Educating for future complexities in management- a vision for the future MBA.

Abstract:

Calls for the reform of MBA education are not new but the issue of change continues to generate work on how this could be undertaken. The MBA has become a site of contestation with differing agendas being played out from instrumentalist approaches that focus on the utility of the MBA as a management qualification to those that adopt a more holistic perspective. This conceptual paper sets out to make a contribution to this discourse through reference to heutagogy and how it may contribute to the development of managerial capability in an uncertain and volatile world. In doing so, this paper relates management learning to the capacity to make effective decisions within organisations. Higher Education is undergoing transformation with an increasing emphasis on learner-centred curricula. This paper contributes to the discourse on the future of learning in higher education.

Introduction

Although Spender (2017, p. 187), has called for a reform of the MBA as part of the wider re-professionalisation of the managerial cadre, he suggests that:

> Those who find fault with what we are doing think more in terms
> [of] adjustment and refinement than of radical reconstruction.

At the heart of this call is the issue of the relevance and utility of the MBA as a management qualification. Kuechler and Stedham (2018, p. 10) acknowledge that:

> Most management classes… are taught by modified traditional techniques in which the acquisition of facts and skills is primary.

This emphasis on knowledge building- that is typical of traditional MBA programmes- may not serve our future needs as well as it has in the past. Instead, we need to think in terms of responsive skill-sets for changing times and a broader scope for understanding of management work and its context. The emphasis on the development of competencies (Albanese, 1989; Boyatzis, 2008), and with this the competency-driven curriculum that has characterised much in MBA education should be viewed as limiting the potential for students' learning and wider professional growth. The future curriculum should look to embed more holistic understanding of management practice that recognises the importance of reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2002, 2016; Cunliffe and Bell, 2016), social responsibility and inter-personal skills .

Moreover, a discussion on management education should also consider how the complexity of organisational problems influence our conception of possible solutions, and management practice (Anderson, 1999; Chiles, 2003; Langley, 2007; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Tsoukas, 2017). This shift in the emphasis in management education from a predominantly a resource-based view of an organisation to one that is process-oriented, acknowledges the complexities inherent with organisation- and is fundamentally an epistemological endeavour. There is still, however, some ground to cover before we arrive at a truly learner-centred curriculum that addresses the demands of the information age and the complexities of organisational life in the twenty-first century. This paper suggests that the adoption of heutagogic principles within MBA curricula may not only enrich management education but also prepare students to be more effective future managers.

For Richardson, McGowan, and Styger (2018, p. 1845):

> The purpose of an MBA, by design, is to develop students that have the ability to undertake their careers and be able to be reflective, analytical and critical thinkers, with the ability to address and solve problems, and supported by the drive to be lifelong learners.

Can we say that traditional MBA curricula fully deliver on these goals? This paper offers a conceptual overview of management education and outlines the case for a paradigm shift within MBA education from the traditional reliance on pedagogy towards greater variety in teaching and learning, particularly with the adoption of heutagogical approaches. This discussion is informed by two underpinning research questions. Firstly, what is the case for the adoption of heutagogy as a learning approach in management education? Secondly, how can heutagogical practice be implemented in MBA programmes? In addressing these questions, this paper makes a significant contribution to the discourse on management learning.

Literature review

The changing context of management decision-making

The challenges facing organisations are complex as are the ways we respond (Anderson, Hibbert, Mason and Rivers, 2018; Pederzini, 2018). Langley (2007, p. 273) invites management educators to acknowledge that 'there is an elephant in the room and it is process'. For Langley (2007) there is a clear need to close an epistemological gap which has sought to dissociate complexity from organisational processes. This invitation therefore involves an exploration of what organisation means - a noun or a verb as suggested by Weick (1979) - as well as how we theorise it as a resource or as a social endeavour. The most immediate concern

relates to the raison d'etre of management, and how we therefore view management education (Mintzberg and Gosling, 2003; Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006). Although it is tempting to focus entirely on how we prepare "managers", the problem we face is much more complex (Verela, Burke, and Michel, 2013). Fundamentally, we must confront some ontological and epistemological issues (Spender, 2017) that relate to our conception of what it means to "manage" Mintzberg (2004, 2013). Rather than reducing our discourse on management education to a discussion of training, we need to consider how organisations identify and respond to challenges, and how our understanding of management may be developed more fully.

Historically, MBA programmes have been underpinned by rational-analytic forms of knowledge and Classical Decision Making (CDM) practices (Abraham and Collins, 2011) that are predicated on objectivist notions of reality and the way in which organisations operate (Bettis, Gamardella, Helfat and Mitchell, 2014). This approach claims that organisational managers should be trained to be able to identify problems and then devise logical solutions. This conception of organisations aligns with the idea of machine bureaucracies that are organised along rationalist lines and that objectify problems and in so doing de-emphasise the debate over what course of action is appropriate. Tsoukas (2017) suggests that we reject this disjunctive view of organisational processes in favour of conjunctive thinking and embrace the idea of complexity. In doing so, we may better understand the challenges organisations face and enable the development of appropriate solutions.

Re-conceptualising ideas and practice in order to make better management decisions

A number of scholars have written on how organisations can change management practices in order to meet the challenges of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) (Nicolaides and McCallum, 2013; Bennet and Lemoine, 2014). In particular, Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, and Schley (2008) discuss the need to develop an environment within which individuals are able to increase their personal capacity and respond to changing problem scenarios. For Nicolaides and McCallum (2013, p. 248)L

This capacity building requires the kind of inquiry that helps us unlearn the old assumptions and biases that obstruct our discovery… and to learn the means to enact new collective visions.

Naturalistic Decision-Making (NDM) offers a more holistic understanding of decision-making. According to Abraham and Collins (2011, p. 374):

One of the biggest reasons why NDM approaches are so attractive is that society rewards experts who are quick to respond to difficult questions. [However] problems can quickly arise, in that overconfidence can lead to mistakes being ignored or blamed elsewhere, with biases in decision-making becoming established and unchallenged simply because they are the 'expert'.

The exigencies of organisational decision-making highlight the importance of critical self-evaluation through personal reflection and professional reflexivity, as well as an understanding of how context influences the decision-making process (Cunliffe, 2002, 2916; Cunliffe and Bell, 2016). The challenge for educators is then how to promote appropriate learning approaches in order to meet the individual and organisational imperatives in the age of VUCA?

Promoting adaptive leadership and management in the age of VUCA

Nicolaides and McCallum (2013, p. 248) pose the problem of 'how do we help build adaptive capacity to lead in the face of evolutionary challenges'? Heifetz, Linsky and Grashow (2009) suggest that organisations aim for adaptive forms of leadership and management that reject established assumptions in problem-solving that are often prevalent within MBA programmes. Hase (2014) argues that not only must organisations restructure the loci for decision-making but also the way in which we

re-construct our cognitive schema when approaching problem-solving. For Hase (2014, p. 105):

> The capacity to learn is dependent on the ability for someone to be reflexive, to be able to challenge his or her own dogmas and beliefs in the face of contradictory evidence. It involves double and triple loop learning.

In order to change the way in which managers address problem-solving and decision-making, MBA programmes must lead on 'an evolution of the way we learn and the way we lead' (Nicolaides and McCallum, 2013, p. 248) and promote cultural changes within organisations. The development of looped learning theory (Torbert, 1991) provides an insight into how organisations may engender change through systemised forms of reflection and action-planning (See Table 1). Although Romme and Witteloostuijn (1999, p. 440) acknowledge that double-loop learning has the potential to be transformative and change how organisations think of problem-solving, they also suggest that 'most organisations seem to have great difficulties in actually learning in a double-loop manner'. The internal educative and communication networks within organisations may not be fully developed and all too often organisational hierarchies may inhibit the sharing of ideas and best practice. Romme and Witteloostuijn (1999, p. 440) suggest that:

> Triple loop learning is about increasing the fullness and deepness of learning about the diversity of issues and dilemmas faced, by linking together all local units of learning in one overall learning infrastructure as well as developing the competences and skills to use this infrastructure'.

Future MBA programmes may usefully incorporate looped learning techniques into the curriculum through embedded work-based projects or consultancy opportunities. Importantly, scholars have identified how heutagogical approaches may be particularly effective in the facilitation of triple loop learning (Yeo, 2006; Yaduvanshi and Singh, 2017).

Type of learning	Characterised as	Key question associated	Impact
Single loop	Simple actions that lead to an improvement, with changing policy	Is the organisation doing things correctly?	Changing how things are done, often on a one-off basis
Double loop	Reframing problems in order to see these differently	Are we approaching the task of problem-solving as we should?	Changing how we think of problem-solving
Triple loop	Developing new and more sophisticated approaches in problem-solving	How do organisations decide what is correct?	Undertaking an epistemological review of how we identify and then address problems

Table 1. An overview of different types of learning loops, after Flood and Romm (1996) and Romme and Witteloostuijn (1999).

Towards heutagogy and capability in twenty-first century management learning
An alternative to both pedagogy and andragogy, heutagogy offers the prospect of a contemporary theory of learning that is fit for purpose in twenty-first century management education. Defined by Blaschke (2017, p. 129) as:

> The study of self-determined learning, heutagogy is a learner-centered educational theory founded on the key principles of learner agency, self-efficacy, capability, and metacognition (knowing how to learn) and reflection.

As such, heutagogy links a number of theoretical concepts such as transformational learning and constructivism together and link these explicitly to a work-oriented form of learning for adults. For Bhoyrub, Hurley, Neilson, Ramsey and Smith (2010, p. 323), 'heutagogy is best understood through its connectedness to both complexity theory and individual capability'. In their critique of competency-based curricula, Stephenson and Yorke (1998) argued that future professionals would have not only to master the requisite knowledge and skills associated with their daily work but also the capacity to act ethically and demonstrate the ability to make decisions in unfamiliar situations. Stoszkowski and Collins (2017) note that such an approach also involves emotional maturity and that:

> This attribute has been suggested as essential for self-directed learners, giving them the capacity to respond positively and reflect in a less ego-involved fashion when new and challenging perspectives are apparent.

In summary then, the literature points to the beneficial connections that exist between reflexivity, problem-solving and heutagogic approaches to learning.

The intellectual roots of heutagogy originated in complexity theory and the development of learning for complex adaptive systems (Hase, Tay and Goh, 2006). For Hase and Kenyon (2003, p. 3), complexity theory 'provides an ontological basis for challenging some of the more traditional approaches to learning and work'. In the place of rationalist notions associated with predictive behaviour, complexity theory focuses on the subjective and uncertain nature of the social world. Complexity theory views the world as characterised by dynamic and open environments where change is emergent and often non-linear, and where establishing any rules of behaviour are problematic. Complexity theory contextualises the relational and processional nature of decision-making in organisations. This processional context within organisational behaviour is described in the typology contained in Table 2.

Aspect	Working definition	Illustration
Temporality	Aims to understand the impact of time on human experience and our sense of meaning- and highlights the uncertainty of an unknowable future	A narrative account of events, whether this is informal through discussion or more formalised as in history
Wholeness	Emphasises the holistic nature of the social world and the interactions between actors	It is not possible to dissociate an individual from their organisational and wider societal context
Openness	An awareness of our 'self' and how this can be constructed and re-constructed through social interaction	Re-professionalisation as a result of training or new codes of behaviour
Force	A creative energy that may enable or inhibit individuals to act	We adopt established norms of behaviour with organisation that are initiated by dominant social interests
Potentiality	The capacity to become more than that originality created.	Individual growth

Table 2. A typology of aspects involved in thinking after Helin et al. (2014).

The typology presented in Table 2 informs our understanding of the human dimension to organisational processes. In particular, the idea of the 'self in context' is highlighted, with its emphasis on meaning, behaviours and the capacity to act. If we are to better understand how individuals engage with complexity in process-driven settings, then issues such as wholeness, openness and potentiality must underpin this goal. It also infers that we need to consider how to prepare people for complexity and the role of education within this agenda.

The process perspective draws from a range of philosophers, including James (1907), Thrift (2008) and Wittgenstein (1980), and is often associated with Whitehead's ideas on the limitations of 'inert knowledge' (Whitehead, 1920), how we approach an understanding of organisational problems (Whitehead, 1967/1929), and the nature of social phenomena.

Studying the world processually acknowledges the performative nature of research. Research, in the non-representational sense, does not leave the world alone when describing and modelling it.

It takes part as we imagine relationships and 'explanations' without
regulating origins or objectives anchored as touchstones of truth
(Helin, et al. 2014, p. 10).

Adopting a process-oriented perspective means that we engage in our
understanding of our complex world from an imaginative and open-minded fashion
rather than a highly structured and regimented way, as in the case of pedagogic
teaching methodology.

   The emphasis on individual capability is a fundamental departure from
competency-based notions of management practice and education. For Halsall,
Powell and Snowden (2016, p. 7):

      A capable individual, as opposed to a competent person who
      performs effectively in the present, is someone who is also forward
      thinking and concerned with potential realisation, imagining the
      future and making it happen.

In pointing out that 'the world is no place for the inflexible, the unprepared, and the
ostrich with head in sand', Hase and Kenyon (2001, p. 3) put forward the case for
heutagogic learning. Moreover, Hase (2000, p. 6) points to the failure of
conventional educational approaches to address the daily uncertainties in the
workplace and the need to develop capability. Heutagogy therefore represents an
attempt to develop a theoretical framework within which to conceptualise how we
may promote those individual capabilities required in challenging and unpredictable
work-based contexts.

   Although advocates of heutagogy may claim that it promotes individual capability
in workplace contexts through the empowerment of the learner (Barton, 2012; Hase,
2014; Yaduvanshi and Singh, 2017) there are also challenges that attend this
learning methodology. In addition to the need for emotional maturity, heutagogic

learning also presupposes that learners are capable of identifying suitable learning objectives as well as the means by which to evaluate their progress. For Stoszkowski and Collins (2017, p. 6) a:

> Strong case exists for an essential set of precursory skills, attitudes or characteristics which are essential if the desirable benefits of heutagogy are to be realised.

It therefore follows that there is a recognition on behalf of the learner and their organisation of the need for relevant functional skills or access to suitable learning resources. Moreover, 'individuals have to be very strong professionally to work in a heutagogical way when managed in a very prescriptive way [as] the current culture of education management can be a significant barrier' (Ridden, 2014, p. 120). If we are to realise the potential of heutagogy, then individuals should be sufficiently empowered to define what, how and when they engage in learning- and historically, such opportunities have been limited within highly structured MBA programmes. So, how can we address this important challenge?

Research method

The practice of undertaking a review of the literature is reported widely (Arghode, Brieger and McLean, 2017; Hallinger, 2012; Lee, Chamberlain and Brandes, 2017; Mangiaracina, Song and Perego, 2015; Manhart and Thalmann, 2015, Snyder, 2019; Xiao and Watson, 2019). However, Hallinger (2013, p. 127) concedes that 'it is somewhat surprising that… scholars have not paid sustained attention to the "methods" employed in conducting reviews of research'. This paper therefore aims to explain the research approach taken and provide some illustrative criteria of quality.

Snyder (2019) highlights the benefits of undertaking a structured review of the literature in Business research. As knowledge production becomes increasingly dynamic and re-defined by interdisciplinary research interests, literature reviews serve an important function for academic researchers in that it delineates the nature of discourse and serves to develop theory. This paper approximates most closely to

a bounded approach (Hallinger 2013) in which the search terms were aligned to heutagogy and Business School education, and that is stand-alone (Xiao and Watson, 2019) in its purpose as an overview of the topic. Lee, Chamberlain and Brandes (2017) suggest that the identification of keywords and the scope of review are essential as an initial step in planning. According to Rowley and Slack (2004), this stage involves a building blocks approach in which the parameters of the literature and lines of enquiry are defined. A subsequent second stage involves the clarification of concepts and the formulation of dominant themes.

In addition to heutagogy being used as the primary search term, other terms derived from management learning were used, such as capability-based training, reflexivity, and responsible management. Apart from reference to Schoen (1983), most of the literature was time-limited to the period within which heutagogy has influenced the discourse on professional learning. Academic search engines, such as Google Scholar, were used to search for relevant literature in order to provide a descriptive review (Xiao and Watson, 2019). The range of journals were drawn from a number of professional and international contexts, and included *Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Management Education, Journal of Management Development, Management Learning,* as well as Higher Education journals. Much of the pioneering work on heutagogy has been generated by Hase and Kenyon (2001, 2003, 2007) and together with Blaschke (2012, 2016, 2018), their publications proved invaluable. Once the review reached what was believed to be a saturation point, the key themes were organised through a mind-mapping exercise that identified important conceptual links and thematised the overview.

There are limitations associated with a review of the literature, not least simply accepting the dominant discourse with its attendant biases. In order to minimise potential bias, procedural frameworks have been developed by scholars in order to structure the review process, the most cited of which is the PRISMA model (Liberati, Altman, Tetzlaff, Mulrow, Gotzsche, Ioannidis…. Moher, 2009). The PRISMA model involves stages that are concerned with searching, screening, appraisal and synthesising processes. Haddaway, Woodcock, Macura and Collins (2015, 1596) concede that even highly structured reviews, such as PRISMA, 'are susceptible to a

number of biases during the identification, selection, and synthesis of individual included studies'. Take, for example, those papers drawn from journals that are ranked by the British Chartered Association of Business Schools in their ranking of research publications. These journals implicitly drive research through their own agenda and publish what they see as important contributions to their particular discourse, with the potential for exclusion of other lines of interest. This activity may disadvantage some forms of research that could offer useful insights (Haddaway et al., 2015, p. 1602). This 'publication distortion' may impact on our awareness of the wider research undertaken (Borrego, Foster and Froyd, 2014), particularly in areas that are not in the mainstream of learning theory, such as heutagogy.

Discussion

Implementation of heutagogy within MBA education

The inclusion of heutagogical learning opportunities within MBA curricula is a necessary step to meaningful change within Business Schools. In their discussion of the re-design of a MBA in Australia, Richardson, McGowan and Styger (2018, p. 1841) justified how heutagogic approaches are particularly appropriate in MBA programmes:

> MBA courses are less impacted by discipline specific requirements found in specialized professional courses …. Therefore, the ability to employ heutagogical principles is less constrained by professional bodies credentialing guidelines. [And] where the objective is to learn good general leadership, management and business practice which can be applied across a wide range of contexts and is not discipline specific.

Halsall, Powell, and Snowden (2016, p. 9) describe two strategies that may be adopted when implementing heutagogic methodology on campus. The first involves

solution-focussed tasks and is linked to Mezirow's (2000) work on transformative learning theory. This approach is apposite to work-relevant MBA project work since it involves the reappraisal of established ideas and elicits critical thought in a real-world situated context. Solution-focussed learning may be facilitated, for example, through self-determined consultancy projects as practised at the Business Clinic at Northumbria University, or through their own problematisation of a work-based issue for their MBA dissertation. In this sense, the curriculum serves as a space within which to develop professional practice in a practical and transparent way. Moreover, for Verela, Burke and Michel (2013) the benefits of this approach are not only related to the experiential nature of solution-focussed learning and dealing with an organisational problem but also to its promotion of reflection on action as a regularised practice for individuals. It is within this context of problem-solving that we can see how double and triple loop learning may be usefully incorporated into MBA curricula.

A second approach to the implementation of heutagogic ideas is through the adoption of practices drawn from mentoring or coaching. Coaching in particular is recognised as an important part of heutagogy (Abraham and Collins, 2011; Collins and Collins, 2015; Collins, Carson and Collins, 2016). As Stoszkowski and Collins (2017, p. 5) describe:

> A key tenet of the heutagogy paradigm is a belief in the notion of human agency, with power and autonomy firmly in the hands of the learner… the role of the educator is positioned as that of a learning facilitator who guides the development of ideas and learners' learning capabilities.

There are some similarities here with established approaches to postgraduate supervision, most notably at doctoral level. As Collins and Collins (2015) describe coaching support can be structured in stages with students moving to higher levels of attainment through targeted scaffolding that places emphasis on emotional

development as much as skills acquisition. As Towell and Hall (2016) report, coaching within MBA programmes is an established and growing learning methodology. Reid, Cook, Viedge and Scheepers (2020, p. 7) consider that:

> Coaching improves individual performance, by directly affecting productivity and goal-achievement and improving people management capability through better interpersonal skills. It supports individual performance indirectly by modelling effective leadership behaviours and enhancing individual well-being and self-confidence.

Coaching is one way of re-orientating the MBA from its traditional focus on 'knowing' to 'doing' and 'being' through personalised forms of learning (Datar, Garvin and Cullen, 2011). As such, future MBA programmes should address existential issues connected with identity and purpose, as well as how to perform a role within an organisation. For Datar et al. (2011, p. 456) 'without 'being' skills, it is often hard to act ethically or professionally', and Muff (2016, p. 147) suggests that we should aim for a 'whole-person learning pedagogy'. Ultimately then, the transformation of MBA curricula is part of a wider change within Business Schools that is concerned with the development of new conceptions of what it means to be a manager and how this self-image is constructed for the individual student. (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010).

Conclusions

This conceptual paper set out to address two research questions. Firstly, what is the case for the adoption of heutagogy as a learning approach in management education? Secondly, how can heutagogical practice be implemented in MBA programmes? In so doing, this conceptual paper offers a contribution to the discourse on the reform of the MBA, and the wider agenda for curriculum change within Higher Education. In respect to the first research question, some Business

School academics may view the practice of heutagogy as too problematic in the sense that its benefits are not as immediate and tangible as a certificate of competency. This predilection in favour of credentialism – and which the MBA symbolises- is increasingly, however, viewed as being limited as it tends to place too much emphasis on the acquisition of functional knowledge and insufficient emphasis on practical wisdom. We must move to an understanding where professionalism is not solely defined in terms of ever more formal qualifications but the ability to respond to changing contexts and expectations in practical ways. Such a goal requires a different expectation of what it means to be a manager and how this professional identity is constructed. The future MBA curriculum should aim to engage students through greater variety in the range of learning opportunities offered and promote personalised forms of learning that are informed by heutagogic principles.

How should we then address the second research question within Higher Education? If we are to promote individual creativity and adaptive thinking within the MBA, the idea of *the* curriculum will need to be challenged. As an alternative, management educators should think in terms of *a* curriculum that is designed by the learner in order to meet their developmental goals and aspirations. The MBA is the foremost illustration of how Business Schools may reorient their approaches to teaching and learning but other qualifications may follow. In particular, the DBA offers a realistic opportunity to embed heutagogic practices and provide faculty with the opportunity to refine their expertise as heutagogic practitioners. Executive short courses and e-learning also offer opportunities to innovate and create personalised pathways that provide choice and negotiated learning.

Complexity appears to be an inescapable feature of our world, both in terms of the challenges strategic leaders and operational managers face and the processes adopted in response. A process-oriented perspective provides some understanding of this challenge and places complexity within an organisational context that is conditioned by hierarchies, bureaucracy and internal micro-politics. Heutagogy is a learning theory that has emerged from the contemporary analysis of workplace environments and the challenges that managers face on a daily basis. It is also an approach that is attuned to the developmental needs of the individual learner rather

than the cohort. In a world where we are each challenged with unforeseen events-and indeed the definition of the problem- the capacity to respond to change is increasingly important. We must recognise the limitations of those forms of learning that focus solely on the functional aspects associated with managerial competency and are concerned with disjunctive thinking. Given the complexities of contemporary organisations, we need to think more about how we promote the capability of managers to become independent, confident learners and whether the MBA fulfils our expectations.

This conceptual paper offers a view of the future MBA but is not without limitations. As a conceptual paper, it is limited by the nature of the literature review derived from the discourse on the MBA and heutagogy. Both of these research areas have particular developmental trajectories that are indicative of underpinning values and agendas within their research communities. Although the discourse on heutagogy offers an opportunity to 'think outside the box', it is itself limited by the under-development of theorisation and the need for greater empirical research on the impact of heutagogy in Higher Education. Moreover, much of the research on heutagogy has focussed on its impact in a work-based vocational content. Future research could usefully investigate the impact of the adoption of heutagogic principles within the wider Higher Education curriculum. In particular, useful research could be undertaken in providing comparative insights across academic disciplines, as well as between subject domains within Business Schools.

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The author confirms that this paper is their own work and is not published elsewhere. The citation of all sources is intended to conform with the Harvard referencing system. There is no conflict of interest to report.

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