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The Student, The Academic and the Business Manager: A Tripartite of Learning in Management Education

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The Student, the Academic and the Business Manager: A Tripartite of Learning in Management Education

Abstract

The lack of real world exposure has long been a criticism of undergraduate management education and continues to be a challenge for academics teaching in this field. The very nature of business management education lends itself to the theory being enhanced by the actual practice of management. This paper explores the role of one introductory management subject in providing the foundation awareness of management using real businesses as the context for learning. More importantly, the research discovers that the educational designers (the academics) and the participating business managers are learning just as much as the students enrolled in the subject. A significant assessment strategy is a longitudinal case study of an actual business and its manager. Part of this process requires students to visit and interview managers in the workplace several times over the semester. Prior research on the curriculum and underpinning educational rationale of the design of the subject are detailed in Bone et al (2000) and Eiseman (2001). This paper explores, through continuing research, the relationships and learning outcomes gained through the delivery of this management subject and thus completing a tripartite of learning between the student, the academic and the business practitioner.

Keywords: management education and development, situated learning, management curriculum

Introduction

The very nature of business management education lends itself to the theory being enhanced by the actual practice of management. Many debates have arisen in the past re the teaching of management at the undergraduate level (French & Grey 1996, Anthony 1986, Proctor & Powney 1991, Watson 1993). Thus, it became very important for the academics involved, to approach the curriculum design of management subjects, with this in mind. As a result, the first year introduction to management subject, *Management in Practice*, was designed to address this (Bone et al 2000, Eiseman 2001). The learning strategies adopted ensured strong links to real world contexts. As part of the assessment schedule, students were required to visit and interview a business manager, on various management concepts, in the workplace on a number of occasions. The students prepared a written case study of that business and presented an oral report to the larger group. During this time, a tripartite relationship was built up between the business manager, the students and the academics at the university.

Whilst the academics focussed the curriculum design on the learning outcomes to be achieved by the student, a recent research study of the business managers and the academics, found that they, too, were benefiting from the process. The business managers identified that they were learning from the students. The academics, through reflective practice, identified significant learning outcomes for themselves.

Background and theoretical context to the curriculum design of the subject

Staff and students at the university have always maintained close links with the business community. This is reflected in the demand for graduates; extensive use of tours or industry visits to enhance the learning experiences of students; an informal system of job placements through alumni and faculty networks; and industry practice being an integral part of management studies (Bone & Watson 2007).

The subject, *Management in Practice*, is the introductory management subject (one out of 24 subjects studied for the degree) for a variety of undergraduate courses ranging from Farm Management and Horticulture to a more generalist Bachelor of Management. The teaching team, of five academics, also represented a variety of science and business disciplines.

The common ground for the academics was a strong commitment to quality teaching and learning outcomes emanating from the belief that learning is a meaning-making process, i.e. constructivism. In constructivism, 'learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience' (Bednar *et al* 1992, p.21). The onus of learning is placed on the student. Students construct their own knowledge by testing ideas based on prior knowledge and experience, applying these ideas to a new situation and integrating the new knowledge gained. It is up to them to make sense of their real world experience and to construct their reality. The academic role is to assist the students with this construction (Cochrane *et al* 2002).

The academic assistance in the learning process is made operational through the notion of 'praxis'. Praxis is learning that occurs through the engagement of the student (and others in the learning community) in a dialectic interaction between real world experience and practice, with conceptual and

abstract thinking (Eiseman 2001). This dialectic is also a key theme in situated learning, the third theory, that had been influential in the subject's design.

Situated learning challenges academics to shift their emphasis from information transfer to facilitation of learning, processes and contexts. Situated learning places special focus on the role of authentic contexts in the process of knowledge development (Lave & Wenger 1991). Advocates of situated learning argue that meaningful learning requires engagement between the learner, the learning community and authentic practice (Bone & Watson 2007). The members of this tripartite relationship, identified in the research study, are the students enrolled in the subject (the learner), the academics within the university (the learning community), and the business managers (the authentic practitioners).

Situated learning compliments the notion of praxis, as both concepts recognise the importance of context being relevant in the learning process. Acquisition of knowledge requires the learner also to make meaning, and this meaning is derived from the engagement of learner and context (Lave 1988). Whilst the praxis (and constructivist) approach tends to centre on the individual, Lave and Wenger (1991) shift the focus to the groups or the 'communities of practice' in which individuals participate. The students working in small groups, and learning from experienced practitioners (the business managers), embodied the situated learning model which values group processes.

Thus, *Management in Practice*, aims to teach students about the concepts and practice of management using a constructivist, situated learning and praxis approach to learning, i.e. where theory informs practice and practice informs theory. The three pronged approach for student learning called for a variety of teaching methodologies and assessment designs that would ease them into the learning processes. Students were provided with a number of conceptual frameworks to use as tools to make meaning of the management contexts with which they engaged.

Methodology

The research study aimed to identify and understand the key learning outcomes and experiences for the main stakeholders (the student, the academic and the business manager) involved in the first year

introductory management subject. Data was collected from each of the stakeholders using the following research methodologies:

The academics: worked as an action learning set (McGill & Beaty 1995; Brockbank & McGill 1998) which involved voluntary engagement in structured forms of learning through sharing teaching experiences with each other. This approach is grounded within a communities-of-practice perspective upon learning (Brown & Duguld 1991; Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger & Snyder 2000). The term community-of-practice refers to 'participation in an activity system about which participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities' (Lave & Wenger 1991, p. 98). For the purposes of this research study, the community was conceptualised as a group of five academics interested in understanding and improving their teaching capabilities. Learning, rather than being individual, occurs through participation in the community (Bone *et al* 2000). This view moves beyond cognition and knowledge acquisition to the situated and social nature of learning. The action learning set engaged the academics in a community-of-practice where they could learn from each other's experiences and from reflexivity on their own practice (Cresswell 2003, Higgs 1998). The five academics met as an action learning set mode on a weekly basis during each teaching semester. Notes were kept from each meeting and these were collated and analysed using the open coding technique (Strauss & Corbin 1990, p. 62).

The business managers: were engaged in semi-structured interviews. The advantages of the semi-structured interviews were that the participants could provide historical and anecdotal information and allowed the researchers 'control' over the line of the questioning (Cresswell 2003). Following approval of all aspects of the study by the university's ethics committee, the business managers were asked if they would participate in an interview. The interviews were scheduled to take approximately one hour and were conducted in the business manager's workplace (the natural field setting as described by Cresswell (2003)). Three academics were involved in the research project and two of the three participated in each interview to maximise consistency of approach. The interview composed of closed and open-ended questions (Gay 1992). The closed questions were designed to give the demographic characteristics of the interviewees: age, gender, business type, number of times being a

business mentor. The open-ended questions were designed to allow the analysis of qualitative data to explore the factors underlying the reasons why they participated in the exercise and to further probe what they gained and learned from the process (Gay 1992).

A list had been kept, over the six years, of the participating business managers and this provided a good sampling frame (Gill & Johnson 2002). The business managers were originally chosen because of the student's background, course enrolment, business interests and student transport. All business managers were within one hour driving time from Orange. The sampling strategy used was stratified sampling (Gill & Johnson 2003). The reasons for this sampling were twofold: the business managers were readily accessible, and to achieve a representation from town businesses and farm businesses.

The researchers interviewed fifteen business managers: five from town businesses and ten from farms. This proportion reflected the number of students from the various courses. Three female managers and twelve male managers were interviewed. Eleven business managers were aged between 40 and 55 years and four were older than 55 years.

The interviews were tape recorded and the responses transcribed and analysed using an open coding process. Strauss & Corbin (1990, p. 62). Each researcher read and reread the transcripts of the interviews, searching for issues/themes considered to be of importance to the interviewees and that gave insights into the research questions. The researchers shared their findings and drew mindmaps as they identified the links and connections in the data. Thus, the data was looked at from differing perspectives and the data organised 'in such a way as to give insightful meaning to the participants voices' (Higgs 1998, p. 10-144).

The students: completed standard subject evaluations, provided by the Faculty, at the end of each teaching semester for six years. The students, as part of their assessment schedule, wrote a reflection on their learning achieved from undertaking this subject. Trigger questions were provided and used as a guide for the students to complete the reflective exercise (Senge *et al* 1999). The evaluations and reflections were collated and analysed using an open coding process.

The analysis identified the key the learning experiences and outcomes for the three stakeholders involved in the business manager case study project; and, highlighted the development and importance of the relationships between the tripartite members.

The Managers' Experience

Five main themes emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts: contribution and involvement in young people's education; community involvement; reflection on own business; exposure to real life management; and positive image of students.

Contribution and involvement in young people's education

The business mentors expressed a genuine interest in 'assisting' students and giving something back to the future generation of business managers. Managers stated '*If I can help out the students by improving their careers then I will be in it, my gain is the fact that I feel that I have helped*' (Farm Manager 4) and '*I feel an obligation to give back what people gave me at university*' (Town Manager 3). This altruistic motivation for being part of the process was very strong. They felt that their business management experience could contribute to the students' education although some managers were modest about their achievements and contributions. It was interesting to note, in the interview process, that this was often the initial response when asked why they volunteered. However, as the interview progressed, and the mentors reflected more deeply, it became clear that there many more motivating factors at work. One farm business manager commented:

I have a real passion for learning in agriculture... I am an avid reader of agriculture and agricultural management. I felt I could offer the students something and I live close to the university. I love having the kids here. I have got a lot out of communicating with them too. A lot of interactions and flow of knowledge from them to me and vice versa. (Farm Manager 2)

Community involvement – breaking down the isolation

One of the difficulties faced by small business managers is that they have little time and/or opportunity to talk to other business people or anyone about their business. This is especially true for farm managers who can go through their working day without communicating with anyone (Johnson

et al 1996). This can be very isolating. The visits from the students gave them an opportunity to discuss their business. As many business managers were from the same district the local 'grapevine' was active with discussion of who was, and who was not, taking part in the project.

By taking part in this exercise with the students, the managers became aware of other business people who were also involved, and could 'compare notes' when they ran into each other in town or at social occasions. The shared experience of the business manager exercise often led to being an ice-breaker in some situations. Discussions about the exercise and ultimately some aspects of their businesses would eventuate. Farm managers, in particular, gained much from the experience. Many farm business managers admitted to being quite 'chuffed' to being chosen and 'miffed' if they were not chosen the following year. The business managers admitted to looking forward to the students' visits and talking and learning from them:

I am staying younger because of them. They are always talking about what they are up to. I learn. It's nothing specific I can put my finger on but it's just having young people around. (Farm Manager 2)

It gives me a sense of community involvement. I always try to help people when I can and I think if I can get some kids on the right track towards achieving their career goals. (Farm Manager 1)

Reflection on own business management

A key outcome from the project was the recognition and realisation from that the business managers were *learning* from their interaction with the students. Many acknowledged that they had to be 'on their toes' when the students came to visit and they were sometimes challenged by the students' questions. The process forced them to reflect on their business management practices. The business mentors found themselves articulating and explaining (out aloud) what they do, why they do it this or that way, and how they do it. It was a great learning experience for them and it prompted them to do much thinking between visits. The business mentors became reflective practitioners (even if only for the life of the exercise, but the general feeling and impressions given by the mentors was this reflection would continue) (Senge *et al* 1999). The following quotes from the business managers explained their learning:

It's encouraged me to keep learning about agriculture, one, because I love it, but two, the kids come out and they want to know specific details about the industry and its future, global implications on that industry so you have to know a little bit about what you are talking about. (Farm Manager 1)

You've got to confront the sustainability of your industry, financially, and environmentally and that sort of thing raises a lot of difficult questions and you have got to vocalise those thoughts. Many people have not had that opportunity to do it in that sort of situation. With the students you've got to. So it is helpful for me in that way too. (Farm Manager 9)

I get ideas too and the satisfaction of doing something. I had to explain everything I took for granted. (Town Manager 3)

Exposure to real life management

Being able to provide the link between the perceived 'theory-based' university degree and the real world experience was an important learning outcome for the business managers. As well, the link with real world managers made the study of management more 'real' and thus more relevant and more interesting to the students and the academics. The business managers stressed the need for the mix of theory and real life experiences:

I know that they have to ask questions but they are caused to develop a relationship with me and ask some personal questions and good for them – it is better than sitting around and being lectured to. It's a different way of learning and I think it's really valuable for them. (Farm Manager 6)

Learning the practical side .. they are not only learning the theoretical side.... Its always the unknown when you are actually back in the real world. (Farm Manager 5)

Positive image of students

Another positive outcome from the study was the very strong impression that the students made on their business manager. The business managers described the students as being cordial, organised, punctuality, and keen to ask questions:

They were very organised. They all had their notes and they had all their questions already written out. The questions they asked were good and I think it is great that a lot of them think outside the square. (Town Manager 2)

The academics had spent some tutorial time preparing the students for their visits and stressed the importance of protocols and procedures. The visits to the business manager also played a role in breaking down perceived difficulties often associated with the generation gap. The average age of the students was 19, and the average age of the business mentor was approximately 50 years of age. Many business managers were pleasantly surprised to learn that the students were gaining something useful out of the exercise that would assist them in their studies. Over the period of the visits a relationship was built up between the students and the business managers. One business manager commented:

I do get feedback from the kids. Most of them are very positive about the experience. The amount of kids who have come back and worked for me through their degree is quite amazing. (Farm Manager 2)

The Students' experience

One way of illustrating the dichotomy between management theory and management practice is for students to 'get out there' and see what is happening in the real world. Thus, the praxis and situated learning approach to management learning within this subject. When the students shared their findings with the rest of the group, by giving oral presentations, the contrasts among the businesses and the business managers became very apparent. It was quite an eye-opening experience for the students and this exercise generated a barrage of questions and comments. From the Sustainable Management Model of business management, used as a tool within the subject, the students had learned the key components of management and the decision making processes. They had learned about how important the personal values of the manager or management team were to the decision making processes.

The most insightful student feedback has come from the reflection on their learning required in the final report. Students were asked to discuss their overall experience of studying this subject, how their view of management may have altered, and to outline any implications for their management practice

and career or business plans (Eiseman 2001). Students made comments that highlighted the value they found from being able to link theory and practice:

I found the subject helped me to clarify many ideas that I previously held about management. I was aware of the different styles of manager, but had not related the reason for these styles to the differing values of the various managers. The realisation that personal values affect managerial skills will assist me to communicate more effectively with others, especially those with different styles to myself.

(Distance Education Student)

I was able to link management functions and behaviours to the qualities of an effective manager through the visits ... I learnt more through seeing his management capabilities in real life rather than just learning about it in a lecture theatre. (On campus student)

Over the years of delivering this subject, several hundred reflections in the final report have been assessed and summarised. The following generalised statements can be made, based on student comments in the final report:

- Students felt they had achieved the subject's learning objectives. Of particular value were the organised tours and the business manager case study project.
- Students enjoyed their initial exposure to management. In particular, they appreciated the opportunities to appraise their own management skills and to observe other management styles through the business manager case study project.
- On-campus students mentioned the small tutorial groups and the development of oral presentation skills, the opportunity for discussion and the balance between practice and theory.

The researchers considered that, despite the inexperience of the students, they displayed a willingness to engage in their own methods of enquiry (particularly the business manager project) and that a wide range of practical exercises aroused their curiosity to learn more about management. Independent learning was being developed with the business manager project.

The academics' experience

The process of the academics working in an action learning set ensured the continual cycle of reflection. The regular meetings allowed the academics to regularly bring key issues relating to the teaching and learning of the subject, including formal and informal feedback from students, to the group forum rather than working on them in isolation. The action learning process provided a five step structure: What happened last meeting; What happened last time in the tutorials; Group reflection and discussion of issues; Planning for the next lecture and tutorial; and, reflection on what happened this session.

The action learning model provided the flexibility required but in a structured and reflective way. The learning objectives of the subject were the guidelines but the academics were able to modify/fine tune/rebuild aspects in response to ongoing experience. This responsiveness was an essential requirement for the group's *modus operandi*.

Outcomes of action learning method and constructivist learning processes for the academics (Bone *et al* 2000) have included:

- a) *Teaching strategies relating to our expressed teaching philosophy* – incorporated small group work to provide a learning process that would engage the student in a dialectic interaction between real world experience and practice. The case study of a business allowed the students to identify, locate, construct and apply new and existing knowledge to a real world situation.
- b) *Professional and personal development* – the methods recognised the ongoing nature of learning by encouraging the academics to internalise learning processes and apply them to their teaching. The academics recognised that they could select the issues they wanted to address, the skills area they wished to focus on and the outcomes they wanted to achieve. They felt empowered as they had ownership over their professional development.
- c) *Strengthened collaboration* – The whole nature of action learning strengthens collaboration. The academics knew what they had to do, they were all experienced educators, but this time

they also wanted to learn from each other. The method allowed academics from differing disciplines to collaborate with each other and research their own teaching.

- d) *Teamwork* – In the subject of study the academics asked the students to work in teams. The academics found that, by working in a team themselves, their understanding of the purpose and potential of teamwork greatly developed. The action learning set had come together with a common purpose, that of delivering the subject, but the resulting support from the set provided an opportunity beyond the knowing or learning of any single member of the team.
- e) *Networking* – The links with the business community provided the academics with real world experience of their own.

Conclusion

One of the criticisms of situated learning is that things are often taught or learned in one context with little or no transferability to other contexts. This subject worked hard to get the learners to adapt to other or unknown situations or methods through a range of assessments including a written and oral presentation of their business manager experience. The students have had to use the knowledge in a variety of contexts and by taking them to the workplace they saw the relevance of what they are learning. Therefore, robust knowledge has to be both situated and unsituated (Collins 1994). Much of our role as educators is working out the relationships and curriculum design between the situational context and the theories. Feedback gained in this research study suggested that the process of real world engagement is achieving understanding of the management concepts and this learning is being applied beyond the immediate needs of the subject to include the business managers.

Real life managers are learning from real life students. This very worthwhile outcome from the study was evident from the feedback and responses gained from the interviews and one that saw the business managers 'stretched' into being more reflective practitioners. It was not a perceived outcome when the original project was being designed, but a very important one when understanding the learning outcomes associated with praxis and situated learning. All participants involved in the learning process learn in some way.

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