‘Science or Craft? – A critical exploration of two forms of MBA education’

Stream: “Whither the MBA? – The forms, prospects and critiques of the MBA (and business school education)”

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Introduction

Since the start of UK management education’s growth-spurt in the late 1980s/early 1990s, there has been a continuous stream of appraisals, and re-appraisals of the form and role of the MBA amongst political and business leaders, as well as management educators. As the literature outlining the purpose of this stream highlights, attempts have been made to render it more ‘critical’, and more relevant to specific organisational contexts.

Initially emerging from the broad debates around the professionalization of management, literature that has questioned the tendency for management practice and management education to be unproblematically linked (Grey and French, 1996), has led to a number of management educators, sympathetic to the aims of CMS, to challenge conventional management education’s technicist orientation (e.g. Willmott, 1994; Grey and Mithev, 1995; French and Grey 1996). As a consequence, they have demanded that the same intellectual approach that is applied to critical management research be taken to management courses. This requires us to question the assumptions of the content of Harvard-style MBAs, which normalise management practice (Grey and Mithev, 1995). As this paper notes however, the focus has predominantly been on the content of such courses. Until very recently there has been little attention paid to the design of management courses and programmes, and the processes used to work with students within the classroom setting (Reynolds, 1997; 1998).

Influential criticisms of the US-influenced MBA model have posited experientially-based forms of generalist management education provision as a positive alternative. These more specialised programmes are presented as being tailored to the needs of practicing managers, and as offering recognition of the craft-like nature of management (Mintzberg, 2004). A dialectic is thus set up between the management ‘science’ (analytic)/classical US-style MBA (bad) taught to new graduates, with various practice-based (good) forms that are offered by some UK business schools to currently practicing managers.

The aim of this paper then is to examine two forms of MBA provision, which arguably represent both models, but which are offered by the same Management School. We focus attention specifically on the processes and design employed by different types of MBA provision, taking into account also students’ responses to these programmes’ pedagogy. Our purpose is to analyse the extent to which it is possible to identify differences between the two models, in terms of the ways they are presented by the institution and in terms of the expectations and professed needs of the students entering each programme. We also aim to highlight possible tensions and contradictions emergent from the two data sets.

What’s wrong with management education?

A key debate that has preoccupied researchers in management studies since the mid-late 1980s concerns the ‘professionalisation’ of management. This debate can in part be characterised as illustrative of tensions arising from the relationship held by management studies and management education with regulatory agencies, and its position within the broader socio-political landscape. Discussions regarding whether management is a professional occupation, and the corresponding implications this has for the form that management education takes, have also concerned critical management educators since the growth in number of accredited management education programmes offered by UK universities. Grey and French (1996) for example, call for management educators to rethink conventional understandings of management education, which in part involves divesting ourselves of the assumption
that management education is unproblematically linked to management practice. The assumption that management education is functional to management they state “is predicated on a model of professional training in which there exists a body of knowledge which is understood to be central to effective practice” (French and Grey, 1996: 3). Whilst this may be true of medical or legal training, for example, the same cannot be said of management, which is not truly ‘professionalised’ in the way that the medical or legal professions are. You do not need specific qualifications to become a manager, indeed the majority do not have any, and this is reflected in the diversity of content and methods that constitute management education programmes.

Similarly to French and Grey (1996), Thomas and Anthony (1996) question whether management and management education are irrevocably linked. They see two academic traditions emerging; one concerned with the sociology of management that seeks to reveal power relationships within management practice, and another that is increasingly eclectic. They suggest that both these traditions focus on the study of management and not managing. Thomas and Anthony (1996) do not completely reject the potential for management education to educate managers. However, they warn against a sleight of hand where practitioners are ostensibly given what they want, whilst educators work to another conception of what they (practitioners) need. They argue that this division has led to a prescriptive theory of management that is “at odds with praxis and divorced from reality” (ibid: 32).

Whether educators are able to focus the content of their provision on either the study of management or of managing might be influenced by the make up of the student body. Do the students have any work experience, let alone experience of managing others? Or, do the students have at least five years’ work experience, which ostensibly creates a learning environment where theory is presented as a way to examine practice? Drawing on Grey et al’s (1996) classification of teaching approaches, Currie and Knights’s (2003) account of an attempt to implement a critical pedagogical approach notes students’ greatest comfort lay with a staff development approach. That is, a pedagogical model that seeks “to balance the educational and the practical” (p. 31), and which “privileges transfer of learning back to the workplace” (p. 42).

Currie and Knights (2003) note the Weberian ‘ideal-type’ model of Grey et al’s (1996) classification, but debates regarding the nature of management - does it have a professional scientific basis, or is it a craft-like occupation? – are reflected in discussions regarding the purpose of MBAs, and the forms they should take.

Theoretical Framework
As noted in an earlier paper (Elliott, 2003), there is a dearth of empirical studies examining the student experience of management education. Discussions within critical management studies have expressed disquiet towards the way in which managers’ working lives are represented (Chia, 1999; Elliott and Reynolds, 2002). Far fewer however, have been studies in which educators consider their role and position, and the way in which the pedagogical practices they employ manage their relationship with students. Educators have shown little appetite to practice on themselves some of the observational and analytical techniques they use in research settings beyond the university. Until very recently (e.g., Currie and Knights, 2003; Rigg, 2005), the student voice has been virtually silent. If heard it all it has been heavily moderated by educators (e.g. King, 1995).

In an attempt to make a contribution to discussions on the pedagogical approaches to the MBA, our analysis of two programmes takes place in two stages. First, we
examine the knowledge-constitutive interests (Habermas) inherent to the MBAs’ proposed content and design. A Habermasian approach we argue provides a heuristic to illuminate the respective purposes, foci, orientations and projected outcomes of the different pedagogic approaches educators claim for both MBA programmes. Second, we focus on the forms of capital (Bourdieu, 1996) presented to prospective students. A Bourdieuan framework works towards providing insights regarding management educators’ perspectives on the way in which the MBA will assist students in negotiating movements in social space. It also provides a theoretical framework through which to examine students’ responses to MBA provision. In employing this dual analytic approach we seek to understand assumptions held by providers regarding prospective students’ expectations, from two perspectives. It also allows us to contrast providers’ views with those held by students through the same theoretical lens.

The Study
To summarise briefly the method of study used for the paper, we present our analysis of both MBAs’ promotional materials and in-depth interviews with full-time and part-time MBA students. We concentrate on how the courses are presented to perspective students, following a ‘second guessing’ on the part of the institution of the motivations and needs which may drive students to follow a given MBA programme. We then contrast this promotional material with the students’ presentations of their motivations and expectations of the courses. In so doing we pose the following questions:

- What do course designers think they are providing?
- What do students want to get from the MBA?
- What is the relationship between course design and students’ expectations?

What do course designers think they are providing?
Both the part-time (26-month) and full-time (12-month) MBA programmes we studied are offered by the same institution. The part-time programme is aimed at practicing managers who have a minimum of five years’ work experience, and who hold a first degree or equivalent. The full-time MBA is promoted as suitable for managers with at least three years’ work experience following a first degree.

Programme brochures and websites provide the majority of students with their first encounter with the MBA. They introduce prospective students to the programme design, including the content of modules and the learning approaches. Mention is given to the assessment structure, including the weightings given to the various forms of coursework and examinations. Whilst primarily intended as promotional literatures, closer examination of their contents can nevertheless reveal the learning traditions in which the MBAs are placed.

The part-time MBA is partially designed in the spirit of adult education learning traditions not commonly associated with management education’s traditionally more technicist orientation. It places significantly more emphasis on the learning approach that underpins the programme’s design than it does to the substantive content covered in the modules. A listing of indicative content is outlined for each module, but the only additional commentary regarding the modules to this listing states, “modules consist of one week of theory” (MBA programme brochure, p. 6). Teaching methods within modules are listed briefly, with reference being made to the use of seminars, simulations and case exercises. Similarly, the full-time MBA’s promotional materials do not provide a great amount of detail about the content, aside from a listing of the substantive areas to be covered. Comparatively speaking however,
more emphasis is placed here on content rather than the approach to learning. Pedagogical practices, when referred to, place more focus on the skills and competencies that will help students become managers.

Standing in contrast to the provider’s brief mention of content on the part-time programme is the emphasis placed on its learning approach. The knowledge students bring to the programme through their work experience is presented as providing a basis for discussion, and through the application of theory to this experiential knowledge it is claimed that further knowledge will be developed. Value is placed on the learning opportunities that arise through collaboration with other students in working on problems and issues within tutorial groups. The tutorial groups are described as environments that offer space and support to develop assignments. The assignments are presented as the mechanism by which students can learn by applying theory presented during the modules to an issue or problem in their organisational setting. The view that learning is a collaborative process, which is best facilitated through the application of theory to a situation based on individuals’ practical experience, is reflected in this quote from the programme brochure that refers to the role of the tutorial groups:

The groups not only allow members to benefit from the diverse experiences they each have but also to learn together about the ways in which theory is being applied to the issues within the (sic) organisations (part-time MBA programme brochure, p. 4)

It is claimed that this approach to the role played by tutorial groups leads them to become ‘learning sets’, that provide “practical support for each of its members” (ibid). The term ‘sets’ is associated with Revans’s (1983) Action Learning model, and refers to a group that forms and meets with a set ‘advisor’, who in the educational setting is a member of academic staff. The set advisor should act as facilitator within the learning set, rather than subject expert or teacher. The learning to be gained through the application of theory to practice is presented visually by a diagram used in the programme brochure adapted from Kolb’s (1984) work on ‘learning cycles’.

On the full-time MBA the learning that emerges through student interaction is also strongly emphasised. References are made to learning frameworks employed to facilitate learning, but these are brief with little explanation given to their methodology¹. Rather learning is referred to in terms of the group work in which students engage with more focus placed on the interaction full-time students will have with each other. This is set within the context of the promotion of the full-time programme as an international programme, one that widens “students’ international management effectiveness”. The inference here being (though not explicitly stated) that a significant proportion of the international knowledge students gain emerges from their engagement with students from diverse cultural and national backgrounds. Claims are also made for how the full-time MBA assists students in acquiring skills and competencies that will help them become managers. The learning framework that the full-time programme draws upon to “teach managers how to apply their learning in practical situations” to assist their ‘re-entry’ into the ‘labour market’ draws on soft systems methodology. Called ‘managing in action’ it implicitly, we suggest, encourages students to take an individualised approach to their MBA learning because it focuses them back on their own concerns of what skills and competencies they need to acquire in order to be a ‘better’ manager.

¹ For example, the f-t MBA website talks of an emphasis on “action learning – or learning by doing – that takes course participants out of the classroom at key points during the year, and facilitates the integration of specialist knowledge to deal with real complex problems”.

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The recognition and value given to students’ experiential knowledge on the part-time MBA, alongside the incorporation of an action learning approach, seems to locate it in the experiential, student-centred tradition of adult and professional education. Students’ experience constitutes the basis for the development of further knowledge. A criticism of the andragogical and student-centred tradition is that it fails to problematise learners’ experience; tending to leave unquestioned the culturally constructed and pre-interpreted nature of individuals’ experience. This would appear to be a criticism that could not be wholly levelled at the MBA. Whilst there is no evidence that each student’s experience undergoes rigorous analysis and interpretation per se, the Action Learning cycle does encourage learners to question “the status quo, using theories to develop alternatives, testing these alternatives and reflecting on their relevance and usefulness” (MBA programme brochure, p. 3). Importance is also afforded to an appreciation of the context of situations. “This contextual thinking requires understanding of the dominant political, social and cultural pressures which shape the ways in which organisations recognise and respond to problematic situations” (ibid). This is an aim sympathetic to the calls made by critical management educators, such as Grey and Mithev (1995), who are concerned to analyse management in terms of its “social, moral, and political significance” (p. 74-75).

The full-time MBA claims that one of its chief characteristics is ‘critical thinking’, and that what this “means for our MBA students is the ability to understand the increasingly complex world of management and business, and to make changes for the better in that world”. However, with only cursory references made to its learning and assessment methodologies it is unclear how the process of critical thinking development occurs. Neither is the level of critical content clear as each module’s content is only briefly listed. Viewed through Grey et al’s (1996) classification, the full-time MBA appears to be working towards a staff development approach which “seeks to balance the educational and the practical” (Currie and Knights, 2003, p. 31) given the emphasis it places on students learning to become managers through the acquisition of certain skills and competencies.

A Habermasian Analysis
In the spirit of Willmott’s (2003) commendation of Habermas’s theory of cognitive interests for a greater understanding and knowledge of management and organization, tensions arising from the model of organization adopted within management education to manage students’ learning, as exemplified by the use of particular methods (e.g. tutorials run on action learning principles) alongside traditional assessment practices (in which tutors have sole responsibility for assessing students’ work), might equally be better understood through Habermas’s theory. Habermas’s work, specifically his theory of communicative action, has been influential in developing more participatory adult and professional education forms, and is generally acknowledged as being “of central importance for critical educational theory and practice” (Welton, 1995, p. 136, quoted in Ossling, 2000). His approach has more recently become a strong influence on the work of radical educators (e.g. Giroux, 1981; Hindmarsh, 1993), particularly in his approach to reflection (Reynolds, 1997). Examining the knowledge-constitutive interests of different pedagogic approaches provides a heuristic to illuminate their respective purposes, foci, orientations and projected outcomes. The acknowledgement Habermas’s critical theory gives to the human interests inherent to the different knowledge forms necessarily recognises their political dimension. In doing so, it subsequently opens up the possibility of formulating approaches to management education pedagogy,
which enhance critical management studies’ ability to challenge management’s dominant technical interest.

Habermas’s knowledge-constitutive interests arise from a challenge to science to remember the particular social needs or interests linked to the different knowledge and research traditions (Usher et al, 1997). According to Habermas, three cognitive interests “underpin the production of distinctive forms of knowledge (and associated types of science): a technical interest in production and control; a practical (historical-hermeneutic) interest in mutual understanding; and finally an interest in emancipation” (Willmott, 2003, p. 94). In seeking an understanding of “how human interests are constitutive of different kinds of knowledge” (ibid), the identification of cognitive interests facilitated “a reflection on the conditions of the possibility of emancipation from ideologies and power structures” (Ottman, 1982, p.79).

Examined within Habermas’s framework of knowledge constitutive interests the action learning principles underpinning the part-time programme, which are also present in the full-time programme, can be understood to lead to a design that is guided by two cognitive interests. Underpinned by a conception of the individual that views her/him as capable of instituting some form of change, the action learning model implies that individuals can gain a measure of control over an aspect of their lives. Its principles appear driven by a humanistic intent to enable individuals to take authority over a situation, and therefore might be considered emancipatory. As employed within management education programmes, the level of control implicitly made accessible to students by the action learning model mirrors recent characterisations of managers that views managers as equally subject to the same processes they visit on others (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996).

Given this understanding of managers’ positioning within social and organisational frameworks, the action learning model affords them at least the illusion of a degree of power and control within the moment of management education.

Assessment’s cognitive interest
Recognition of the anxiety expressed in interviewees’ responses, particularly with regard to the assessment of their learning as it occurs within the part-time programme’s overall action learning framework, illustrates tensions contained with an experiential, student-centred, educational design. This correspondingly serves to reveal the dual nature of the cognitive interests driving the part-time MBA. Interviewees’ responses to the framework placed on the assignments illustrate that in many instances they view it as an inhibitor to learning. Jo, for example, stated she found it difficult
“to always fit the work into the plan given to us, it has to be done in a certain way”

Richard viewed the assignment structure as irrelevant when placed in an organisational setting:
“I now see, certainly within our own organisation how, if you’re wanting to influence opinions, how you do it ... and it’s not by writing 5,000 word essays”

Nevertheless, as soon as they register for the MBA interviewees recognise that they must at least attempt to accede to the MBA’s assessment frameworks, if they were to receive the desired and publicly accredited demonstration of their continuing education. To this end, the programme is driven by a technical interest.

The full-time MBA’s emphasis on students’ interaction with each other, presented in part as valuable in gaining necessary skills and knowledge to become managers,
obscures the consequences of these interactions upon individual student’s assessment. The full-time MBA at once informs students as to the benefits of work within multi-national student groupings, and refers to the skills and knowledge necessary to work in an “increasingly complex world of management and business”, but ignores the impact this work in groups might have upon students’ eventual marks and the potential impact this might have on students’ future career prospects.\(^2\)

Ostensibly framed as a vehicle for ‘learning in action’ that gives students an element of control, students’ responses to the full-time MBA highlight its technical interest and mixed pedagogic principles. The stories reveal the very rapid forming of informal small support groups after the initial induction period and during the first group work assignment. These groups are where the majority of student learning and reflective thinking seems to take place.

as I’m sure you’ve already seen these pockets of nations kind of come back together where it’s because they need to a simulate or consolidate what it is they think they have taken on board in lectures I mean that’s particularly that’s most noticeable with the Chinese I think and they tend to have study groups and the approach is very very different so friction tension ill feeling that comes about from having to work in a team because you are your mark depends on it it’s very much that’s the conflict I don’t think necessarily that it’s we do things differently (full-time MBA, Neil).

The official groupwork groups become more perfunctory and task orientated, and much of the real work is done within smaller subgroups. In contrast to the programme’s claims for a critically reflective approach, there is very little reflection and debriefing among the groups, nor is this facilitated in any way.

I know if I wanted to discuss something I would go to one of the Brits and sound them out I know that cause I feel more comfortable both in the language terms I know that when they talk to me back I’m going to understand exactly what they are saying and I’m purely from a practical I haven’t got the time to waste (full-time MBA, John).

A Bourdieun Analysis

‘The social world is accumulated history, and if it is not to be reduced to a discontinuous series of instantaneous, mechanical equilibrium between agents who are treated as interchangeable particles, one must reintroduce into it the notion of capital and with it, accumulation and all its effects.’ (Bourdieu 1986:241)

To examine the MBAs from within a Bourdieun (1986:422) framework encourages an analysis which starts from the view that it is impossible to understand the social world without acknowledging the role of ‘capital in all its forms’. By saying this Bourdieu is emphasising that, although very important (and perhaps ultimately the most important), economic capital (material possessions and so on) is not the only kind of capital that functions in the social world. He makes it clear that other types of capital, for example ‘cultural capital’ (i.e. knowledge, skills and other cultural acquisitions, as exemplified by educational or technical qualifications), ‘symbolic capital’ (i.e. accumulated prestige or honour) (Thompson 1981:14), and social capital (i.e. the networks a person can draw on as a resource) are also significant in getting on and getting by both professionally and personally. These forms of capital are interrelated and he intimates that all forms of capital can be ultimately reducible to economic

\(^2\) Ironically, on the f-t MBA website one of the ways in which the provider’s institution is assessed by its peers – the RAE – is referred to, thereby implicitly attaching value to assessment practices and recognising their social significance.
capital (see e.g. Calhoun et al. 1993). For example, the more social capital someone has the more likely it is that he/she will get a better paid job or promotion through, for example, personal connections. Bourdieu also argues that different types of capital can be also be derived from economic capital’ (Bourdieu 1986:252). So the ‘investment’ in the MBA could be taken as a good case in point here were students are using economic capital to gain cultural and social capital.

The full time MBA is presented primarily in terms of the acquisition of skills, competences and knowledge necessary for a managerial career. Stated aims include preparing students to: ‘develop critical thinking skills’; ‘develop cutting edge knowledge and understanding’; prepare students for ‘management and consultancy’, as well as widening ‘international management effectiveness’, and enhancing the students’ ability to ‘apply theory in practice’. This implies that the students are lacking in management practice, expertise and theory and the emphasis is on learning and studying rather than on sharing knowledge and experience. There is however, some emphasis on the social aspects of learning such as the creation of ‘friends – people with whom we keep in touch for the rest of our lives’.

In Bourdieu’s ‘capital’ terms, such aims relate most closely to gains in types of cultural capital, particularly in regard to enacting management roles, what he terms ‘embodied cultural capital’. There is also reference to social capital (in creating friends) but this is not as instrumental as that posited by Bourdieu, which is more concerned with establishing professional contacts.

From a Bourdieun perspective an analysis of the part-time MBA’s aims suggests that programme designers view it as providing managers with social capital to progress their careers. The MBA will therefore “develop participants’ personal networks with senior managers”; will enable them to “draw on the expertise of other organisational members, as well as academic and outside experts”; and help them “achieve buy-in to recommendations from key stakeholders”. In addition, under the programme aims an emphasis is placed upon the economic capital that can follow from ‘the learning partnership’ between executive development and organisational development. The ‘learning partnership’, in this sense, ‘ensures’ in part “an organisation with a range of recommended if not actually implemented improvements”, that ensures ‘outstanding value for money’. A reading of the programme’s aims, and the promotional material in general, however indicates that its designers view its appeal to prospective students as lying in its pedagogic approach; that is the cultural capital that might be accrued through studying on this programme.

What do students want to get from the MBA?
In order to obtain an understanding of common reasons for choosing to do an MBA we conducted content analysis on interview transcripts from both programmes. Such a method revealed many reasons why students decide to do an MBA. Often there is more than one reason or trigger contained within the explanation or story; these reasons are sometimes (within one story) quite varied and sometimes contradictory. The results of the content analysis are interesting in that although the most re-occurring themes could in some ways be described as instrumental, or at least connected to career planning and development, they are not very explicit in their instrumentality.

The full-time MBA
Explicit aims such as to ‘make more money’ or become ‘a better manager’ are rarely mentioned. The three most common reasons are connected in some way to
a) A need for more business knowledge/skills particularly in terms of having a broader perspective or broader understanding of management.

b) Reasons connected to improving career progression and/or the availability of more career opportunities.

c) The third concerns the connection between the MBA and career change; sometimes from the specialist to the generalist, sometimes as an excuse to get out, or escape from, what they are presently doing and sometimes with a clear objective in mind, e.g. to start their own business. Another re-occurring reason, which could overlap with any of these three groups is that of being bored or ‘stuck’. Some respondents also told stories directly connected to international motivations for doing the MBA.

Students gave many reasons for choosing to study at this particular institution. The course was seen as being good ‘value for money’ as the fees were lower than similarly ranked metropolitan universities and also costs of living were perceived as quite low. Other reasons included convenience, being close to home for example and personal recommendation. Interestingly enough none of the students mentioned course philosophy or the uniqueness of the methodologies used as a reason for choosing this particular course.

The part-time MBA

Analysis of students’ expectations and motivations for registering for the part-time MBA indicate a variety of reasons for doing so. Despite the emphasis placed in promotional materials on the MBA as a vehicle that assists managers in the management of change interviewees did not, on the whole, explicitly express this as a reason for their decision to undertake this particular programme. The four most common reasons are:

a) It provides a way to develop in response to their work-based activities. They therefore seek knowledge and skills to improve their work practice, which they view as currently insufficient. In particular they are looking for more specialised knowledge in different areas that are new to them.

b) Interviewees expressed a need for a course of management education to perform their current work role, and see the MBA as providing a platform for career development. It also enhances the possibility of moving from their current organisation to another.

c) The MBA is seen as a way to manage others’ expectations of them. It was seen as a way to challenge colleagues’ (and potential future employer’s) opinions of them regarding, for example, their management style, or their strengths and weaknesses.

d) Reasons given for their choice of this particular part-time MBA referred to the fit of the programme’s structure to their work demands. The pedagogic approaches employed on the programme, such as the tutorial groups/action learning sets, and the less didactic way in which the large group sessions were managed, were also viewed positively and perceived as providing a better learning experience.

‘Capital’ expectations

We suggest that concepts of capital framework provide a useful starting point from which to make sense of, organise, and analyse the ‘reasons for doing MBA’ stories. This analysis demonstrates the complex and diverse motivations articulated by students for taking either the full-time or part-time MBA. They indicate that the acquisition of an MBA could be viewed in terms of the acquisition of capital both cultural (in learning to ‘talk the talk’ - embodied cultural capital and also in terms of
acquiring the paper qualification; *institutionalised* cultural capital) and *symbolic* (in terms of the prestige attached to the qualification). In addition, the MBA experience could also be seen as a means of acquiring future *social* capital by using the MBA as a means of joining (elite) groups and networks. Finally, the MBA is also recognised as a means of acquiring *economic capital* through its *employability factor*, and as such can be viewed as an ‘investment’.

Examples of the representations of the MBA given in the student interviews are given in the tables below.

**Full-time MBA**

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<td>be more confident when presenting myself as a manager</td>
<td>the stepping stone from moving from a junior associate to a manager level</td>
<td>prerequisite in any consulting company’</td>
<td>an investment</td>
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**Part-Time MBA**

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<td>to try and learn some of the, I think, some frameworks on which to try and take five or six years’ experience.</td>
<td>I realised that if I wanted to get on in ‘T’ (another of the organisation’s plants), I had to be a ‘T’ person.</td>
<td>A handy thing to have on your CV</td>
<td>because the market is changing … and because I want to stay employable</td>
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1. **Economic capital** Bourdieu argues ‘… is immediately and directly convertible into money’ (Bourdieu 1986:243)

The lectures they keep talking about getting payback on it and all the.. well obviously I’m one of the older members of the group and all the youngsters are thinking emm ‘10 year pay back’ and I’m thinking ‘err 5 year pay back’ (full-time MBA, John).

In many cases having the MBA is associated with getting a better-paid job or a position that (presumably) would have a high (er) salary. Although money is rarely (directly) mentioned, we are struck by how many of the full-time students use financial discourse when describing their reasons for doing the MBA. Firstly, the concept of *investing* in the MBA is quite common:

‘I just wanted to make a good investment in MBA’ (full-time MBA, Ash).

The employability factor of the MBA was certainly a motivational factor for some:

‘The MBA employability factor... it’s taken for granted you’ll get a job’ (full-time MBA Neil)

and

(with the MBA) ‘… maybe it’s easier to get a job’ (full-time MBA, Taki).

Whilst the part-time students saw the MBA as means to facilitate career development, and for some it was seen as a way to remain employable, they were less concerned with how quickly it would pay itself back. This may be because they
were already in full-time employment and the majority of them were being sponsored by their organisations. The MBA was therefore a lower risk investment for them in comparison to the full-time students.

2. Cultural Capital
Bourdieu (1986:243) explains that cultural capital can exist in three forms: (1) the embodied state, i.e., ‘in the form of long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body’; (2) the objectified state, ‘in the form of cultural goods (pictures, books, dictionaries, instruments, machines etc.’); and (3) the institutionalised state, ‘a form of “objectification” for example educational qualifications.’ It is the embodied and institutionalised forms that primarily concern us here. These are the most common forms of capital referred to in the interviews. We address embodied cultural capital and institutionalised cultural capital in turn.

Embodied Cultural Capital
Two representations of the MBA connected with embodied cultural capital are the MBA as 1) a skills and knowledge package and 2) professional development. In many of the stories connected with change or transition there comes a point where there is recognition that there has been a lack of skills, confidence or knowledge, which an MBA in some way could redress. The desire to learn new skills, or a feeling that they have been lacking in some skills in some way, are motivating factors for the students. This interrelates with personal confidence; not only in knowledge terms but also in terms of how to present yourself. Some students want to learn

‘…how to be a leader in a team and how to be more confidence when presenting myself as a manager’ (full-time MBA, Lucy).

‘… I talked to her (her boss) about it and I said I think it is to do with the way that I feel about what I am doing, and the way that I feel about my position with people who are also doing the same sort of jobs as I am. I want to able to hold my own’ (part-time MBA, Jo).

A connected reoccurring theme is the general or broad nature of the MBA and how that is suitable for general management (rather than being a professional who manages or a generalist rather than a specialist):

‘MBA give you a more broad view of management...for people who want to be general manager’ (full-time MBA, Zhong).

‘… and so what I hope it will do is provide me with a much better, not necessarily strategic, but a much better overall view of the business world’ (part-time MBA, Gerard).

It is also seen as a means of progressing further in the organisation:

‘The MBA is widely recognised as the stepping stone from moving from a junior associate to a manager level’ (full-time MBA, Ash).

‘I very much wanted to make sure it was appropriate to ‘Z’ (his organization) or to my position, to give me the commercial experience’ (part-time MBA: Richard).

It is interesting that in some cases respondents are talking about becoming managers when they have already had (in some cases substantial) managerial experience. We found this particularly surprising in the case of part-time students, all of whom had worked for at least five years (and many up to between 10 and 15 years), and all of whom had been working at a managerial level for 5-10 years. This is closely connected to concepts of social capital whereby membership of certain
groups and networks is tacitly controlled by such things as qualifications and social standing:

‘I wanted to get on but having an MBA seems to be a prerequisite in any consulting company’ (full-time MBA: Ramesh).

‘… if I ever wanted to get beyond that (a level above his current position) I would then have to, at a later date, come back and do an MBA’ (part-time MBA: Rob, interview 1).

**Institutionalised Cultural Capital**

Many of the stories (as noted above), contain references to movement and transition, particularly in regard to the narrators’ careers. The MBA is seen in terms of a catalyst or change agent.

‘With the academic qualification, a certificate of cultural confidence which confers on its holder a conventional, constant, legally guaranteed value with respect to culture, social alchemy produces a form of cultural capital which has relative autonomy vis-à-vis its bearer and even vis-à-vis the cultural capital he effectively processes at a given moment in time.’ (Bourdieu 1986:248).

3. Social capital

“Social capital is the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group” (Bourdieu 1986:248).

This is connected to the ambitions illustrated above in terms of change and getting on, but social capital also contains the notion of belonging and of helping each other for mutual gain or benefit. MBAs (as people) are therefore sometimes seen as a distinct group apart from others:

‘As far as jobs are concerned they separate everyone and they separate the MBAs’ (full-time MBA, Ash).

‘It changes people’s perception of you somehow. It’s not something that they say, except just in passing’ (part-time MBA, Jo).

4. Symbolic capital

Many of the examples given above also contain an element of symbolic capital. That is to say, having the MBA carries with it some sort of status or prestige that can be convertible into economic capital – for example, a highly paid job.

Connected to the discussion on the symbolic nature of where the MBA is conducted is the notion of rankings. The prestige of the institution and its place in the ‘Rankings’ were often given as important reasons for choosing one institution above another or for choosing an institution which is known abroad:

‘I think in China maybe the people the best choice is still for the for the top US business school they maybe choose to go there but not everybody can go there so some people come here’ (full-time MBA, Zhong).

The part-time students also mentioned the institution’s ranking in comparison to other schools.

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3 Explanation of what this means (FT etc.)
It's a very credible degree compared with 'P'... and people say to me outside the organisation - it's not what you've got, it's where you got it’ (part-time MBA, Mark).

In contrast to the full-time students all were based in the UK so the ranking was not cited as the only reason for choosing this particular institution. The programme’s modular structure, its pedagogic practices, and the relatively small size of the cohort were other reasons that were given.

‘I didn’t want to be in a class of 55 or 60 because I felt that well, although your tutorials would give you personal interaction, the classes won’t, and it’ll just be like a lecture, so you sit and write’ (part-time MBA, Richard).

‘The way the course is broken down, in that we have week module away, and then we go back to work for two months, suits what I feel will be my work environment in the next, over the next two years’ (part-time MBA, Rob).

‘The other thing about this course, which I think is good – if we can just do as we are advised to do – is the tutorial groups. On courses that I have been on in the past ... the actual whole group is quite competitive. But it’s not like that on this course, and the idea is that you actually help each other, and you learn from each other’ (part-time MBA, Jo).

The small cohort size and the programme design might also be seen in symbolic capital terms; giving the impression of a higher degree of selectivity and offering an alternative approach to other MBA programmes.

**Capital Theory and reasons for doing the MBA**

Many elements of the ‘reasons for doing an MBA’ stories fit very well into Bourdieu’s framework. The most striking connection is that of the MBA as being seen in terms of *cultural capital*. This is particularly true of institutionalised cultural capital where the education process of obtaining the MBA is seen to give or to reaffirm skills and knowledge. Many participants see the process of acquiring this capital as representative of larger changes in their lives. The concept of embodied social capital also fits well with participants’ stories of wanting to change the way they present themselves or behave to give themselves more credibility as managers. A connected ambition is to be able to talk the managerial talk, to be able to be convincing and speak with authority on matters managerial. The MBA itself is also seen as social capital as a means of belonging to a certain group.

**Concluding Thoughts**

The purpose of this paper was to analyse the extent to which it is possible to identify differences between two MBAs that ostensibly fit the dualistic classification of MBAs into the management science model and the practice-based model. Analysing the provider’s assumptions about programme design through Habermasian and Bourdieun frameworks did reveal differences in approach. However, we argue, there is more commonality between them than difference. Analysing the cognitive interests engaged by their learning and assessment practices reveals them to be pedagogically ambiguous. That is, they simultaneously emphasise the value of acquiring knowledge, skills and competencies in specific ways; e.g. by working with each other, and through ‘learning in action’, to become managers (full-time MBA), and to gain some control over their work environments (part-time MBA).

In Bourdieu’s ‘capital’ terms the provider’s presentation of the full-time MBA’s aims suggest that students will gain cultural and social capital. Our examination of the
part-time MBA’s aims also suggest its designers view it as providing managers with the social capital to progress their careers, but also emphasise the economic capital students will achieve. This is the inverse of students’ expectations. It is the full-time students who speak most of the MBA as a way to increase income or to attain a higher level position (and its presumably higher salary). Part-time students did see the MBA as a means to facilitate career development, and in some cases, to ensure their employability. However, for them the MBA was a lower risk investment.

It is the strength of connection between Bourdieu’s framework and students’ perception of the MBA as providing cultural capital, alongside their expectations and experiences of the MBAs’ pedagogical practices, which we view as most significant for future research and practice. The part-time MBA is partly ‘sold’ on its pedagogical practices and structure, which does prove an attraction to students, although it remains unclear how effectively this is followed thorough in practice. The full-time MBA focuses more on students’ interaction with others – though fails to locate these strongly in a learning framework - but students do not specifically refer to this when discussing their expectations. Nevertheless, full-time students’ experience of process comes to dominate their reflections during the course of the programme, as it does for the part-time students. Both programmes are presented as developing various skills, competencies and knowledge. The provider’s emphasis on methodology serves to build up a symbolic capital, which effectively claims that this course is superior to other MBAs because it employs a unique methodology (action learning, ‘a critical reflective approach’) that helps in the acquisition of cultural capital. It suggests to students that they will have the edge on MBA graduates from elsewhere as they have used, and are familiar with, these important methodologies. However, the students’ responses indicate that in practice these methodologies and learning frameworks have not been sufficiently explored with students to assist critical reflection on the pedagogic processes of learning and assessment. On the full-time MBA this leads to for example, ‘pockets of nations’ forming where students retreat to homogeneous national groups for study or social purposes. On the part-time MBA students become sceptical as to the value of assessment practices, controlled by tutors, but which are nevertheless located within a programme that claims to value their experiential knowledge and to develop their cultural capital.

We conclude by suggesting that in ignoring the significance of process to student learning, or in failing to frame theoretically skills and competencies in socio-cultural terms, skills and competencies acquired by students just become technologies to be applied without critical reflection.
References


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