Blurred practice: Creating a community of reflective practitioners in management education

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ABSTRACT This paper attempts both to weave and to unravel conceptual links that may occur in the process of creating a learning community in a department of management. The intention is to assess synergies to be gained from exploring the labyrinth of paradoxes that exist in and between research, education, strategy and organization. We think there are and that they may be illuminated by considering a management department as a community of reflective practice. This paper provides and invites commentary on the conceptual basis for such a project.

The metaphors of Petri dish, soup, and tapestry come to mind as one considers community of practice, learning to teach and teaching learn, management education and the management of education, organizational learning and the learning organization, the teaching of strategy and the strategizing about teaching, and so on. The argument is that when lecturers reflect communally on their practice as educators and consider how they organise and strategise their teaching they may well enrich both their teaching and the content of their organization and strategy courses.

Keywords: management education, communities of practice, learning

INTRODUCTION

In 1980 Clifford Geertz wrote “Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought”. The term “blurred genres” became an important reference in the social sciences literature, used by, for example, Denzin and Lincoln (1998) to characterise a phase in the history of qualitative enquiry. Geertz’s point was that a qualitative change was occurring in the way we think about what we think.

This essay invites discussion on blurred practice. What do we do when we teach strategy and strategize about our teaching; teach reflectively and reflect on that; question the very existence of management as we teach the subject; treat strategic management as organizational learning; design strategies for designing organizations; learn to teach and teach to learn; analyse organizational learning and the learning organization; reflect on organizations and organize reflection, and so on? One could endlessly elaborate such compoundings in strange loops, lemniscates, endless knots and Ouroboros-type models. As Geertz made clear, it is more than just language that is at issue. This paper explores how we might end up both practising and thinking differently about how we educate managers. The blurring of practice, it is suggested, provides an opportunity to capitalize on synergies that exist in educational moments. We could change the way we think about management education.

Conceptually, our community of practice (CoP) will be a Petri dish, soup, and/or tapestry. The variety of metaphors reflect the variety of processes that take place in the practice of teaching and learning, and research and management; cultivation and conversion, admixture, transformation and creation, weaving and unravelling, and patterning and re-patterning. The question arises of how the concepts we teach become part of our practice as teachers and the extent to which our practice is marked by the concepts we teach;
Furthermore, how do these processes contribute to the department becoming a learning department embedded in a larger learning organization.

In the next two sections, CoPs are examined in the context of business and education, followed by consideration of how practice in both these fields may be blurred. The next section considers organizing, learning and reflecting, which leads to a consideration of paradox and advances the analysis of blurred practice.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN BUSINESS

The concept of CoPs owes much to Etienne Wenger (1998) who has more recently applied it to organizational design and knowledge management (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Wenger and Snyder define CoPs as ‘groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise… [they] may or may not have an explicit agenda… people in communities of practice share their experience in free-flowing, creative ways that foster new approaches to problems… its primary “output” – knowledge – is intangible’ (p. 140). Because of their organic, spontaneous and informal nature, they are resistant to supervision and interference and cannot be mandated and managed. They require cultivation and their value has to be measured in non-traditional ways.

Wenger and Wenger and Snyder do acknowledge limitations to their concept and there have been other critiques of CoPs and their work (Roberts, 2006; Contu & Willmott, 2003; Fox, 2000; Handley et al., 2006; Marshall & Rollinson, 2004; Mutch, 2003). These can be usefully summarised under power, trust and pre-dispositions (Roberts, 2006). At the heart of a CoP is a high level of shared meaning. A CoP may, however, become excessively quiescent and consensual, and pressures from various sources can inhibit the will and ability of workers to negotiate meaning. Thus local knowledge may be set against expert knowledge. The power relations of the encompassing organization may be reflected in the CoP. CoPs are predicated on high levels of trust, and the promise is that they engender it. This is especially suitable for knowledge organizations since trust, familiarity, and mutual understanding are prerequisites for the successful transfer of tacit knowledge (Roberts, 2000). However, ‘the ideology and practices that constitute management tend to undermine the foundation on which trust is built’ (Coopey, 1998:366). A further limitation is that ‘community of practice theory tells us nothing about how, in practice, members of a community change their practice or innovate’ (Fox, 2000:860). Paradoxically then, while CoPs may support the accumulation of incremental knowledge developments, they may reduce the scope for radical innovation (Roberts, 2006:630). Roberts suggests a need to refocus Lave and Wengers’ (1991) original concept of CoPs as a context of situated learning, a point developed further by Handley et al. (2006).

The issues of power and trust and the problem of quiescence arise in education as they do in business. In education too, what matters is intangible and tacit. There is also the paradox that attempts to directly evaluate and manage that which is valued may destroy it.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE IN EDUCATION

There is much to be gained from exploring CoPs in tertiary education (Viskovic 2005). The value of CoPs in education revolves around the ideas of the professional learning to exercise judgement through an educational process (Gonczi, 2001). In a kind of cognitive apprenticeship, adults learn to deal with ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel, 1972) and get access to knowledge that traditional instructions do not offer, because such knowledge is usually tacit (LeGrand Brandt et al., 1993:167).
The link with situated learning is common (cf Handley et al., 2006). Malcolm and Zukas (2000) list ‘educator as situated learner within a community of practice’ as one of five pedagogic identities found in higher education. Knight and Trowler (2001:150) advocate continuing professional practice in departments, because central staff development provision can be ignored by the disengaged, whereas ‘the community of practice approach to CPS is about trying to distribute expertise among team members’. Harwood and Clarke (2006) claim that CPD can be gained through CoP and their research claims that the focus on student learning has led to more CPD.

In general, but perhaps especially in business and management, the competencies required to teach in a modern framework have changed. Content and pedagogy now have to be understood by teachers (Quinlan, 1998; Pennington, 2000; Pharr, 2003). Teachers need to build bridges between students learning and their own understanding (Marton & Booth, 1997) and research their own practice (Entwistle, 1998). Such research should inform curriculum design, delivery and assessment (Prosser & Trigwell, 1999). Sharing of experiences also has the potential to create cultural shifts in education, which some educators (Edgerton et al., 1991; Langenberg, 1992) regard as a fundamental responsibility. Quinlan’s (1998) claim that the best means of learning about teaching is through peer groups sharing experiences is built on by McKenzie (2002), who suggests it is this sharing of experience that provides the necessary focused long-term systematic approach to professional development. Pedler et al. (1989) state that for learning teams to succeed the environment should encourage individual members to develop potential through experimentation and learning from each other, in an ongoing process of change. The results, it is claimed, will be mutual trust, exchange of information and commitment to achieving goals (D’Andrea-O’Brien & Buono, 1996; Quirke, 1995). Establishing professional communities can ameliorate resource constraints and some of the deleterious effects of overwork common in education (Mann, 1999).

The core of a learning community is ‘authentic’ learning (Gross & Kientz, 1999; Newman & Wehlage, 1993), which is constructed by collaboration (Brockbank & McGill 2000). Such environments, rather than isolated individuals, are better able to improve student learning and evolve with the needs of the student community. Garmston (1997) has argued that collaborative teams learn more, work more effectively, and are more emotionally stable and committed to outcomes. The impact on students may be measured in terms of higher order thinking, depth of knowledge, connectedness beyond the taught environment, substantive conversation and social support (Gross & Kientz, 1999). In the teaching team, it is the higher order engagement with the process of exchange between members and continuous professional development (CPD) that leads to an enhanced student experience, Harwood and Clarke claim (2006).

It seems that CoPs in education address many of the issues addressed by CoPs in business: the problems of quiescence, issues of power and trust, and expert knowledge between teachers and between teachers and students. What matters is not only intangible and tacit but difficult to measure and there is a danger that the interests of the bureaucracy may override and even harm the educational process. It seems worth investigating whether or not an intentional blurring of the practices of both management and education can lead to more effective management education.

BLURRING THE PRACTICE: MANAGING AND EDUCATING

Just how do management and education intertwine and what do they have in common? The general assumptions of the value and role of management have long been subjected to critique (Grey & French, 1996; Burgoyne & Reynolds, 1997; Alvesson & Willmott,
1996). It remains arguable whether management is quantifiable, manageable and teachable. Grey (2005) has persistently questioned the claims of management education on the grounds that it cannot exert control over others, and that therefore the pretensions of management education to teach techniques for effective management are unfounded. The conceit of management that managers take actions ‘that lead to predictable outcome and only to those outcomes’ is a false aspiration. The real influence of business schools is in socializing students into believing this conceit. Since Aristotle, the purpose and methods of education in the West have been questioned. According to Nash (2006), one of the most common areas of disagreement among educational theorists concerns the purpose of education. Ultimately, as the well-known educationalist RS Peters has stated, ‘all education is self education’. Greene (1995:20) similarly concludes ‘there is no summing up the themes of what counts as Philosophy of Education’, but writes of initiating the young into a conversation whilst bearing in mind ‘that the great conversation, like culture itself, becomes subject to transformations by means of critique and reflexivity’. In both management and education, ontology, epistemology and methodology are contested. Perhaps this why there are so many metaphors in both fields.

There have been many metaphors for strategy, and a recent proliferation thereof. The concept needs new metaphors, especially those that ‘bring life to the human dimension of creating new futures for institutions’ (Liedtka, 2000:8). The metaphor of a potter working with clay was developed by Mintzberg (1987) partly in reaction to the strategy as design school. It is Liedtka’s resuscitation of the design metaphor, his defence of strategy as design that links strategy with education. In drawing on Jefferson’s creation of the University of Virginia, Liedtka emphasises the concept of ‘a space’ – not buildings or specific place, so much as a space linked to the design process – ‘one in which the values and purpose, the nature of the terrain, capabilities of the draftsmen, and a host of other elements are brought together to create a purposeful space – a space that recognizes the power of both form and function, of both the aesthetic and the pragmatic” (page 11). Such a linking of strategy, design, space, process and education, invites conversation, and not unsurprisingly just as Greene above could speak of education as conversation, it is possible to speak of strategy as conversation (Liedtka & Rosenblum, 1996).

One may develop this line of thinking in terms of a CoP in management school or a department of management, i.e. in terms of being an educator in management education. We claim to be educating; what we are actually doing is creating those conditions of order which, we believe, have the highest potential to intersect with an infinite number of unpredictable possibilities to create a certain outcome. We have set up conditions and processes (school, university, workshops, courses – a technological apparatus) in conjunction with irrational, infinite, and unpredictable entities, such as a teacher, student, location, time, event and so on, which, we hope, maximises the chance of a favourable outcome - ‘educatedness’. It is difficult for one to discern patterns, much less reasons for the patterns. Donald Schon (1983), inspired by his observation of architects, described design as ‘a shaping process’, in which the situation ‘talks back’. It is akin to Mintzberg’s notion of the potter shaping clay, and of course there are many similar metaphors in education (Fox, 1983; Fox, 1997). Educators constantly work the paradox of not wanting to lose control, even while they repeatedly assert that their aim is to create independent, autonomous, self-educating individuals. It would appear that management and education as professional practices have much in common. Change lies at the heart of both, and the provocation of change and the organization of coherent responses to it are central to the practice of both. There is already a substantial literature on the blurring of organization, learning and reflection which invokes the role of conversation.
ORGANIZING, LEARNING AND REFLECTING

The learning organization (LO) is ‘a place where people are continually discovering how they create their reality’ (Senge, 1990:12). The LO concept is attractive because of the way it draws on many prevalent and popular themes. Senge’s concept of LO has much in common with Nonaka’s and Takeuchi’s ‘knowledge-sharing company’ (1995) and Quinn’s ‘intelligent enterprise’ (1992), and a useful summary of the LO is offered by Pedlar et al. (1991). The ideal LO does not have to be made to change and adapt: it does it ‘naturally’ as an organism adapts naturally to changes in the environment (Salaman & Asch, 2003:156). The learning organization, however, comes up against the fact of organizing itself. There are essential features of organization that clash with the ideal state for constant learning, adaptation and innovation. Organization is comprised of hierarchies and structures. Efficiency requires repetition. Therefore, the mere fact of organizing processes effectively interferes with the ideal of open-ended learning. The politics and culture of organization mean that information will be distorted, abused or censored. Special interests will distort both scanning and feedback. Group think and dominant logic also distort clear information processing. Another point is that managers learn to solve recurring problems by relying on routines. Such routines then interfere with clear information processing. On the other hand, learning itself is facilitated by a variety of subtle recurring patterns of behaviour. It is habits, conventions and routines that underpin learning and make it possible. The very act of human scanning and organizing of information sets limits to that which can be thought about. In so many ways, it seems, organising and learning have to be set against one another. Effective learning in the context of organization requires that learning takes place across the organization (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1998), that it be continuous and distributed (Hughes, 1984), that it overcomes the design-implementation split (Hamel et al., 1989), and that even major innovations ‘are best managed as incremental goal-oriented interactive learning processes’ (Quinn, 1995:82). Organizational learning ought to be a routine and frequent part of organizational functioning (Teece & Pisano, 1998:201). The link with CoPs is implied by Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1998) notion of redundancy. Redundancy in information-sharing and job allocation encourages frequent communication and dialogue, which creates the common cognitive ground, which then facilitates the transfer of tacit knowledge.

This means the organization has to cope with paradox. Bahrami (1998) identifies three features of the ideal organization: agility, versatility and flexibility. To be effective the organization must be both organic and mechanistic, structured and chaotic. The point is to build a climate. ‘[I]t is not so much great single issues but rather a pattern of interwoven problems. The skill in leading change therefore centres on coping with a series of dualities and dilemmas’ (Pettigrew & Whipp, 1991:165–6). The operation of an organic system of management hinges on effective communication in which status, technical prestige, functional preserves and other common features of organization can have little part to play. They are, however, the features that can be found in CoPs (Burns & Stalker, 1991).

Some indication of how this may be achieved in a classroom has been described by Mazen et al. (2000), who draw on organizational learning (OL) as opposed to LO because of its less prescriptive nature and greater focus on learning as opposed to organization (Easterby-Smith, 1997). Mazen et al.’s point is that ‘The class is [the students’] real learning life, not a rehearsal for some sort of learning to be lived later, elsewhere’ (p.154). They too take change to be an integral and core part of learning (Argyris, 1993; Bateson, 1973; Vince, 1996).

In terms of encouraging the blurring of practice between management and the teaching of management in the single academic department or management school, one needs also to blur or at least make more permeable the distinction between individual reflection and
collective reflection. One may collectively organize reflection (Reynolds & Vince, 2004). This invokes the concept of CoPs (or what Joe Raelin in the introduction to Reynolds and Vince calls ‘communities of participation’), which allows for ‘a recursive yet inherently organized dialogue that can accommodate multiple frames of reference’ of collaborative projects in which people are engaged (p. xii). This is the situation in an academic department, and as communal reflection brings to the fore the importance of questioning, the role of emotions, especially uncertainty and vulnerability, and the socio-political nature of the enterprise, it illuminates the commonality of the profession of management and education. It makes its paradoxical and complex nature more obvious, and potentially contributes to a radical learning, and to a fundamental questioning of the way we do business today (Markides, 2001). Collective reflection suggests conversation.

The role of conversation in the process of change (and change is at the heart of strategy and education) is widely acknowledged (Barrett et al., 1995; Deetz, 2003; Heracleous and Barrett, 2001; Quinn, 1996). For some writers, conversation is viewed not simply as the tool for communicating change, but as the very medium through which change occurs (Ford & Ford, 1995:592). It is in this context that Jacobs and Heracleous (2005) can examine reflective dialogue as an enabler of strategic innovation.

Jacobs and Heracleous’ (2005) framework links strategy innovation, mental maps and reflective dialogue. They discuss mental models within CoPs. Mental models are ‘highly local and contextual and are developed primarily in the context of social and cultural practices, through discursive interaction’ (p. 341). They refer to Fish’s (1980) ‘interpretive communities’, and link the concept with Brown and Duguid’s (1991) CoPs. In discussing what is required for new mental models and new understanding – in strategic terms we are talking of organizational renewal and strategic innovation, in educational terms we are talking of – well, education – Jacob and Heracleous point out that ‘innovation per se cannot be designed, but can be designed for, where the conditions fostering innovation can be put in place’ (p. 241). The resonances with designing an educational space as Liedtka claims Jefferson was doing, are clear.

PARADOX AND RELATED CONCEPTS

There is another set of concepts that illuminate the commonalities between management and education. Both practices have to confront paradoxes and related concepts. Paradox, like design, has an interesting history in strategic thinking and in education (Clegg et al., 2002; Eisenhardt, 2000; Huxham & Beech 2003; Lewis, 2000; Smith & Tushman, 2005) and quite specifically in management education (Lips-Wiersma, 2004). Indeed De Wit and Meyer (2004) have long used it as an organizing principle of their widely-used textbook. In the context of managing strategic tensions, De Wit and Mayer distinguish between a puzzle as a challenging problem with an optimal solution, and a dilemma as a vexing problem with two solutions, neither of which is logically the best, and each with its own advantages and disadvantages, but where a choice has to be made. A trade-off is a problem situation with many solutions, each striking a different balance between two conflicting pressures. A paradox is a situation when two apparently contradictory or even mutually exclusive factors appear to be true at the same time – it is a problem with no definitive solution. One hopes for a workable reconciliation to cope temporarily. De Wit and Meyer (2004) propose ten such paradoxes (not all of them equally pertinent to the teaching situation). The first three, for example, address rational reasoning versus generative intuitive reasoning, strategic planning versus strategic incrementalism, and discontinuous renewal versus continuous renewal.
There is a danger of being rather glib about applying these paradoxes to the teaching process. Nevertheless one might usefully ask in what ways is the practice of teaching rational or intuitive, to what extent can an educational process be planned, and whether learning is a series of ‘Aha!’ moments or the steady accumulation of insights. One might ask if it is better for the teaching process to be dominated by the strengths of the teacher or the demands of the learner or if the bureaucratic demands of an educational system deserve greater weighting than the divergent learning styles of “customers”. In terms of being discrete or embedded, most teachers are familiar with being at odds with the system in which they operate, and how this affects their teaching; it would appear that the ability to discriminate between and face up to puzzles, dilemmas, trade-offs and paradoxes is fundamental to the professional practice of managing and teaching.

Such an analysis has been applied in education by Rowland (1993:27), who distinguishes between two models of teaching he calls didactic and exploratory, and proposes what he calls an interpretive model, in which the tutor’s [lecturer’s] inquiry takes place in the negotiation and reflection phases of the work. Such inquiry is something the tutor does as a central part of teaching and gives rise to what Rowland calls dilemmas. Dilemmas present a fundamental conflict of value or principle that requires the exercise of judgement; ‘The ability to recognize and face professional dilemmas is fundamental to the concept of professionalism’ (Rowland, 1993:35).

The first dilemma is that of infinite regress: How do we negotiate ground rules when we need ground rules to conduct the negotiations? A problem here is the covert power of the tutor, and the distinction between a ‘surface’ negotiation and ‘deep’ negotiation. The second dilemma is that of unpredictability and risk. Learning involves change, and may even involve pain – what right has the tutor to subject students to the risk of pain? On the other hand, if outcomes must be ensured at the start, then what, beyond the crudest technicality, can be learned? The third dilemma is the dilemma of structure. This revolves around individual differences, the problems of domination and of clarifying needs, and the ability to cope with uncertainty. Inability to cope with uncertainty is often experienced as a need for structure. Finally, there is the dilemma of the tutor’s inquiry. This relates to Rowland’s central question: How can tutors be both researchers into their own practice and tutors at the same time?

This is an example of a true strategic and educational issue that poses a wicked problem. Rittel’s (1972) contrast of ‘tame’ and ‘wicked’ problems helps us identify further features of professional management and teaching practice. Tame problems can be exhaustively formulated and written down separately from what their solution might be. There is a list of operations that can be used to solve the problem. By contrast, wicked problems have no definitive formulation – understanding them is synonymous with solving them. There is no single criterion to decide if a solution is right or not. There is no enumerable list of permissible operations for solving the problem. Every wicked problem is a symptom of another problem, and every problem is unique. Resonances between wicked problems, dilemmas and paradoxes can be appreciated. It seems in fact they constitute a profession qua profession: they are the very stuff of management and education. Becoming a professional results from an accumulation of a myriad of relatively minor delights and frustrations, involving emotional, ethical and pragmatic considerations. It is not easy to access this experience, hence the use of methods such as fiction (Ruth, 1998; Pelias, 2004). This is what makes CoPs and modes of reflective inquiry such as journaling and reflective dialogue valuable. Trust, so important in the practice of management and teaching, also bears on the mode of inquiry. It is quite reasonable for educational and management research to increasingly use ‘mode of inquiry’ rather then ‘research methodology’ to signal inquiry conducted in a qualitative rather than quantitative research...
framework (Kinichelo, 2003; Ashworth, 2004; Pring, 2000). The analysis proceeds tentatively, accepting the complexity involved in inquiries by the self-reflective practitioner (Fish, 1991; Murray & Lawrence, 2000).

CONCLUSION

“We educate children. We train monkeys, dentists and doctors. But we develop managers and there are important differences between these three verbs” (Paauwe & Williams, 2001: page?). There is vigorous debate over what exactly comprises education, training, development and learning, but the focus in this paper is on the commonalities of management and education and the claim that as practices, they have much common.

For example, the following could apply equally to management or education, referred to as ‘the practice’. A huge investment is made in the practice, both publicly and privately. Substantial benefits are claimed in the name of the practice; there is some evidence for some of these claims, but it is highly contingent and contested. There is no consensus on the purpose of the practice, and therefore little consensus on what the practice should comprise. In fact, there is debate on the actual possibility of the practice. Every issue raised in the practice seems to be a wicked issue. The practice is intensely relational and context specific; the more it is abstracted and generalised, the more theoretically vague and vacuous it becomes. There are conflicting traditions in the practice, with one tending to deny its ideological nature by reducing it to ‘what works in practice’, while another insists on foregrounding the ideological and political nature of the theory and the practice. One school of thought claims the practice should serve the interests of society (sometimes equated with the interests of the economy) and is in conflict with another school of thought claiming that it should serve the specific interests of those who have invested directly in it. No doubt readers could elaborate on this, and sooner or later the parallels would begin to crumble. One should also consider some distinctions between education and management. We offer some suggestions that might illumine the features of each of them.

It seems easier to accept instrumentality in management than instrumentality in education, although one should acknowledge that there is in both a range of instrumentality. Notwithstanding this, there is an element of a calling in the sense of professional vocation in education that does not exist in management. Education has, at least in the West, been considered an activity in its own right for centuries – it has a philosophy, albeit contested. Management has only recently come into focus, or been created as a profession, a practice and a theoretical body of knowledge – it awaits a philosophy.

This paper has suggested that there are synergies to be gained from exploring how we manage our teaching of management, how we organize our teaching of organization and how we strategise about teaching strategy. That there is no consensus on what constitutes management or education is cause for relief. That management education should be as contested as it is must be welcomed. Such an important function in a society should never be settled. In our view, CoPs provide a useful context for the constructive contestation of the importance granted to these functions. To refer, once again, to the eminent anthropologist Clifford Geertz and paraphrase his understanding of interpretive anthropology, it may be that if management education has an office in this world, it is in pursuit of fugitive truths about the purpose of managing and educating (Geertz, 1983:16).
REFERENCES


