

Unlearning the Other in Management Education

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Abstract: Management Education has been receiving its fair share of critique, especially since the financial crisis and other business scandals that have unveiled the immoral and unethical dispositions in the business world. Questions about what kind of responsibility is being taught in business schools, if at all, have been raised, and in which way are these values being learned? In the more subtle field of learning responsibility, relationships between people, and fundamentally, the perception of ‘the other’, learning through theories and concepts is not sufficient. It requires rather a practice of ‘unlearning’ habits that have been formed through one’s experience. This is where transformative learning offers a huge opportunity in management education, and the following paper explains how this kind of learning can be beneficial for future business leaders.

Key Words: Unlearning, Management Education, Transformative Learning

Management Education’s Soft Spots

In December of 2017, the Washington Post released an article about the surprising thing that Google learned about its employees. From the list of most important qualities of Google’s employees, “hard” STEM skills (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) came in last, while the top seven characteristics were all “soft skills” (Strauss, 2017). Perhaps this was not surprising to the many critics of management education, who have been writing about the curricular gap in soft skills for many years. Harold J. Leavitt was one of those critics, observing that although we teach the right things, we do not teach the critical things in MBA programs (Leavitt, 1989). The reason for this, as he explains, is that these critical things are much more difficult to teach, and instead we stick to the things we can justify teaching and therefore create “icy hearts and shrunken souls.” Since then, the critique only seemed to get worse, as many scholars echoed Leavitt’s condemnation and offered their own perspectives of the whats, whys and hows of the failing of management education (Ghoshal, 2005; Antunes & Thomas, 2007; Hendry, 2006; Mintzberg, 2004; Gosling & Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005).

While not all of the critique explicitly highlighted the missing so-called soft skills, much of it criticized the overly analytical and scientific educational approach. This approach then led to the many flaws outlined by the above scholars, which included irrelevant research, being too market-driven, breeding a culture of narcissism, being too analytical and therefore not action-oriented, having theory and practice be very far apart from each other, not integrating the real-world experience, not allowing for reflection, critical thinking, or ethical decision making processes. The rare hopeful study showed that developing cognitive and emotional intelligence competencies is possible in a business school setting but not using the typical teaching format, which focuses only on acquiring new knowledge (Boyatzis, Stubbs, & Taylor, 2002). From the research, it was clear that whether the term was soft skills, personal, or communication skills, a “human element” was missing in business education, which created an impact as students made their way into managerial positions.

With the financial crisis of 2008, as well as other numerous business scandals that started even earlier, the wording of the conversation turned from critique to “crisis,” as the world was trying to figure out whom to blame for the unethical and self-interest-led motivations of top managers. Business schools and management education took a hit with headlines in the Wall Street Journal like “How business schools have failed business” (Jacobs, 2009), while scholarly research already confirmed and predicted the effects of the shortcomings of management education and stated we should not be surprised at the morally bankrupt behaviors of managers, as business schools propagate “ideologically inspired amoral theories..[freeing] their students from any sense of moral responsibility” (Ghoshal, 2005, p. 76).

All the same critiques from before the financial crisis were stated even more strongly afterwards, with a particular call to responsible action from business schools. Though it includes the notion of soft skills, the critique seems to highlight the issue of responsibility as a necessary component of management education that needs to be addressed. Three major areas highlighted as necessary to integrate into the curriculum are soft skills, ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility, as well as a connection to globalization and societal challenges of the current times (Schlegelmich & Thomas, 2011). Additionally, the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative was launched in 2007 by an international task force that aimed to promote new approaches to management education that can engage and foster socially responsible leaders (www.unprme.org).

This seems a logical progression; the problem is lack of responsibility, as demonstrated both in theory and in practice, so the solution is – integrate responsibility into the curriculum. But how? In this case, the “how” is a crucial component that could “make it or break it” in terms of the responsabilization of business students.

What is Missing in Management Education?

The discourse on the critique of management education generally points to a missing human element but varies in the specific skill or competence that it claims is missing. At times, the critique addresses soft skills, at other times ethics and morals. The solution currently proposed seems centered on responsibility.

Responsibility is a term understood within its context. In itself, it comes from the Latin *respondere*, which means to answer or offer in return. To be responsible means to be answerable to another for something. In the term itself there is an implication of its relationship to something or someone else. In relationship to management, responsibility as a term has been linked to business ethics, Corporate Social Responsibility and sustainability. It is best understood as an umbrella term for a set of responsibilities to various stakeholders, one of which is the wider society (Matten & Moon, 2004). In its application, responsible management seems to also include ethics, morals, and the intention to consider the wider society in decision making processes. This is reflected in the critique of management education outlined above.

However, there is a flaw with understanding responsibility as an umbrella term when trying to apply it to a learning process. It fails to consider the individual’s values or belief system, and the subjectivity of these belief systems. Without this consideration, the umbrella term presents a general, objective, collective responsibility: the responsibility of the organization towards the society, or in education, the business school towards its students. If the application of responsibility to the business world were only understood in this way, it would be fair to assume that what is needed to learn responsibility is to understand and teach what these responsibilities

towards society are. However, learning what these responsibilities are does not guarantee acting accordingly. This is a dilemma that has already been discovered and thoroughly written about in the critique of management education.

Mintzberg for example, in his critique of MBAs, uses the example of teamwork to highlight this dilemma:

collaborative teamworking, for example, gets taught within organizational behavior, without collaboration or teamworking...we know about the dangers of doing such things in business practice – indeed, we teach about these dangers – while we succumb to them in our own practice. (Mintzberg, 2004, p. 31-32)

This obvious theory-practice gap suggests that one cannot learn about teams purely through theories about teamwork. The experience of being in a team matters. This gap occurs in other fields besides management education. The scholar and researcher Shrivastava, for instance, observed that being an expert scholar of sustainability had not led him to change to more sustainable practices in his own life (Shrivastava, 2010). Much like management, sustainability is a field that requires responsibility in order to achieve beneficial results for society, and perhaps knowing this cognitively is not enough to guarantee that one's actions or decisions will reflect this knowledge.

The *Journal of Management Education* published a special issue in 2014 called the “Unfulfilled promise of RME” (Responsible Management Education). Several articles highlight going “beyond the rhetoric” and make the same critiques that were made before the RME initiative was established – focus is too much on analytical skills and not on the learning process, and the teaching culture is dominated by quantitative measurements (Cornuel & Hommel, 2015). The lecture format, for example, has been found to have little effect in changing student attitudes towards an ethical dilemma (Ricci & Markulis, 1990). One point of view about the reason for this problem proposes that university students' characters and personalities are already set by the time they get to university and an attempt to change their ethics is “guaranteed to fail” (p.144).

Although some scholars acknowledge a development with RME in the teaching methods, which now include case studies to ensure more relevance, there are still few opportunities to deal with cross-cultural real world problems and the education remains disciplinary based (Dyllick, 2015). This means that values and ethics may be taught, but this is not enough if the challenges are not reflected upon inside each student's own experience (Colby et al, 2011). What this is essentially saying is a conversation about ethics does not necessarily make one more ethical. This is also supported by experiential learning theorists, such as David Kolb, who sees learning as a continuous process and juxtaposes it against the traditional learning theory that sees learning as an outcome in the form of accumulated facts, habits or behaviors that can then be measured (Kolb, 1984). Kolb's experiential learning theory assumes that ideas are not fixed but are formed and re-formed through experience, and learning is a process where concepts are derived from and continuously modified through the experience. Therefore, if teaching and learning remain disciplinary based, the learner risks developing a rigidity that inhibits ability to modify ideas and habits when confronted with a new experience that may require new ideas or behaviors. Fortunately, a disorienting dilemma, seen often initially as a negative experience, gives the opportunity to break this rigidity and launch a critical reflection process on some of the accumulated facts and assumptions stored up as knowledge.

It would not be entirely accurate to claim that responsibility, ethics, or soft skills are not taught in business schools, as efforts increasingly include these topics in the curriculum. However, the way they are taught makes a difference. If educators attempt to teach responsibility

or ethics in the same way as they do other subjects, this would not necessarily lead to the results they hope for. Responsibility might be taught but not learned. To take it a step further, perhaps focusing on responsibility stops too short. An individual's sense of responsibility is guided by his/her belief systems. Ethical decisions are made based on an existing perspective, including how individuals see themselves in the world. Therefore, to attempt to change these perspectives, the learning must itself be transformative and must include the individual's belief systems. To change belief systems, transformative learning theory suggests that one must go through a perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1997), which cannot be achieved through cognitive learning but requires a transformative learning experience. Ricci and Markulis's hypothesis that one's character is already set when they get to university may be true, but the study only tells us what doesn't work – the lecture format – and does not explore whether characters and personalities can change through a transformative learning process, as Mezirow claims.

What happens in this transformative process, and how is this process triggered? Without understanding this process, it is difficult to determine what changes are taking place and whether these changes are targeting the lack of responsibility and other criticisms of management education.

Transformative (Un)learning

The leading scholar on transformative learning, Jack Mezirow, started writing about perspective transformation in the mid-1970s with the investigation of women's re-entry programs into community colleges in the US (Mezirow, 1975). The central element of Mezirow's transformative learning theory is that our perceptions are subjective, and they can and do change, through critical reflection on the meaning of one's experience (Mezirow, 1997). The transformative component refers to a process of "using a prior interpretation to construe a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's experience in order to guide future action" (Mezirow, 1996, p. 162).

To see if this works, business students must not only learn the right theories and responsible practices but could go through an internal self-reflection process that has them question and challenge their own perspectives. This may be done through a transformative learning experience, which includes the unlearning, or deliberate suspension of one's previous knowledge, values and behaviors (Tsang & Zahra, 2008), and the expansion of one's boundaries to include what was previously "the other" into his/her own group. One aspect of this that has been very little studied in business education is that in order to be able to assume these new inclusive dispositions, educational experiences must involve some degree of unlearning of beliefs and practices acquired previously (Becker, 2008), including unlearning habitual ways of perceiving and defining "the other." The core skill of unlearning lies in the ability to *give up* beliefs or ideas that produce a rigidity in thinking and a limitation for individual growth (Bettis & Prahalad, 1995; Prahalad & Bettis, 1986). This is a very different approach to responsible management education, which usually involves the adding of knowledge and skills about responsibility and ethics to students' repertoires, without addressing their existing belief systems.

Although Mezirow did not use the term "unlearning," he describes a similar process that happens in transformative learning, triggered by a disorienting dilemma. His formulation is stated as critically examining one's epistemic assumption and reassessing a problematic frame of reference (Mezirow, 1997). This means that the existing frame of reference is let go of, or unlearned, in favor of a more inclusive one. The initial proposal for this paper considered focusing on unlearning as distinct from transformative learning, but after some examination,

judged unlearning to be included in the transformative learning experience, as part of the critical assessment of assumptions. The benefit of using the term “unlearning” is that it immediately disqualifies the additive type of cognitive learning that is proposed to be an obstacle to addressing the critiques of management education outlined above. Thereafter, the lens of the transformative learning theory can be used to see what type of transformation could be possible for business students.

Unlearning the Other

The experiential process of unlearning is especially important to consider in the context of how we see “the other.” To understand the mechanism of “othering,” it is important to explore how social identities are constructed (Zevallos, 2011), which is through a process of social interaction with other people and a process of self-reflection about who we are, based on those exchanges (Mead, 1934). Othering can be defined as “a process of casting a group, an individual or an object into the role of the ‘other’ and establishing one’s own identity through opposition to and, frequently, vilification of this Other” (Gabriel, 2012). This vilification of the other is in fact a mechanism for shifting responsibility; the other is usually wrong, which makes oneself right. In its manifestation, othering produces a power dynamic that reinforces the idea that one group is inferior and can be dehumanized (Riggins, 1997).

The hypothesis proposed here is that unlearning the other, meaning unlearning the assumption that an “other” exists, is in fact a movement towards responsibility, because the unlearning is letting go of a belief system which is divisive, creating an “us and them” and therefore being irresponsible towards the greater whole society. Through this individual introspection, an attitude is transformed towards the collective. As these changes are brought about, learners ideally expand their view of themselves, and the border between “me” and “other” is dissolved. Therefore, the actions that follow, including decisions taken, would naturally be more inclusive and responsible. As the learners confront and unlearn their own ideology and start to include what was previously the other, Daloz, who writes about transformative learning for the common good, states that “the possibility of deliberately injuring another person will grow as unthinkable as deliberately injuring ourselves” (Daloz, 2000, p. 120).

Therefore, the transformative unlearning experience can be the process needed for a great shift in the perception of business students and the shaping of their moral character. By confronting and working through a disorienting dilemma, business students can break out of their limited perceptions of “the other,” unlearn some of their previously held beliefs and work towards a more inclusive and responsible society. This would address the critiques of management education, including the question of how to “responsibilize” business students. Whether this in practice aligns with the theory remains to be seen.

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