Introducing *Reflexive Critique* in the Business Curriculum

Reflections on the Lessons Learned

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Extended Abstract

Whilst management studies continue to raise several key issues about the ‘lived’ experience of ‘management’ and the complexity of ‘managing’, management education has been very slow to respond to such issues and to incorporate them within the business curriculum. One such issue concerns the role of *critique* towards analysing management, which despite being widely discussed over the years, particularly in relation to ‘what it is to be critical’, it still remains relatively unexplored in the graduate business curriculum. One possible explanation may be the fact that ‘being critical’ underpins much of the existing work of *critical* theory (Habermas, 1978; 1984; Foucault, 1980), *critical* management studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, 1996), *critical* systems (Flood & Jackson, 1991), *critical* pedagogy (Giroux, 1997; Barnett, 1997, Dehler et al., 2001), *critical* thinking (Kurfiss, 1988; Paul, 1990).

Each of these schools of thought propounds a different set of definitions about ‘what it is to be critical’. For example, ‘being critical’ is a form of questioning, reflective reasoning and a way of ‘disciplined’ thinking. Moreover, being critical implies scepticism towards arguments, assumptions, practices, recognising the impact of social and political dynamics and the implications of the inequalities of power and control. Despite the different epistemological, ontological and methodological principles, that inform the interpretations of what it is to be critical across the various schools of thought, similarities do exist. At the most basic level, being critical in its broader sense encourages reflection and questioning of one’s reason and practice so that one can be both informed and accountable of one’s actions. This broader definition extends what it is to be critical beyond principles of emancipation, inequalities in power and control and the significance of systematic and insightful thinking. It does, however, elevate an important distinction between *being critical* and *critique*. The former often implies criticism and scepticism, whereas the latter, as this article will argue is about emphasising *critique as reflexive praxis*. This article focuses in particular in advancing the idea of *reflexive critique*. Reflexive critique seeks to
integrate the various aspects of what it is to be critical to be found in the related literatures. It distinctively seeks to draw the emphasis on reflexive practice rather than criticism or scepticism. Critique therefore, propounds that being critical is not only about revealing inequalities or systematic reasoning. Instead, critique is also about reflecting and questioning one’s practices when one is being critical. After all, to be critical one must start from being critical of the critical orientation one applies in assessing any situation including one’s own reason and practice. It is important in analysing further reflexive critique and the role it plays in the business curriculum, to also think about the forms of critique common across the various schools of what it is to be critical.

Mingers (1999) offers a good summary of the main forms of critique currently in the literature identifying: the critique of rhetoric, the critique of tradition, the critique of authority and the critique of objectivity. In advancing the idea of reflexive critique, this article will argue that two additional forms of critique are necessary to any process of being critical. These are: the critique of simplification and the critique of identity. Each of these forms of critique will be developed and discussed in more detail drawing on the experience of teaching an innovative course as part of the MBA Curriculum. Therefore, both forms of critique and the notion of reflexive critique are grounded in the empirical praxis of the author. This point emphasises that in reporting on the experience of introducing reflexive critique in the business curriculum this article also presents a reflexive critique of this particular teaching/learning practice (the introduction of a ‘Critical Thinking’ course). Moreover, the analysis will also aim to show how the critique of simplification and the critique of identity were exercised both in the context of the course in question, as well as, in the way the author practiced them in the course of this specific set of activities.

With this as a backdrop, this article seeks to argue that reflexive critique can make a valuable contribution within the graduate business curriculum by integrating more closely the analysis of the nature of management with the experiences of managing. Considering that a common pedagogical feature in the curriculum of many MBA programs is that they tend to analyse management as a series of functions, currently there is limited evidence that the MBA curriculum encourages critique in exploring management in relation to experiences of managing. In other words, the
functional model of curriculum design tends to be unquestioned and limits questioning personal practice (amongst practicing managers attending MBA programs and management faculty delivering them). MBA programs designed on functionally-based courses frequently leave participants with a set of disconnected knowledge and skills which bare little coherence and resemblance to the complexity of managing they experience. Moreover, the lack of a synthetic/integrative analysis of the cross-functional and multi-disciplinary nature of management leaves little room for reflection and questioning of various social and political facets of managing in the context of organizational life. These observations are much in evidence in the ongoing criticisms about the lack of ‘relevance’ and ‘applicability’ levelled at management theory and research (see Rynes, et al. 1999; Starkey & Madan, 2001; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002).

There are therefore, several pedagogical issues about the educational experience that MBA programs offer. It is not sufficient that we provide Ethics related courses to sensitise ourselves and MBA participants that managing is complex and risky, flawed with traps that require informed judgement. This is hardly new, and perhaps we have much to think about in the ethical practices in our profession (see Antonacopoulou, 2002a, 2003b). What is perhaps more important is that we instil reflexive critique within the business curriculum so that critical reflection and a synthetic analysis of management in the light of participants’ experiences of managing can be key elements on which our pedagogical practice rests. Moreover, reflexive critique in the business curriculum would emphasise that more attention be given to the learners’ experiences and problems, and a more rigorous analysis of theoretical propositions and established wisdom, such that social and political dynamics can be revealed. Furthermore, what could be termed as reflexive critique in management education would also seek to create the space for management educators to be reflective and reflexive of their teaching and learning practice (see Antonacopoulou, 2002a).

It is these issues that this article seeks to discuss in more detail, by reflecting on the development of an innovative course entitled ‘Critical Thinking’ (CT) offered to MBA students. Drawing on over five years of work in developing and delivering this course, the analysis presents first some of the main characteristics of the course in
the way it was designed and the way different theoretical frameworks emphasizing what it is to be critical were integrated in producing the distinctive emphasis of this course to advance reflexive critique and in particular the critique of simplification and critique of identity. Therefore, the first section of the paper defines clearly the perspective on what it is to be critical that has informed the CT course. The structure of the course is reviewed and the three workshops, which constituted the course, are discussed in the section, which follows. The content of each workshop is discussed in relation to the teaching, learning and evaluation techniques used. The article concludes with reflections on the lessons learned from the experience of introducing this course on the MBA curriculum and considers some of the implications of instilling reflexive critique in management learning.
References


Empirical here is used in the true sense of the word from the Greek ‘ἐμπειρία’, (empiria) meaning experience. I am not seeking in this paper to present so much a piece of empirical research, although this inadvertently I am doing by taking care in presenting sufficient information about the findings of introducing the Critical Thinking Course. What is more fundamental, however, is my effort to reflect on the experience itself and from that to propose new theory in relation to what reflexive critique may be and why the new forms of critique (critique of simplification and critique of identity) would add value to our understanding and efforts in management education to bring closer management practice and theory. Research is frequently assumed to take place by and among a research community, thus neglecting the possibility that research is an integral part of practice and practicing. Research is not a profession it is a practice. Research viewed in this way responds directly to criticisms of rigour and relevance. It responds to rigour by reminding us that research is in fact research - the on-going search. Even when we feel we know something research is what keeps us on our toes reminding us that there is always a possibility to be surprised by the unknown. This view of research also responds to criticisms of relevance by emphasising that in management education we ought to be committed in a joint search of practice (both our own and that of others). Therefore, relevant research is the collective search of practice by practicing ways our praxis can be improved. Research therefore, as verb and noun, provides room for theory to be seen as the intellectualisation of good practices in a reflective mode where lessons learned from practice and which are relevant and particular to that practice can also inform other practices when practised.