

# PERSPECTIVES

## Invited article

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## CHALLENGES OF TEACHING STRATEGY IN PROFESSIONAL MASTERS AND DOCTORATE PROGRAMS

### INTRODUCTION

Professional Masters Programs (PMPs) are common in the fields of Public and Business Administration, Accounting, and Tourism. They were conceptually originated in December 1965, with the publication of CFE Opinion No. 977 (Cury, 2005), and took shape in the 1990s (Fischer, 2005). Since its conception, the professional modality has been an alternative to the academic training of professors and researchers. It is oriented toward practical application and focused on the needs of the labor market (Paixão & Bruni, 2013), considering that “the expansion of the Brazilian industry requires a growing number of creative professionals, capable of developing new techniques and processes, and for whom only an undergraduate degree is not enough” (Almeida et al., 2005, p. 165).

Between 2006 and 2017, the number of PMPs in the area of Business Administration grew from 16 to 74, representing about 40% of all courses in the field (Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior - CAPES, 2017). In 2018, more professional masters graduated in the field than academic masters. The rapid and constant growth of PMPs is due to CAPES' resolutions and normative ordinances that regulate the professional modality and, mainly, the increase in demand for advanced degree courses with an emphasis on solution-oriented real-world applications. Starting in 2019, PMPs will be accompanied by recently approved professional doctorate programs (PDPs).

The rise of professional modality brought new challenges to graduate programs. Since the Brazilian experience of *stricto sensu* programs is a mixture of European and North American frameworks (Verhine, 2008), there is still no standard that establishes admission processes, qualifying exams, technical and technological productions, or even the final products of PMPs and PDPs. Such issues are amplified by the fact that the main objective of these masters and doctoral programs is not to train the professional; therefore, they are no longer called professionalizing masters and doctoral degrees. Currently, PMPs and PDPs aim to qualify professionals already active in the labor market in innovative and transformative practices, making them capable of generating solutions to complex problems that public and private organizations have not been able to solve.

Logically, this article does not intend to address all these issues. From the context presented, the analysis focuses on a rarely discussed issue in the context of Brazilian graduate programs: teaching challenges in professional masters and doctoral degree programs. In this article, the teaching of strategy, main issues, and professors' challenges will be discussed. The intention

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here is not to guide the curricular structure of the programs. On the contrary, the intention is to resume the objectives and basic purposes of PMPs and PDPs in order to achieve the essence of the modality and stimulate peer-to-peer debate on the teaching of professionals. The issues and challenges here addressed result from the experience of the author as a professor of strategy in the *stricto sensu* modality for over a decade and a coordinator of a PMP for five years. Despite the overall theme of this article focusing on strategy and Business Administration and Business programs, the arguments expressed here can be transposed to other disciplines and areas of knowledge.

## THE TEACHING OF PROFESSIONALS

PMPs and PDPs aim to take knowledge beyond the academy by bringing the theory studied in educational institutions closer to the activities mastered by practitioners. This is not trivial for Brazilian graduate programs. For this reason, those responsible for teaching professionals share common concerns, such as those presented here.

The first issue that a professor of the professional modality faces is students' pre-existing management routines that are rooted in 10, 20, 30 years of experience in the labor market. The natural impulse of the professor is to reinforce this prior knowledge of the group of students, adding new and more complex techniques and tools. In the discipline of strategy, this is expressed by emphasizing usual strategic planning and the teaching of current and advanced instruments of execution, evaluation, and control. This teaching method is pleasant for students because it is cognitively consonant with their own experiences. However, the validity of this approach for meeting the central objective of qualifying professionals in innovative and transformative practices is questioned.

This issue does not arise due to the well-known criticisms of strategic planning (Mintzberg, 1994) because strategic execution instruments can be innovative and transforming. The assumption to be rethought is that certain strategic practices are universally applicable to all businesses. In organizations, the strategic emphasis is on achieving goals and objectives. Consistently, professionals focus their attention on the strategy's structural elements and the resulting performance of the organization, dedicating little time to reflecting on the strategy's products. Thus, PMPs and PDPs constitute one of the rare spaces in which professionals can allow themselves to conceptually discuss strategy and question prevailing organizational logic that there is only one correct way of implementing strategy.

Another issue derived from the managerial practices of strategy and widely adopted by non-academic literature is that of the formula that ensures results. These are prescriptions of systematically organized and detailed strategic actions, corroborated by real examples that supposedly followed these precepts and reaped the rewards (Evans, 2013). The appeal of such prescriptions is understandable, given that professionals seek to reduce risks and increase gains. Basing strategic choices on guaranteed prescriptions makes their actions appear more assertive and effective. However, in the PMP and PDP context, it is essential to question the validity of these prescriptive approaches in order to fulfill the basic mission of training professionals to develop solutions for complex problems that organizations are unable to solve.

The dissemination of non-academic literature is responsible for a third issue typically faced by those who teach professionals: substantiating the theoretical framework of knowledge support. The simplest solution to account for the technical and applied bias of regular reading by professionals is the curricular adoption of scientific journals of management or practitioner-oriented literature. The texts published in these journals are objective, usually of short or medium length, written by researchers in the field of Business Administration and related areas, and aim to popularize scientific knowledge.

The issue is not the quality of the articles per se. Respected publishers and renowned institutions publish most of these journals. Some have high impact factors, such as Harvard Business Review and California Management Review. These are, therefore, good references for updating professionals and, above all, a gateway to research topics that have not yet been mastered. However, in isolation, such readings are insufficient to sustain the scholarship and abstraction necessary for conceiving innovative and transformative practices. They represent the bridge to be crossed, but not they are not the port of arrival. Conversely, the incorporation of seminal texts, provocative theoretical essays, and intricate empirical articles stimulates the reflective capacities and strengthens the rhetorical arguments of students.

These issues do not exhaust all concerns related to teaching in PMPs and PDPs. However, they do provide an opportunity to discuss the possibility of aligning the teaching of strategy with the objectives of the professional modality. To stimulate this debate, three challenges of teaching strategy in professional programs are presented below: pluralization, contextualization, and reflection.

## PLURALIZATION

Every professional has already experienced the process of strategic decision or execution. Many have a preconceived truth

about strategy. Invariably, this truth was conceived in the cycles of planning, the readings of prescriptive texts, and the errors and successes that substantiate his career. This empirical knowledge is of high value and cannot be underestimated. However, the unique ways of understanding borne of this knowledge narrow one's understanding of the world and limit their ability to solve non-routine problems. Thus, the qualification of a master or doctor requires that the professional faces other perspectives and be open to the pluralization of ideas.

One primary challenge of teaching in PMPs and PDPs is broadening the horizons of professionals through the adoption of a plurality of perspectives, implementing cognitive dissonance as a lever for new opportunities of action. In other words, the challenge is to provide an education that promotes intellectual pluralism, theoretical flexibility, the valuing of multiple perspectives, motivation toward openness, dialogue, and the questioning of basic assumptions (Morrell & Learmonth, 2015). Although experienced professionals resist leaving comfortable areas of practice, the pluralization of intellectual perspectives is helpful in enabling them to seek complementary ways to deal with the problems faced by organizations.

Pluralization can occur in at least two ways in the teaching of strategy. The first and most usual is a sequential curriculum construction, in which each meeting is intended to address a different strategic perspective and is organized in a linear evolutionary sequence. In this case, professional students have contact with a plurality of perspectives throughout the discipline. The second way occurs through an spiral curriculum. Here, at the same meeting, different perspectives, antagonistic or not, are used to address a specific theme, face a theoretical problem, or debate a managerial decision. These and other methods of diversifying the teaching of strategy in PMPs and PDPs allow the professional student to review old problems from new perspectives.

Pluralization in the teaching of strategy can also contribute to updating students' knowledge. Lately, technological innovations have been affecting strategic decision making. Technologies such as artificial intelligence, blockchain, the Internet of things, and quantum computing are part of the business environment but are not always integrated into graduate curricula. The task of breaking down the conceptual foundations of these technologies ends up being undertaken by enthusiasts or experts in technology who do not typically structure their programs from an analytical point of view. Thus, continuously updating strategic perspectives in light of emerging technologies—in addition to providing students with a critical view of these phenomena—reinforces the plurality needed for innovation and organizational transformation.

## CONTEXTUALIZATION

Professionals master the use of strategic tools. In their executive life, they experienced various forms of strategic planning and balanced ways of monitoring the achievement of goals and objectives. They analyzed strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities. They have met cash cows, stars, question marks, and dogs. Then they came across with value chains and diamonds. Recently, they have filled blank canvas in order to create and validate hypotheses and finally, find their value proposition. However, most professional students are unaware of the origins of this practical spring.

The richness of the plurality of strategic perspectives stems precisely from the context in which they originated. Some strategies have a historical origin. They originate in contexts far from business, in the tricks of politics and the stratagems of war, unfolding in the perspectives of competition, protection of advantages, and conquest of market shares, or in collaborative alliances and the sharing of resources (Freedman, 2013). Others originated in the context of business, motivated by the rapid economic expansion in the post-war period, having been created by professionals who were leading business consulting firms that emerged in abundance (Kiechel, 2010). Contexts guide the use of strategies and, without them, different perspectives are reduced to instruments without effectiveness.

Therefore, one of the challenges in teaching strategy in PMPs and PDPs is to contextualize the different perspectives addressed. This is not a responsibility of undergraduate or *lato sensu* programs. It requires professors to connect the trajectory of strategic thinking with economic and social evolution. Moreover, the incorporation of the context in the classes enables a broad and deep understanding of the content. At the same time, it requires that professional students do not aim only to master the technical aspects but also deepen their knowledge of underlying issues.

However, the challenge of contextualization goes beyond the historical trajectory. The national, regional, and local contexts in which students operate determine the possibilities of their strategic choices. Therefore, PMPs and PDPs were created with the mission of being socially, scientifically, and technologically relevant as required by advanced training processes in certain localities. Therefore, the purpose of contextualization is to question the assumption of the universally applicable strategy and stimulate the student to develop innovative and transformative practices within their own contexts. By contextualizing strategy perspectives, the professor is consequently qualifying the professional to fulfill the role of strategist in the market in which they operate.

## REFLECTION

The precise formulation of a problem is as important as its solution. Experienced professionals are used to solving everyday problems. Difficulties are part of their daily routine. They may be more prepared to teach problem-solving methods than the professors themselves. The challenge of teaching in PMPs and PDPs is not limited to seeking answers to known problems. The core of its mission is to raise new issues, bringing new perspectives and interpretations about a given scenario, and to identify and create opportunities that can be pursued by organizations. Therefore, the creative imagination and critical capacity that comprise so-called strategic thinking are essential (Dixit & Nalebuff, 2008).

Strategy is not just a means to achieve a goal. It is both the means and the goal (Gaddis, 2018). Trivial goals do not require strategy. Unattainable goals cannot be achieved. Strategic reflection enables the identification of issues and opportunities, organizing them by considering the scope and reality of professionals and their organizations. It is a model of thought that implies detachment from action through practice or the recurrent reproduction of decisions based on experience. Strategic reflection is based on multiple analytical models, convergent or not, that make professionals question themselves about usual problems and solutions.

Strategic reflection involves competencies that can be developed within PMPs and PDPs. To this end, Grant and Baden-Fuller (2018) discuss the merits and limits of the concepts, theories, and structures of strategic analysis and present the cognitive and behavioral skills needed to fill the gap between analytical tools and strategic choices. The results of a recent study show that human interaction motivates more active behavioral involvement and greater cognitive engagement (Hewett, Becker, & Bish, 2018). Providing an interaction that generates strategic reflection is one of the greatest challenges involved in teaching professionals. The time reserved in the disciplines for interaction among students is short. The analyses of the strategic choices presented in handbooks guide the interaction among students to the past. Therefore, it is imperative to structure a curriculum that enables professional students to interact around strategic decisions that occur in complex and ambiguous situations in their reality in a structured and goal-oriented manner, seeking subsidies on their own, generating unexpected discoveries, and learning together.

## IMPENDING CHALLENGES

Teaching strategy in PMPs and PDPs also includes challenges posed to other disciplines. CAPES Ordinance No. 275, of December

18, 2018, regulated *stricto sensu* graduate programs in the distance learning modality. The regulations, while not specifically targeting disciplines, encourage the offer of distance learning credits in face-to-face courses. There are few experiences of out-of-person teaching in academic *stricto sensu* programs to follow as a guide. Given their peculiarities, professional courses can be the environment in which distance learning be tested in *stricto sensu* programs. Therefore, it is an impending challenge that adds to those faced in the teaching of strategy.

In the wake of non-contact disciplines, blended learning—which involves classroom participation and computer-mediated interactions—thrives with expressiveness. The positive results of blended learning are demonstrated by several studies (Bernard, Borokhovski, Schmid, Tamim, & Abrami, 2014). However, these results require that computational support covers cognitive issues, not just content, and that professors implement effective interactivity. Therefore, blended learning is another impending challenge for the teaching of strategy.

The rapid growth of professional programs raises concerns about ethical issues in disciplines. Ethical teaching is a formidable challenge in teaching strategy in PMPs and PDPs. This issue is not focused on reviewing content and incorporating the virtue of good values in the curriculum, because this type of effort tends to have a low impact on the behavior of students (Cohen, 2006). Given that business schools have been criticized for their complicit involvement in corporate scandals and international financial crises, the ethical challenges involved in teaching strategy include rethinking business schools' mission, principles, and beliefs (Murcia, Rocha, & Birkinshaw, 2018). Especially in the professional modality, this reflection demands a critical detachment from usual practices of strategic operation.

## CONCLUSION

The *stricto sensu* graduate programs in PMPs and PDPs exhibit distinct characteristics from specialization programs and academic masters and doctoral programs. The purpose of this modality is to qualify, at a high level, professionals working in the labor market by making them capable of solving complex problems while innovating and transforming organizations. This purpose is put in practice in teaching activities. They constitute the appropriate environment to integrate theory and practice.

Among the several challenges that accompany the professional modality, this article emphasizes issues on strategy teaching. To this end, the concerns shared by professors of

PMPs and PDPs were brought to the debate. These concerns have fostered the discussion of three challenges—pluralization, contextualization and reflection—which should not be ignored by the curricula of strategy disciplines. Moreover, some potential challenges that currently affect education in PMPs and PDPs were raised. Thus, the difficult mission entrusted to the professors and the great dedication required of the students were emphasized. By valuing the essence of the modality, it is expected that the issues and challenges briefly addressed here are not viewed as a curricular orientation, but rather as provocations for Brazilian graduate programs which still take the first steps in the *stricto sensu* training of professionals.

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