



Those Who Can, Do; Those Who Can't, Teach? A Case for B-School Professors of Practice



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Abstract

While traditional B-School degrees have lost their sheen, it's very possible for them to hit 'reset' and regain the same, as most Professors are bright, committed and hardworking. Systemic and environmental pressures have forced them away from the real world that they can reconnect with-if they so decide, and if the yardstick to measure them is less of scientific research, and more of industry engagement evidence. Replacing traditional B-School degrees with untested and yet unproven 'experiments' such as micro credentials and interdisciplinary degrees is throwing the baby out with the bath water, and a costly mistake.

Keywords: Micro credentials; Interdisciplinary; Professors of Practice; B-Schools

Opinion

Nothing seems to have changed in almost twenty years since Bennis and O'Toole (2005) in their thought provoking article (How B-Schools lost their way) quipped:

'We cannot imagine a professor of surgery who has never seen a patient, or a piano teacher who doesn't play the instrument, and yet today's business schools are packed with intelligent, highly skilled faculty with little or no managerial experience. As a result, they can't identify the most important problems facing executives and don't know how to analyze the indirect and long-term implications of complex business decisions. In this way, they shortchange their students and, ultimately, society.'

A clear attestation to B-Schools' organizational inertia -and more precisely 'routine rigidity'-even in the face of an existential threat, is the rapid proliferation of micro credential certifications being offered by a rash of institutions globally, including universities. The *raison d'être* for this proliferation-besides the enhanced demand for gig skills in recent years-are the thousands of graduates with Business degrees being churned out each year, sans the market-driven competencies demanded by employers in business organizations across the world. In this case, are micro credential certifications the answer? I would say not quite, as these certifications serve to fill here and now gaps, whereas long term success within a profession- especially as one moves up an organizations' managerial rungs-requires much conceptual clarity and a deeper

understanding of specific areas being managed. The latter is what traditional business degrees are expected to provide-and are very capable of so doing-but unfortunately aren't.

What's alarming is the absence of any clearly discernible large-scale action by traditional B-Schools in response to the demands of a dynamic job market. This chink in their armor (skill gaps associated with traditional business degrees) has also led to some universities in different parts of the world experimenting with 'interdisciplinary degrees', with fanciful combinations of various subjects, which despite some positives, would arguably see their graduates far worse off than holders of traditional business degrees, provided the latter were a bit more aligned with business needs within a region, if not globally. One comes across talk at times about the likes of Elon Musk having competencies of the kind that interdisciplinary degrees produce. This is debatable, as universities are made for students who constitute the norm being their intended end products, and not outliers or geniuses, like Elon Musk!

It is pertinent to discuss the aforesaid point (interdisciplinary business degrees replacing traditional ones) a bit more in detail before turning back to how and why traditional B-School degrees have lost their sheen in recent years. Imagine a situation in which Alan Greenspan (PhD Economics) is the current US Federal Reserve Chairman, and Dr Fauci (Doctor of Medicine) the Chief Medical Advisor to the President of United States, both with traditional degrees, and subject matter experts in their respective fields.

Would the president seek advice on matters pertaining to the US economy from Dr Fauci or on Covid control from Alan Greenspan? Frivolous as it seems, this in essence is what interdisciplinary degrees claim to be able to do, producing generalist, jack of all 'problem solvers and critical thinkers', who could apply their skill sets to any organizational setting. To those with an iota of corporate managerial experience, this begs the question: where is the question of a freshly out of university graduate indulging in 'problem solving and critical thinking' in a corporation, while bereft of deep, subject-specific knowledge in a certain field?

Further, apart from entrepreneurship and startups, any industry-exposed manager would know that large corporations with their steep hierarchies expect youngsters to keep their mouths shut until asked otherwise, and to leave 'problem solving and critical thinking' to those who've done their nine yards, and have earned their stripes in specific fields.

To further reinforce the foregoing, let's imagine a weekly Monday morning management meeting in an established business. While managers indeed exchange their views to facilitate information sharing and decision making, it's important to note, that various functional heads mostly mind their own business (no pun), represent their specific functions, and bring to the table their specific expertise in a unique area, developed through years of study and work experience in that specific area. This is akin to a multidisciplinary team of specialist doctors attending to a critically ill patient, with each doctor focusing on their unique part-not someone else's- based on their unique expertise gained through traditional university degrees. What then is the reason that traditional B-Schools that do have the capacity to deliver excellent results, and often have very bright and capable Professors, have increasingly been failing to do so? Why have they been churning out graduates not fully equipped to cope with demands placed on them by corporations they are supposed to serve, resulting in their space being encroached upon by arguably inferior silver bullets, such as micro credentials and interdisciplinary degrees? Is the baby being thrown out with the bath water? Following is a brief discussion on these.

Bennis and O'Toole [1] attributed the aforesaid shortcomings of B-Schools to their fundamental flaw, in their identifying themselves as 'scientific' institutions, and their professors perceiving themselves as 'scientists', and their (business) research as 'scientific research'. All this arose from their need to overcome their 'physics envy', in other words, their inferiority complex in relation to their professorial counterparts constituting the 'sciences', or, 'disciplines'. This misplaced sense of envy is in fact baseless, as -according to these scholars- management is a profession (like law or medicine), and not a discipline (like chemistry or physics). Business courses must therefore be taught by those skilled in the profession of business, as with the case of medical and law school professors, who almost always practice alongside their preaching. Over several decades however, this

'business as science' thinking became the entrenched dominant logic of B-School professors, with a 'herd mentality' clearly observable within their lot. Rather than focusing on, and engaging with the world of business and professional managers that their research is supposed to serve, their focus has become significantly skewed towards the creation of hypothetical research questions, the scientific research methods to use to deal with the same, and what ranked journals they can get their research published in, and the 'ranking' of these journals. This is where their expertise mostly lies. It's not surprising that a renowned CEO labeled academic publishing a "vast wasteland" from the point of view of business practitioners.

Operations research (OR) apart, and also perhaps 'data science', there are only very selected aspects of business such as thin slices of economics, accounting and finance that lend themselves to rigorous scientific research and -in some measure- being defined as 'sciences', with the far greater part have nothing scientific about them at all, hence are not amenable to 'scientific research'. Hence, in broad terms, there are significant aspects of business functions HRM, ethics, leadership studies, cross cultural and diversity management, sales, marketing and general management, that do not require rigorous scientific research tools to better understand (and subsequently manage) them, and for which meticulous, basic data-analyses would do, of the kind resorted to be trade bodies and the professional press.

However, as a result of business academics' careers and B-School rankings currently being almost entirely contingent upon research publications in top ranked scientific journals, B-Schools have been hiring professors high on their 'scientific research' skills, albeit often with negligible real-world experience. Senior 'research-intensive professors' -classic products of inbreeding- far removed from the real world, are a mutually reinforcing, self-serving group, and earn their stripes based on their 'research citations', quite often with each citing the other's research, to boost their 'citation indices'. These 'scientists' passionately research and publish 'scientific' articles using rigorous methodologies albeit most often on topics of zilch value to industry professionals. They are further encouraged to 'use their research to inform their teaching', as irrelevant as the same may be. This is why senior industry managers rarely read these scientific articles, despite having been forcefully and extensively exposed to them as students while at B-School. They instead maintain their currency by reading consultants' and trade bodies' reports.

Quite often, young Professors with freshly minted PhDs from top universities and fully innocent of how a company runs, armed with a textbook and publisher developed 'instructor power point slides', crow about 'organizations and management' without being exposed to either, except in their capacity as customers! As a result, they tend to teach what they know, and produce graduates who are ill equipped to deal with the complex, unquantifiable world of management.

Mark McCormack [2] famously said:

'Business demands innovation. There is a constant need to feel around the fringes, to test the edges, but business schools, out of necessity, are condemned to teach the past. This not only perpetuates conventional thinking; it stifles innovation. I once heard someone say that if Thomas Edison had gone to business school we would all be reading by larger candles.'

Professional managers with general management (or HR) functions need to have a clear though basic understanding of topics such as the importance of, and what drives employee motivation, and how diversity benefits organizations. What's clearly wasteful though, is Business / scientist -professors running a full length course needing students to complete 3000 word written projects -with 20 APA references- and drawing links between an existing organization and the lessons they were taught in excruciating detail, on Pavlov's salivating dogs (1897), Maslow or the Hawthorne Experiments (1920s). These are good things to know-but in a hour or two-not over a semester! There are also instances wherein faculty with doctorates in English and tourism have been assigned to teach management subjects, solely based on their being PhD holders!

Before preaching to students about business, B-Schools themselves need to be more entrepreneurial and must be run more like businesses. This must be done by drawing upon the business-acumen of their business faculty, well aware of their respective institution's inner workings. Unfortunately, such acumen is often in short supply for reasons discussed earlier. Also quite often, such acumen when available is not tapped into by universities' senior administrators. Take for example the well-heeled B-School that was struggling with its master's programs, owing to the prohibitive pricing of these programs relative to rival institutions. Rather than adopting standard business tactics of predatory pricing for market penetration, and losing a few battles in the short-run in order to achieve longer term gains, the institution decided to wind down its courses altogether, and surrender its share of the pie to its more entrepreneurial corporate -university rivals.

There are simple solutions to mitigate the various shortcomings that plague B-Schools. Perhaps three of the most doable ones would be:

- i. to have industry practitioners teach into at least one half of the programs / courses leading to a business major, except in cases involving subjects that clearly belong to the 'scientific' genre (as mentioned above), where $2+2=4$, that need 'scientists'. This position is well supported by Funk [3], a retired academic.
- ii. Requiring PhD holding 'scientist-business professors' to do a mandatory stint in industry, before getting behind university classrooms' lecterns. This would greatly improve teaching, as evidenced by Chan [4] based on Singapore's B-School experiences.
- iii. Ensuring 'scientist-business professors' steer clear of Executive MBA programs, unless they have themselves managed

significant responsibilities within industry, or, unless they're teaching a 'largely science' subject-as described above. Or else, it would be an insult to the work experienced 'executive' cohorts to have a scientist professor teaching them business, without knowing the difference between an LC and a GRN (letter of credit and goods received note).

There's a popular belief within the ilk of scientist-business professors, that practitioner professors' experience is mostly 'one place, one time, one industry, one set of bosses', hence the lack of universal generalizability of this experience. This is nonsense. Assuming that professors of practice hired by a B-School have 20 years of industry experience, this most often would mean the individual in question would have seen several business cycles, changes in management, colleagues, customers, suppliers, and stakeholders at large. Also, it's not a stretch to seek those with experience in 2-3 different industries, and with international experience. Implicit within this situation, are the qualities of adaptation, adjustment, and learning of the concerned individual.

This no-frills write up is only an opinion on the subject. It stakes no claims at being a '*scientific paper*' on management education', for the simple reason that management is not a science but a profession. It therefore needs to be taught -ideally- by those familiar with the cut-parry-and thrust of real-world organizations, highly dynamic in their environments, routinely subject to the vagaries of managerial / human decision making and behavior, and wherein laboratory style '*controlling for certain variables*' and '*identification of mediating and moderating variables*' are both laughable, and downright nonsensical. This latter part is particularly so with business functions such as sales, marketing, human resource management and general administration, that are relatively far less regulated as compared to finance and accounting. In these latter functions too, significant portions of what's taught in classrooms runs counter to what happens within these functions managed in the real world.

I have argued that relatively new fangled experiments such as micro credentials and interdisciplinary studies -within the context of B-Schools -are what they are- 'experiments', and nothing more. They are no match for what a traditional degree can provide students with, in terms of deeper level knowledge and skills required to perform competently within business organizations, provided the Professors possess industry experience. While traditional B-School degrees have lost their direction, it's very possible to hit 'reset' and change direction, as most Professors are both bright, and very committed and hardworking. Systemic pressures have forced them to move away from the real world that they can reconnect with once they so decide, and, most importantly, if the yardstick to measure them is less of scientific research, and more of industry engagement evidence.

Replacing traditional B-School degrees with untested -yet unproven- experiments is throwing the baby out with the bath water, and a costly mistake.

Conclusion

On a note of conclusion, an anecdote: Not too long ago a high profile B-School with strong links with an advanced western country and with a heavy-weight team of scientific-business professors, decided to set up a B-School in India. The finance faculty professors decided to do something novel -manage the institution's finances themselves, right from the initial stage. They knew all the scientific finance jargon alright -great stuff for the classroom- but things started getting increasingly complicated with each passing day, and was soon getting out of hand. They then panicked and decided to hand back the 'managing' to seasoned chartered accountants -well versed with massaging the books in every which way possible. The finance scientists then quickly left the office blocks (Finance department), and sprinted for the

safety of their classrooms where they found shelter-behind their lecterns, and in front of their business students. Here they could do what they did best-hypothesize and preach. "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach. Sounds familiar?"

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