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# The MBA: a learning system in need of rethinking?

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**Abstract:** Since 1989 the Open University MBA has offered practicing managers a route to improved professional practice and career development. Experience with a new consultancy module suggested that a substantial proportion of students were not benefitting as intended. Students were *learning* theory instrumentally rather than *using* it to prompt rethinking of their assumptions and practice. Action research during 2008/9 explored the reasons for this and suggested ways of redesigning the MBA to achieve a more critical engagement. One key feature of the current system is its strongly hierarchical nature, which ‘disables’ managers as learners. A more collaborative and co-creative learning system would pose serious dilemmas for academics and sponsors. How can managers and academics mutually exploit their very different professional backgrounds for shared learning? Recognizing both shared concerns and real and significant differences in perspective is central to achieving this.

## Introduction

The Open University Business School (OUBS) MBA was introduced in 1989 as a distance learning program for experienced managers. We have always claimed to exploit this experience, and to offer ‘theory’ as a practical tool for increased effectiveness, rather than as an end in itself. Many assignments are based on students’ own organizations. In 2005 a new final module was designed to encapsulate this approach: students were required to draw upon the theory they had learned in their MBA to inform an internal evidence-based consultancy project. By early 2007 it was becoming clear that many students could not use theory in this way, calling into question the value of 2 years (and 1200 hours) of their ‘learning’. We needed to understand why this was happening and do something to change it so that the MBA experience impacted upon the majority of students’ management practice as intended. While this has been a substantial and ongoing project, this paper focuses mainly on an inquiry undertaken by central and associate faculty during 2008, and the actions and shifts in thinking which resulted from this.

Initially a small group of interested faculty started to discuss their perceptions of both what was happening and what should be happening. Early in these discussions the term *critical engagement* was adopted to describe the approach to learning that we sought. The group orchestrated a wide range of discussions with key stakeholders in MBA learning, including Associate Lecturers, alumni, current students and central faculty. (OUBS central faculty design courses and create multimedia learning materials and assessment frameworks. Associate Lecturers, or ALs, are experienced and qualified managers and management developers who interact with and support students and mark – and teach via – their assignments.)

At first we blamed the inability to use theory on the quality of students and the time pressures they were under. Then we realized that *we* were responsible. We had inadvertently created a teaching system which allowed, indeed positively encouraged, an instrumental approach to study. (Thinking in systems terms was helpful since it focused us on a wider range of potentially relevant factors, and on the relationships between them.) Since the ALs we consulted estimated that 60–75% of students nearing the end of their MBAs appeared to have difficulty in putting theory to use, this needed to be changed. We first needed to understand the reasons.

Funding was obtained for AL involvement in this investigation. ALs were asked to identify the main barriers to engagement for students on the module they taught, and to suggest ways of removing these. This paper focuses on this investigation, the shifts in thinking and actions which resulted, and the questions generated for those teaching on an MBA. Although the OUBS teaching system is in many ways distinctive these questions seem relevant to MBA teaching more generally.

## Method of inquiry

Funding was obtained to allow 12 ALs to work with central faculty to explore the issues in more detail. Five small teams were formed, associated with core MBA modules and the two most popular electives. The brief was kept deliberately loose and atheoretical to avoid slanting or limiting the line of inquiry. All team members, as MBA teachers, were however familiar with a wide range of management and learning theory, and a wide range of theoretical papers on management learning and knowing were made available as a resource.

The project was action oriented and carried out by those involved in the issue (Coghlan, 2001). Teams were asked to identify barriers to critical engagement, and suggest ways of removing these. An online environment was created for discussions within and between teams, and teams also consulted online with other colleagues teaching their respective modules, some formally, some less formally. Each team was required to produce interim and final reports on their deliberations. These reports were discussed with a wider group of

central faculty at a final 24 hour face-to-face workshop and short and longer term recommendations for the MBA were produced at the workshop. (A fuller account of this part of the inquiry is given in Cameron 2009.)

Subsequent to this phase of inquiry a number of other small projects have explored aspects of the situation in more detail, looking at student expectations both at start and towards the end of the MBA, at how ALs can help a global cohort of students to collectively draw upon their diverse experience, and at the skills which may need to be targeted. These, and further individual and collaborative reflection on the implications of the teams' findings, and on relevant literature have contributed to the insights and conclusions reported here. Redesign of Stage 1 of the MBA is almost complete, and this experience has begun to test the emerging ideas.

## Insights gained

The inquiry highlighted a number of tacit assumptions about our own teaching that needed to be questioned, and shifted the thinking of participants quite substantially. The first assumption was that there was a shared view of MBA teaching goals. We discovered a wide divergence of views about what an MBA program should seek to achieve. As a result of early discussions we adopted the term *critical engagement* to describe the approach to learning we sought. This term seemed to resonate with all concerned, and was helpful in generating interest in the project, even though both 'critical' and 'engagement' meant very different things to different stakeholders.

A degree of convergence was achieved by describing critical engagement metaphorically as three cogwheels. The manager's *thinking* was seen as a central cog. This thinking cog needed to engage with a 'theory' cog and with a 'practice' cog for the intended learning to take place. Engaging thinking with theory would allow theory to change thinking, or *vice versa*. Engaging thinking with practice would allow thinking to change practice, and *vice versa*. Theory and practice were connected via thinking. The metaphor seemed more immediate than Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle with which students and faculty are familiar but which seems to convey to many a more sequential process.

The second key realization was that rather than 'blaming' time poor students for adopting a 'disengaged' and instrumental approach, we could more usefully think in terms of a system which we had created which *encouraged and rewarded* an instrumental approach. One student said she had been taught to '*populate*' rather than use theory. Another said '*I started my MBA trying to apply theories at work. I soon learned that this was not what gained me marks*'. This directed us towards considering the nature of this (notional) system, and the way in which different features impact on learning.

The third surprise was the excitement participants in the project felt and the novelty of this experience. Although we have always stressed the importance of reflective learning to students, this was the first time most participants (ALs and central faculty) had reflected collaboratively on their practice as teachers. One longstanding AL said '*This was the first time that MBA ALs have worked together in this way*'. A central faculty colleague said '*I've never had this sort of discussion before*'. We realized that in failing to reflect regularly on our own professional practice we were falling short of what we taught others.

The fourth insight was the deeply hierarchical nature of our system. Academic priorities and practices define the system and these priorities are not subject to question by students. While this leads to a robust and stable system, and satisfies our (triple) accreditors, it has the effect of devaluing the extensive experience of managers on the program and of perpetuating the divide between academic and management 'landscapes of practice rather than creating '*bridges across the landscape*'. (Wenger 1998, p159).

Finally we realized how many ways there are in which the system explicitly and implicitly discourages engagement. Emphasis on academic 'rules' serves to discourage practical managers from adopting a critical approach to either theory or practice as they focus on working out the rules. Students see an academic writing style as irrelevant to their professional writing. (Does their seemingly willful refusal to reference Harvard-style reflect a psychological resistance rather than any technical difficulty?) The volume of 'content' presented allows little time for thought. The breadth of assessment questions combined with stringent word limits encourage superficiality. 'Application' of theory in assignments is typically focused on demonstrating understanding of those ideas and plausible use of terms and models to describe situations, rather than on using theoretical ideas to generate questions resulting in insights and changed behavior. Many ALs reinforce student instrumentality by interpreting their role as helping students pass modules rather than to challenge their ways of making sense of their professional role and context. Many are alumni shaped by the system while students themselves.

## Discussion

Many of the barriers identified can be (and are being) relatively easily addressed. A redesign of the entire MBA is currently being undertaken. The nature and benefits of engagement are explained at the outset. Stage I of the program is now driven by practice-relevant activities. These will contribute to assessment which features depth as well as breadth, and application to students' own management practice as well as its context. The final assignment in Stage I will be issue based and serve to introduce the approach the final module will require. There has been an attempt at reducing the number of theories taught. There is a strong individual and collaborative strand running throughout the program.

A more difficult recommendation to implement was that the system should become less hierarchical: learning should be seen as a more collaborative and co-creative undertaking. This requires a rethinking of the respective roles of students and teachers. Instead of being seen as ‘apprentice academics’ managers on the program need to be considered as (quasi)professionals in their own right. Two sets of ideas have been helpful here. The first is the idea of self-authoring (Kegan, 1994), and the learning partnerships model developed from this (Baxter Magolda, 2001, 2009). The second is the idea of relational agency (Edwards, 2005, Edwards and Kinti, 2009). Taken together they help to clarify the shift in thinking that is needed if a more collaborative approach is to be achieved.

### **Developing self authoring**

Kegan’s (1994) idea of the developmental stage of self-authoring as a way of knowing resonates strongly with the idea of critical engagement. A self-authoring mind is one in which knowledge is understood as something constructed in a context, as coming from one’s own perceptions, interpretations, and evaluations, stemming from a sense of curiosity and sense of responsibility for one’s own perceptions, interpretations, and learning. At this level it is possible to co-ordinate multiple roles and different expectations and adopt different perspectives. This is contrasted with earlier stages in which knowledge is seen as a possession, as objective truth derived from experts or authorities.

Adopting an expert role as teacher will *necessarily* inhibit the development of a self-authoring way of knowing by reinforcing dependence on authority. Baxter Magolda (2001, 2009) has developed a learning model better suited to learning at this level. She suggests six principles for developing transformative, self-authoring learning

1. Validate participants as knowers, respecting their thoughts and feelings: without confidence in their own thinking, and the permission to think for themselves they are unlikely to construct their own ideas.
2. Situate learning in students’ own experiences, helping them to see these as opportunities for learning and growth, thus providing a sound foundation for learning.
3. Define learning as mutually constructing meaning, a process whereby teachers collaborate with students to analyze their own problems and engage in mutual learning.
4. Highlight the complexity of work and life decisions: it is important to discourage simplistic solutions.
5. Encourage participants to develop their personal authority by paying attention to their own thinking
6. Encourage participants to share authority and expertise, and collaborate to solve problems

The similarities with the conclusions of our own inquiry are striking, but this formulation articulates the principles more clearly. The link with Kegan’s model provides a supporting rationale for our unease with the prevailing hierarchy. Many of the barriers to engagement in our existing system worked to *invalidate* participating managers as knowers.

### **Developing relational agency**

Once participants are seen as professionals with their distinctive priorities, practices and ways of thinking, the challenge becomes that of developing effective ways of working together from these very different mindsets. Edwards (2005) explored this question in the context of teachers and other professionals working with disadvantaged young adults, and suggested that the idea of relational agency was helpful. This was seen as the capacity to work with others, recognizing the resources (in particular the cultural tools) that they bring to the situation and negotiation the use of these resources for mutually increased understanding. Bringing together two or more sets of perceptions and interpretations will enrich understanding of a problem space.

Edwards and Kinti (2009) suggest that exercising relational agency involves two stages. First, working together to expand the task by recognizing the motives and the resources that others bring as they too interpret it. Second, aligning one’s own responses to the newly enhanced interpretations. Both stages may be problematic, striking at the heart of professional (and personal) identity, and bringing professional boundaries into question. But the skills may be extremely important for managers in their own right. Not only will they enable a more engaged and more mutual learning, but the prevalence of inter-functional and inter-professional teams suggests they will be highly transferable. (They may be equally important for faculty working across boundaries.)

### **Conclusions**

Adding ideas of self-authoring and relational agency to those of a more collaborative and non-hierarchical learning system suggests a need for deeper rooted changes than the design changes already in hand. An MBA would cease to be an academic apprenticeship at the feet of the experts, and become instead a shared exploration of possible meanings creating possibilities for previously unconsidered actions.

Academics’ could usefully work with managers (and in the case of the OUBS, also ALs) to clarify what they, and participant managers can usefully bring to, and seek to take from the learning occasion, and how to develop the skills needed by all parties to exploit the diverse resources they can potentially contribute.

The issues of professional identity, boundaries and power may be hard to resolve, and changes here cannot be imposed. The potential benefit in terms of learning for all those involved in the MBA, whatever their role, is substantial enough to warrant an attempt at cultural change.

## Limitations to the research

Both the focal inquiry and ongoing reflection are based on a constructionist view of management knowledge, and a conception of an MBA as practice-relevant professional learning. A key goal of this learning is seen as being to develop more flexible thinking, with the ability to incorporate a range of perceptions, interpretations and values into the understanding of situations. If this view is not accepted then the suggested ways of making sense of learning on an MBA will not be helpful.

The inquiry was loosely defined, richly textured and created a sense of increased understanding in participants. However it is subject to perceptual and interpretive bias. The 'evidence' was predominantly in the form of quotes which seemed to the inquirers to add to their understanding of the situation. All inquirers were insiders with their own prejudices and preferences. Communicating the significance of participants' shifts in understanding to others who had not participated presents an ongoing challenge.

Although actions are being taken in response to changes in thinking generated by the inquiry, the redesigned program has not yet been tested on students. Recommendations suggested fundamental system changes were needed if the new program was to be as effective as hoped, but the inquiry cast only limited light on how these (primarily cultural) changes might be achieved.

However, the sense of having made a substantial advance in understanding by means of collaborative reflection within (loosely) an action research framework was rewarding for all concerned, and prompted changes to our personal approaches to teaching, as well as sensitizing us to a number of previously un-noticed barriers to learning that we were inadvertently creating.

## Outstanding questions and dilemmas.

If an important aim of the MBA is to change the way managers *think* about their practice, how can we reconcile 'validating participants as knowers' with challenging their long-held beliefs and assumptions about their own thinking and practice and in some cases its assumed superiority?

We charge premium fees for the MBA. How can we reconcile that with a move away from an expert position as teacher?

How can we convince our accreditors (and some faculty colleagues) that quality of learning may be inversely proportional to quantity of content, and a means rather than an end?

How can we distinguish between academic practices which are valid only within the academic (primarily research-oriented) landscape and those which are equally of value to MBA participants?

How can we persuade colleagues (who may have little contact with current management practices) to venture into this less comfortable territory, and to relinquish their comfortable position at the top of the hierarchy?

Will we be competent to design assignments and assess students' work if we move away from 'correctness' to 'insightfulness'?

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