Crisis Management as a Critical Perspective

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Introduction

> *"Private industry practices often exist in spite of evidence that shows they are*
>
> *harmful. Many managers are dedicated followers of fashion. They see other*
>
> *organizations doing something, and assume – quite irrationally – that they*
>
> *must have a good reason for doing so. They then copy it"* – (Tourish, 2011,
>
> p.26).

Tourish's comments are directed towards issues of appraisal, but they have a wider

relevance to business *practices* and to *management education.* First is the matter of

evidence-based management - organizations frequently had to take action based on

a limited, weak or ambiguous evidence base yet must do so within a context that

increasingly advocates transparency and accountability. The second issue concerns

the tendency for managers to search for template solutions to complex problems

(Fischbacher-Smith, 2014). Their underpinning logic is that if several organizations

can achieve success by employing a particular approach then presumably the

approach can be successfully copied. The third issue concerns the notions of

rationality and sensemaking in organizations. Managers typically assume that they

behave in a rational manner and yet history points to the limitations of that

rationality (Simon, 2000). It is against this background that business education has

come under a great deal of scrutiny. Critiques include perceived inadequacies in its

preparation of practitioners for a world that lacks evidence, does not fall neatly into silos, requires integrative rather than functionalist perspectives and questions the transferability of solutions from one organization to another (Grey, 2004, Schlegelmilch and Thomas, 2011). The aim of this paper is to reflect on long-standing critiques of MBA programmes, and to draw on a particular approach to teaching crisis management as a means of addressing some of the perceived shortcomings as well as the opportunities that MBA teaching can offer. We demonstrate how the subject matter of crisis management is intellectually consistent with a critical management approach, and moreover, lends itself to teaching and learning through problematizing, thereby addressing the theory-practice divide that too often characterizes MBA programmes. Furthermore, we propose that crisis management should, for reasons of academic logic, business logic and moral imperative, be given greater prominence in the MBA than is currently the case. The paper elaborates on the experience of developing and teaching a course on crisis management that has been delivered on MBA programmes in the UK, within the EU and in the USA.

Business education: A suitable case for treatment?

The MBA has a long history dating back to the mid 1950s, but it has seen substantial growth globally since the mid-1980s and is the flagship programme for the majority of business schools (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002, Currie and Knights, 2003, Schlegelmilch and Thomas, 2011). Unsurprisingly, therefore, MBA programmes have attracted a

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great deal of attention, with scrutiny of content, learning style and value to participants and their employers being the subject of much of that attention (Cunliffe et al., 2002, Neelankavil, 1994, Welsh and Dehler, 2007, Grey et al., 1996). This has been particularly marked in the aftermath of a series of organizational crises across a number of sectors. Widely cited critics of the MBA such as Leavitt (1989) Mintzberg (2004) and Pfeffer and Fong (2002) level much of their concern at the extent to which MBA programmes reflect real world problems and equip participants to be effective managers rather than strong analysts with functionally-oriented mindsets. The teaching process is also inextricably linked to this criticism with Pfeffer and Fong considering that "many programs operate on the basis of some incorrect assumptions about learning, thereby doing things that contribute to poorer learning outcomes" (p.8) and adopting inappropriate methods of instruction, often valuing theory and analysis over experience and observation. The lack of multidiciplinarity is also seen as a fundamental weakness of MBA programmes as this reinforces functional perspectives on real world problems rather than integrative perspectives on the major challenges that business face (Waddock and Lozano, 2013). Further concerns relate to the under-development of softer skills such as leadership or influencing skills, echoing aspects of Mintzberg's evaluation in 2004.

One caveat to such critiques is that they are often based on limited empirical evidence (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002, Hay and Hodgkinson, 2008, Armstrong, 2005)

and, as Hay and Hodgkinson argue, "an oversimplification of both management practice and the relationship between management education and management practice"(p.22). However, a consistent and unifying theme in the research is that of whether or not an MBA education adopts as sufficiently critical approach to management education and learning. Whilst there is little consistency in the use of the term 'critical', and a vast literature discussing it to which we cannot do justice here (see for example (Garcia, 2009, Currie and Knights, 2003, Grey, 2004)), we agree with Hay and Hodgkinson (op. cit.) who emphasize the importance of problematizing within an MBA programme, where:

> "...'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'.."
> (Source: Mezirow (1991) cited in Hay and Hodgkinson (2008, p.33))

Consistent with approaches elsewhere (Grey, 2004, Grey et al., 1996), Hay and Hodgkinson advocate problematizing as a means of adding "complexity to the learning situation because it introduces difference, tension and doubt" (p.33), highlighting the demands that this approach places upon the learning and teaching experience within the MBA. This not only encompasses the tensions surrounding theory and practice, but also requires both educators and students, to reflect on interpersonal relationships and notions of control within the lecture setting (Grey,

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2004). It also necessitates the use of pedagogies that allow students to "relate knowledge to their own experience of 'being in the world'" (Grey et al., 1996, p.100).

Crisis Management as Critical Management Education

Crisis management can be seen as readily compatible with a critical approach to management education and so unsurprisingly, its place on the curriculum has been debated by a number of established scholars in the field (Shrivastava, 1994, Pearson and Clair, 1998, Mitroff et al., 1988, Kovoor-Misra et al., 2000). Crisis management focuses on how the core paradigmatic views on management and business can be flawed and ultimately fail (Fischbacher-Smith and Fischbacher-Smith, 2013), thus challenging notions of control, and questioning the validity of core organizational assumptions about performance. Avoidance of crises requires critical analysis of organizational cultures, the role of expertise in decision-making processes, and the adequacy of organizational controls (Smith, 2006).   There are also strong links between corporate social responsibility and the various stages of a crisis (Tombs and Smith, 1995) aspects of management often identified as missing elements of the moral and ethical development of managers and leaders on many programmes (Waddock and Lozano, 2013, Schlegelmilch and Thomas, 2011).   As Shrivastava et al (2013) note, "High moral awareness is necessary because crises prompt questions about the legal and ethical responsibilities of corporations and managers to their immediate stakeholders as well as to the larger social system, the natural environment, and even future generations" (p.11).

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In addition to a convincing academic logic for the inclusion of a crisis management component within an MBA degree programme, is compelling business logic. Organizational crises during the last 30 years, have occurred across a range of organizational contexts as a result of various root causal problems including:

- socio-technical failures (Three Mile Island, Bhopal, Chernobyl, Challenger, Columbia);

- environmental problems and natural disasters (Exxon Valdez, Deepwater Horizon, Hurricane Katrina, and the Indonesian and Japanese tsunamis);

- medical and health issues (mad cow disease, foot and mouth, rogue doctors and other 'problematic' medical staff);

- failures of critical national infrastructure;

- intentional acts and organizational misbehaviors (terrorist attacks, fraud, and other aspect of professional and corporate irresponsibility); and

- leadership crises amongst financial services organizations political organizations in particular.

The economic, political, societal and environmental impact of such cases is such that it would arguably be remiss of any business school not to encourage attention on crisis prevention and mitigation. In all such cases, a characteristic that underpins the crisis is the inability of the organizations concerned to cope with the evolving set of task demands within the short time frame of the event (Smith, 2005). As a consequence, notions of managerial competence and skills and thus the relationship

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between theory and practice, become a central focus of crisis management teaching

and thus fit well with the calls of those advocating a critical management approach.

Teaching Crisis Management

"…..educators have a special responsibility to help students develop the creative

thinking skills required to imagine the unimaginable events that lead to crisis" -

(Cirka and Corrigall, 2010).

Although some business schools have introduced crisis management into their MBA

programme, they remain relatively few in number (Lalonde and Roux-Dufort, 2013).

Moreover, some of these schools offer courses that have a focus on reactive

approaches that emphasize business continuity and turnaround rather than crisis

prevention. We would not advocate this approach as it can downplay the causal

dynamics of why organizations fail and the role of management in that process

(Reason, 1990, Turner, 1994).

The crisis management course that we discuss here was designed for MBA students

specifically and has been delivered many times at institutions in the UK, Europe and

the USA. In response to concerns about functional, positivistic curricula that focus

on methods of control, the course was designed to specifically address and counter

such perspectives and as such, was designed as a stand-alone course establishing

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principles of critical management and critical pedagogy from the outset. It was also

designed to introduce notions of organizational failure, weakness in decision

making, and the prominence of uncertainty as normal characteristics of

organizations, rather than the exception. The logic of the course is that it requires

students "to consider the practices of 'management' through a range of analytical

lenses. The ultimate aim is to question the nature of evidence, the manner in which

it is collected and analyzed, the limitations of technical experts and their associated

domains of knowledge, and the processes by which the 'normal' routines and

processes of management can conspire to create conditions of failure" (Anonymous,

tbc).

There are two components of the term 'crisis management' and both are open to

interpretation and debate. Crisis, for example, has been debated for many years and

there is still considerable discussion as to its precise meaning (Kovoor-Misra et al.,

2001, Pearson and Clair, 1998, Pauchant and Mitroff, 1990, Shrivastava, 1994,

Smith, 1990), so too the related concept of 'disaster' (Quarantelli, 1998).   Equally,

there is debate about the concept of management within the context of crisis. In

part this has emanated from outside the management discipline. Gilpin and Murphy

(2008), for example, observe that,

> "……….. *initially hesitated to use the term management because it implies a*
>
> *level of control that, we argue, does not exist in most crisis situations. However,*

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management also implies a comprehensive, strategic worldview that we believe

is fundamental to understanding crisis" - (Gilpin and Murphy, 2008, p.7).

The essence of their critique is that the focus of management research on crisis is

not on the causal factors that lead to such events but on the contingency responses

to them, i.e. work that considers "what you do rather than why crises happen"

(Gilpin & Murphy, 2008, p.7). Essentially, Gilpin and Murphy approach crisis from a

communication studies tradition rather than from the large corpus of research in

management and organization studies that deals with crisis generation and

incubation (Perrow, 1984, Reason, 1990, Turner, 1976, Turner, 1994). In so doing,

their perspective neglects key areas of research and practice in crisis management.

Engaging students in debate about such definitions and their associated limitations,

allows early exploration of the influence of disciplinary perspectives on

fundamental considerations about crisis management, forms a key building block of

critique within our course, and builds towards the working definition of crisis for

the course which is:

a situation in which an event exceeds or comes close to exceeding the

capabilities of an organization to cope with the task demands that it faces.

There are some important implications arising from adopting this definition. Firstly,

crises are invariably situation-specific.   As such, a template-based approach is

unlikely to be satisfactory, and students must look deeply into the situation to understand why the crisis occurred. Secondly, any crisis is a function of the interaction between the organization, its core capabilities and resources, and the environment in which it operates. Students must therefore adopt a holistic perspective on the organization and its wider network, recognizing that such elements are temporally and spatially contextualized. Both considerations speak directly to the notion of *problematizing*, whereby core assumptions and norms of command and control are called into question.

Structuring a crisis management course

The course approaches these issues through a systems perspective (Checkland and Scholes, 1990, Fortune and Peters, 1995, Jackson, 1994) to enable the holistic approach that we and others believe is essential (Lalonde and Roux-Dufort, 2013, Shrivastava et al., 2013). In contrast to the reactive approach to crises that was highlighted earlier, our course is designed around the well-established notion of phase transitions that an organization in crisis will experience.

The transitions that organizations go through before, during and after a crisis then form the main sections of the course and are taught with roughly equal emphasis over the 21 hours' (3-day) delivery structure that typically applies. The first of these stages is the *crisis of management* phase (Smith, 1990) – that period in which

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the organization incubates the conditions for failure. It draws heavily on Turner's

work on error incubation (1976, 1978, 1994), the role of various forms of human

error (both latent and active) in giving shape to failure (Reason, 1997, Reason, 1990,

Tenner, 1996), issues around organizational cultures and their impact on decision

making and (mis-)behavior (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999, Czarniawska-Joerges,

1992, Janis, 1982, Mitroff et al., 1989), notions of highly reliable organizations (Guy,

1990, La Porte, 1996, Roberts et al., 1994), the processes of system design (Chiles,

2001, Perrow, 1984, Tenner, 1996) and the nature and value of precautionary

approaches in dealing with risk (Calman and Smith, 2001, Fischbacher-Smith and

Calman, 2010).

Much of the focus at this initial part of the course is on the ways in which managerial

decisions and actions create the very conditions in which crises can be generated.

Thus, following from the debates about definitions of crisis and differing approaches

to understanding the concept, students are immersed into an evaluation of the

problems that arise from management practice.   They are required to reflect on

their own, and their organization's practice, to identify where there are gaps in

controls and where individuals could subvert organizational custom and practice,

and indeed to consider where custom and practice could in fact be the source of a

crisis.   This need to reflect upon, evaluate, and reshape thinking and practice is

echoed through each stage of the crisis transition approach.

The second phase in this framework can be defined as the *operational crisis* (Smith, 1990). Here, the course attends to aspects of crisis management that managers are typically more aware of, i.e. the event that is associated with causing damage to the organization or its stakeholders. The critique here is associated with the adequacy of contingency plans, the competence of management to deal with the challenges that the organization faces, and whether organizations are able to adapt their decision making processes to cope with the task demands that a crisis creates. Communication processes (Fortune and Peters, 1995), crisis management team performance (Sasou and Reason, 1999, Smith, 2000, Smith, 2004) and the processes around damage limitation, containment and business continuity (Elliott et al., 2002) are all key elements of this part of the course. We also require students to consider the system issues that arise from the interconnected nature of organizations and organizational life, i.e. the range of formal and informal networks within and between organizations that can both be the means of dealing with a crisis (through shared resource and expertise) and the reason for difficulties containing a crisis thus further extending the notion of the limits of control (Fischbacher-Smith and Fischbacher-Smith, 2014).

The third phase – termed the *crisis of legitimation* (Smith, 1990)– is concerned with the events after the crisis; how the organization re-builds its reputation and credibility in the eyes of internal and external stakeholders. Also relevant here are wider interests such as regulatory reform (Tombs and Smith, 1995, Elliott and

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Smith, 2006), whether, and how, organizations learn from crises (Smith and Elliott, 2007) and how that shapes organizational approaches to the crisis of management phase in future and thus future crisis potential. This stage is particularly pertinent for two reasons. Firstly, we illustrate the ways in which paradigm blindness can hinder the organization from fully learning from a crisis – believing it to be a one off that will not happen again. Secondly, it is the learning from this phase that should inform the initial phase in future and students are expected to engage with how that might in practice occur when so many organizational structures, practices and routines prevent the types of changes that might have avoided the generation of a crisis in the first instance.

Importantly in the context of this paper, the phases of crisis themselves are evident of a critical management approach because they begin at the *crisis of management* stage of challenging assumptions and conclude with the learning loop encountered during the *crisis legitimation* that reflects on failures and seeks to inform the reframing of risk and crisis within affected organizations. Crucially then, the approach highlights the central role that management can play in the generation of crisis events. A crisis is not simply about the operational phase or even the processes by which turnaround processes occur but is a function of the core activities of management. It is the notion of a crisis *of* management – a central critique of the flawed assumptions of command and control – that forms the critical underpinnings of the course and allows students to reflect on the effectiveness of

organizational strategies as crises unfold. As such, a correctly constituted crisis

management course will apply the same analytical and critical lenses to the core

approaches to management in steady state as well as during a crisis. It should detail

the limitations of knowledge, the problems around a burden of proof and predictive

validity, the potential failings of expert judgment, and the limitations of control.

Critical Pedagogy

Currie and Knights (2003) stress that simply adopting a critical approach to content,

does not engender a fully critical approach to enquiry and learning and that the

relationship between student and teacher must also be scrutinized.   Student

participation is essential, but alone, insufficient. Rather, the openness required to

question and challenge is likely to require educators to "move to an approach where

they cannot so easily hide behind the 'authority' of their discipline and expertise'"

(p.33). There are many challenges associated with a critical approach that Currie

and Knights highlight, in particular international students' interpretations of such

changes in the balance of power and expertise (see also Currie (2007)), but the

value of dialogue between participants, the ability to draw on their own experience

in the workplace, and the opportunity to debate differences in responses to case

studies and theories, emerge as essential ingredients of a valuable MBA learning

experience (Hay and Hodgkinson, 2008, Armstrong, 2005). It is precisely these

interactions that we seek to engender from the outset on this course. By beginning

with debates about definitions and disciplinary approaches to crisis management,

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we legitimize differences in perspectives and emphasize the learning that comes

from understanding and integrating differing approaches to organizational

problems. The use of case studies, aids us yet further.   Cases are arguably essential

in the teaching of crisis management given both the merits of the case study

approach (Shrivastava et al., 2013) and the fact that few participants may have had

any experience of managing a crisis such that they can reflect on their own practice.

Case studies, if carefully selected, help illustrate the variation of approach taken in

mitigating and managing crises.   More specifically:

> "Cases provide practical, relevant examples, that can be linked to executives'
>
> prior experiences; anchor concepts and theoretical frameworks in accessible,
>
> analogous settings; provide drama and colorful stories that improve
>
> attention and retention; stimulate involvement and class participation; and
>
> couple knowledge acquisition to decision making and action" (Garvin, 2007,
>
> p. 364).

We combine the use of historical cases such as Space Shuttle Challenger and 9/11

with more recent cases, and develop contemporary cases from the world news in

the preceding weeks and months of the course. This approach draws extensively on

print, internet and television media to combine sources for crisis situations that

students can consider as they unfold or, alternatively, review the learning as

organizations go through the crisis of legitimation phase (e.g. the financial crisis, the

breast implants scandal, and more recently, the Ebola outbreak). We also make use of scenarios, requiring students to adopt stakeholder positions within a hypothetical or current crisis and to retain that perspective and role that as the crisis event unfolds. (See (Anonymous, tbc) for further discussion of our approach.)

Such teaching methods, when embedded within a course that is essentially critical in nature, offer a rich opportunity for students and teachers. Indeed, it is the nesting of these teaching approaches within a course philosophy that embodies a critical management approach, that we believe adds considerable value to the intellectual learning and skills development of our students.   Of course a key aspect of teaching and learning is assessment. Here we require students to undertake a reflective analysis of their own organization or one with which they are familiar and to provide an account of the ways in which the limits of control are manifest within that organizational setting such that there may be vulnerabilities that require the attention of managers.   The purpose of the assessment is to draw on theory examined in the course, but to ensure the link between theory and practice is articulated clearly by the students and demonstrated as one of the core learning outcomes of the course. Also essential though is the element of personal evaluation and reflection and students are expected to identify managerial actions that they could/would take to lessen the likelihood of crisis generation.

Conclusions & Implications

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The inclusion of crisis management within an MBA provides an opportunity to consider the ways in which organizations function, the nature of managerial decision-making, and the ways in which uncertainty is incorporated into organizational control systems. It provides an effective critique of the rationalist approaches to decision-making and offers alternative perspectives, often drawn from other academic disciplines, on the ways in which we incubate the potential for failure as a function of our normal ways of working.

There are several implications that arise from this approach. Firstly, the course challenges the notion that what can be measured can be managed. A key element of the approach taken within the course concerns the role that emergence plays in undermining the control systems that organizations have in place. Secondly, the course also challenges the role and importance of the paradigm within which managers work. This also has implications for the command and control culture that dominates many MBA programmes and which has proved to be important in shaping a range of organizational crises. Thirdly, by considering a crisis across a number of stages, it is possible to show how managerial interventions can themselves lead to an escalation of the crisis. This highlights the important role that uncertainty plays in the managerial decision making process. Fourthly, the course brings the question of organizational learning, and the range of barriers that appear to prevent learning from taking place, directly into the critique that is made of organizational theory and management development. A key message from the

course is that of life-long learning – something that is often preached within business schools but not always practiced. Finally, the course has a focus on the role and nature of expertise within the process of management. It requires both the students and the staff to reflect upon the nature of their own knowledge domains and the gaps that exist between the task demands generated by a crisis (from incubation through to recovery) and the capabilities that we each have. This can be a painful process of introspection but one that has significance for the ways in which students then consider the remainder of the programme.

Ultimately, the challenge for business education around the teaching of crisis management is a relatively simple one - it is to ensure that students have a greater awareness of how management theory might fail in practice. This is not to jettison all theory, on the contrary as we have sought to demonstrate, the course draws extensively on a range of theories pertinent to the topic. However, it is a firm objective to evidence the limitations to theory, to juxtapose competing theories, and to illustrate the benefits of integrating theories and disciplines.   We have argued that crisis management fits well within an MBA curriculum when considered from an academic, business and moral perspective. More specifically, it is our contention here that such a course should be part of the core curriculum for an MBA degree and explored through a critical pedagogy, as it challenges some of the mainstream views of control purported within business education.

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