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Designing and Delivering Pluralistic Management Learning for the Digital Era

Summary

The aim of this work is to consider the idea of pluralism as applied within curriculum design of a given case in order to be able to determine the usefulness that this has within management learning in the digital era. The work explores what is meant by pluralism within the context of management practice and it seeks to determine how pluralistic curriculum design defines the scope of content within a particular management module. It also seeks to understand how pluralistic management education might enable both theoretical and practical opportunities for learning and the enhancement of capabilities. An action research approach is adopted during the development of a management module that considers and attempts to define the characteristics of a pluralistic framework of management capability as a critical element in the curriculum design process. Additionally, as the module being designed will be delivered to 600+ students it seeks to determine the opportunities for the utilisation of digital technology in the delivery of this module and its efficiency benefits.

Introduction

Pluralism as a general principle can be viewed as a multiple range of aspects being included, which is in contrast to the singular view where aspects are present as standalone elements which are not specifically linked or interrelated. Within the context of management learning and curriculum design, pluralism can be seen from the perspective of being able to embrace and synthesize a varied range of management discipline areas such as operations, marketing, human resource and finance management. BAM (2015:BAM2015 Conference) determine that “pluralism is a defining characteristic of management research, education, and practice” but that pressures from institutions actually lead to greater homogenization. It is therefore likely that this leads to a degree of uniformity of teaching and learning practice and what appears to be simpler more standardized approaches that enable both efficiency and measurement to take place.

Historically the design of university courses moved away from ‘whole course’ design to modular design and notably Winter (1996,) states that since the modularization of courses of study that we have ended up with “shallowness of learning” and with students not establishing any deep understanding of any particular discipline (cited in Rowland, 2006:23). Therefore in terms of education and learning, the genuine shift towards pluralism is particularly pertinent in the management curriculum where we seek to adopt the multi-disciplinary approach. This is because the singular disciplinary approach doesn’t constructively embrace other disciplines and tends to leave learners with limited understanding of the interrelationship between different areas of management practice. Interestingly, as far back as 1994, Burgoyne states that “management learning is maturing into an integrated area of study” (cited in Burgoyne and Reynolds, 2002:10). Moreover he

sees this integrative approach as selecting from a range of different disciplines which can foster sensemaking [of the overall management practice]. Sensemaking (giving meaning) within management practice is important because it leads to deeper levels of practical understanding of situations and therefore enhanced capability to cope with [familiar and unfamiliar] situations (Weick, 2006). In his work on sensemaking Weick (*ibid.*) talks about being alert to a range of situations as this enables you to become more aware of the associated problems; it is therefore hypothesised that through an improved and more pluralistic curriculum design and with appropriate pedagogic practices for management learning that management learners have enhanced understanding and capability. It is understandably essential to define the management capabilities that learners should acquire from the curriculum so that they can be included as learning outcomes for courses and modules and used as the starting point for design and delivery.

Curriculum as content and pedagogy as process

Establishing that there is a need to combine pluralistic curriculum design, which covers the aspects of content that can act to enable the development of both understanding and capability, with the planning for the delivery approaches and the pedagogic practices being adopted is important as it draws together the roles of design and delivery. Whilst it is relatively easy to apply pluralism to areas of management study as interrelated and multi/cross-disciplinary it is more difficult to consider the pluralistic nature of pedagogy particularly in relation to the enhancement of management capability. Pedagogy could be described as being pluralistic in nature where it has elements of both theoretical and practical learning and that where possible the wider range of teaching approaches used are those that support the acquisition of knowledge and the development of understanding (and therefore capability) that leads to the ability to be able to act on the knowledge as so well defined by Entwistle (2009).

One relevant debate regarding the design and delivery of management learning (particularly for higher management levels) is well articulated within the work of Raelin (1993 and 2009). He has particular concerns that we are adopting a spoon-feeding approach which makes the teaching job easier [and more standardised]; specifically he worries that it will develop clone managers which it could be assumed will lack the ability to think beyond the obvious, and therefore be unable to be sensemakers and to deal with a range of problems constructively and effectively. This spoon-feeding approach is also referred to as the transmission mode wherein tutors are deemed to be providers of knowledge as opposed to facilitators of understanding (Biggs, 2003). This pedagogic approach is often adopted at the earlier stages of management education and is probably increasingly the case as we are having to deal with ever rising numbers and demands for efficiency, particularly within higher education, HE (BIS Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2013b). The problem with the spoon-feeding approach is that we then end up with a narrow scope of managerial innovation and capability; and whilst a management curriculum that is categorically defined and scientifically engineered can be easily and economically delivered, it moves us away from developing management learning systems and approaches (content and process) that enable practical capability and competence to be developed (Barnett, 1994, Entwistle, 2009, Raelin, 2009, Tynjala, 1999, Tynjala *et al*, 2003).

Understandably with the need to become more commercial in HE (and more efficient with the available resources) it could be determined that we should maintain the spoon-feeding approach to management education as this offers the most efficient product offering with

standard and categorical content and simple and efficient processes. However the idea that management theory is based on knowledge that is permanent and quite simplistic in nature is one that is flawed. But by continuing to do so we are not addressing the operationalization of the knowledge and therefore not supporting the practical capability of the learner to use that knowledge and gain competence in management practice.

The difference in the digital era

The design and delivery of management learning in the digital era provides the opportunity to consider how ways of teaching and learning can be developed that adopt a more pluralistic nature which might thereby bring about deeper levels of understanding and higher levels of practical competence. In light of this evolution of education Shepherd (2004) describes the digital era as having a very high knowledge (content) turnover with technology providing the opportunity for speed [and massification of process]. Interestingly Speer (2012) defines a number of questions including how teaching and learning will change in a world where information is always accessible. There is no doubt that information technology also provides the opportunity for massification and economies of scale as is the case for new modules currently being designed at the business school within which the author works and upon which this work focusses. This is particularly pertinent as there seems to be a shift away from the traditional pedagogical models towards more efficient digital processes and mass provision, which it is hoped will be able to maintain the high standards of quality that the more traditional pedagogical practices have established.

The digital era provides new possibilities for management practice but also for management education and learning. However with many of the educators being mostly familiar with the traditional approaches to curriculum design and delivery it becomes a challenge to shift the curriculum design towards the rapidly evolving digital delivery (JISC Executive, 2009, JISC, 2012, Rowland, 2006). In the JISC 2012 report, (JISC were formerly known as Joint Information Systems Committee), conclusions were made that determined that the curriculum offer should be enhanced in a number of ways (including making it more sustainable and flexible) but most importantly that it needed to be more attuned to the capabilities that today's students require. JISC (Advice:2015) has developed an extensive resource base for curriculum design including items that provide guidance for using technology to improve curriculum design which will provide opportunities to explore examples of good practice that can be applied to the case for this work.

Opportunities for designing new modules for mass audiences in a digital era

This work aims to explore the extent of the shift that the digital era has brought about in terms of pedagogical practice in management education and how this might be realised in a given case within HE. The university within which this work is based is currently redesigning the portfolio of courses with the intention to begin delivery in September 2016. Within this action research project the module content will be designed for delivery to seven hundred and fifty HE students per year who are attending a central London business school based in a HE institution. The module being designed focusses on digital business operations and is one of the core modules in the second year of a three year business and management BA. The mix of topics and learning outcomes includes being able to use information systems (drawing from the first year core module) and having knowledge and understanding of the

business processes that drive operational activities. Most critically learners will need to be able to understand and determine the role and implication that effectively applied planning and control have on operational performance. It is hoped that due to the overarching scope and breadth of management focus that operations management provides within organisations, that the learners will have enhanced their development and capability in the other areas of the business and management programmes such as strategy, marketing and finance; and that they therefore become more pluralistic in nature in their management understanding.

In terms of the teaching process the pedagogical methods to be used in the new module include traditional approaches such as lectures and seminars which are to be complemented with online discussion forums, case study workshops and industry guest speakers. The module content will be available via an online learning platform and will include recorded lectures, online discussion, online sharing spaces for student collaboration and videos showing operations management in practice. The challenges in terms of module design at present include being able to design for mobile devices and being able to keep the constant attention of the learner in a world full of distractions. Also a challenge within the module design is the extent to which changes need to be made to address the fact that students are becoming increasingly disinclined to read traditional texts and journal articles which would help them acquire essential knowledge and assist in generating a deeper understanding. Therefore with many students having a tendency towards surface learning (Biggs, 2003) they tend not to be able to develop depth and practical understanding and then the associated management capability. Hence the extent of the changes that the digital era brings along with the benefits of information technology starts to become clearer. This is along with the identification that the challenge for the curriculum designer is to be able to address the need for both efficient and effective delivery and outcomes; but also being able to produce capable managers for the future.

How can operations management be taught to enable practical capability and how can technology support efficient and effective outcomes?

The problems that teaching within management areas such as operations management poses is the reality of the practice as contrasted to the possibilities as set out in the theory; and that in practice many of the theories cannot be applied in the pure scientific manner in which they are taught and that these require learning through doing or what Entwistle (2009) describes as acting [sometimes randomly but most often intuitively] on the knowledge. Traditionally students would be working in small group seminars that allow for discussion to develop and for cases to be reviewed and understanding of practice to be developed (albeit from a scenario based approach as opposed to a 'real' situation). It is the challenge to address the focus on practical competence and genuine capability that the UK government voices concerns about and has done so for many years within the discussion on skills needs as well as knowledge needs (DFES, 2003). However much of this argument was developed in the traditional era when access to knowledge was more difficult and where opportunities for learning were more restricted; and the number of learners were much lower. Moreover, the digital era has brought about the opportunity for mass provision and open access but also the opportunity for copying and commissioning (written work) which may enable learners to acquire credentials which are not a true reflection of the management capability. For curriculum design these situations mean being able to benefit from the technological system that enables mass provision but also being able to design more appropriate learning and

assessment approaches in order to provide evidence of what management learners are capable of doing as a result of the knowledge that they have acquired.

How will the paper be developed?

Following the initial review of submissions in April 2015 the development paper was accepted and has since attempted to build a stronger theoretical foundation as advised in the feedback given by the track Chairs. The amended paper was resubmitted to the conference submission online repository on 5th June 2015 ahead of the 30th June 2015 deadline as the author was away on overseas travel for the remainder of June. During the period March to September 2015, the digital business operations module being designed will be further developed from its' current draft stage with initial validation for the design having been achieved in May 2015. The intention is to be able to have the module design finalised in time for the next round of university applications at the end of 2014-5 academic year, working in collaboration with the degree programme leader. This work takes place alongside PhD research which explores curriculum design for management learners of a specific type (part-time, post-experience professionals) and the extent of responsiveness by HE providers to their needs for both theoretical and practical learning outcomes. The work will provide the opportunity to apply the principles of content and process being determined within the action research activity and to prepare a paper that explores curriculum design and pedagogic approaches for management learning in the digital era whilst working on a live case. The specific aim is to be able to explore how the curriculum can be designed for the digital era in a way that enables the acquisition of management knowledge, the establishment of management capability and the realisation of the benefits of information technology and process efficiency. It provides a qualitative research opportunity that will explore a case in depth (Yin, 1981) in order to determine critical conclusions and in this case appropriate curriculum and process design approaches.

By the time of the event the paper will include a finalised literature review, primary findings and a first stage conclusion of the practical implications of designing a management module in the digital era, from a pluralistic, capability and efficiency perspective. It is hoped that discussion at the event will provide the opportunity to refine the argument towards how this work can inform future curriculum design and the delivery process for management learning.

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