Critical Pedagogy in the ‘New Paradigm’: Raising Complicated Understanding in Management Learning

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Conference Stream: Management Education and Learning

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... the absence of any serious discussion of pedagogy in cultural studies and in the debates about higher education has narrowed significantly the possibilities for redefining the role of educators as public intellectuals and of students as critical citizens capable of governing rather than simply being governed. [Giroux, 1997, p. 259]

Abstract

This paper argues for changes in management education that not only recognize the profound shifts in competitiveness that have already occurred but also equips students as independent learners, capable of a complicated understanding of the historical, social, political, and philosophical traditions underlying contemporary conceptions of organizations and management. To that end, we argue for the adoption of critical pedagogy [Barnett, 1997; Giroux, 1997; Reynolds, 1997] by management educators. Critical pedagogy necessitates changes in educational roles, curricular content and classroom practices so that a learning space is created which supports and encourages students to engage in critical commentary. This space emerges when power in the classroom is decentered, disciplinary borders become permeable and issues are problematized. Two examples of how to implement critical pedagogy in content and process are presented. The choice and use of text material can contribute to a critical pedagogy if students participate in selection [for the widest possible set of voices] and when dialogue explicitly considers the various perspectives in terms of the power interests they reflect and reproduce. Paradoxical thinking is a method that promotes critical dialogue and self-reflection and illustrates the potential for the transformation of organizational arrangements. This is the promise of critical pedagogy in management education: developing students with a greater sensitivity to the emancipatory and transformation possibilities today and in the future.

The winds of reform in education generally and management education more specifically gained velocity throughout the 1990s. But attempts to transcend the strong currents of management orthodoxy and its analogous educational precepts emit only occasional and sporadic gusts. Paradoxically, just as the development and importance of management as a domain of professional study has grown in the decades since World War II, so too has its misconception and oversimplification. Grey and French [1996, pp. 9-10] have argued
persuasively that ‘traditional conceptions of management education are no longer sustainable. For much critical research suggests that management knowledge is not just undesirable but inaccurate. For example, the assumption in much managerialist work of rationality in organizations … has been widely challenged.’ Yet, dean- and faculty-driven business curricula continue to privilege rational approaches and quantitative techniques – in direct opposition to calls by alumni and corporate leaders for greater attention to behaviorally oriented subject matter made over a decade ago [Porter & McKibbin, 1988, p. 84].

For the most part, attempts to understand the complexity of management have been approached in a Newtonian attempt to break it into parts – to simplify and segment it into its own separate ‘functions’ much as Taylorism fragments work into self-contained units. Indeed, two decades of creating look-alike textbooks and teaching management utilizing a reductionist ‘principles’ approach have resulted in analogously simplistic and ultimately sterile notions of ‘management’ as merely a set of ‘content’ areas to be ‘learned.’ Rather than being something that people [including non-managers] in organizations do, this fragmented view bounded the domain as a technically grounded content arena in the same vein as operations, finance, or information systems. Students learn management ‘content’ as separate from, and to be merely added onto rather than integrated into, the technically grounded business functions.

Such approaches to management as an organizationally based activity have been robustly and appropriately criticized in the pages of Management Learning and elsewhere, of course. With few exceptions, however, elaboration of critical views of the ‘management-as-technical-activity-done-by-people-in-managerial-positions’ has emanated primarily from the UK [e.g., Willmott, 1984; Reed & Anthony, 1992]. In the US, views continue to be constrained by a shoot-the-messenger hegemony. Here, management scholars who offer thoughtful critique of undergraduate and MBA curricula, and of the embedded traditional pedagogies and institutionalized understandings, are treated as deserters from the perspective of those living in the camp of loyal functionalists who stubbornly defend the status quo.

In that context, this paper addresses three related topics. First, we contribute to the implicit evolution and growing critical mass of organizational scholars who constitute the movement toward a more explicit ‘new paradigm’ of management thought and education. We hope these arguments lend credibility to need for critique, if not for the content of our own. Our fundamental argument is grounded in the notion of critical pedagogy [e.g., Barnett, 1997; Giroux, 1997], specifically positing that in order to adequately prepare students for the turbulent world of the next century, future management education needs to become both transformational and emancipatory.

Second, we argue that in order for students to comprehend the ‘study of management as a socially organized, and not a technically determined, activity’ [Willmott, 1994, p. 106], curricula and instructional pedagogies need to explicitly address seemingly contradictory
objectives. The complexity associated with managerial thinking, action, and controversies needs to be reduced with sufficient clarity that students comprehend its essence, while simultaneously raising their level of complicatedness in order to grasp that extant complexity. That is, in the teaching of management we face the challenge of creating a learning context whereby students create meaning and personal interpretation with respect to ‘managing’ while also enhancing their own ‘complicated understanding’ [Bartunek, Gordon & Weathersby, 1983]. We contend that ‘effective’ instruction is developmental and thereby oriented toward helping students create more complicated knowledge structures. From the standpoint of creating a genuinely critical education, however, this is merely the starting point.

Third, we will extend this notion of complicated understanding into the realm of critical reflection through a discussion of critical pedagogy and how it may be incorporated into management education. Our discussion is devoted toward raising the level of complicated understanding for educators as well as students. We conclude by highlighting the potential for student emancipation and transformational potential unleashed by critical reflection on knowledge, self, and the world [Barnett, 1997]. The ultimate aim of this work is to begin transformation of both the outcomes of management education and the instructional pedagogies employed to achieve those outcomes.

**The Minefield of Management Orthodoxy**

The tenets of management orthodoxy served practitioners and academics fairly well from its founding as a ‘discipline’ of scientific study in the mid-1950s. Grounded in Weberian concepts of hierarchy and bureaucracy, command and control, and the efficiency principles of Taylorism, such initiatives suited a lengthy era based on the manufacturing orientation of the industrial revolution. Not surprisingly, as the first ‘managers,’ engineers extended engineering concepts to management, e.g., machine bureaucracy. The organizational struggle of today seeks to overcome this techno-rational model of organizing and managing.

On the education side, starting with the taken-for-granted assumptions of management orthodoxy, preparing managers for the industrial era was relatively straightforward. Debate emerged in the wake of the principles-of-management approach [e.g., Carroll & Gillen, 1987; Hales, 1986; Willmott, 1984], whose purpose was to reduce the complexity of managing to a reductionist set of functions or roles. Of course, an important covert assumption was that only those who held ‘management’ positions undertook these activities! Consequently, the dominant focus in educational orthodoxy as played out in business school curricula led to a ‘prevailing managerialist and functionalist perspective’ [Pfeffer, 1997, p. 178] with an instrumental orientation grounded in the trappings of technical rationality [e.g., Roberts, 1996].
Business schools’ [rational] response to explosive demand for accredited MBA programs has led to an increased reliance on economics and other rationally based quantitative methodologies. Even a noted economist such as Lester Thurow acknowledges the irony that ‘major theoretical foundations of economics survive despite lack of empirical support ... primarily because they assume sophisticated form devoid of factual content’ [Cheit, 1985, p. 50]. Further, in a review of more than 200 articles, Cheit [1985] codified 13 main complaints about MBA programs into four categories: they emphasize the wrong model, ignore important work, fail to meet society’s needs, and foster undesirable attitudes. [But other than that…!]

Miles [1985, p. 63] presaged the current condition 15 years ago: ‘We clearly are in a period of major change, and questions concerning the quality and direction of business education are, therefore, highly appropriate.’ Commentary from theorists such as Grey and French, Thomas and Anthony, Willmott and others has finally led to confronting some basic yet thorny – and potentially threatening – issues involving fundamental assumptions, topical content, programmatic objectives, and institutional aims. For example, Grey and French [1996] question our reliance upon the validity of rationality assumptions introduced especially from classical economics, while Thomas and Anthony [1996] question whether what managers learn in management education programs is worthwhile and if it would really matter if management education was eliminated. In his recent overview of the organization theory domain, Pfeffer [1997] warned of the overreliance on economic models of choice and their tendency to replace rather than supplement other forms of organizational analysis. At the institutional level, it has been argued that ‘universities are being reconstituted as knowledge factories organized by managers, whose aim is to intensify and commodify the production and distribution of knowledge and skills’ to any who desire to purchase them [Prichard & Willmott, 1997, p. 300]. These issues set the stage for where we are today.

As conceptualizations of organizations and management education look toward the future, the historical minefield laid by the precepts of management orthodoxy continues to influence present-day conceptualizations of organizations, managing, and management education. Clearing these mines is a long, tedious process, disrupted by occasional blasts from the leftover status quo. Institutionally this is exacerbated by the reduction of traditional resources and the consequent increased dependence on external constituents [especially the business community] for support. These phenomena further impacted management education programs by rationalizing business curricula, both through the quantitative-technical thrust driven by perceived operational and instrumental needs and by the delegitimation of ‘management’ as a broad-based context in favor of its presentation as a more narrow set of self-contained ‘content’ areas virtually disconnected from other business activities.

A couple of examples are illustrative. At the program level, consider this brief discussion between a management faculty member and an MBA program director:

Director: The real ‘drivers’ of organizations are operations, marketing and finance.
Faculty: OK. Don’t you think that an equally critical activity is ‘management’ – the ability to integrate, or coordinate, those functions?

Director: Well ... no.

Faculty: Oh? What, then, do you think ‘management’ is?

Director: ‘Management’ is organizational behavior, organization theory, human resource management, strategy.

At the level of individual courses and topics, Watson [1996] captured an unintendedly humorous [or distressing] example in, ‘Motivation: that’s Maslow, isn’t it?’ – an actual student response to a query about prior learning on the topic of motivation! Easily generalizable to other topics, motivation was being treated by students as an ‘academically-defined topic, as opposed to a task or function to be carried out by a manager’ [p. 453]. As Watson points out, management knowledge has ‘become a series of packages of formalized information’ [p. 447]. These two examples convey a critical message for management educators and program developers. Business schools continue to emphasize the wrong model of management education [Porter & McKibbin, 1988], in large part because ‘mainstream approaches to transition are still dominated by concerns for prescription, linearity and the maintenance of order’ [Jeffcutt, 1996, p. 172].

The ultimate dilemma posed with respect to the arguments put forth in this paper lies with the use of instrumental, techno-rational, positivist approaches that serve to essentially remove [or deny] uncertainty from the analysis of organizations and managing. Beck [1994, p. 237] contends that ‘the reality of managerial work is much more complex than this [functions] model would suggest.’ By steadfastly adhering to the tenets of managerialist orthodoxy, a false simplicity is cast on both organizations and the management of them. But the world has changed and according to one view, there ‘is little reliable evidence that management education in general and the MBA in particular contribute to improved managerial performance’ [Thomas & Anthony, 1996, p. 30].

The new organizational forms ‘with new managerial roles and emphases’ anticipated by Miles [1985, p. 66] have dramatically altered the organizational landscape in the 1990s and will have an even greater impact as we enter the new millennium. This has led management educators to the precipice of major change – indeed to the emergence of new ways of thinking about both what managers [and others] do as well as how to prepare people within the context of a ‘new paradigm’ in the education of managers. It is, unarguably, the ‘dawning of a new era’ [Beck, 1994, p. 231].

The ‘New Paradigm’ in Management Learning

On the organizational and management side, the decade has seen the advent of the ‘new business paradigm’ in shaping global enterprise in an increasingly turbulent environment. Technological advances, political instability, and economic upheavals have dramatically altered the context of business processes. In response, organizations have embraced large-scale change from lean production and reengineering to downsizing and
restructuring, creating intra- and inter-organizational networks that dramatically alter traditional understandings and power relations. This evolution away from management orthodoxy has engendered a ‘change or die’ mentality in a highly competitive world marketplace.

As the precepts of management orthodoxy fall by the wayside, it follows that the preparation of students needs to diverge from traditional approaches as well. The result is emerging agreement that management educators [and educators more generally] are in the throes of a paradigm shift as well. Edgerton [1998, p. 13] observed that the ‘school reform community has concluded that the game itself needs to be changed in fundamental ways.’ The old game based on learning as mere recall has evolved to a new game based on understanding, reason, communication, and solving problems. Acknowledging its critics, Barr and Tagg’s [1995] elaboration of the ‘learning paradigm’ represented a groundbreaking catalyst that has led to structural and curricular reform in American educational institutions, particularly community colleges.

In management education, Miles [1985] predicted the demise of functional specialization at the undergraduate level. Beck [1994, p. 235] in particular has challenged the traditional paradigm, noting its ‘focus might be appropriate for functional specialists or staff advisors but not for managers.’ He calls for new methods designed to develop ‘students’ abilities to handle “messy” problems which are multicausal and which do not have clear and simple solutions’ [pp. 239-240].

Zohar [1997, pp. 32-33] likewise points out that the dominant Newtonian-based serial thinking approach in business ‘does not tolerate nuance or ambiguity.’ She explains that associative learning processes construct routine responses to patterns after trial-and-error and sensemaking activities. This includes tacit learning that can handle nuance and ambiguity, but still lacks the ability to articulate protocols to share with others as would Schon’s [1983] ‘reflective practitioner.’ Zohar favors quantum thinking, which goes beyond serial and associative thinking that can be simulated by computers. She describes quantum thinking as holistic, self-organizing, and possessing the capacity to question itself, i.e., double-loop learning. The key point is that this approach moves ‘away from certainty, toward an appreciation for pluralism and diversity, toward an acceptance of ambiguity and paradox, of complexity rather than simplicity’ [Zohar, 1997, p. 9]. The challenge we face as management educators is to ‘prepare managers “for the complexity, uncertainty, uniqueness and value conflicts”’ [Beck, 1994, p. 239 quoting Schon, 1983]. This speaks to raising the level of students’ ‘complicated understanding.’

**Complicated Understanding in Management Education**

The notion of ‘complicated understanding’ is not new, of course. But it does serve management educators well in providing an overarching concept to guide instructional philosophy, design learning opportunities for students, and to strive for challenging learning outcomes that serve students’ needs. Its underlying premise is fairly straightforward. Complicated understanding means ‘increasing the variety of ways [events] can be understood’ [Bartunek, Gordon & Weathersby, 1983, p. 282], i.e., being able to see and interpret organizational phenomena and environmental events from more
than one perspective [Weick, 1979]. This counters traditional functionalist approaches that rely on more narrow frames grounded in particular business specialisms.

Complicated understanding has been defined as a two-stage process [Bartunek, Gordon & Weathersby, 1983]. People perceive a situation from multiple perspectives and then ‘achieve an integration that incorporates the different perspectives’ [p. 275]. Problems encountered by organization members are seldom self-contained within a particular domain as business school training would suggest. Fostering more complicated understanding ultimately falls to ‘designing management education programs that might increase complexity in managers’ [Bartunek, Gordon & Weathersby, 1983, p. 276]. Building on Willmott’s [1994, pp. 106-107] argument that ‘the critical study of management, in which managerial work is theorized as a social and political practice,’ the pedagogical challenge is to ‘make management education more personally meaningful for students of management.’

A number of critical scholars, including Thomas and Anthony [1996] have made similar comments. Caproni and Arias [1997, p. 301] argue that ‘skills in self-reflexivity and cultural critique are designed to complicate rather than simplify the manager’s life’ [emphasis added]. Prasad and Cavanaugh [1997, p. 312] note that ‘critical management’s scholarship’s focus on contradictions ... seeks to draw organizational analysis away from the naivete of functionalism.’ Finally, Linstead [1996, p. 21] describes a pedagogy that develops the manager as anthropologist, enhancing learning and understanding by taking the perspectives of others and testing those views, and engaging in self-critique. The ’key factor in the manufacture of meaning in organizations’ ultimately entails ‘treating the process as problematic and meaning as an emergent property’ [p. 17].

Accepting that understanding ‘management’ in a new business context requires updated and richer conceptualizations, it follows that teaching and learning necessitates innovative pedagogies that both capture and convey these more complex notions. In the next section we present the fundamentals of a critical pedagogy. Our intent is to link critical pedagogy with management education and learning. Acknowledging calls for bringing a critical perspective to content, Reynolds [1997] argues that ‘educational methodology should equally reflect a critical position’ [p. 312]. Similarly, Barnett [1997] argues that the goal of higher education should be the development of critical beings. Finally, Giroux [1997] offers some specifics suggestions on how to engage in critical pedagogy. After outlining the arguments made by these scholars, we then examine the use of a critical pedagogy in educating managers.

**The Domain and Practice of Critical Pedagogy**

Barnett [1997] challenges universities to support the development of critical beings – individuals in whom critical thinking underscores action, reason, and reflection. Such individuals are the ‘kind of person we look upon our students to become’ and should be the goal of a critically based education, which prepares students to take up a stance against the world, to evaluate a proposition and to attempt to understand oneself, these are three fundamentally different purposes of critical thinking. Each is worthwhile but none is reducible to either of the others [Barnett,
Barnett extends critical thinking beyond disciplinary competence [knowledge] to critical self-reflection and critical action in the world. For students to become critical beings they must master the highest levels of critique across all three domains.

This view of critically based education is consistent with Giroux’s [1981] and Reynolds’ [1997] definitions of critical pedagogy. They classify four pedagogies according to the extent to which radical notions of content and process are incorporated. First, in traditional settings [management education orthodoxy], neither content nor process exhibits critical influence. Second, in a content-focused setting, wider perspectives enabling more critical analysis are introduced and contribute to creating complicated understanding, yet this is done within traditional classroom settings. Third, process-focused settings create a democratic learning space, yet rely upon a conventional vocabulary that is inadequate to the task of critique. While the instructor’s complexity increases in order to facilitate this process, students retain their traditional orientation toward learning. Last, to produce a truly critical setting for management education, Barnett, Giroux and Reynolds concur that both radical content and radical process is required in order to truly complicate students’ understanding. The scope of inquiry needs to be broadened to include aspects of self and the world in addition to disciplinary knowledge and the process of inquiry conducted in democratic classrooms. In order for critical pedagogy to be enacted, however, at least three aspects of management education must undergo change: the roles and responsibilities of faculty and students, curricular content, and pedagogical methods.

**Roles and responsibilities.** Critical pedagogy requires that the roles of both faculty and student need to be re-defined to embrace a wider conception of their respective critical tasks [Barnett, 1997; Giroux, 1997]. At the most fundamental level, this requires an inversion of self-understanding of faculty as educators [Barnett, 1997, p. 112]. Learning is ultimately the responsibility of the student; the educator’s task is to create a space in which learning can occur. This raises two questions: What do we mean by this role reversal? And why does it foster critical education?

Teaching must be positioned as part of the research process, not an outcome of it. This suggests that educators can no longer hide behind conceptual distinctions between teaching and research. This view presents institutional, pedagogical, and personal implications. Institutionally, this means a shift in perceptions of and rewards for teaching activity. The generation of knowledge speaks as much to teaching as to research. Teaching is a process of inquiry, where understanding and meaning are created, not simply passed on to students. Arguments over the value added by each activity [a staple in promotion and tenure discussions] miss the point and are themselves uncritical. It is not a matter of demonstrating the equal value of these activities – this serves instrumental needs of placating constituencies, instead of critical ones. The critical response illustrates that teaching and research are inseparable. It also refutes the conventional belief that faculty are disinterested, that knowledge is unproblematic, and that teaching is simply a means of transmitting information to students [Giroux, 1997; Reynolds, 1997].
Pedagogically, a critical approach means imparting to students the concept of learning as an unfolding research process where data of any form are to be viewed in a genuinely critical way. All agendas [faculty and student] must be taken seriously leading to critical assessments across the broadest range of issues. And, if students are to be given the space to form their own critical evaluations, then the educational process cannot just be cognitive, it must also be experiential. Students must not only engage in substantive learning to develop disciplinary competence, but also they need to develop the reflexive capacity to evaluate that understanding and its epistemologic underpinnings [Giroux, 1997]. Students may become facile with material – able to question, reflect on, and assess fundamental concepts and categories – but while this demonstrates critical thinking skills, it remains uncritical. Students must move beyond to evaluate the origins and structure of their discipline, its current social functions, and its underlying ideologies – the way it shapes human beings and society [Barnett, 1997; Reynolds, 1997].

Considering the personal implications, faculty must demonstrate that their own favored intellectual frameworks are subject to critique, thereby explicitly acknowledging the limitations of the frameworks in which their intellectual identity are based [Giroux, 1997]. This places faculty and students on the same epistemologic ground. This is crucial. When the contestability of any and all ideas [even one’s own] is recognized, learning space is created where critical commentary becomes something not to be feared but to be relished and embraced. Barnett [1997, p. 71] emphasizes this point,

> With understanding of this kind, with a sense that the next book, lecture or experiment is not going to yield all the secrets on even one small topic, a critical stance opens up. All knowledge claims are understood to have an element of openness, they do not close off debate but, on the contrary, their being made serves only to open up debate.

**Curricular content.** But debate about what? Both criticalists [e.g., Habermas, 1978] and postmodernists [e.g., Foucault, 1980] focus upon the socially constructed and sustained nature of knowledge as well as its backing by powerful interests. With respect to management education, an appreciation of the wider context of power relationships impacting curricular content [as well as the potential for change] requires us to examine several aspects of the environment in which management education is occurring.

The first aspect concerns the increasing closeness in the relationship between universities and external organizations, most notably state legislatures and accreditation associations [Willmott, 1995]. Second, the boundaries between business organizations and management schools are becoming increasingly permeable as businesses take a heightened interest in curricular matters, e.g., education for jobs. Third, changes in the student population lead to demands for greater relevance [the flip side of education for jobs] and certification [Dore, 1976]. Separately, as well as collectively, these changes lead to the establishment of evaluation and control structures disguised under the rubric of strategic planning or operational efficiency. Finally, funding shifts requiring institutions to raise a greater proportion of their own revenues have led to the interpretation of assessment requirements as an opportunity to demonstrate their
internalization of the various constituent agendas in an effort to sustain or acquire funding [Barnett, 1997; Giroux, 1997; Willmott, 1995].

The impact of the increasing intrusiveness by external constituent groups is paradoxical. Closer linkages between universities and their constituent groups give management educators a greater opportunity to be critical of those constituents’s policies and practices. At the same time, however, the internalization of constituent agendas limits the application of critical thinking to traditional issues such as promoting effectiveness, efficiency, and control. Critical analysis that results in practices that help achieve greater effectiveness, efficiency, or control is acceptable, but unfortunately also uncritical.

At the same time, changes in economic competitiveness have resulted in changes in the prevailing discourse of management and a re-conceptualization of business [e.g., Raelin & Schermerhorn, 1994; Ray & Rinzler, 1993]. This has led to an increasing interest in the inculcation of critical thinking skills in our students. The idea is that critical thinking should enable students to respond appropriately to change. Three ‘solutions’ have been proffered as part of the repertoire of critical thinking: the reflective practitioner [Schon, 1983], transferable skills, and problem solving. But because of the way they are presented in management education, these so-called critical thinking skills end up limiting a student’s ability to engage in critique, i.e., reducing rather than enhancing complicated understanding.

As Barnett [1997] points out, Schon’s [1983] reflective practitioner is really a description of a contemporary professional. In educating our students to be reflective, we are having them reflect on society and its institutions as they are. The emphasis on skill building is based on the assumption that knowledge for its own sake should take a back seat to knowledge that is immediately useful, i.e., instrumental knowledge. Finally, the emphasis on problem solving presumes that problems are straightforward – easy to diagnose and resolve. Such curricular emphasis is typically reinforced by a pedagogy that is grounded in rational ‘technique,’ i.e., decision modeling or economic forecasting. Building a curriculum around these critical thinking skills may lead to students with disciplinary competence – but this is a necessary, but insufficient, condition for critical beings. This aspect of critical theory is especially relevant for management educators. Management is not neutral or disinterested. Managers, through power and position, affect other people’s lives and their future. In a similar vein, management educators play their part in the development and dissemination of knowledge in their professional programs of study.

So, if our current definition and emphasis on critical thinking falls short, what are we to do? Reynolds [1997, p. 315] calls for curricula that provide students with the following opportunity: to question assumptions, understand power relationships, and engage in critical reflection with a collective focus. If students are to learn to question assumptions, they must be exposed to a wide variety of topics, and, more importantly, they must be exposed to critical treatments of these topics. For example, discussions of strategy need to explicitly focus upon whose interests are being served; discussions of organization structure need to explicitly consider a range of work designs, autocratic,
bureaucratic, democratic; discussions of new product development should explicitly incorporate issues of sustainability [Alvesson & Willmott, 1992].

Raising issues critically exposes the relationships between power, knowledge and their managerial consequences. At the same time, students should be reminded that the educational system of which they are a part is itself based on asymmetries of power: ‘Knowledge and professional practice can be constructed in ways which support and maintain those arrangements’ [Reynolds, 1997, p. 315]. Understanding the embedded network of power relationships [and their own place within them] helps students develop a strategy for personal research that follows from a view of management as a political, cultural, and ideological phenomenon. Such research is self-consciously motivated by an effort to discredit forms of management that underscore the narrow instrumentality of work-process relationships [Alvesson & Willmott, 1992].

Reynolds’ [1997] third attribute is critical reflection with a collective focus. Critical reflection speaks to both curricular content and pedagogical issues. Citing both the individualist cast of many pedagogical methods as well as the historical, political, and social nature of management knowledge, Reynolds [1997] suggests that critical reflection is a means for students to overcome the individualism inherent in many experientially-based pedagogies and understand that management is practiced in community. Using an example from Alvesson and Willmott [1992, p. 7], exposure to material on the historical, political, and social underpinnings of management thought enables the student who is reflecting upon an incompetent manager to move beyond technical and instrumental commentary to consideration of a system in which managers are not held accountable to their subordinates. As critical beings and managers, they have the potential to begin to make organizational relationships less exploitative. This is where issues of classroom process become so significant – it is through this experience that students begin to become critically reflective [Barnett, 1997].

**Pedagogical methods.** Giroux [1997] presents critical pedagogy as theoretical insights and practices about conditions articulated within a particular context, educating managers in our case. Its use is argued to extend the study of management and power by addressing not only how management is shaped, produced, diffused, and transformed, but also how it is actually taken up within specific organizations. Further, critical pedagogy is deliberately transformational, as it intentionally operates from a perspective in which teaching and learning are committed to expanding rather than restricting the opportunities for students to be social, political, and economic agents [Giroux, 1997].

One of the problems with extant treatments of critical pedagogy is that they are long on theory and short on technique, as in, ‘how do I implement critical pedagogy in my classroom?’ That is, how can management educators create classroom spaces which challenge students to [1] question assumptions, [2] explicitly recognize power relationships in their analysis of managerial situations, and [3] engage with other students in collaborative efforts to critically reflect upon the embedded network of management relationships and to consider alternatives for its transformation [Reynolds, 1997].
Three themes emerge from the literature on critical pedagogy: decentering power in the classroom, challenging disciplinary boundaries, and taking up issues in a genuinely problematic way. We discuss each of these themes briefly, and in the next section, examine them in the context of curricular choice and classroom activities.

Decentering the classroom is where critical pedagogy enters the debate on the relative virtues of teaching-centered and student-centered classrooms [e.g., Barr & Tagg, 1995]. While student-centered is certainly an improvement over continuation of the dominant teacher tradition, a decentered classroom is one where faculty and student stand on the same epistemologic ground – recognizing that all issues are contestable [Giroux, 1977] – and engage in a common journey toward what Barnett [1997, p. 55] called hermeneutical understanding – attempts toward understanding for mutual respect rather than for instrumental ends. Raab [1997] provides a wonderfully rich example of a faculty member trying to decenter her classroom. She develops the faculty role as an Expert In Not Knowing where the role becomes one of refusing to tell [i.e., be the Expert in Knowing] in an effort to get students to start depending upon their own knowledge and experience as they try to gain more of each. In the process of creating new roles, there is no need for the habitual response to the old role [Expert in Knowing]. The absence of the habitual response enables a space to be opened up thereby giving students the opportunity for self-reflection.

Giroux [1997] speaks to the issue of challenging disciplinary boundaries at great length. His intent is to expose students to the widest possible array of domains and disciplines. Then, through critique, students become sensitive to the social and political character of thought and of its acquisition by individuals. This process creates what Giroux [1997] calls a hybridized space or borderland where these domains overlap and interact. Working within this space provides a location for discourse that is fundamentally critical. Further, it establishes the foundation for activities [frequently writing assignments] in which students learn to take up issues in a problematic way.

Problematicizing an issue means developing a general conceptual scheme organized around a core idea or problem in which the interests and agendas of specific people in specific situations are represented. This, then, provides a range of puzzles for people to identify the values and perspectives which underlie various treatments of the issue [Brookfield, 1995; Dehler & Welsh, 1998; Reed, 1992]. When students problematize an issue, they become active knowledge producers instead of passive recipients. Their focus shifts from articulating the meaning in other people’s theories to theorizing their own experience within the context of the texts, ideological positions, and theories that are introduced as part of the course. In this way, students will come to see how other people’s theories serve to position students as a consequence of their institutional and ideological authority. Once understood as a student, it is a short step to understanding how managers are similarly positioned as a consequence of dominant theories about organizations. When this forms the basis for critical reflection, students are demonstrating the best of intentional learning [Dehler, 1996]. Intentional learning occurs when students are able to activate prior knowledge, relate old to new in reflective ways, and to reach conclusions and assess those conclusions before settling upon them. When
this occurs, students have become independent or, in the language of critical pedagogy, ‘emancipated’ learners.

**Summary.** This section has been devoted to a discussion of critical pedagogy with an emphasis on identifying the structural requirements necessary for it to occur as well as a deeper discussion of what it means in the context of management education. By definition, critical pedagogy is context based. Context, however, is not to be limited to discipline, rather it extends outward into the wider community of interests. Additionally, context includes student experience. For management education, this means that students must occupy a learning space in which the concept of ‘educating managers’ is just as focal an issue as the traditional content topics in management education. Similarly, curricular content needs to be recast to include not just management texts per se, but also historical, philosophical, social, and political treatments of organizations, business, and society. Our emphasis on the so-called critical thinking skills, e.g., skill-building, problem solving, and self-reflection, has to be extended to consider the assumptions underlying these skills and to explicitly consider the extent to which their instrumental benefits may mask their critical potential. Finally, three themes that characterize critical classroom process were identified. These themes, decentering power, challenging disciplinary borders and problematizing issues, are the lever that enables the potential for critical reason to be transformed into the actuality of critical reflection by students.

**Invoking Content Critically**

While the issue of content selection has been raised previously, particularly with respect to organizational behavior [e.g., Fineman & Gabriel, 1994; Boje, 1996], from a critical pedagogy perspective instructional considerations have generally ignored the forms and social practices involved in knowledge transmission [Giroux, 1997]. If management education is to achieve the aims of a ‘new paradigm,’ then pedagogical reform needs to distance itself from instructional orthodoxy and especially its positivist paradigm [Summers, et al., 1997]. A central aspect of this initiative concerns the resources, i.e., textbooks, utilized in the classroom to represent the discipline’s content or body of knowledge.

Extending our arguments beyond OB to the broader range of texts used in management courses, e.g., human resources, organization theory, strategy, the first step is to acknowledge the role of textbooks in representing and presenting a discipline to students. The tenets of management orthodoxy would suggest the field is grounded in what Giroux [1997] calls a ‘culture of positivism’ that generates ‘positive knowledge.’ In this view, textbooks treat knowledge as a ‘storehouse of artifacts constituted as canon,’ where ‘knowledge appears beyond the reach of critical interrogation except at the level of immediate application’ [p. 122].

The instructional challenge is to involve students as active producers of meanings, based in part on their own experiences, rather than as passive consumers of information, and proceeds toward overcoming the more instrumental ‘reproductive theory of schooling’ [Giroux, 1997]. This view, arguably a growing dilemma in resource-starved business curricula increasingly dependent upon corporate largess, posits that programs of study
covertly ‘reproduce the values, social practices, and skills needed for [perpetuating] the dominant corporate order’ [p. 119]. Incorporating student voice creates conditions for decentering power in the classroom, ‘where students can be educated to take their place in society from a position of empowerment rather than a position of ideological and economic subordination’ [p. 120]. The objective, then, is to involve students in the construction of knowledge [rather than transfer of knowledge].

With respect to classroom resources, power naturally is most evident in the instructor’s choice of text and other supporting materials. While it may be more logistically feasible for the instructor to select the text [although there are alternative approaches, e.g., no standardized text], the critical aspect arises in terms of how the textbook is utilized in the class. In the decentered classroom, the text becomes one element in the construction of classroom knowledge and most importantly its interplay with values. Textbooks [and their selection] are not value neutral. Students should treat the text as one social construct produced out of multiple discourses [Giroux, 1997]. Questioning underlying assumptions including the place of the author, whose perspective is adopted, for what purposes, and with what ends, becomes part of the students’ role in understanding which voices are privileged and which are silenced. This has been an important concern more recently with respect to feminist perspectives, but with the increasing disparity in wages between those in upper and lower levels, the issue of whose interests management serves is increasingly salient [Pfeffer, 1997]. Other areas open to deconstruction [e.g., Summers, et al., 1997] include green and sustainability considerations as well as women’s views of leadership [e.g., Helgesen, 1990]. The question is why these issues are marginalized or otherwise separated from rather than incorporated into mainstream management education, e.g., ‘women in management.’ Treating teachers and students as critical agents makes all issues raised in the management classroom contestable.

In challenging disciplinary borders, Willmott [1997, pp. 168-169] posits that management textbooks lack ‘a way of making sense of the mundane features of managerial work.’ From a critical position, the objective is to expose students to a broader array of understandings than typical of traditional texts. This is in large part an issue of what Steffy and Grimes [1986, p. 326] term ‘descriptive epistemology,’ which requires greater breadth of reflection.’ Since a text represents and constructs reality, as well as projecting and negotiating social relationships and identities [Fairclough & Hardy, 1997], exploring different pedagogies to engage content can be constructive. Students are not ‘neutral technicians’ [Willmott, 1997, p. 168]; their constructions of organizational reality ‘involve exercises of power which produce and reproduce inequality’ [Grey, Knights & Willmott, 1996, p. 105]. For example, using ethnographic studies [Willmott, 1994] and stories can surface underemphasized emotional aspects of organizations [Vince, 1996], drawing attention to feelings, meaning and experience. The ‘truth’ of stories lies not in the facts they communicate but in the meanings they convey [Fineman & Gabriel, 1994]. In this sense, then, students derive their own meanings from the context in which they are embedded. Management ‘knowledge’ then becomes more interpretive than objective [Raelin & Schermerhorn, 1994]. They transcend disciplinary borders by developing their own unique insights on social practices.
Management texts have been criticized for failing to provide depictions of organizations as truly experienced by people. When students become active knowledge producers, they begin to create their own [critical] understandings of managerial work rather than merely accumulating ‘facts,’ i.e., developing their ‘quality of thinking, not the quantity of what is thought’ [Grey, Knights & Willmott, 1996, p. 104]. By approaching topics critically, they incorporate their experience in a way that organizes knowledge in a compelling way - one in which they can relate and generate interest. But as a byproduct of constructing their own meanings, students are able to identify the contradictions and gaps in the knowledge base when compared to their experience [Watson, 1996]. In essence, experience provides ‘a way of problematizing rather than validating that experience’ [Grey, Knights & Willmott, 1996, p. 100]. Problematizing entails embracing differences or tensions instead of compromising or privileging one understanding.

When creating alternative understandings by illuminating power considerations, wading into the grayness of pedagogical border and problematizing the organizational context, content that is produced and legitimated so readily in traditional textbooks now becomes more complex. Students are confronted by issues that are complicated rather than simplified. The richness of organizational life can be explored, probed, and challenged in a way that people truly experience it rather than by merely looking at it through a window. The next section presents a method for enhancing complicated understanding.

**Paradox as a Pedagogical Tool**

Shifting from content to process, a critical pedagogy requires application of alternative teaching methods – methods that foster student dialogue, critical reflection, and transformation [Reynolds, 1997]. Paradox offers a potentially valuable tool in a critical pedagogy. A paradox denotes the simultaneous, and often seemingly absurd, appearance of contradictions. For example, one ‘of the most fundamental and striking paradoxes of contemporary management of is the pursuit of “participation,” “involvement,” and “commitment” on the one hand and the urge for control and exercise of power, familiar themes to managers, on the other’ [Koot, Sabelis & Ybema, 1996, p. 11]. Such paradoxes are inherently perceptual. Bateson [1979] explained that actors naturally parse phenomena into distinct and polarized [i.e., either/or] perceptions. Yet, in doing so, actors place themselves in a double-bind in which they use their existing and simplified perceptions to comprehend an increasingly ambiguous and multifaceted world, fueling conflict, frustrations, and misunderstanding. In contrast, ‘working through paradox’ entails learning to explore, critique, and embrace contradictions within a more accommodating and holistic [i.e., both/and] perspective.

‘Working through paradox’ in the management education classroom entails encouraging students to define and even exaggerate their polarized perceptions, thereby, tapping their natural tendency to stress contrast over connections. This process allows students to experience the frustrations of the double bind. By juxtaposing contradictions, such as participation and control, students may learn to debate opposing perspectives, grapple with their simultaneity, and recognize the biases and limitations of their sensemaking processes. The objective is to develop students’ capacities for paradoxical thinking: the ability to comprehend the complicated interplay of opposites by picturing a paradox in its
more complete surroundings [i.e., recognizing the historical, ideological, political, and social context underlying their perceptions]. Following our framework, we now discuss the role of paradox in de-centering power in the classroom, helping students question disciplinary borders and problematize fundamental theories of management.

Exploring paradox alters power in the classroom through the introduction of ambiguity. Reminiscent of the participation/control paradox in organizations, using paradox as a pedagogical tool requires that the teacher foster a sense of uncertainty and confusion, while maintaining sufficient order to enable students to feel secure enough to express their frustrations and debate opposing views. The surprising nature of paradox serves as provocation. For example, a class might examine a case of organizational redesign: management in an assembly plant implements self-managing teams and a system of employee involvement, while simultaneously stressing the use of time clocks and adherence to a managerially defined organizational mission. As students and teacher struggle with mixed messages of participation and control, discourse equalizes their roles in their learning process. Knowledge becomes the product of interactions among students and between students and teacher [Reynolds, 1997].

Multiple disciplinary or paradigmatic theories may serve as lenses to deepen debates and insights [Bartunek, Gordon and Weathersby, 1983]. Juxtaposing conflicting understandings creates a space for learning—an opportunity to recognize how differing perspectives coexist and complicate the learning milieu of organizations. Critical perspectives play a particularly vital role by offering a stark contrast to orthodox management principles. For instance, by viewing this same case from conventional economics [e.g., agency theory] and critical sociology [e.g., radical Weberian theory] perspectives, students may recognize how organizations act as mechanisms for fostering efficient transactions and for subtly tightening ‘the iron cage.’ Divergent lenses enable students to explore the selective focus and blinders of alternative theories and question their isolation, while helping students critically self-reflect on their own sensemaking processes.

Moving beyond insightful, yet partial perspectives requires paradoxical thinking, as students [and teacher] learn to approach management theory and organizational issues in a manner skeptical of one-sided and potentially biased viewpoints. The ability to problematize is vital to gaining an awareness of the intricate underpinnings of perceptions. Again, the case of organizational redesign serves as illustration. In class discussion, students [often with teacher playing the role of ‘devil’s advocate’] may critique the assumptions that underlie each perspective. What is the influence of the historical, ideological, political, and social context? Managerial perceptions may be entrenched in the orthodox principles of scientific management and Fordism and in an awareness of tremendous global competition and needs for continuous production improvements and innovation. Managers may view workers and their labor as a means to an end, desiring to enhance operational efficiency and coordination, as well as foster employee commitment. On the other hand, workers may harbor a strong desire to retain control over their craft and skills, viewing participation as just one in a long line of
attempts to increase the power of managers and bolster their exclusive identities as ‘decision makers.’

Paradoxical thinking requires recognizing that both perceptions may be equally valid. By polarizing their perspectives, however, managers and workers are incapable of realizing their shared interests in cultivating worker skills and creativity to foster high quality and exceptionally flexible production. Class discussions illustrate the need for organizational actors to engage in ‘open communication’ [Habermas, 1978] – discourse that surfaces underlying assumptions and sensemaking processes, liberating actors to negotiate more humane and mutually beneficial understandings, practices, and identities.

**Conclusion**

We began this paper with a quote from Giroux [1997] about the need to include issues of critical pedagogy in debates about education if we are to have any hope of revitalizing management education. The precepts of management orthodoxy continue to influence and cast a false simplicity on present-day conceptualizations of organizations, managing, and management education. Environmental and competitive changes have made the reality of managerial work much more complex than the orthodoxy model would suggest. Organizations have embraced large-scale change, creating intra- and inter-organizational networks that dramatically alter traditional understandings and power relations. As the precepts of management orthodoxy fall by the wayside, it follows that the preparation of students needs to diverge from traditional approaches as well – creating a need for a paradigm shift in management education.

Accepting that understanding ‘management’ in a new business context requires updated and richer conceptualizations, it follows that teaching and learning necessitates innovative pedagogies that both capture and convey these more complex notions. The challenge management educators face is to prepare future managers for the complexity, uncertainty, equivocality, and value conflicts, i.e., to raise the level of students complicated understanding. Doing so requires bringing a critical perspective to content, as well as a critical methodology. The scope of inquiry needs to be widened to include aspects of self and the world in addition to disciplinary knowledge and the process of inquiry conducted in democratic classrooms. This is the domain of critical pedagogy.

Producing a critical pedagogy will entail the recasting the roles of faculty and students in ways that would enable faculty to turn back the trend toward commodification [e.g., Willmott, 1995] currently endemic in higher education and for students to achieve an education that sensitizes them to the myriad possibilities for improving human existence. Within the realm of management education, the aim of a critical pedagogy is ‘the empowerment of the individual and the infusion of democratic action into social institutions’ [Steffy & Grimes, 1992, p. 195]. As Pfeffer [1997] notes, critical theory provides a more explicit focus on social change. According to Burgoyne and Jackson [1997, p. 62], critical management education highlights the continual tension between emancipatory process of giving divergent views a chance and exposing such deviant thoughts to monitoring and control. This emancipates students as they come to understand the persistence of tension, anxiety, and doubt in the manager’s role is a
product of the contradictions inherent in current management systems rather than as a statement of their performance potential as managers [Willmott, 1997, p. 168]. Critical pedagogy possesses enormous potential to shape students. For example, students gain:

the willingness to see one’s own world from other perspectives, the willingness to engage with them, the willingness to work things through in a positive spirit, the willingness to risk critique not just from within, but also beyond one’s own intellectual and professional world, the willingness to go on giving relentlessly of oneself, and the willingness to go on undercutting one’s own social and professional identity as one takes on the conflicting perspectives of one’s own frameworks [Barnett, 1997, p. 169].

In sum, the potential of critical pedagogy is to promote more critical self-reflection on the context and practice of management and to strengthen resistance to its mindless perpetuation [Alvesson & Willmott, 1996].

But these outcomes lurk in the distant future. A more immediate outcome of a critical management education is the development of critical beings [Barnett, 1997]. Critical beings apply their critical reflection skills in three arenas: the knowledge base, the self, and the world. Critical education enables student critique to move from the limited scope provided by simplistic and fragmented critical thinking skills to a metacritique that not only locates management within our traditions but also offers insights into the unlimited opportunities for refashioning those traditions [Barnett, 1997]. In this process students become critically self-reflective. This occurs when self-monitoring relative to established norms gives way to reflection on how the self is developed within prevailing traditions and then on to critical self-reflection and the reconstruction of the self. Educational projects that were originally viewed as ways of understanding the world [as illustrated in our discussions of text and paradox] become reconstituted as ways of understanding the self.

This process thus moves students beyond the flexibility and adaptability encouraged by Thomas and Anthony [1996] and Schon [1983] to the emancipation of being independent thinkers, able to use educational experience as a source of self-discovery. It also leads to the potential for critical action in the world, enabled by critical reason and critical reflection [Barnett, 1997]. As Alvesson and Willmott [1996] suggest, there are many steps along the road to transformed organizations. But students armed with the potential to critically self-reflect will be more sensitive to the broad spectrum of career choices and, as a consequence, more discriminating with respect to managerial practice and more selective of companies and their underlying culture and values.
References


