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You Can't Learn Management in a Classroom

A leading management thinker argues that MBAs need more real business world experience in their education

by [Charles Handy](#)

Forty years ago I was an enthusiastic advocate of formal business education. I was involved in the beginnings of three of the leading business schools in Britain, following my own indoctrination as an executive student at the [MIT Sloan School of Management](#). Now I am not so sure. Business schools have their uses but they overstate what they can deliver and they may be unintentionally letting down their products—the students—by forgoing real-world learning for the classroom.

The letters MBA should, if the schools were honest, stand for Master of Business Analysis, because the tools and disciplines of analysis are what the students learn, not management, or administration as it used to be called. Analysis is a necessary part of good management and leadership but it is not the whole of it. Who to trust, how to inspire, how brave to be, how forgiving or not—these relationship and judgment skills may be discussed in a classroom but they can only be learned by practicing them.

You can bring the world into the classroom but you cannot replicate it there. The new MBA graduate should carry a white flag as she or he goes to work for the first time—"I know how to count," it would say. "Now teach me how to do."

RESEARCH VS. REPORTAGE

Another problem is that the business schools lie within the universities and cherish their academic standards, yet what they call research is more accurately reportage. The true experimental laboratories of management are in businesses and other organizations. The business schools are the interpreters and transmitters of best practice, not its originators. Nothing wrong with that, just another case of overstating what they do and can do. The danger lies in those academic pretensions that value the reportage more than the transmitting, i.e. the teaching, and even that teaching must always be a year or more behind best practice. The schools, in other words, are always doomed to follow business, not to lead it.

Sadly, too, this confusion between research and reportage leads to a lack of questioning and challenge in the business school tradition. It is as if the schools see themselves as grooming their students for the world they will be entering and are reluctant to query any of its principles or practices. Capitalism is not without its critics, but they are not usually to be found in the business schools, which should know its ways and its flaws better than anyone. The recent appearance of courses in business ethics in many of the schools is a welcome antidote to the over-cozy relationship between the schools and business, but, too often, these courses only provide more examples of reportage rather than a serious exploration of moral philosophy.

The real danger in all this is that the students learn to count, to analyze, and to imitate but are not encouraged to think for themselves. If the schools really are preparing the future leaders of the business world, this is a serious drawback. There are signs that some employers are recognizing this and are happy to look for their future leaders elsewhere and coach them themselves. If that happens, the best potential students will also skip the business school route, leaving the schools with the best of the second-best. No longer, then, will employers see the schools

as a convenient talent pool, an obvious first call in their search for their new managers, irrespective of what those managers might have learned there. It will be a downward spiral that will help nobody.

PART-TIME LEARNING FROM A DISTANCE

The growing popularity of part-time executive programs is one response to this criticism. These programs offer their participants not only the skills of analysis but also the opportunity to reflect on, and to conceptualize, their experience at work, as well as allowing them to earn while they learn, a not unimportant consideration. In those ways they imitate the manner in which we prepare people for the other professions such as medicine, architecture, and accountancy, which mix tutored experience and classroom instruction in their programs.

I have been particularly impressed by the Open University Business School based in Britain. This school relies on distance learning, with lectures delivered over the Internet, supplemented with fortnightly tutorial groups in the student's own locality, and an annual summer school. The students, of all ages and backgrounds, are encouraged to relate every set of concepts to their own situation in their fortnightly essays, thus cementing the learning in their own experience. Other schools employ distance learning technology, but few do it as successfully as the Open University Business School, whose students around Europe now number more than 25,000.

Can business schools change? Of course they can. But given the tradition of tenured staff they have inherited from the world of universities rather than from business, they may find it is easier to preach change to others than to practice it themselves.

*Irish-born Charles Handy is repeatedly ranked as one of world's most influential business thinkers. He reflects on business schools and other topics in his latest book, *Myself and Other More Important Matters*, to be published by Amacom in February, 2008. .*

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