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Call Number: CSU289706
Management education:
(Re) assessing relationships with MBA ‘customers’

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Keywords: Assessment, Management Education, Business Schools, Narrative, Workplace
Introduction

The forces of globalisation and the rise of knowledge management as a key driver of competitive advantage have created an increasingly complex and fluid business environment. These changes in society and the business environment have triggered a debate both within and outside higher education about capacity and relevance of business schools to prepare graduates for the challenges of dealing with an unforeseeable working life (Pfeffer & Fong, 2004; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005;).

Given the rapidly changing workplace, attaining a specific body of knowledge is less important than the ability to learn and to transform knowledge. What is increasingly demanded is an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding that can be used appropriately and effectively in new and changing circumstances (Stephenson, 2001).

Business degrees have been criticised for providing knowledge about specific topic areas without the necessary integration to produce flexibility and a complex problem-solving ability (Walker et al., 1998; Mintzberg, 2004). A focus on knowledge building that assumes unproblematic transfer of knowledge from the university context in which it is learnt to other contexts is increasingly contested (Tennant, 1999). Transfer of learning is more likely to occur where students are prepared for the complexity and ‘wholeness’ of practice (Greeno, 1997). One way of achieving this is through the use of ‘authentic’ assessment tasks, where assessment is designed to ensure that there is a greater correspondence between student work and that undertaken in workplaces (Newmann and Archibald 1992 cited in Boud & Falchikov, 2005, p35).

While the views of academics and industry on postgraduate business education have been well canvassed (Starkey & Madan, 2001; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2004; Bennis & O’Toole, 2005;) there has been little written from the student perspective. This is somewhat surprising given the phenomena of ‘student as customer’. While cash strapped universities have used full-fee paying students to compensate for declining levels of government funding, assessment practices have not necessarily changed significantly in response to changing ‘customer’ expectations.

This paper examines emerging conceptualisations of learning in times of uncertainty and complexity and explores in-depth one MBA student’s story of his experiences in a distance education program. We make no claims as to the representative nature of this narrative. However, Adrian’s story provides a basis for beginning to understand the experiences and desires of postgraduate business students.
**Changing perspectives on learning**

In response to the changing world of learners there are calls for new takes on learning, where learning is conceptualised in more multifaceted ways. While by no means a dominant trend, there is small but growing number of authors calling for a view of learning that acknowledges complexity and uncertainty.

Learning so conceived is not a process of individual knowledge construction within a socially and culturally stable situation, but is fragmented, uncertain and changing precisely because it is constructed in this increasingly fragmented, uncertain and a changing world (Light and Cox, 2001 P.45)

Haggis (2003) argues that the dominant conceptual frameworks of learning in higher education present a relatively unidimensional perspective, which reflects institutional objectives. However, there is a delicate balance in weighing up how students perceive their learning needs and how universities perceive their responsibilities for accrediting students. In working towards this balance, Light and Cox (2001) argue that:

For the student personally, and for the development of his or her identity, the control and certification functions of assessment need to match the intellectual, personal, social and practical demands of a course. In this assessment, needs to be less a right of passage and more a significant and relevant personal achievement. This relevance needs to be not just in terms of today’s needs, reinforcing a status quo, but in terms of the demands of tomorrow’s ‘supercomplex’ challenges (p.193).

Increasingly learning is not just about what students ‘know’ or ‘can do’ but it is about taking up new identities, new ways of understanding and conducting oneself. In contemporary workplaces, to demonstrate expertise one must participate in a particular work activity, and transform it, and in the process be transformed by it (Laufer and Glick in Barnett, 1999). Adult education discourses highlight the importance of lifelong learning (Edwards, 1997; Field and Leicester, 2000) and a shift from viewing educational institutions as the principal sites of learning, to the recognition of the power and importance of the workplace learning (Boud, 1998). This opens up new assessment opportunities for post-graduate business students.

Using individual workplaces as the site of learning and a focus of assessment encourages students to move beyond application of disciplinary knowledge, to informed analysis made more meaningful by access to significant company information that would not be made available to outsiders. It can also give students confidence to be more proactive in their workplaces and seek out learning opportunities. Eraut’s (2004) work on informal learning highlights the
overwhelming importance of confidence in enhancing learning at work. Students can use their university assignments as a way of opening conversations with a range of individuals in their organisation, both within and beyond marketing and management groups.

Disciplinary knowledge from formal education can provide students with new ways to think and talk about their work situation. It can also provide a vocabulary for them to talk about aspects of their work and make sense of their experience and understand issues and alternative perspectives more clearly (Eraut, 2000). The synergy created by a combination of formal and informal learning provides students with a much richer learning experience and facilitates effective transfer of learning. It also creates the opportunity for learning beyond completion of a formal qualification. ‘Authentic’ assessment tasks encourage students to apply relevant disciplinary knowledge in a familiar context, develop and enhance their generic skills and generate workplace specific knowledge.

Locating assessment in the workplace also acknowledges learning as social practice. Billett (1988) argues that an individual’s learning is not isolated from social practice and that consequently expertise is fashioned within particular contexts and embedded in social circumstances. The social aspect of learning is illustrated in Adrian’s story.

Adrian’s story: Diving and delving like a kid into a pond

Adrian’s experiences, narrated in this article, form part of a larger study examining students’ experiences of workplace-based assessment in postgraduate business subjects. What began as a telephone interview using a semi-structured interview on workplace-based assessment expanded into a wide-ranging discussion across two telephone interviews and a follow up two-page email.

Use of a narrative approach in this paper reflects several key concerns that are central to narrative research: (1) an interest in people’s lived experience; (2) a desire to allow research participants to contribute to determining key themes covered; (3) an interest in process and change over time; and (4) an interest in the self and representation of the self over time (Elliot, 2005). In examining the way individuals story their experience we can look at their understandings of their own experience while also exploring the social and cultural resources that people draw on to help make sense of their lives (Edwards, 1997).

The story that Adrian narrates is of interest because it deals with several key issues in postgraduate education: diverse motivations for undertaking postgraduate study, the importance of relevance in coursework, learning as social practice, and the identity work involved in postgraduate business study.

Adrian returned to university study in his early 50s, a gap of several decades after his undergraduate course. His motivations for commencing postgraduate work
were varied. Firstly he wanted the status, the sense of recognition and achievement that he believes is associated with a completing a MBA.

I wanted the kudos of having an MBA. If I go into a meeting, if I look at someone’s card and it has MBA on it, I know what level I have to go into the conversation.

His comments on the level of the conversation can be seen in terms of socially recognised knowledge, where to be knowledgeable is to be capable of participating in the specialist discourse of a knowledge community (Wenger, 1998).

Adrian believes that the MBA qualification (fairly or unfairly) is more highly regarded than extensive work experience. It provides a path to gaining recognition for and legitimising the work experience and capabilities he already sees himself as having.

I can do everything from making pottery, running a council, to running tourism or whatever. This makes me more multi-skilled. But it is one thing to have a heap of experiences in a 16-page resume, and another having three letters after your name, which opens the key for people to bother reading. It’s a fact of life. If I want to stay relevant at the level, which I think I am, [where] I deserve to be, then basically [I need to] put my money where my mouth is.

Despite his view of his deserved worth, he acknowledges the need to update his knowledge base to compete in the current workforce.

An MBA or any other course at a postgraduate level, should be one which has a genuine beneficial effect, both on your self-esteem and your professional and wider knowledge… My qualifications are all old 1960’s and 1970’s qualifications. Things change, the knowledge you had then may not be relevant or accurate now.

The decision to study was also influenced by his desire to maintain his position in the family household as his children and wife undertake university study.

Also, showing the kids… Of the five, two have graduated; two are still in and one to go. I did not want to be the odd one out in the family.

While Adrian looked to the MBA to broaden his knowledge in a changing world, the experience was not without challenge to his identity as a professional.

It is an opportunity to reassess your own abilities in light of a much wider world. This may come as a shock to one, as it has been in my case being the chief executive of my own company for over 25 years. I have become so used
to having people around me whom I regard as not being academic or intellectual superiors, and so I have lost any sense of place in the intellectual community.

Adrian mentions twice the shock of realising the limitations to his personal knowledge.

If one is honest, it quickly becomes clear not only how much you have forgotten, but how much information has changed over the 25 years since I personally did any undergraduate study… it is a shock for people who are my age to realise how much you think you know, against how much information is available beyond your own bank of knowledge, and contrary to what you believe to be true.

He is also very conscious of his difference in position in an academic community compared with the high-level position he holds in his workplace and his community.

Understandably, the MBA course does not discriminate between people such as myself… and those who are fresh graduates from an undergraduate degree. I believe it is a good thing that there is no discrimination either by the lecturers or through the course information. This lack of personalisation, in effect acts as a reality call to people such as myself, because within the society of academia, we carry none of the distinctions as senior managers or community leaders. As such, one is forced to put one's ego in the back pocket, and address the information, which is given based on current academic knowledge. One is forced to put one's own experiences and prejudices aside, unless an opportunity presents itself to use your own experience, as it relates to assignment work.

Assessment based around the workplace provides a significant opportunity for students to draw on their work experience and also position themselves as ‘knowers’ in their workplace. When asked the types of assessment tasks that he has enjoyed doing Adrian answered:

Those associated with current work, past experiences or future ambition/projects, which is only natural I guess. Personally I am willing to learn anything as long as I believe it is relevant, as this is, being a course I chose to do, and for which I pay a lot of money. Therefore the more relevant a task is to my experiences at work or in society generally, the easier it is for me to relate to the academic literature, which in turn allows me to fulfil assignments and the course.
Adrian believes that universities must acknowledge relevance from the student perspective not just engage in parochial promotion of their individual subjects or disciplines.

The pride each school takes in its bank of knowledge is commendable. However what should be valued by the University is that students, even at undergraduate level, are now invariably customers of the faculties as well as being students.

For Adrian, there was a tension between needing to complete the assignment work and being free to explore the subject in a way that maximised his understanding and interest.

My reason for doing it [study] is to get the knowledge, it really not to do the assignments… I find assignments really annoying… I know they are really good tools. I know they make you focus on particular aspects… but you don’t have all the time to do all the other reading that is nice. And how many people will after they finish their course go back and read their notes and redo all the things and have a look at the other info and the beautiful textbook?

Across the course of his degree Andrew has had to change the way he goes about preparing assignments. He was concerned that despite all the work he did he was only ever awarded a pass. He sought advice from a study skills centre at the university and subsequently changed the way he went about assessment tasks and achieved significantly higher results. This is how he describes the early days of his course:

In my first year I would read 2-300 pages of text and I’d write anything up to 100 pages of hand written notes and then with about 2 days to go I’d go and look and say what’s the assignment about and then I would have to reread everything and I just got so interested you know I’d be darting from book to book and delving and diving in like a kid in a pond who’s supposed to be swimming laps but I wasn’t swimming laps. And when they say the race is on in two days time and you’d better get your start and your finish times and your tumble turns right. I think s..t! I haven’t been doing that I’ve been chasing dolphins. And so I’d have all these notes and all these bloody references but I haven’t done what the assignment has said.

Adrian’s use of playful imagery to describe his learning experiences highlights that there is much more to learning than the rational intellectual aspect of study. He talks of the feelings and emotions involved in leaning. We see the ‘whole person’ not just the ‘student’. While he feels has mastered assignment writing technique, there is a sense of loss of freedom.
That is the irony. I feel that I have robbed myself of the opportunity to learn as I have constrained myself to a dressage circle instead of a paddock. I’ve had to look at what they want in an assignment so I get the assessment. Having done that I have enjoyed the academic stringency imposing the discipline to cut the 8000 words down to 3000 words to do what I am supposed to do for the lecturer and for myself and to achieve something better than just garble and that part has been enjoyable. But I have spent so much time doing the assignment that I would have otherwise been just sucking in information.

What is evident from Adrian’s story is that the value he places on knowledge moves well beyond the individual and the functional aspects.

Knowledge kept to your self isn’t worth having for knowledge’s sake … Knowledge should be shared and enjoyed.

New ways of knowing opens new conversations and entrée to new communities of learners.

**Discussion**

Anecdotally, we are aware that there are academics who believe that many postgraduate students in business are just after a qualification and will do the minimum required of them to obtain their degree. By and large that has not been our experience. It could be said, however, that postgraduate business students demand relevance in their programs and are not reticent in informing academics where they perceive this relevance may be lacking. Also, as highlighted in Adrian’s story, students do not come as empty vessels or with a blank sheet. They may have had significant industry and life experiences and not unreasonably appreciates having this acknowledged.

Starting university for the first time or returning after a long period of absence for study can mean that students experience challenges to their identity. While this is generally a constructive part of the total education experience, it is helpful for students if academics can be sensitive to this process.

Across the degree, postgraduate students are fashioning and refashioning their identities as students, professionals and knowledge workers. Ideally, the programmes we design and deliver should disrupt students’ existing patterns of thinking and challenge their interpretations of life and work experience as Adrian states, “The skills you learn getting out of your comfort zone are important, the increase in your perspective on the wider world”. However, academics simultaneously need to provide support and recognition of what students bring to the academic arena.
Much of the time we forget the frames that mediate our experience. Yet, framing plays an essential role for functioning in the world. “It is only by relating new experiences to similar ones from the past that we can begin to make sense of the world” (MacLachlan and Reid, 1994 p.42). Theoretical frames provide students with a resource to reflect on their work practices, challenge their existing frames and develop new ways of knowing.

In a complex and fluid business environment these are desirable capabilities as Starkey and Madan (2001) suggest:

Experienced executives are more interested in concepts and ideas that can help them make sense of and deal with the problems they face in their day-to-day work. They are also concerned with how to think about an increasingly complex and dynamic future, which does not conform very closely to the perspectives that inform the average MBA syllabus. They are looking for the concepts behind best practice and are, therefore, more concerned with theory.

Workplace based assessment addresses both the relevance concerns of students and recognises that they have a more complex identity than just that of a student. It allows them to draw on existing experience and capabilities but have their worldview challenged and broadened. It also recognises the social practice of learning and effectively provides both an opportunity and a structure to situate their new learning in their local workplace.

While in his narrative Adrian underplays the importance of assessment in his postgraduate study, he acknowledges that it has given focus to his explorations in the literature and a way to measure his achievement. It also provided a vehicle to open new conversations and connections within his workplace and community.

Moving assessment further into the workplace can create challenges for academics. Identity challenges are by no means limited to students in this kind of work. As academics we are not necessarily experts in specialised problems of individual workplaces, so our roles may be subtly or not so subtly changed. The position of academic shifts from a privileged position as disciplinary expert and knowledge disseminator to co-learner about workplaces, and provider of learning resources that will facilitate the student’s capacity to generate their own knowledge in the workplace, currently and into the future. As Brown and Duguid (2000) suggest perhaps the most important thing learners need from higher education institutions is “access to authentic communities of learning, interpretation, exploration, and knowledge creation” (p. 232).
Concluding comments

While there is an ongoing need to address the complex nature of learning in an uncertain and changing world, there are no easy solutions. In designing postgraduate programs consideration must be given to equipping professionals for diverse and changing work contexts. In this paper we have outlined the role of workplace based assessment in contributing to this agenda. Adrian’s narrative has drawn attention to the multidimensional nature of postgraduate learning and the identity work involved.

It is worth remembering that university experience is just one chapter in a text of lifelong learning. The commonly used term ‘lifelong learning’ alerts us to a way of seeing learning without boundaries (Edwards and Usher, 2001). Learning is no longer limited to specific periods of life or confined by predetermined outcomes of educational institutions. That said, linking workplaces and the academy more closely in postgraduate management education programs can better prepare postgraduates for the complex and fluid business environment they will continue to experience.

Acknowledgement

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