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Can business schools increase student employability by embedding action learning into undergraduate management education? An account of practice.

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Abstract

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

Introduction

We begin by acknowledging that this paper is not a conventional account of practice in the sense normally applied in this journal. However, it starts with a description of a process that reflects some key principles of action learning, which is extended by writing and publishing this article. That process therefore can be considered a relevant account of practice. More importantly, the purpose of the article is to inform and shape practice in undergraduate education. The focus of this it to show why and how to embed action learning in that practice. The arguments presented draw on actions taken by others for support. On these grounds then, we believe that the content has value in the Accounts of Practice section of this journal.

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

management education impact on management practice?' Participants were asked to work in groups to respond to the following tasks and questions:

1) Consider: 'What are the key issues for scholarly-practice and scholarly-practice research? What changes are going on that are significantly affecting how research relates to practice and vice-versa in business and management?'
2) 'What have been the success stories and causes for celebration? What have been the downsides? What is working well and what needs to improve? What do you want most? What would you keep, drop, create? Where does scholarly-practice research need to go next? What is your vision for a desired future and what is the vision for a likely future?'
3) 'Based on the visions created in Task 2, what are the options for action in relation to scholarly practice over the next 5 years? What actions do [you] propose to advance and what are the objectives? What are the key questions we must now answer in response to options for action?'

The authors of this paper took further action to work together to explore these questions, bringing insight and experience from various stages of their careers in practice and scholarly practice research. For clarity, the authors focused their exploration both during the conference, and afterwards as an ongoing process to work on this paper, on the teaching of management during *undergraduate* education. It is important to highlight, however, that there is a paucity of research on action learning in undergraduate management education. Therefore, the following exploration draws largely from case studies where action learning has been implemented at the Master's degree level, or from other forms of experiential learning where critical reflection has been integrated, including simulations.

Throughout the remainder of this paper, the authors made use of Kotter's 8-stage model of change (Kotter 2002) as we continued to work on the product begun during the Future Conference, because we wanted to explore a guiding framework that could help the action learning community to advance scholarly practice in undergraduate management education.

A vision for the future of undergraduate management education

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

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

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

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

When considering the questions in task 1 of the Future Conference, we agreed that one of the most pressing concerns in the advancement of management education involves the fact that traditional methods of teaching and assessment, coupled with very large cohorts, often lead teachers to focus largely on Programmed Knowledge, or expert knowledge. Programmed Knowledge serves to prepare students to some extent for employment, as the theories imparted are often well-established, uncontested, and largely settled (Revans 1982; Brook, Pedler, and Burgoyne 2016). However, the authors were increasing concerned that graduates are lacking the critical, analytical skills required for a world of work where knowledge is situational in nature, and where change is often the only constant.

A thematic analysis of interviews with graduates and faculty, carried out by Andrews and Higson (2008), identified three key skills and attributes crucial to "employability," or a set of knowledge and skills that lend themselves to being successful in the workplace, and found that these were similar across a variety of European countries (including the UK). This set of skills includes:

- Business-specific issues (*hard* business-related knowledge and skills),
- Interpersonal competencies (*soft* business-related skills), and
- Work experience and work-based learning

Action learning was a theme that emerged during all three stages of the Future Search process. Revans' conceptualisation of Action Learning (l), as the product of Programmed Knowledge ('p'), combined with Questioning Insight ('q') (Brook et al. 2016) suggested an alternative way of thinking about Andrews and Higson's skills, and subsequently a potential way forward in connecting action learning with graduate employability. Programmed Knowledge ('p'), or as mentioned above, expert knowledge, aligns with 'business-specific issues'; Questioning Insight, involves development of 'soft skills,' through active, critical reflection and integration with established literature; which in turn might equate with action learning ('l'), or 'work experience and work-based learning.' This evolution in the Future Search led us to focus on action learning as a means of developing scholarly practice among undergraduates. Here the total educational experience of undergraduate students might comprise the integration of real-world experience, rigorously-derived evidence and critical reflection to ensure employability in the truest sense – being fit for employment at a graduate level, not only being recruit-able at that level.

In the United Kingdom, the overemphasis on the 'p' of the action learning equation shows in employability statistics. According to the 2017 CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey, while employer satisfaction with graduates' numeracy skills ('p') increased by 7% in the preceding four years, satisfaction with skills such as 'self-management/resilience,' 'teamworking,' and

'analysis skills' ('q' and 'l') held nearly constant. In fact, about a quarter to a third of employers reported dissatisfaction among graduates' skill in the latter areas (CBI, 2017).

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

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

As the example provided by Fallows and Steven (2000) begins to illustrate, universities across the UK are beginning to test novel teaching methods, including action learning. However, there is still more work to do. Given the persistent gap in crucial employability skills among graduates, if Universities want to develop impactful graduates, the authors believe that there is a sense of urgency to increase the implementation of effective pedagogy, such as action learning, to enhance the 'q' and 'l,' of students participating in management education.

2. *'Pull together a guiding team powerful enough to guide a big change.'*

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

- Representatives of employers of graduates, who have first-hand practitioner knowledge of the nature of graduate jobs;
- Action Learning experts to build capacity in this area of teaching in business schools;

- Pedagogic experts who can help to navigate the processes of teaching and assessment, and who will provide reassurance that improving insightful questioning will not damage the acquisition of programmed knowledge, but rather enhance it;
- Other academic partners who already have experience doing this work, for instance those at Brighton University business school, who have embedded action learning and scholarly practice into their MBA programme (O'Hara, Webber, and Reeve 1996).

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

Scholarly practitioners engaged in this work might consider a top-down or a bottom-up approach to driving change. A top-down approach would involve engagement with administration, to shift university incentive structures and resources toward the change they want to see. At the University of Luton, the University-wide drive to ensure employability skills were integrated into the undergraduate curriculum was led by a top-down approach, where a strategic decision at the most senior levels of University management was made to prioritize these efforts (Fallows and Steven 2000). A bottom-up approach requires a grassroots collaboration, where faculty members would engage in collaborative processes to change the approach to teaching and learning.

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

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

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

Although this work will be challenging, there is evidence that action learning and other methods of scholarly practice education, the authors can see that these action-focussed methods are already being embedded into management school curricula. At Brighton University and the Bradford University School of Management, action learning has been incorporated as a central feature of their MBA programs (O'Hara, Webber, and Reeve 1996).

There is also evidence that incorporating scholarly practice can increase employability among students. One of the authors worked with postgraduate leadership students, supporting them to take part in a novel leadership simulation during their course. The simulation was designed to facilitate critical reflection and help students explore the application of theoretical concepts in

the practice scenario. Alumni of the programme were surveyed at the end of the programme and reported the leadership simulation, combined with critical reflection increased their confidence during their final project and their transition into work. While the degree to which simulations are considered a form of action learning remains a subject for debate, the authors feel that this particular example, focused as it is on the facilitation of critical reflection, the insightful questioning element of Revans' equation, is worthy of note and the authors plan to publish further on this topic in the future.

The vision outlined above and evidence to support it is only a starting point – scholarly practitioners must work to develop a set of strategies and tactics to embed action learning into management education. Here, we have begun to leverage the experience from other universities. Next steps for the scholarly practitioner community may be to investigate these examples further and draw lessons from others' experience to tailor their own vision, strategy and plan of action.

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

Once the vision and strategy are fully formed, scholarly practitioners should look to channels of communication that are effective in their institutions. Within individual institutions, there are likely unique formal and informal "outside in" and "inside out" channels of influence and communication, and scholarly practitioners can leverage those existing networks. Scholarly practitioners may also consider forming action learning sets among peers in their business schools to advance change processes as part of an inside out approach. Alternatively, or additionally, change makers in this context could consider leveraging social media as a means of facilitating action learning communities, and developing novel ways of co-creating learning.

5. *'Empower people by removing obstacles to the vision.'*

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

6. *'Create short-term wins that provide momentum.'*

The scholarly practice community as a whole, or guiding teams at individual universities, can draw from the strategic planning community, along with evaluative methodologies, to create medium to long term plans of action, interspersed with appropriate assessment/evaluation to help mark progress. In order to assess the benefits of action learning approaches in the curriculum, the authors recommend that scholarly practitioners can use a variety of survey methods , including virtual engagement, to assess the benefits of novel educational approaches at varying lengths of time post-graduation, and use their channels of influence and communication established at earlier stages of change to communicate interim progress and results.

7. 'Maintain momentum so that wave after wave of change is possible.'

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

8. 'Make change stick by nurturing a new culture.'

This last stage of the Kotter model, by definition, will require a cultural shift in universities, including in business schools, to move beyond Programmed Knowledge and incorporate a scholarly practice approach to education as a means of enhancing graduate employability. We are encouraged by seeing signs that this shift is taking place in our own institutions. As more and more students are exposed to novel methods to drive their curiosity, reflection and engagement around their career journeys, and increase their competitiveness in the job market, more and more universities will engage with the kinds of approaches and methods discussed in this account of practice. The scholarly practice community can help to ensure these methods are promoted, and cultures continue to shift, by continuing to advocate for, develop and study novel approaches to embedding action learning into management education, and sharing the results in publications visible to university administrators.

Conclusion

The current challenge of increasing and enhancing graduate employability out of business school could be classified as a 'wicked problem,' having 'multiple stakeholders with competing perspectives and by an absence of obvious solution' (Brook et al. 2016, 369). This problem is compounded by the dearth of examples of and research into action learning in management school education, which could be considered a 'wicked problem' in and of itself for the scholarly-practice community, as our research is born out of practice and our practice is enhanced by research.

Through our own experience with Future Search, we put a metaphorical stake in the ground, recognizing that to advance undergraduate management education, we must make a start. In this case, we argue that we must start with practice. Therefore, we have developed a vision and proposed a strategic framework, leveraging Kotter's 8-stage model of change, which might assist teaching professionals and university stakeholders in advancing the embedding of action learning in management education.

Although the change process is unfinished, the authors have glimpsed ways forward that we hope will act as a catalyst for change. In suggesting a framework, this paper moves forward the debate, providing a focus that we and other scholarly practitioners can use as a starting point for change within our own institutions to embed a scholarly practice approach in management education, with the ultimate goal of better preparing graduates for the increasingly competitive, global labour market. Having opened a dialogue here, we invite others to join in our community, to further our discussion and to push forward the reach of action learning in undergraduate management education.

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