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Executive Education: Can it Be Too Good?

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Abstract

A successful business school must serve two communities: the research community on one hand; and the business community on the other. However, despite the spectacular growth of business education over the last four or five decades, there has been growing criticism of the relevance of much business school activity: The academic-practitioner divide has emerged and largely refuses to close. To bridge the gap b-schools must serve both communities concurrently. Executive education is identified as being a critical strategy in the repertoire of b-school deans through which to do so. The aim of this paper is to discuss the construct of executive education, and to challenge some of the dominant logics that executive education is simply education for executives. Executive education is reported as being distinctive from most content focused education – the tangible material that most universities teach.

The successful design and delivery of a suite of non-credit executive education courses, with a focus on corporate and institutional governance, is presented. Their underpinning pedagogy, based on developing a critically reflective practitioner, is discussed. Executive education courses are found to be distinctive on the basis that responsibility for learning, and the direction of the journey being taken, rests largely with the participants themselves. The adverse reaction to a six month long not-for-credit short course, offered in-house annually for four years is then briefly described. Observations are shared as to the source of this reaction. The means of avoiding similar adversity towards effective executive education in the future is then identified.

Introduction

A successful business school must serve two communities, the research community on one hand and the business community on the other (cf. Simon, 1959). Executive education - providing it is both effective and genuine - is an essential tool in the repertoire of most b-school deans (Davies & Howard, 2009): it is a critical strategy (Margulies & Gregg, 2002) to be used to meet the respective needs of both communities. However, to do so b-schools require more than just faculty with credibility. A b-school's ability to serve the business community is also dependent on multiple forms of engagement with businesses (Found & Fei, 2009) as well as industry groups through designing and judging business awards; benchmarking and quality assurance exercises; membership of chambers of commerce; contributions to the business policy environment; business consulting; undertaking contract and action research; and holding governance positions. The perspective

parallels with the other professional schools, notably medicine (Becker, Geer, Hughes, & Strauss, 1961), law (Messinger, 2008) and dentistry (Bertolami, 2007) can easily be observed.

Bennis and O'Toole's observation (HBS) that many b-school professors have never set foot in a business augurs poorly for the sustained delivery of executive education in the 21st Century. The defence of the division of labour between research and practice (see Bartunek, 2007) is becoming an increasingly implausible position from which to defend the current failing model, a subject which has been debated by the *Academy* since its foundation in 1958 (Mowday, 1997).

Despite the spectacular growth of business education over the last four or five decades there has been growing criticism of the relevance of much business school activity based on the supposed academic-practitioner divide (Miles, 1996; Lockhart & Stablein, 2002). Academics note that practitioners do not refer to academic findings, and academics seldom refer to practitioners for either agenda setting or elaboration. Commentary extends to the extreme view that relationships between the business and research community may not even be possible (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). American business schools (the AACSB International influence) create a vast amount of literature for practitioners but rarely appear to extend the boundaries of theory. By contrast, European schools appear to contribute more to the theoretical development of the range of business disciplines. However, in order to truly bridge the gap between research and practice, both communities must be served. Boundary spanning (Gulati, 2007) is offered as one means for b-schools to bridge the practitioner-academic divide, executive education (Varner & Bales, 2002) is another.

The aim of this paper is to discuss the construct of executive education and to challenge some of the dominant logic that executive education is simply education for executives. The successful design and delivery of a suite of non-credit executive education courses is described. The underpinning pedagogy is discussed. One outcome, not anticipated at the outset, was the increasingly adverse reaction to having better informed, reflective executives contributing to the board room. Observations are shared as to the source of such reactions. The means of avoiding similar adversity in the future are then identified.

Executive Education

Executive education and development programmes typically comprise two attributes: those of process, and those of content. The pedagogies concern emotion, engagement and enquiry in addition to the conventional content (the tangible *stuff*) that b-schools teach. Executive education programmes are said to deal with the knowledge, skills, perception and development of business leadership. They must also deal with the economic, social, cultural, technological, and political environments of business, as well as the ethical concerns of management (Podolny, 2009), and arguably the broader stakeholder community. In this respect executive education should provide a contrast to conventional management education in that it is focused more on learning how to learn (Pfeffer & Fong, 2004) rather than being content driven.

Executive students are notoriously demanding and the reputation of a portfolio of programmes can be badly damaged by allowing unsatisfactory teaching and delivery to persist. Executive students appear to be significantly less willing than undergraduates, or distance-taught graduate students, to suffer quietly when they regard the teaching as less than excellent, or the lecturer insufficiently knowledgeable. Faculty must be knowledgeable about current practice and problems as well as about findings from the research literature, and must be able to synthesise this knowledge in real time as students raise issues in class. Lecturers must meld practical experience, theory, case study learning and anecdote in response to

demanding learning objectives; inquisitive; and, engaged students with often considerably more experience and status than their own. To do so effectively they are likely to be drawn from the very rare ranks of both AQ *and* PQ qualified faculty (AACSB, 2012) – a classification of faculty seldom used in the public domain, and likely to only account for 8 – 12% of a b-school at best. Therefore, successful executive education appears to involve three mutually dependent attributes:

- i. A firm connection with an academic discipline. To be credible there needs to be a nexus between the applied learning courses and the teaching for credit and research environment. The delivery can be done by supported specialist adjuncts but programme leadership should come from tenured senior university faculty. In the absence of a research background there is, however, little to distinguish such activity from mainstream consultant-led short courses - for which the commercial prerogative is demonstrably stronger.
- ii. A significant national (and possibly international) reputation for either the discipline or a high profile member of the university staff in that area. If a b-school is to compete in an already saturated market there needs to be a point of distinctiveness about what is offered. Reputation among and contribution to the discipline is one such point.
- iii. An existing identified external client or client group to anchor the programme or a clear strategic plan of how such a client or client group might be obtained.

All three attributes appear to be required for the successful implementation of an executive education offering. Faculty or b-schools masquerading as subject matter experts will quickly be exposed in the increasingly competitive market where the barriers to entry are near zero; information on content is readily accessible and transmittable; and, the review and evaluation of courses is conducted by participants in real time via social media.

A major challenge for executive education is to deliver value to a demanding audience. That demand is the source of both the “challenge and the inspiration for executive education” (Moulton & Fickel, 1993, p. 64). Herein lies an important distinction between executives enrolled in an executive education programme and others. Namely other programmes simply do not contain the same level of expectation, nor do they deliberately engage through process and emotion. An executive enrolled in an executive education programme immediately seizes the opportunity presented to him or her, engaging with the process and constructively challenging the content for personal benefit. The process by which teaching is conducted (or orchestrated) is, therefore, critical to the success of the programme.

A simple definition of executive education was provided by Ballou, Bowers, Boyatzis and Kolb (1999, p. 340) who stated that executive education is “management education for people who are in executive roles or who hope to be” in such roles. An implication of this definition is that executive education is management education undertaken by anyone in the position of an executive, or aspiring to be one. The problem with this definition is that delivery of content and emotion, engagement and enquiry, as identified previously, are embedded. An analogy may clarify the distinction needing to be made. A plumber enrolled in dispute resolution is not taught plumbing; he or she is taught dispute resolution. Neither the course content nor the process of engagement enhances the plumber’s ability to plumb - although they may do so by chance! Similarly, an executive participating in education does not necessarily create executive education. Therefore, b-schools need to be especially mindful of the opportunity that exists before them. The relationship with the business community requires very careful management to ensure that public programmes offered by b-

schools are mostly of either a technical business nature – which is not executive education, or something that is predominantly process driven for executives.

More learned definitions accentuate the reality that executive education is different from conventional education. Moulton and Fickel's (1993) definition is that "executive education is empirical and experimental, it is difficult to discover any unifying theory embracing management, managers, leaders, or the education and development thereof.... That empiricism accounts for why formal executive education developed extensively first in the pragmatic climate of America" (p. 56). In doing so, the authors join the genre of critics of higher education in business for whom Dent (2002) provides a succinct summary: "Nearly every critique of higher education [in business] for at least the past 40 years has decried the rigid disciplinary focus of academia" (p. 145). Executive education should maintain a holistic stance: conducted at the level of the organisation, rather than the level of business disciplines. Therefore, it is unlikely that individual faculty or even an administrative department would have the capability to deliver real executive education - one of the reasons that the global model is one of business *schools*. However, within b-schools it appears easy to take for granted the assumption that executive education is both distinctive and well understood. Rationale for the pursuit of continuing executive education is provided by Moulton and Fickel as follows:

Finally, it is worth noting that executive education programs, and the business schools that have provided most of their substance and impetus, have turned the spotlight of inquiry onto the dynamics not only of business, but onto the executive. It turns out that the executive is not a static entity in the corporate equation, but rather an ever changing person who performs many roles during his or her lifetime. Thus, the effects of all-pervasive change seem to underscore the rationale for a lifelong learning effort by executives under the encouragement of their organizations. (p. 56)

Therefore, the focus on executive education is the executive's development and importantly his or her subsequent impact on business performance. This then makes an important shift in outcomes from content to the impact that a b-school achieves on an individual's performance, their career, and subsequent business performance: and, in doing so, spanning the academic-practitioner divide.

To summarise, executive education is primarily orientated towards developing an executive's reflective capability (Burgoyne & Reynolds, 1997) within the context of business organisations. By contrast, mainstream b-school education is focused on developing individual knowledge (that may or may not be eventually applied), and to a far lesser extent, executive skills. The embeddedness of executive education implies the maintenance of a holistic, rather than reductivist (Leicester, 2010), view of business organisations. Embeddedness also implies the interdependent (or co-development) of both skills and knowledge (Brophy, 2005) for the executive's benefit firstly, and then subsequently that of the business.

Programme Mix

For many decades organisations have established their own internal management development programmes to meet specific corporate needs. These appear to be developed as a cost effective means of providing organisation-focused education and professional development. But each represents failure, to some extent, of the tertiary education sector and b-schools in particular. MWH (Montgomery Watson Harza), for example, have their own in-house university, as do IKEA, and Air New Zealand - but these are not executive education programs. The net result of this increased investment in management development is masked

from external examination (Moulton & Fickel, 1993). For example, the number of students enrolled in the executive MBA in the USA remains relatively static. But this trend ignores those enrolled in various courses offered in-house (Friga, Bettis & Sullivan, 2003).

A b-school's executive education programme typically encompasses a portfolio of activity. The courses being offered can be classified into two broad groups: Those that are internal to the organisation (i.e., in-house or private courses) and those that are external to the organisation (i.e., public courses). Both deliveries can be provided by way of credit or not-for-credit offerings. For example, the Graduate School of Business's (GSB) four year contract with the National Bank of New Zealand from 2001 to 2005 was a multi-level, multi-stage, multi-year internal leadership development programme (LDP), to which was attached unspecified transferable credits towards a bachelor degree in business. Similarly, the GSB's entire MBA has been offered in-house to the Australia New Zealand Banking Group, alongside its key customers and suppliers in New Zealand. Thursfield (2008) reports of a similar experience at Hull University Business School in the United Kingdom.

Public executive education programmes (external to the organisation), were first conceived by Harlow Person, The Amos Tuck School's first dean (Daniel, 1998), and have been characterised by the MBA, in a multitude of delivery guises, ever since. Many b-schools now offer a portfolio of courses in their executive education programme; in-house and public; and, credit and not-for-credit. However, it is largely through the performance and demands of the public programmes that a b-school's reputation is enhanced.

The full array of executive education courses from tertiary providers can be captured in a two by two matrix; credit or not-for-credit on one axis; and, public or in-house (private or tailored/customised) on the other. A significant opportunity for b-schools is to recognise the interdependence between these activities. Namely, there should be a constant flow of candidates between non-credit and credit programmes, and a constant flow of clients (employers) between public and in-house (Friga, Bettis & Sullivan, 2003) programmes. Similarly, public credit programmes benefit from being informed through better and more relevant curricula as a result of the interdependence; students are more likely to meet employers' expectations because faculty are better informed; and research agenda is likely to be more relevant (achieving better impact, and attracting greater endowments), which is something that can't be replicated by the degree- and diploma-mills (Stewart & Spille, 1988). In short, some b-schools *have* demonstrated they can span the academic-practitioner divide (Lorenzi, 2012) through offering a more comprehensive portfolio rather than a simple strategy of generic credit programmes to the public.

Figure 1. Schema of the full provision of executive education courses.

	Public	In-house (private)
Credit	MBA / DBA	In-house MBA to corporate client & key partners
Not-for-credit	Public short courses	Tailored in-house courses from needs analysis

Management Learning

A comprehensive and integrated account of this emerging field is provided by Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997) in their seminal book, *Management Learning*, where management learning is presented as an area of both professional practice and theoretical enquiry. The authors identify three areas of professional practice as follows. *Effective practice* (where the practitioner may not operate out of conscious theory but is successful anyway); *reflective practice* (where the practitioner is conscious of what is being done and why it should work, and can, therefore, be more flexible and adaptable); and, *critically reflective practice* (where the practitioner is consciously operating out of a best available working theory but is willing to critique it, and is aware of and open to other perspectives). The authors frame managerial learning to include both formal management training and development activities, as well as informal managerial learning that occurs naturally on the job. Some of which will spill-in to executive education. Therefore, an underlying assumption of effective executive education providers should be to develop critically reflective (Dewey, 1933) practitioners. In doing so, the participants, should they be executives, are expected to be better equipped to develop, contribute to, and lead initiatives that enhance the performance of their current or future organisations.

Schön (1987) observed that real world problems “do not present themselves to practitioners as well-formed structures” (p. 4). Noting that these “indeterminate zones of practice – uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict – escape the canons of technical rationality” (p. 6). Schön’s recommendation is not the conventional one of making better use of research, but learning “from a careful examination of artistry... the competence by which practitioners actually handle indeterminate zones of practice” (p. 13). Therefore, an executive education course ought to be focused on the self-examination of artistry (superior skill) by which participants manage unbounded problems and opportunities. De Déa Roglio and Light (2009) report on the development of the reflective executive through an executive MBA, where the main responsibility of faculty is to guide the “student process of discovery” (p. 166). However, the failure to focus on developing self-awareness (Gosling & Mintzberg, 2003) is also noted. Curriculum design should then include a personality trait indicator from the outset, such as, Myers Briggs (MBTI) (Myers & McCaulley, 1985), from which to initiate conversations about and practice of self-awareness.

Director Training

Director training in New Zealand, the very pinnacle of executive education, has followed global trends. The Institute of Directors in New Zealand (Inc) mirrored the process adopted by their former UK parent through the ubiquitous five day course. But the near complete absence of a unifying theory in governance (Clarke, 1998; Tricker, 1993), and hence the lack of a coherent conceptual framework has not prevented the proliferation of governance training to meet almost insatiable demand. Global trends appear to be little different. Regrettably, much director training resembles a hodgepodge of ideas and perspectives drawn from a mix of practitioners and professionals. Bolstered by the requisite war-stories, providers appear to have entirely overlooked the primary objective of governance training, namely that of enhancing the performance of organisations, through executive education. Regrettably, governance, in many circumstances, appears to have retreated to a process to be followed rather than an outcome to be achieved. Pound’s (1995) promise of the governed corporation - loaded with uncertainty, uniqueness, and value conflict - has too often been ignored. Therefore, two competing, and at times conflicting, demands on governance informed the prescription offered by this institution: strategic governance (strategy and

leadership), and compliance. These activities remain distinctly separate and different activities for any board (Peebles & Lockhart, 2011). The prescription and pedagogy had to provide a means through which these dilemmas could be explored - as opposed to being resolved.

Curriculum Design

To deliver genuine and effective executive education curriculum design had only one a priori assumption: Developing the critically reflective practitioner. However, curriculum design also needed to deliver on preconceived expectations of knowledge transfer with respect to corporate governance - this is a university after all, critical inquiry, conscious rather than unconscious consideration of ethics, self-reflection, “deep examination of personal beliefs” (Larrivee, 2000, p. 293), and, adult learning. All to be delivered in a stimulating, challenging and fun environment that could, depending on client expectations and their budget, vary in length from one month to six. The later courses were substantially longer than a conventional ‘credit semester’, but with similar face-time between faculty and participants – some 40 hours.

The curriculum also included a number of *tools* (Gray, 2007) including storytelling; reflexive and reflective conversations (Cunliffe, 2004); metaphors; a dedicated learning journal (Lockhart & Franklin, 2008); and, critical events analysis. However, mindful that many of the participants are also kinaesthetic learners, and successful businessmen and women in their own right, course design had to balance tangible (pragmatic) outcomes with both critically reflective practice and reflexive learning. Over time the executive education course learning outcomes developed to include the following:

- Provide each participant with the fundamental knowledge and information that underpins director performance.
- Develop participants’ skills needed to practically apply this knowledge.
- Require that participants give a practical demonstration of their understanding and skills as directors.
- Test participants’ ability to apply their new knowledge and hence identify any need for further training, mentoring and/or individual coaching.
- Provide on-going support to individuals as required and provide a group “refresher” courses at a later date.

From discussions with clients a wide variation in the understanding of governance and the role of directors among participants was identified. It was also found to be counter-productive to put participants with such widely disparate skills in the same course. To ensure that all participants gained the maximum practical skills and learning from participation it was necessary to identify those who did not currently have the fundamental level of understanding required to participate effectively. These participants were then offered tailored pre-training to enable them to maximise their learning and practical outcomes from later participation in the core programmes.

In practical terms programme objectives were achieved by a series of day long and short-residential courses over a six month period. One particular course culminated with a four day residential course in a remote five star retreat located in New Zealand’s wilderness. A range of linking activities between the various residential phases, including book and motion picture reviews, were embedded to maintain continuity of learning and cohort engagement amongst participants. Unbeknownst at the time, one course which was repeated annually for four years, significantly exceeded the ability of the organisation to absorb their *newly equipped* participants. In short, the process of executive education developed

heightened awareness of integrity, honesty, trust, courage, commitment and team work within the large corporation. Over those four years a critical mass of participants developed - as intended - who subsequently began challenging extant practices within the corporation. Gross interference in board processes was uncovered by three of the participants, from different year groups, and they 'called it' for what it was. Having discussed the matter with the actors involved (the Chairman, CEO, independent directors, and select shareholder directors) and after being severely rebuked for doing so, they then had the courage to subtly bring this malfeasance to the attention of shareholders. Immediately blame was directed by the same key actors at the course provider! The course had grossly exceeded its mandate.

The key lesson is that there is and always will be tension in effective and genuine executive education. Later clients were always warned of expectations and outcomes in advance, and were repeatedly back-briefed on progress, not just in terms of learning and developmental outcomes but on the highly intangible space surrounding alignment, or the potential lack of, between client values and those being developed by the participants in each respective course.

Conclusions

The term executive education is being increasingly applied to all graduate management education, especially taught courses (e.g., the MBA). While there may be marketing advantages from doing so, it may be misleading. Executive education is not simply a matter of having executives, or those who aspire to be executives, on a course. Executive education ought to be distinctive, so that an executive immediately seizes the opportunity presented to him or her. They are observed to engage with the process and constructively challenge the content for personal benefit. The very process by which teaching is conducted has been found to be critical for its success. Universities' fascination with prescriptions and curriculum is invariably focused on content - the tangible material that is taught - as opposed to the learning journey within which participants are encouraged to indulge. Shifting the responsibility for learning to participants is something that *all* executive education ought to achieve from the outset.

The credibility of effective and genuine executive education is increasingly at risk if b-schools are unable to span the academic-practitioner divide. In which case the low barriers to entry, arguably being driven lower by the b-schools themselves, will continue to encourage a raft of providers in this domain. To some extent that opportunity will continue to be explored by corporates with their in-house programmes. As importantly, the emerging absence of well-defined and difficult to replicate features amongst university offerings will continue to attract other providers to this growing market.

Faculty credibility with participants as recognisable knowledge experts, irrespective of the course focus on process, also remains essential to avoid reputational damage. As does the relationship between not-for-credit courses and credit courses being offered by an institution. However, successful executive education is not without its risks. It has, in this case, been observed as being too effective in the short term. Faculty have assumed that both organisations and participants have unlimited capacity to absorb (grow and develop) executives positively. This has been observed to be false. Despite their best intentions some organisations will find the development of integrity, honesty, trust, courage, commitment and team work amongst groups of executives difficult to manage. A commercial response may be to work within less challenging boundaries - in which case executive education is immediately compromised - the other is to repeatedly back-brief clients on the development of those participating on their behalf.

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