MORE SUCCESS THAN MEETS THE EYE: A CHALLENGE TO

CRITIQUES OF THE MBA.

POSSIBILITIES FOR CRITICAL MANAGEMENT EDUCATION?

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Abstract

Management education generally, and MBA programmes in particular, have been persistently criticised for failing to speak adequately to management practice. One response to such criticisms has been to suggest a wider consideration of Critical Management Education (CME). Drawing on research findings from an empirical study of MBA learning, the paper argues that MBA learning can be seen as more valuable to the manager in practice than critics contend. Moreover, the learning which is valued resonates both with a critical understanding of management and critical accounts of the role of management education, suggesting that a covert form of CME may already be operating. We argue that further building on this understanding provides the potential for a more prominent CME. Specifically, we propose that the experience brought to and lived within the MBA programme provides an opportunity for 'problematising' accepted ways of making sense of the world.

Keywords: MBA, Critical Management Education, Practice, Learning, Experience

Introduction

Critiques of management education generally, and the MBA in particular, have been persistently found in both the US and the UK, from the damning management education reports of the late 1980s (Constable and McCormick, 1987; Porter and McKibbin 1988) to more recent critiques such as that of Pfeffer and Fong (2002: 78), who have argued that "there are substantial questions about the relevance of their [business schools] educational product and doubts about their effects on both management careers of their graduates and on management practice". So powerful are such critiques that the future of the business school generally, and the MBA programme specifically, have been increasingly questioned. However, closer scrutiny of these mainstream critiques reveals an oversimplification of both management practice and the relationship between management education and management practice. Furthermore, critiques invariably lack evidence to support their claims. The paper here presents work which has empirically examined the value of a UK MBA programme and suggests that learning was described as more helpful to the manager than critics suggest. Moreover, the identified value of MBA learning here suggests a central role for Critical Management Education (CME).

Critiques of the MBA

Central to popular critiques of the MBA is a questioning of the relationship between what is taught on MBA programmes and management practice. Management education reports of the late 1980s for example, suggested that MBA programmes did not produce individuals who were able to perform managerial work to a satisfactory standard in practice (Constable and McCormick, 1987; Porter and McKibbin, 1988). A number of features of MBA programmes were seen to contribute to this inadequacy, including an overemphasis on quantitative and analytical subject areas, and a neglect of 'softer' areas such as people management, interpersonal abilities and leadership skills (Cheit, 1985; Lataif and Mintzberg, 1992; Linder and Smith, 1992). Indeed, Leavitt (1989: 39) argued that the MBA degree "distorts those subjected to it into critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts and shrunken souls".

Despite attempts at reform, MBA programmes continue to be subject to intensifying criticism (CEML, 2002; Eberhardt and Moser, 1997; Mintzberg, 2004). Mintzberg's (2004) scathing attack on traditional US MBA programmes suggested that they "train the wrong people in the wrong ways with the wrong consequences" (p.6). Mintzberg is particularly critical of MBA programmes which recruit relatively young people with little or no management experience, arguing that "trying to teach management to somebody who has never managed is like trying to teach psychology to someone who has never met another human being" (p.9). Although his critique relates primarily to US

programmes, it has stimulated a serious questioning of the future of the MBA on both sides of the Atlantic. Notably, Mintzberg is also critical of programmes which take those with significant management experience (such as those frequently found in the UK) arguing that they continue to place an emphasis on business functions and analysis and largely fail to use the experience brought to the classroom. As such these programmes continue to say little about the practice of managing. Generally, therefore it would seem that most would concur with Pfeffer and Fong (2002: 84) who argued that the "curriculum taught in business schools has only a small relationship to what is important for succeeding in business".

The criticism that MBA programmes offer little of practical relevance is important and warrants serious attention for it has been persistent throughout recent decades, and is voiced by both management academics and practitioners. Further, these concerns are likewise articulated by critical management scholars (Nord and Jermier, 1992; Thomas and Anthony, 1996) who traditionally hold divergent views to those of mainstream academics. The challenge for all is thus how best to respond to such concerns.

The mainstream response has been to call for business schools to give greater focus to the practical needs of business (e.g. CEML, 2002). Generally, this entails a search for more appropriate methods or techniques which can address areas such as leadership and people management, and thus speak more sufficiently to practice. However, as Grey (2004) highlights this response is somewhat problematic since a search for reliable management techniques

has so far evaded management researchers. Grey persuasively argues "the fact that after a century of effort we have little by the way of generally applicable formulae should surely give us pause for thought" (p.181). And indeed here we do pause for thought.

Challenging critiques and mainstream responses

Grey's observation suggests that more progress might be made if we employ a more critical scrutiny of popular critiques of the MBA and their associated solutions. We suggest here that such critiques make certain assumptions about the relationship between management education and practice, and indeed the nature of managing itself. Claims that MBA programmes do not improve management practice, and in turn a belief that the problems of management education can be remedied by the introduction of more appropriate techniques, is seen to oversimplify the relationship between management education and management practice as there is an assumption that the two are unproblematically linked. Such an assumption follows managerialist thinking which characterises an orthodox view of management education. This perspective views management education as functionally related to the development of managerial effectiveness (Grey and French, 1996) which is facilitated by the provision of a set of skills and techniques. This latter belief can be said to represent a form of technicist thinking which treats management as a morally and politically neutral technical activity and as such management education is "primarily concerned with the acquisition of techniques regardless of the context of their application" (Grey and Mitev,

1995: 74). Accordingly, such thinking encompasses ideas that management education should be immediately 'useful', 'practical' and 'relevant' to the real world.

However, such technicist thinking has been challenged by critical management scholars such as Willmott (1994) and Grey and French (1996) who have argued that the notion of management education as functional to managerial practice is based on a model of professional training in which there exists a body of knowledge which is understood to be key to effective practice. Implicit to such a professional model is a view that managing is a rational, neutral and disinterested activity as articulated by technicist thinking. An alternative view offered by a critical perspective is that in reality managing is far more complex involving social, political, moral and emotional dimensions resonating with a process-relational view of management practice (Watson, 2002), and as such there is no professional body of knowledge that can easily be transferred. Accordingly, management education can be more usefully seen as helping managers to understand, analyse and challenge the complex activity of management rather than as a set of techniques and skills to be learned and later applied (Grey and French, 1996). Management education may thus be seen to complexify rather than simplify management practice. Adopting a critical perspective as to both what management practice is taken to be and in turn its relationship with management education, thus raises doubts as to whether there could ever exist a direct and simple relationship between MBA learning and managerial performance.

A further concern with popular critiques of the value of the MBA is that they promote a grander role for management education than perhaps it could ever hope to achieve. Fox (1997) reminds us that management education represents "but the tip of a learning iceberg" (p.35) recognising that much learning to manage is done informally. This however, is not necessarily to be seen as a shortcoming of management education but rather an acceptance of the nature of manager learning itself. As Watson and Harris (1999) suggest learning to manage is like learning to swim and "nobody ever learnt to swim without entering the water" (p.108), but this is not to say that management education can not help managers to swim better. Further, that learning to manage is largely an informal and practical activity also points to its ongoing or emergent nature. As Watson and Harris (1999: 17) argue "there is no obvious point at which one suddenly 'becomes' a manager and that even when the individual accepts the status or role of a manager they will inevitably continue to learn about managing and will go on through their career to modify or develop their understandings and practices". Thus mainstream critiques which accuse educators of failing to *equip* managers to manage and question the sorts of managers management education *produces,* is perhaps to overstate the role of management education and the MBA. It might be suggested that those primed to look for easily demonstrable and grand effects of the MBA may overlook its very real value.

Indeed, it is interesting to note that critiques of the MBA are rarely accompanied by any systematic evidence (Blass and Weight, 2005). Any evidence which is offered tends to be anecdotal and generally fails to provide

a convincing case against MBA programmes. For example, Mintzberg (2004) in building his case against MBAs highlights that on a list of most admired business leaders not a single one had an MBA. This perhaps supposes a grand effect of the MBA which we have argued above may not be possible. Further, given the suggested complexity of the relationship between management education and management practice, it is perhaps likely that those looking to understand how MBA learning might inform practice may have to allow for a more subtle and complex relationship.

Examining MBA Learning

Given the questioning of the MBA on both sides of the Atlantic, we propose that systematic research which invites the opinion of the MBA graduate may provide one useful way forward. Such research presents an opportunity for those who have actually undertaken MBA programmes to elaborate on the ways in which their learning for them is seen to speak to managerial practice. Below we draw on accounts of MBA alumni which describe their MBA experience and the ways in which this is seen to relate to their managerial jobs and careers. In so doing, we hope to question the common criticism that MBA programmes speak inadequately to practice. Our intention here is not to provide a detailed description of the study's findings, as this can be found elsewhere (see Hay, 2004) but to suggest that according to the accounts of the managers here, MBA learning is more complex than is traditionally portrayed, and is seen to be more helpful to management practice than critics

contend. Moreover, we in turn suggest a more prominent role for Critical Management Education (CME).

The research context

The study was conducted at a large UK university whose business school is rated in the top 15 business schools in the UK (Guardian, 2004). The focus of the research was the school's part time programme which is targeted at existing or aspiring senior managers, although in reality the majority of students tend to occupy middle level management positions. This is in contrast to the common assumption that MBA programmes are exclusively associated with senior level managers. The programme's espoused aims are to 'provide the underpinning knowledge and analytical skills necessary to function at a strategic level and develop the ability to respond to and manage change effectively'. Table 1 illustrates the specific modules included in the MBA programme. The programme here is seen to place an important emphasis on 'linking theory and practice' and to this end a distinctive feature of the MBA is an international consultancy project which involves a week spent overseas tackling an international business issue.

Insert Table 1 about here

The research approach

Alvesson and Skoldberg (2000) remind researchers of the importance of a conscious consideration of personal beliefs guiding their research. Below we therefore aim to make explicit our 'interpretive framework', that is, our basic set of beliefs that guided action (Guba, 1990). Such beliefs can be seen to encompass the conceptual resources drawn upon to make sense of the research findings along with ideas relating to ontological, epistemological and methodological positions. Given our arguments made thus far, conceptually we may be seen to utilise a process relational view of management practice, and accordingly a view of management learning as a non-technical and essentially emergent process. In turn, such perspectives arguably lend themselves to an interpretive research approach whose goal as described by Schwandt (1994: 118) is "understanding the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it". The interpretive approach can be seen to embody a number of competing paradigms, of which we would most closely identify ourselves with a social constructionist position (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). A social constructionist position contends that our reality is determined by the way in which we experience and understand the world which we construct and reconstruct for ourselves in interaction with others. However, as Watson (2002: 474) highlights this is not to suggest "that there is no world beyond language but rather the world is only meaningful to us - given a reality - when people make sense of it through language". Following Watson (1994:79) an internal realist position is adopted here,

"which sees a reality beyond the individual, but one existing for us through….the social and cultural processes whereby human beings make sense of the world".

Our ontological position of course in turn influences our epistemological beliefs, accordingly if we place emphasis on a social construction of reality, we must accept that as researchers we interact with the researched (here the MBA managers) jointly shaping the constructions of each other. Moreover, as Schwandt (1994: 118) offers "to prepare an interpretation is itself to construct a reading of these meanings; it is to offer the inquirer's construction of the constructions of the actors one studies". The discussions that follow are not therefore taken to be a straightforward reflection of an objectively existing reality, but instead an effort to make sense of managers' constructions of the ways in which their MBA learning was seen to inform their managerial practice. Further, in presenting our account, we acknowledge our role in the shaping and crafting of the offered interpretation.

Consistent with our position outlined above, the work here followed a grounded theory methodology. As Strauss and Corbin (1994: 273) contend grounded theory is a "general methodology for developing theory that is grounded in data systematically gathered and analysed. Theory evolves during actual research and it does this through continuous interplay between data analysis and data collection". It is important to note that Strauss and Corbin's position on grounded theory accepts the salience of the researcher's accumulated knowledge, recognising how this informs and develops emerging

ideas. Indeed, as Watson (1994: S80) helpfully elaborates, researchers 'without a map at all....will face the danger of becoming an explorer stumbling about in the pitch-black dead of night in the depths of never-ending forest'. Thus our sense of the ways in which managers' MBA learning informed practice emerged through an iterative process of research and analysis, informed by both the conceptual resources described above and as the fieldwork progressed, additionally more nuanced resources such as notions of transformative learning and critical learning. Importantly, the close interplay between data collection and analysis promotes the development of interpretations which are comprehensible to the researched and can provide an increased understanding of the nature of their situation (Turner, 1983). In particular, there was a concern here to give voice to the MBA graduate in current debates surrounding management education.

Data were collected through the use of in depth interviews with MBA alumni from the university, 19 males and 16 females aged between 29 and 56 years old, who graduated between 1993 and 2004. Those interviewed came from a variety of job backgrounds, spanning private, public and voluntary sectors. As is commonly found in qualitative research studies, purposive sampling was used which enabled the use of judgement to select cases which best helped in answering the research questions (Miles and Huberman, 1994). Each interview lasted between 1 and 2 hours, and took place at either the manager's place of work, or at the university business school. All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured and asked managers to describe their careers to date, the

challenges of their current role, their manager learning generally and their MBA learning in particular.

Research Findings

In contrast to the predominantly negative views towards MBA programmes which articulate that they provide little of value to the practising manager, the accounts of actual practising managers here seemed to suggest otherwise. Overwhelmingly, managers spoke of their MBA experiences in positive terms, illustrated by comments such as "*it was fantastic, I mean I am thoroughly glad I did it*" superficially indicating the perceived worth of their MBA studies*.* A deeper analysis revealed a complexity to the described value of the MBA. The managers' accounts indicated a modest but salient role for management education suggesting its contributions may lie in the facilitation of managers' on-going learning to manage through a broadening and challenging of their understanding of management practice. This rather less dramatic role may in part be linked to the middle level positions occupied by the managers here and may illustrate a more nuanced understanding of the function of management education than notions of a simplistic technical model which would seem implicit to mainstream critiques of management education and the MBA.

Indicative of a more humble role for management education, the managers' accounts highlighted a belief that their MBA learning added to and complemented other learning relevant to their learning about managing.

Whilst managers generally acknowledged that most learning to manage was done informally, for example through trial and error and observation of others, supporting Fox (1994), their MBA learning was seen to make an important contribution, facilitating an enriched learning experience. This is illustrated by the manager below when explaining how MBA learning forms part of a bigger 'jigsaw' of his management learning experiences:

"*So it is an important part of a big jigsaw. The MBA on its own wouldn't be enough, nor would everything else I am doing be enough without the MBA. They genuinely fit together really, really well".* [Training Manager]

This would seem to suggest that an MBA education is necessary but not sufficient and represents a more modest (though important) contribution to management learning than is often supposed. Moreover, managers' accounts of their manager learning frequently pointed to its emergent nature (Watson and Harris, 1999; Watson, 2001a), and as such MBA learning was not seen to mark the end point of their learning journey but rather a contribution to their ongoing learning to manage. This is shown in the comment below where the manager talks of his MBA learning as improving his 'muddling through':

"I think the education, actually supports the muddling through and improves the way that you muddle through. So that the muddling becomes more productive and you have a sense of which bits are helpful to you and which bits aren't …you have to adapt, experience and adapt. The education helps in

that way, which is obviously related to this business of learning how to learn. And you become more skilled....at muddling". [Sales and Marketing Director]

This account would seem to indicate that an MBA education in some part aids the manager's on-going learning in the sense that the manager's words suggest that greater shape is given to such learning. Accordingly, MBA learning may perhaps be more usefully seen as making a contribution to the manager's emergent learning, and as such is not seen to 'make' a manager but rather as enhancing managerial practice. Indeed, one manager in our study questioned the assumption that an MBA is seen to make a manager and instead suggested that for him, the MBA was about 'wider things':

"*I read an article in the press about someone who had done an MBA, they were sort of saying how terrible it was, it didn't teach you how to be a manager and I kind of thought that they were missing the point about the MBA really in that it wasn't really about that, it was for managers about teaching them wider things*". [Housing Manager]

The manager here would seem to question the extent to which MBAs can be seen as directly functionally related to management practice in the sense of providing skills in 'how to' manage, rather his account makes a suggestion of broadening managerial understanding and as such is seemingly consistent with ideas articulated by critical scholars. This is to perhaps suggest a far less grand role for the MBA but as we shall see below this is not to deny its important contribution as described by its graduates.

According to the ways in which managers spoke of their MBA experience, it would seem that MBA learning is somewhat more complex than critics commonly assume, in terms of what is learned, how learning proceeds and in turn, the ways in which learning informs practice. Generally, the managers' descriptions suggested that the MBA predominantly involved them learning about themselves and others, and was seen more as a transformative experience rather than as an acquisition of technical knowledge and skills. Indeed, the learning talked about by the managers here seemed to be consistent with the notion of transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991). Crucially, this suggests that learning involves a reconstrual of meaning perspectives, significant in fostering personal and social change. Such learning would seem to be in stark contrast to the suggestion that the MBA mainly results in an over improvement of analytical ability (e.g. Leavitt, 1989; Mintzberg, 2004). Of interest, the transformative learning recounted here seemed largely to be associated with informal learning (Snyder, 1971), and more specifically to the experience brought to and lived within the MBA programme. This suggests that experience may already be leveraged in MBA programmes (Mintzberg, 2004), although this may often be unintentional. Given the account of MBA learning provided, it was perhaps unsurprising that the ways in which managers talked of their learning informing practice were subtle and indirect, but nevertheless personally salient. Notably, there was little suggestion of what Grey ad Mitev (1995) refer to as a 'technicist attitude' to management learning, which places an emphasis on learning techniques whose practical relevance should be readily demonstrable. Instead, their

accounts portrayed a sense of the manager 'seeing differently' which was seen to influence practice in complex ways.

The managers' accounts of their MBA experience seemed to reveal three broad outcomes of their MBA studies. The first way in which individuals spoke of what they had taken from the MBA experience can be described as broadened perspectives which depict the development of an awareness of alternative ways of thinking and doing. This was seen to be facilitated by, for example, working with others outside ones' organisation and visiting foreign countries as part of an international project, highlighting the salience of experience to the MBA learning situation.   An illustration of this reported outcome is provided by the manager below:

"*Opened my eyes, you see with being in just one company for so long it was useful to see what other people were up to and to see 'oh actually there are other ways of doing this'. So that was good to get a wider perspective".* [Strategy Planning Manager]

The 'opening of eyes' described here is somewhat different to allegations that MBA programmes foster a narrowing of managerial thought, with their claimed analytical overemphasis (e.g. Bloom, 1987; Leavitt, 1989; Mintzberg, 2004). Instead, our managers talked of an increased openness of thought, with a consideration of alternative ways of doing being seen to provide opportunity to re-evaluate accepted interpretations of managerial practice (Mezirow, 1991). In turn the managers' accounts suggested that such learning had important,

though often subtle, implications for their practice. Notably, an appreciation of alternative ways of thinking and doing was seen to facilitate the managing of relationships since an increased understanding of the position of others was often discussed:

"*I think whether you are in the public sector or the private sector, even though you do have some contact with others, there is a degree of distrust about motives and issues of control really, and I think it is important to sort of contextualise what different individuals are doing, why they do what they do… so it gives you the sort of confidence to address some of the things that other individuals come up with*". [Strategy Development Manager]

The broadening of perspectives may be seen to facilitate the manager in taking the position of others, thus speaking to the relational challenges of the managerial role. In the above example, the manager seems better placed in understanding the ways in which different individuals may think and act. This may seem rather ordinary and insignificant; however, if like our managers here, relational challenges are described as constituting a major part of everyday management activity, then such learning holds great significance for management practice. Furthermore, constructions of managerial practice which accentuate interpersonal relations echo a process-relational understanding of management activity (Watson, 2002), and as such a more sophisticated relationship between MBA learning and management practice is highlighted.

The second way, in which managers talked about what they had gained from the MBA, can be expressed as an enhanced sense of self. This refers to increased positive feelings toward the self, typically an increase in self confidence, self esteem and personal credibility. The influence of informal learning was again underlined in the managers' accounts as it was suggested that such positive feelings towards the self were related to coping with a masters level education, the achievement of the qualification itself, and taking part in novel and challenging experiences such as visiting new countries and undertaking consultancy projects. There was very much a sense of the individual engaging in a process of self discovery:

"*So it has helped me at both a personal and a professional level. I think it has really untapped something, I always believed that I had the potential but I was never quite totally comfortable with myself and now I feel as though the MBA has given me the platform to say actually yeah, I have developed that potential*". [Operations Manager]

As highlighted by the manager above, learning about the self was seen as central to the MBA learning experience. For this manager, the MBA provided opportunities to 'develop potential' which for him and many others, was associated with profound personal transformation. Again, Mezirow's (1991) ideas of transformative learning are echoed here. The MBA experience may be seen to provide opportunities for managers to challenge given ways in which they have come to see themselves, in turn inviting possibilities for salient personal change. Accordingly, such change was described as

informing practice in various ways. For example, managers often spoke of how they felt more comfortable in presenting personal views and notably, had begun to challenge the positions of others:

"*I suppose the confidence to share and approach things and challenge things. Whereas two years ago I would have been mortified if somebody thought what I said was stupid or whatever. So I have obviously grown a huge amount in my own confidence and ability".* [Communications Manager]

There is thus a suggestion of managers seeing themselves differently in practice, in the above example, as somebody who has worthwhile views and somebody who has a right to question others. Again, the implications for practice are rather more complex than an application of technique. Indeed, the intensity of the described changes suggests that MBA learning may be seen to be more pervasive than is often assumed.

The third way in which managers described the value of their MBA programme might be put as 'tools, techniques and theories' which tended to be more closely associated with formal learning. The label denotes the various ways in which managers referred to academic material presented during the course of their studies, however their accounts suggested a hidden complexity. Whilst the value of academic knowledge taken from the MBA programme was frequently emphasised by our managers, their accounts suggested that such knowledge was seldom directly applied to their practice. Rather they indicated that what was important for them, was the

understanding developed by academic material which provided new perspectives on their managerial practice. This is illustrated by the sales director below:

"*I took a language, references and models and a way of thinking which was enormously helpful in terms of I wouldn't be doing things and think oh on my MBA I did this, but I think it gave me time to reflect, to analyse processes, in a way which I would never have done had I not done the MBA".* [Sales Director]

The value of academic material is highlighted here, however again an indirect value to practice is proposed. The manager's explanation suggests that the academic material introduced in the MBA programme stimulates a process of reflection on management activity which presents possibilities for seeing through 'the habitual way that we have interpreted experience of everyday life' (Mezirow, 1991). Indeed, the manager here talks of the MBA providing a new 'way of thinking' which was often seen to entail the manager in understanding their practice more clearly. For example, the product manager below illustrates how her consideration of models of change management, helped her to make sense of the pain and uncertainty of change, which for her meant a decreased anxiety towards change situations:

"*We are going through a lot of change at the moment, just an example of how I think through some of the models, like now I have got teams that are going through motions, getting angry about things, they are getting upset about things and I know it is natural behaviour because we went through all of those*

change curves and I can kind of help to ease the pain I guess by talking them through... And even myself when I am feeling stressed or angry or upset I just know that I am at that stage of the change curve..... So it helps me to cope".
[Product Manager]

Therefore the accounts of our managers offer little suggestion of management education providing individuals with a set of techniques to be applied since the managers' talk avoided any expectations of the implementation of academic material being seen to yield obvious results for practice. Instead their accounts propose the value of academic material lies in the development of an enhanced understanding and ability to analyse managerial activity. Arguably, this may be seen to closely resemble a critical perspective of management education which avoids the promise of simplistic solutions to managerial problems (Grey and French, 1996). In turn, the implications for practice are somewhat subtle.

Overwhelmingly, the accounts provided here would seem to suggest a rather more positive MBA experience than is ordinarily assumed, and may be seen to highlight an example of successful UK MBA practice which demonstrates the modest but valuable effects of the leveraging of experience brought to and lived within the programme. Overall, the managers' talk of their MBA experience implies that the MBA for the manager is seen to be of greater value to practice than critics contend. Critics such as Pfeffer and Fong (2002) argue that the MBA is doomed since it demonstrates little if any value to manager performance. However, it has been proposed by the managers here

that whilst the value of the MBA may not be obvious and highly visible, or to put it differently, is seldom immediately useful, practical or relevant in a narrow sense, the genuine value to the practising manager should not be overlooked. The MBA experience as described here is not so much seen as making the manager but more modestly contributing to their ongoing learning to manage through a broadening and challenging of their understandings of practice. The MBA here may thus be seen to complexify managerial understanding. As such, the benefits of MBA study spoken about here are rather different from an acquisition of techniques and skills in any traditional interpretation. Instead, there is a suggestion of transformative learning with the identified benefits of MBA study often subtle and related to the hidden curriculum. Subsequently, a more sophisticated relationship between MBA education and management practice is highlighted.

Indeed, the suggested complexity of this relationship is perhaps unsurprising given that managers' accounts of practice frequently emphasised its relational dimensions. To construe practice in this way makes problematic notions of a simple transfer between management education and management practice. It might be argued that the ways in which managers described their practice and subsequently its relationship to their MBA learning resonates with critical understandings of management education and thus lends support to Grey (2004) who argues that CME can contribute to a more prosperous future for management education. In particular, we suggest that the centrality of learning about the self and others highlights a process of self-reflexivity which provides a space for critical management learning. Self reflexivity involves a

questioning of accepted ways of making sense of the world, and as we shall elaborate below, such questioning for us is fundamental to a critical perspective of management learning.

Prospects for the MBA and CME

There are numerous views within the critical literature as to what CME may entail (Mingers, 2000; Perriton and Reynolds, 2004; Watson, 2001b). Broadly, a critical approach to management education may be seen to involve "a redefinition of both what is to be learned and how learning is to proceed. A critical pedagogy… not only offers a challenging view of management as a social, political and economic practice, but does so in a way that stimulates student involvement of a kind that is rare in other forms of management education" (Grey et al, 1996: 109). This broad definition is however open to various interpretations and in particular the term 'critical' remains much contested. Mingers (2000) in addressing the very issue of what it is to be critical suggested that what different aspects of being critical seemed to share was "not taking things for granted, not just accepting how the situation seemed or was portrayed but questioning or evaluating such claims before deciding or acting" (p225). Thus what might be seen as fundamental to what is taken to be critical is the notion of 'problematising'. Indeed, for Grey et al (1996) this is seen to separate the critical from the uncritical.

The idea of problematising is also central to critical accounts of reflection which highlight distinctions between problem solving and problem posing.

Such a distinction is articulated by Mezirow (1991: 105) in his discussion of critical (premise) reflection: "the critique of premises or presuppositions pertains to problem posing as distinct from problem solving. Problem posing involves making a taken for granted situation problematic, raising questions regarding its validity".

Others writing from a critical perspective on reflection uphold this distinction (e.g. Reynolds and Vince, 2004a) and Reynolds (1998) contends that it is such critical reflection which forms the cornerstone of critical pedagogy. Indeed, it is such "critical self reflection on the context and practice of management which is seen to strengthen resistance to its mindless perpetuation" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1996).

Crucially, problematising is seen to add complexity to the learning situation since it introduces difference, tension and doubt. This echoes Chia's (1996) definition of reflexivity which involves 'complexifying thinking or experience by exposing contradictions, doubts, dilemmas and possibilities'. Similarly, Dehler et al's (2001) notion of complicated understanding has relevance here. This is described as "increasing the variety of ways [events] can be understood i.e. being able to see and interpret organisational phenomena and environmental events from more than one perspective" (p.498). Indeed, Dehler at al (2001) contend that complexifying understanding is at the heart of a critical pedagogy in contrast to traditional approaches concerned with simplification. Saliently, the complexity that is introduced through making learning situations problematic highlights the way in which what we take to be a given reality is

socially constructed, and in turn presents possibilities for change. As Alvesson and Willmott (1992: 435) argue what is central to critical theory is "the emancipatory potential of reason to reflect critically on how the reality of the social world, including the self, is socially produced and therefore, open to transformation".

For us then, what is fundamental to CME is an effort to problematise the learning experience. Such questioning is seen to complexify understanding which in turn is seen to highlight the social construction of our worlds inviting possibilities of ways of acting which are more sensitive to the intricacies of managerial work. However, this is not to reject some degree of functionality between management education and management practice. As Watson (2001b: 386) argues "it is quite unrealistic and possibly morally questionable for those employed in management education to turn their backs on the role that most of them are paid to fulfil as employees of business or management schools. This is a role in improving the quality of the practices which the managers and would be managers who enrol in those schools undertake". Here we concur with Watson's pragmatist conception of CME which accepts that some degree of functionality between management education and management practice must exist but questions the technicist thinking we described earlier. This is to suggest that management education has a role to play in the enhancement of management practice, though such a role may be rather less grand than is often supposed. In this vein, we discuss some possibilities for CME suggested by our study's findings.

Although arguments for CME are not new, CME tends to remain relatively marginalised (Grey, 2004). The continued challenge for supporters of CME is therefore to find ways of increasing its presence (Cavanaugh and Prasad, 1996). The findings here would seem to suggest that a form of CME is currently operating, if only accidentally. The challenge would seem to be how management educators can build on this and make such learning more explicit within MBA programmes. We suggested earlier that the informal learning of our MBA managers, which largely related to the experiences, brought to and lived within the programme, was essential to the expressed valued outcomes of the MBA. We propose here that this provides one potential opening for a more prominent CME. Indeed, it is increasingly recognised that lived experience may provide a promising vehicle for CME (Currie and Knights 2003; Grey, 2004; Reynolds and Vince, 2004b).

Learning 'from within experience' is central to Cunliffe's (2002) proposal of the inclusion of 'reflexive dialogical practice' in management learning as a way of developing a critical pedagogy. This is seen to locate a critical questioning in practice and self rather than concepts and ideologies. It is perhaps this form of criticality which most closely resembles the learning recounted by our managers here. Cunliffe proposes that fundamentally managers can be helped in developing a critical practice from within experience which may be achieved by helping managers develop "self reflexivity, an ability to question their own ways of making sense of the world" (p. 41). Here there is thus a concern with problematising experience which although primarily relates to the individual's experience, is infused with possibilities for a more fundamental

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analysis of management in terms of its social, moral and political significance. Drawing on the accounts of our managers, below we provide a number of examples which can be seen to illustrate managers learning 'from within experience', questioning their accepted understandings, dealing with dilemmas, tensions and possibilities, seemingly accentuated by difference brought to and lived within the programme. This may therefore be seen to suggest a complexifying of students' thinking.

Our research suggested that two forms of lived experience within the MBA programme were particularly salient in complexifying students' thinking. These related to working on an international consultancy project and the sharing of experiences with other managers on the programme. The international consultancy project requires students to spend a week overseas, working in small groups to tackle a selected issue. For our managers this was frequently a novel experience, since few had international responsibilities as part of their job roles. As discussed earlier, this project was seen to make contributions to what was valued in the MBA experience. Importantly, the managers' accounts suggested that the project work presented opportunities to experience different cultures and ways of living and in so doing raised the complexity of their thinking. For example, one manager described how her exposure to different ways of living and working as part of her consultancy project in an African country had stimulated a questioning of her management practice in the UK:

"*When I got back from Africa, the first sort of big project I had to do was to help implement a new tariff….and I am saying 'excuse me, I have just been to a country where there is no water, there is no sanitation, there is hardly any food and you want me to help you implement a [unfair] tariff'. And I know it is totally the wrong way of looking at it, but I just could not get back into this capitalism, this commercialism*". [Communications Manager]

The different ways of seeing introduced by the manager's consultancy experience described here can thus be seen to 'make a taken for granted situation problematic' (Mezirow, 1991). The manager is seen to question her actions (those concerned with the implementation of a new tariff) highlighting an uncomfortable comparison between the profit seeking tendencies of the West and the less privileged position of the African country visited. The consultancy project can be seen to accentuate the social norms and cultural codes which distribute power and privilege (Mezirow, 1991) often obscured by day to day management practice. A consideration of the wider context of management is thus evoked, along with a sense of unease in the performance of the managerial role. As Reynolds and Vince (2004a: 4) argue a critical perspective involves "a commitment to asking questions which may neither be comfortable nor welcome" and it is perhaps such discomfort which presents a central challenge to CME.

Other managers talked about how the different ways of organising introduced in their international projects, were seen to prompt a wider analysis of their practice in the UK. For example, the deputy chief executive below described

how his project experience of working with education providers in the US for him had opened up possibilities for better ways of doing:

"*In terms of the project….. a different way of doing things, particularly looking at the American models and how far better they are, how far advanced they are in interaction with businesses. I don't think even now we are anywhere near what they do, but that is partly to do with the mindset that businesses have not just the education [organisations] themselves".* [Deputy Chief Executive]

This suggests a different interpretation of organisational practice as a broader analysis of what may contribute to a more successful relationship between business and education is deliberated thus invoking consideration of the wider context of managerial work. Moreover, the introduction of alternatives ways of organising here may be seen to highlight the ways in which accepted practice is socially produced thus inviting possibilities for change (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992). The international project experience is therefore seen to be ripe with possibilities for critical learning since aspects of managing which are often hidden in the day to day practice of the manager seemingly reveal themselves stimulating a questioning of accepted ways of knowing, and thus complexify the manager's understanding.

The sharing of diverse experiences brought to the MBA classroom provides a further opportunity to introduce a complexity to the managers' thinking. This resonates with Mintzberg's (2004) proposition that the classroom should

leverage the managers' experience in their education. Our work suggests that this highly valued (though often unintentional) learning experience presents educators with a space to expose contradictions, doubts, dilemmas and future possibilities. Saliently, the diversity of managers' experience can be seen to place doubt in managers' accepted certainties, again highlighting the social production of their worlds, and in turn can be seen to encourage openness to new possibilities. Our managers frequently drew attention to their interaction with others from diverse organisational backgrounds, describing how this encouraged a questioning of taken for granted ways of organising and managing in their own organisation:

"*It was very rare that there were many more than two people from the same industry, so just chatting to people from different industries, how they went about their businesses and some things we did the same, and some things you did totally differently. And then to go back and question what we were doing which is what I tried to do in the last year at [company name*]". [Business Development Manager]

The manager here would seem to be raising questions of the 'way we do things round here', (echoing Deal and Kennedy's (1982) definition of culture) or to use the term offered by Mingers (2000) 'critiquing tradition'. Moreover, for this manager, the probing of local practice had in turn contributed to a more fundamental questioning of what it meant to be a manager:

"*I think the word manager is grossly overused. Everybody is a manager in a business from the person who sweeps the floor because of the impact they have, to the person who signs the contracts at the top, everybody manages. We tend to us the term as some form of social status…I think we put too much emphasis on the word rather than what people actually do and how they go about it*".

The manager here may be seen to make problematic the term 'manager', raising issues of power and privileged social status. Such critique resonates with Mant (1979) who similarly argued that in the UK there is a problematic emphasis on the 'being' rather than the 'doing' of management. Such questioning perhaps provides potential for practice which is sensitive to the inequalities often exacerbated by accepted management action.

The accounts of the managers also suggested that sharing of experience in the management classroom can provoke a consideration of personal possibilities. An operations manager described how moving out of his 'closetive world' into 'an environment where there is a cross section of people' challenged his assumption of a 'right' way of doing and instead encouraged an acceptance of multiple ways of acting:

"*You get very focused in your own environment and you think I can never do that job because Fred Smith does that, he's that sort of person…One of the things when I came on the MBA was that you are in this closetive world and then you have suddenly got this environment where there is a cross section of*

people from private sector, such as myself, public sector to charity sector people, and hear what they have got to say and the way that they approach things, I can actually benchmark myself against these people and I can actually hold my own, I am quite good! …It is appreciating that just because somebody does something slightly different to the way you'd do it, doesn't mean it is right or wrong…I have got a lot more, back to this word confidence again, to say well actually what about this and what about that". [Operations Manager]

The manager's interaction with diverse others may be seen to prompt a critique of authority (to again borrow from Mingers, 2000). The manager's introduction to difference seemingly challenges his assumption of one right or dominant view and encourages an acceptance of a plurality of divergent but equally valid perspectives. As Mezirow (1991) suggests the individual is seen to learn to "negotiate meanings, purposes and values critically...instead of passively accepting the social realities defined by others". Moreover, the manager's account suggests that his changed perspective in turn provides a confidence to further challenge his management practice.

The above examples serve to illustrate the potential of experience in facilitating critical learning within MBA programmes. We suggest that the experience which is brought to and lived in the MBA programme appears to crucially introduce difference which can be seen to reveal aspects of managing which remain taken for granted in day to day practice. Difference potentially makes accepted understandings problematic, thus adding

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complexity to the manager's ways of knowing. The doubts and dilemmas which follow provide opportunity for alternative ways of thinking and acting.

The critical learning which is seen to be evident here is a questioning in terms of practice and self rather than concepts and ideologies. As Cunliffe (2002: 40) notes in "working from within our experience the impetus for change can be far more powerful than that mediated by externally imposed frames". However, the possibilities for change created here are not necessarily seen as a move towards overturning structures and practices of domination, rather there is often an instrumental suggestion of better ways of doing. And we would argue that this is not necessarily a negative thing, if as we suggested earlier that a certain degree of functionality between management education and management practice must exist. We would suggest that within this functionality there is space for critically reflective practice which raises social, moral and political questions which provides possibilities for enhanced management practice. Such interrogation may be seen to raise awareness of the different ways in which situations or events facing managers may be framed and this provides possibilities for acting in ways which are more sensitive to the complexities of managerial work. This is however not to downplay the very real challenges in terms of sustaining such questioning in the face of ongoing organisational pressures (Legge et al, 2005).

Finally, we acknowledge that our paper has said something about the ways in which learning processes may inform a more critical agenda and have said little in terms of critical content. We of course recognise that critical content is

also salient in developing CME (Giroux, 1981). It is possible however that the examination of lived experience as described here may be seen to encourage an openness to new perspectives and ideas, including those contained in the critical literature.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the work here challenges conventional critiques of MBA programmes and suggests that the relationship between MBA learning and management practice is somewhat more sophisticated than often assumed. Arguably, mainstream critiques of the MBA are framed by a techncist model of management education which is seen to bestow a fictitious simplicity on managerial activity and in turn the relationship between management education and management practice. In contrast, the accounts of the managers' reported here, suggest a more refined understanding of both management practice and subsequently the contribution of management education to such practice. MBA learning is seen to make a modest but significant contribution to the managers' on-going learning, through the broadening and challenging of their understandings of managerial practice. In particular, the work demonstrates the valuable effects of the leveraging of experience within MBA programmes which represents a potentially useful way forward. Thus it may be proposed that the future of the MBA is more promising than often told. Moreover, the insights from the work here perhaps offer hope of providing MBA programmes which can satisfy both critical academics and management practitioners, since it is suggested that the

learning which is valued resonates both with a critical understanding of managing and critical accounts of the role of management education.

Notes

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Year 1	Year 2
• Business Policy and Performance • Financial Resources • Human Resources • Learning and Changing • Consultancy Project • Management Applications Project	• Thinking and Managing Strategically • International Consultancy Project • Dissertation • Elective 1 and 2 [Typical options include Constraints Management; Entrepreneurship and Business Development; Contemporary Issues in HRM; Operations Management]

Table 1: Programme Structure of the MBA Programme