smith and Araujo, 1999; Taylor and Easterly-Smith, 1999; Thompson and Thompson, 2008). A pragmatic theory of learning views the process of thinking as an instrument, a method of experimentation in which inquiry of the uncertain situation is the necessary condition for knowledge attainment. In other words, the context in which learning can occur is through the engagement in inquiry and the application of thinking and reflection as tools in that practice-based process. Therefore, we propose initiatives such as experiential learning, service teaching and working in virtual contexts that incorporate important aspects of teamwork and learning in an experiential, reflective and reflexive manner in the real-world context. Indeed, recent years have seen a move to more participatory modes of knowledge production or a focus on mode 2 research. The notion of mode 2 research has its origins with the work of Gibbons et al. (1994) and is widely understood as a knowledge production system undertaken in the context of application. Research undertaken encompasses the production of enduring knowledge and engages with a live problem for those for whom the research is produced. In contrast, mode 1 research can be understood as work undertaken in a separate context, that is, university institution, from that in which the problem originated. Fundamental research undertaken in this mode has no immediate application potential; however, the knowledge can often be exploited at a later stage, dislocating knowledge production from knowledge consumption (Burgoyne and James, 2001; Starkey and Madan, 2001). The following features are more commonly associated with mode 2 knowledge production: knowledge produced in the context of application, transciplinarity, heterogeneity and organisational diversity, social accountability and reflexivity (MacLean et al., 2002, p. 191). These writers posit that the features can be viewed not as a recipe, but as ingredients for mode 2 research. They also note the deficiencies in the literature addressing the practical issues in conducting this type of research. This challenge is similarly highlighted by Starkey and Madan (2001), who suggest the requirement for management researchers to address issues of content, process and dissemination in efforts to bridge the relevancy gap. These issues and in particular the process topic can be successfully addressed through the adoption of action learning teaching and delivery modes and further augments the benefits associated with mode 2 research. Action learning focuses on the integrated and holistic development of the student by applying a task as the vehicle for learning. It is based on the premise that there is no learning without action and no sober and deliberate action without learning (Pedler, 1991). It is underpinned by the cycle of experiential learning, where the learning methodologies emphasise intellectual and personal development, through responsible involvement in solving real-world complex and stressful problems, to achieve intended change (Revans, 1982, p. 627). A number of authors suggest that experiential learning is more than problem solving, rather, it extends to a deeper cognitive process in which learning is perceived as experiential, reflective and reflexive (Kelly, 1997; Tenenbaum et al., 2001; Hytti and O' Gorman, 2004).

Experiential learning modes are based on the relationship between reflection and action. Such learning locates reflection within a social context, albeit as a process in which a group of individuals support each other in their own and their peers reflection and learning (Ramsey, 2005). Reflective learning that is focussed on individual knowledge is in danger of neglecting the importance of social processes in making that 'knowing' real in a complex environment. Thus, active forms of learning encourage students to think and work more creatively to develop problem-solving strategies for confronting unknown or unfamiliar situations they may encounter in the workplace (Tenenbaum et al*.,* 2001).

Service learning provides one bridge between theory and practice in management education that has the potential to benefit students individually and society universally and is an academically rigorous instructional method that incorporates meaningful community service into the curriculum. Focusing on critical, reflective thinking and civic responsibility, service learning involves students in organised community service that addresses local needs, whilst developing their academic skills, respect for others and commitment to the common good. Examples of service-learning encounters might include developing business plans and other strategies for non-profit organisations, working on a variety of social service projects for at-risk youth and/or economically disadvantaged citizens or creating a successful fundraiser for a nonprofit organisation. One particular avenue of service learning could focus on social entrepreneurs – individuals who begin a new venture with an explicit social mission. Given that research in social entrepreneurship is in an embryonic state (Hynes, 2009; Short et al., 2009), student involvement in a variety of social enterprises could yield benefits for scholars seeking to gain rich data on such organisations – providing a further possible bridge between research and practice in an under-recognised sector. The engagement of student teams in the completion of market research and business development plans for entrepreneurs in socially and economically disadvantaged areas (Southill Development Cooperative, Limerick), childcare groups and social entrepreneurs has provided students with exposure to non-profit organisations and the challenges encountered in managing such ventures. Additionally, collaboration with this broader not-for-profit sector enhances the corporate social responsibility image of the educational institution extending its relevance to a broader range of stakeholders. Another practice-based initiative, the Business Consulting Module is a further example of how collaboration between educational institutions and industry might address multiple stakeholder needs and benefit the student, educational institution and broader external stakeholder requirements. Other institutions have introduced co-operative education programs that come in several forms. Recognising the continued advancements in technology and 'virtual' learning – as evidenced by Nicolini's (2007) study on distance work, there is also merit in developing virtual contexts. Furthermore, the extent to which knowledge can be developed and applied and expressed through a 'network of practice' where members are not (physically) necessarily co-located, but who do engage in common practices and as a result share tacit knowledge yielding network learning, should be emphasised in this context.

Such experiential forms of delivery are highly resource dependent relative to the more traditional didactic methods. This poses challenges and may cause conflict for educators in achieving alignment between the broader institutional teaching strategies and what is best suited to practice-based management education. Moreover, the provision of a supportive, appropriate infrastructure for this type of learning has a positive impact on broader institutional sustainability and can enhance its credibility externally and further legitimise the image of the business school (Poole and Robertson, 2003; Hynes and Richardson, 2007; Pittaway and Cope, 2007).

Another potential opportunity to maintain legitimacy within the global academy whilst providing a unique and value-added form of differentiation for Irish business schools is through 'mission-linked' accreditation. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) implemented 'mission-linked' standards for accreditation in 1994 to increase the accessibility of accreditation to colleges that were historically engaged primarily in instruction (Yunker, 1998; Jantzen, 2000). Given linkages between college mission statements and business school performance (Palmer and Short, 2008), carefully crafting a distinctive mission could provide the starting point for an organisational strategy that explicitly involves serving practitioner as well as academic audiences. This suggestion is particularly relevant in an Irish context as a number of Irish universities (e.g. Dublin City University, University College Dublin, Waterford Institute of Technology) count themselves as members of the AACSB.

In a related manner, the theoretical language used in academic studies may not be comprehensible or realistic in the commercial domain, which can be improved whereby academic research is translated into a form amenable to practitioners without losing its rigour. This is being addressed in some journals that have a largely practitioner focus such as Business Horizons, and research briefs at The Academy of Management Journals provide just a couple of select examples of pieces explicitly aimed at bridging the gap between research and practice. Creating new delivery formats beyond academic journals that provide theoretically driven material might also help bridge the gap between research and practice. For example, one recent contribution to the management literature presents the challenges of a technology management leader by presenting key issues in a narrative much like a traditional novel (Austin et al., 2009). In addition, the graphic novel has been suggested as one format that uses storylines and rich metaphor in conjunction with cartoon-like images to deliver business content (Short and Reeves, 2009). For example, *Atlas Black: Managing to Succeed* tells the story of two university students struggling to begin their own entrepreneurial venture; as the students plan a start-up restaurant, they integrate key concepts that bridge micro- and macro-research areas such as the attraction–simulation–attrition framework, decision biases, Porter's Five

Forces, the balanced-scorecard, person–job and person–organisation fit, the Resourced-Based View, 'Big Five' personality traits, and other management theories and frameworks (Short et al., 2009). In addition to such feature length texts, Harvard Business School recently published the first case in graphic novel format (Austin and Short, 2009). Given the flexibility of such formats, novels and graphic novels might provide more flexible mediums than traditional textbooks – which can at times be slow to integrate new areas of research (Stambaugh and Quinn-Trank, 2010). In addition, recent research has found that student use of graphic novel texts results in superior verbatim recall of material than traditional textbooks (Short et al., 2013). Additional means of dissemination at the conference level are also required to provide legitimacy with a need for practitioner lead research outputs. The inclusion of the Teaching and Learning Stream at the Irish Academy of Management Conference is a welcome initiative in this respect. As Galavan et al. (2009) have noted elsewhere, the quality of our scholarly work cannot be defined singularly in terms of the quantitative method, which 'while excellent in some contexts provides limited value in others. If the rigour of our work is not defined in terms of its quality and fitness for purpose then we as researchers are subservient to the method. Claiming rigour on the basis of well implemented method, even though the method is unsuited to the question, is akin to the medic claiming the operation was a success but the patient died. Ignoring the question (refusing to treat the patient) because it doesn't suit our method, makes us slaves of our science and abandons all hope of a relationship with society that could infer we were a profession. If we have aspirations to be a profession, which we strongly believe is a must, then our relevance must be defined in terms of its impact on society, via the medium of organisations and the economy'.

Concluding comments and stakeholder implications

As the review suggests, business schools strategies and activities will continuously evolve to more closely align their work with practice-based interventions. This requires a paradigm shift in educational institutions to ensure that initiatives are embedded in a comprehensive and long-term-oriented strategy for educational, research and enterprise industry linkages. As remarked by Nussbaum (1997), it requires institutions to reflect more critically into management practice in ways that enhance our humanity and challenge the oversimplifications of practice. Indeed as other writers have argued, the challenge of developing relevant practice-led knowledge that prepares and encourages students not just to observe but also to initiate and lead new business activity must address the academic–practitioner interface (Kelliher et al., 2009). Educational interventions should better be developed to reflect academic and practitioner accounts, with students and lecturers as co-learners, co-planners, co-produces, and co-evaluators as they design, implement and continually refine their work to meet industry needs in a professional manner. In this context, managers will engage and interact more critically in the management research process if they accept the need for the research and its potential to address management problems. This results in a different facilitator/learner relationship, which requires changes and flexibility in the role of educator/practitioner and offers great potential for future research.

Much of what has been reviewed here in terms of academic literature deals with the macro-level debate and in contrast there appears to be a paucity of studies dealing with the implementation of mode two research and future studies might take this trajectory. This would allow greater understanding of the dynamics of how the research process emerges and the roles and motivations of key stakeholders. In particular, it could build on the limited work available (Mitev and Venters, 2009; Kearney and Harrington, 2011) and explore the underlying power dynamics and conflict between key actors.

Another emerging theme suggests the exploration of how the increasing commercial pressures on universities and business schools, in particular, have altered how they create, exchange and disseminate knowledge. Indeed, one might well begin by exploring the very nature of what practitioners understand as *knowledge*. A notable omission from the extant literature appears to be studies aimed at understanding why businesses fail to use, contribute to and create business knowledge and further research is needed in this area (Weick, 2001). This will take greater account of the diversity of management studies as a social science and the requirement for more innovative forms of collaborative research engagement.

This transformative learning requires an environment and resources (physical and financial) that encourages and rewards this type of intellectual openness. In order to increase visibility amongst industry, faculty should be encouraged to gain practical experience in consulting and the realities of managing business in a changing environment that can be replicated in the classroom. This interaction results in increased networking, thus giving

greater potential for research collaboration and sourcing much needed external funding. Moreover, this interaction provides validation of research outcomes in a real-life test-bed; a valuable pool of information and cases thus allowing for benchmarking.

As Fincham and Clark (2009, p. 514) noted, 'management studies as a social science has wider external affinities and greater diversity and is less of a closed system than natural science, and any relative inability to communicate with practice may derive from other sources – perhaps the nature of management itself as an uncertain activity where there are no ultimate answers or design solutions'.

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