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Learning by Design: developing practice based learning design – a case of the MBA
development

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LEARNING BY DESIGN: DEVELOPING PRACTICE BASED LEARNING – A CASE OF MBA DEVELOPMENT

Abstract

Framed within the ongoing criticisms of MBA education and within the context of curriculum development, we explore our own learning in the design process and early delivery of a stage 1 module for a distance learning MBA programme. We use reflective dialogue to explore emerging issues of academic expertise, collaborative working and practice-based learning in both our own practice as educators and in the learning journey we have designed for students. In so doing, we emphasise two areas of learning design – the locus of learning and the focus of learning – and make some recommendations for developing learning design that supports practising managers. (102 words)

Key words

MBA, practice-based learning, learning design, reflective practice, autoethnography

Introduction

The MBA is a qualification intended for people with management experience and those wishing to build management careers and improve their management practice. Yet criticisms of the MBA question its traditional MBA structure, design and purpose (Brocklehurst, et al. 2007; Mintzberg 2004; Mintzberg and Gosling 2002), especially given the diverse and challenging needs of managers in an increasingly complex and challenging environment (Brocklehurst, et al. 2007; Culiffe and Linstead 2009). So how can we design and deliver an MBA curriculum for managers to develop their capabilities, and learn in a way that acknowledges and emphasises 21st century management issues such as the importance of cultural impacts, Web2.0, communication and growing global connectiveness and does this in ways which help managers make a difference (waves) through individual and organisational learning and by impacting on their own practice, workplace and organisations?

In addressing the conference theme, we argue that our perceptions of the goals for an MBA are where waves need to be (and continued to be) made, and that we also need to capture examples of concrete learning design to create energy for the continued development of our pedagogical approach on the ways managers are educated. This paper therefore addresses the question: *what challenges and opportunities are opening up to management educators, specifically in terms of designing and supporting work- and practice-based learning in order to help practising managers learn from and make sense of their own management contexts?*

In this paper we argue that an MBA design, which seriously considers individual and organisational learning, would be an important first step in addressing the many criticisms of this qualification and making it suitable to fit the developmental and learning needs of 21st century managers. In telling the story of the development and design of a practice-based distance learning MBA at the Open University Business School (OUBS), focusing specifically on the design of the stage 1 course, examining the pedagogic, practical and organisational issues we encountered, and illustrating how we responded to them, we show how one institution addressed these challenges and the resulting learning that took place.

As such this paper is structured in the following way:

Firstly we introduce some of the debates and tensions concerning the MBA and emerging pedagogies. Secondly we give the background information to our curriculum development project in terms of the drivers, motivations and project brief. Thirdly we outline the methodology of this paper in terms of a justification of a case study approach and the

reflective autoethnographic data we draw on. We then present the analysis of our reflection data triangulated with examples from our design process and the resulting learning design. We conclude by discussing our learning in terms of some ideas on potential contributions to pedagogical thinking, identifying the limitations of this study, and making suggestions for future work.

MBA debates and tensions

Mintzberg's (2004) critique of MBAs is widely cited in the literature as summarising some of the more salient criticisms. Although we wholeheartedly agree with some of these – e.g., reflective practice being a key part of the curriculum – some issues continue to make improvements difficult to implement. For example, in his review of the book, Feldman (2005) acknowledges that the challenges in facilitating an MBA student's education can overwhelm any difficulties in teaching content. Additionally, it has been pointed out (both by Feldman and others, e.g., Armstrong 2005) that European education programmes do differ substantially from the case-based and siloed approaches decried by Mintzberg.

Nevertheless, our own programme has traditionally used a siloed approach with the hope that integration comes sooner than a capstone (how successful we have been in this is another matter, see later discussion). We also agree with Beech's (2006) assertion that learning from experts is an important part of a student forming his or her identity – especially in terms of role modeling. Therefore, to find the balance and right mix of 'expert' content and facilitated learning becomes a primary challenge.

In the early development of the stage 1 module we discuss in this paper, we considered using a critical management approach acknowledging the value placed on developing critical thinking skills (Antonacopoulou, 2004, 2010). However, we soon came up against curriculum requirements from accreditation bodies. Moreover, critical management studies may not necessarily develop students into the critical thinkers we expect – there is a certain amount of normative education going on, even in critical management studies, and we needed to constantly check that we didn't suffer from the 'moral narcissism' discussed by Ford, Harding and Learmonth (2010) (p. S79).

We are not the only MBA programme to reinvent itself – and, in fact, our modules and programmes are regularly updated. Yet, it is interesting to note a few of the experiences in the literature, besides the IMPM programme (see Mintzberg 2004, Mintzberg and Gosling 2002). For example, the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia threaded reflective practice throughout its programme (Segon et al 2010). Cranfield University, based

in the UK, placed a greater emphasis on student self-awareness, personal development and experience (Kwiatkowski et al. 2005), and an Executive MBA in Sweden argued that it used theory to help students integrate and make sense of their experiences (Berglund et al. 2007). This last example also mentioned the importance that students gave to learning how to speak with other ‘experts’ with whom they worked (e.g., from another ‘functional area’), an approach we used to help us to integrate the ‘functional siloes’.

The need for a re-developed stage 1 MBA module

As a distance learning programme, the OUBS MBA is structured primarily through written course materials (both online and offline) and through a supported open learning framework (McAndrew and Weller 2005) with one-to-one and group tutor support and peer and collaborative learning in online forums. The traditional OU pedagogical model offers texts that summarise and integrate the key literature and theories. These textbooks serve as a dialogue between the writer (usually an academic member of the OU) and the student, with local tutors providing additional guidance and support through one-to-one conversations and through periodic face-to-face learning experiences with a group of locally-based students, as well as ‘residential schools’ that provide students concentrated face-to-face learning experiences over several consecutive days. Over the past decade, the use of online forums, which allow access to additional peer and collaborative learning experiences, has become standard practice as part of the open learning process.

In the traditional OU MBA, this module structure was duplicated across all modules until the students reached the capstone module: ‘Making a Difference’, which is an action learning-based project. Students completed what was called an ‘evidence-based initiative’ (EBI) in which they incorporated ideas from their previous modules into an individual, practice-based project in their workplace. Our reflections on the efficacy of this structure (formal, structuralised learning modules and a project-based capstone) indicated that many students came to the final module unprepared to utilise the theories that they had learnt about in the previous modules. Although students readily demonstrated understanding of theory and content in the carefully crafted modules prior to the capstone, the short preparation for putting this theory into practice was not enough to allow students to successfully transfer their learning into their practice. A rethink of the pedagogy was needed.

In addition to the need to integrate the link between theory and practice throughout all of the modules in the programme, the redesign needed to address several key issues emerging from a number of institutional and organisational imperatives:

1. Making more use of online resources and an online structure for learning
2. Recycling good, popular material in the existing MBA
3. Updating the content with contemporary ideas and theories
4. Addressing the needs of an increasingly international student body
5. Retaining a flexibility of access so that students can learn at their own pace
6. Increasing the opportunities for peer/collaborative learning

The OU development model utilises teams of faculty members and other academic and production staff to create and implement a module's materials. For the stage 1 redesign, the team was quite a bit larger than typical module teams in order to provide enough resources to develop the module in a shortened time frame. Because of the nature of a stage 1 module requires it to introduce all main functional areas, and because this was seen to be an important module in the overall innovation of the MBA, non-authoring stakeholders also joined the team. Internally, stakeholders included school faculty members, the primary writers of the material; various experts on learning design (e.g., staff who advise on accessibility and international issues and production staff); and tutors, regional staff, and Master's programme management. External stakeholders included external advisors, members of industry, accrediting bodies, partners, critical readers and student developmental testers.

While the team was quite large, a smaller group of these members eventually self-selected and re-grouped to form the main learning design team. With many criteria to satisfy, the development process seemed at times both protracted *and* rushed. We undertook a series of workshops with key authors and tutors and then met individually with authors to develop how we would integrate the written learning resources with the online materials. As the module team chair and chair of the online portion of the module, we reflect on our own individual learning and the organisational issues we encountered as we developed the module.

Paper Methodology

This paper uses a loose case study approach. It has been argued that research focusing on a course or programme is particularly suited to case study research (Creswell 1998), and certainly case study approaches have been widely used in education research (Bassegy 1999, Merriam 1998) focusing for example on a class, a course or an individual student. Case studies are useful tools for educational practitioners as they build 'a picture to help inform our practice or to see unexplored details of a case' (Creswell 1998, p. 95). In this paper, we adopt a case study approach to inform and reflect on our practice.

In focusing on our particular context –and specifically the challenges and opportunities it afforded for learning –we take an ‘intrinsic’ approach rather than an ‘instrumental’ approach (Stake 1995). The difference, as Stake explains, is at the level of the motivations for using a particular case: whether it is to explore something particular to that case (an intrinsic case study) or whether it is to explore a more general phenomenon using a case as an example (an instrumental case study). Our intrinsic case study focuses on the development of the new MBA stage 1 course: ‘Management: perspectives and practice’, and examines how and why we did what we did and what challenges and tensions we encountered in our specific higher education, distance learning context at the Open University Business School. Our primary case study data, therefore, are derived from our reflections on the module’s development triangulated with relevant descriptions of the module we helped to produce.

In developing this data set, we have drawn heavily on our own experiences using reflective practice. While the use of reflective practice is not unique in the management education literature (see Cunliffe 2009 for a very interesting use of reflective practice in course design), its use in this context provides what we see as a unique way to both uncover some interesting issues and mirror the reflective practice process we have included in the module’s design. With this in mind, we hoped to capture our own experiences of the unfamiliar: ‘The person who wishes to learn, be it the student or the business school teacher, must therefore embark on a voyage from the familiar to the unfamiliar. This voyage implies that learning is uncertain and risky in that it invariably represents an encounter with the incalculable other’ (Dey and Steyeart 2007, p. 454).

Furthermore, this approach parallels an autoethnographic approach (Ellis and Bochner 2000) in that we use our collaborative reflections and dialogue to ‘evoke’ a set of narrative reflections that help us to understand emergent meanings of our practice (Ellis and Bochner 2006). It also allows us to reveal the ‘socially sustained activity’ that we as ‘lovers’ of teaching have experienced in our practice (Gherardi 2009, p. 546-547).

Certainly, at some point, a more quantitative approach to evaluating the module’s outcomes will be warranted and, in fact, required. However, at this step of the reflective process uncovering some of our own assumptions, ideas, as well as perceptions of challenges and successes, provides for some fruitful discussion of how we as educators can make waves within our own institutions and stimulate organisational learning¹.

¹ We should note here that at that time of writing this paper, we are not sure what organisational learning has taken place. We have plans to disseminate the learning, as well as the innovations. However, at this point, we can only discuss our individual and group learning.

We gave ourselves four questions (see Appendix 1) to reflect on and began a written dialogue on the individual, group and potential organisational learning we experienced and witnessed. We then grouped the resulting dialogue into themes and related these themes to our original intentions for the module and to some of the pedagogical choices we made. This analysis is presented in the next section.

Reflections on module development

Several unexpected themes emerged in the analysis, which made us realise that what we had originally intended by doing this dialogue – to discuss the innovations in the design loosely grouped under the categories of a ‘locus’ and a ‘focus’ for learning – were really a small part of the overall process on which we had reflected. By locus of learning, we hoped to capture the innovations we made in expanding the places where learning takes place, for example, in the student’s practice setting or online in the module forums. Focus of learning, on the other hand, referred to what innovations we had created for expanding the ‘content’ – what student’s were to be learning, and how we did this through the learning design. Locus and focus do indeed emerge in our reflections but in a much different way than we assumed they would. In this section of the paper, we discuss some of these surprising themes and link them to some of the pedagogical innovations of the module.

Safety nets, identity and self-directed learning

One metaphor that we found ourselves returning to over and over again in our dialogue was the use of and reliance on ‘safety nets’ in performing our roles on the module development team. What we were attempting was new and innovative, and at times scary for stakeholders (including ourselves!), and relying on past experience and the experience of others seemed to create a comfortable place from which to step into the unknown:

*I think in some ways I saw existing materials as a comfort blanket
and safety net...*

...I wonder if that was what made it even more
challenging?...[W]e didn’t just have one safety net, we had
several different types...sometimes it seemed like we were
spending so much time managing the safety nets that we never
got to spend time on the trapeze!’

We reflected that the safety nets provided a comfort zone based on an expert identity that helped us to feel like we knew what we were doing:

Coming from a different background and context I was doing what instinctively to me felt right (hence bringing in my teaching tacit knowledge)...

...I so felt the need to be the ‘expert’ on the e-learning side and felt pressed to get some agreement [on the design] that I didn’t allow myself to learn from others until much later in the process...

I think the issue of roles is important – I felt I had to be the module chair and you felt you had to be the IT expert – I think it took us awhile to realise that we actually had to be a learning design team.

Not only did we challenge our expert roles in creating the design but we also challenged the distance learning pedagogical models for which the OU is respected. Traditional OUBS module materials have a certain way of dialoguing with our distance learners, which include ‘activities’ and self-assessment questions. However, in the new design, activities were to be offered in the online ‘spine’ of the module, and these activities, rather than testing mastery of the content, were meant to be more synthesising and integrative. Consequently, writers found they needed to use a different voice – akin to the facilitative voice that our tutors were required to use in ‘teaching’ the material to their students. Our academic writers perceived this to be a ‘new way of working’ and quite challenging at times (even though the issue of lecturer voice and the power differential between educator and student is not a new issue for business schools, e.g., Murray and MacDonald, 1997).²

Online learning is typically much more fluid and self-directed (Simmons 2009), and writing for such self-directed learning can be very challenging, particularly when traditional models expect a ‘sage on the stage’ or, in the case of OU written materials, ‘sage on the page’. We redesigned the learning experience to allow for action learning and sense-making (Raelin and Coghlan 2006), which required a substantial scaling back of content to make space for self-

² It is further interesting to note that the change or loss of voice even manifested itself physically with one of us reflecting: ‘I remember a few times trying to answer stakeholder questions and feeling my voice breaking not feeling confident or comfortable with what I was saying.’

directed learning, reflection and practice-based learning. We developed a series of online grouped activities, which we call Management Development Activities, or MDAs, to help students to develop a critical and synthesising perspective to their understanding of management theory. In this way, the locus of learning – where learning takes place – is much more diffuse. Our own locus of learning, taking place in our practice as we developed the module, mirrors the changes in the locus of learning that we designed.

The term ‘locus of learning’ relates to the ‘locus of control’ continuum of social learning theory (Rotter, 1954; 1990), which refers to the degree to which individuals perceive they have control over events that affect them. In this sense, the management educator role – for the academic writer of the materials (for distance learning) – changes substantially from one that imparts ‘content’ or theory to one that facilitates learning. This type of student-directed learning builds on a history of adult learning principles (Merriam 2001) and is linked to the practice-based pedagogical model (Raelin, 2007).

These views on where learning takes place and on where control for learning lies have had important implications for our learning design and its development. In the first instance, practice-based learning requires ‘space’ for learning situations apart from assimilating traditional content or theory. In practical terms, this required us to think very carefully about the purpose of the content to include in written materials (i.e., theories to cover) to allow time for students to conduct their own research of ideas and to investigate their own workplace practices. We found this to be a delicate balance: how much content is necessary? What theories do we include? What new ideas are important (e.g., ethics and sustainability)? What are the important ‘classics’ that students ‘need to know’ (also dictated by accrediting bodies), and at what point do additional ideas, concepts, theories and so forth become supplementary rather than foundational?

To respond to the question of balance, we scaled back our written textbooks considerably to offer key ideas and supplemented these with online learning activities that provide opportunities for students to expand their learning through self-directed online research, use of multi-media (videos, podcasts and audio recordings), peer learning tasks, and workplace investigations. Perhaps more importantly, however, we deliberately chose to integrate activities that supplemented content with general learning skills development, such as digital literacy, critical analysis, collaborative learning and reflective practice. The result is a synthesis of skill development, content mastery and student-directed, practice-based learning that we envision as preparing students for 1) continued learning in their MBA studies; 2) preparation for their practice-based project in the capstone module; and 3) a developed

appreciation of lifelong learning and reflective practice for our students. One example of how we use an integrated locus and focus of learning is the integration of digital literacy skills.

Digital literacy

Digital literacy has been defined in many ways in the literature, however we like Eshet-Alkalai's (2004) framework, which accounts for working, practising and interacting in a digital environment and thus includes both the information and multi-media literacy aspects as well as socialisation issues. Although the typical MBA student may not be part of the 'net generation' or be a 'digital native' (Prensky 2001), they are likely to interact with one or more digital texts in their personal and working lives (e.g., mobile phones, texting, e-mail, social networking, etc.). Regardless of their own personal or professional use of digital media, MBA students must develop skills in accessing and utilising digital media for learning purposes. The OU offers an extensive digital library with databases and other digital resources that students will use in their academic development. Combined with these formalised, academic and professional 'texts', the wider digital landscape offers a wealth of material from podcasts, blogs, professional society webpages, videos (produced or shared), forums, and other communication media.

Our assumptions about the locus of control for the pedagogical design of the module follow through to the focus for learning. In this module, we encourage students to do their own investigations using digital resources. Early in the module, we provide some step-by-step guidance in how to use formal, academic resources (e.g., article databases) and provide links to various professional resources (e.g., professional society webpages with related content). However, very soon the focus moves from understanding how to use the technology to understanding how to discern and critique the information the technology affords. Lea and Jones (2010) note that such 'meaning making' of digital resources has tended to blur the boundaries between traditional academic knowledge and 'external resources', which have implications for assessment. Indeed, while our assessments do require students to demonstrate understanding of core concepts, the formative assignments regularly allow for students to use and refer to external resources and to demonstrate the discernment (critical analysis skills) in how useful, valid, robust, and so forth these resources are. By interweaving digital resources into the module – via the online activities – we acknowledge their importance in the landscape of learning (locus) as well as offering supplementary, contradictory or supportive views in which to assess and reflect on management theory and practice (focus).

For our own learning journey, developing what we hope will be a successful online experience required team members learning how to write for an online learning environment (i.e., allowing for more self-directed learning) and expanding the portfolio of resources to more than the typical academic works. We assume many of our students are already immersed within a digital landscape, so we developed activities that we hope will be enhance skills in discerning and critically analysing available information that students can successfully integrate into their practice. Part of this discernment process can be thought of another locus for learning: the collaborative learning environment.

Collaborative learning and practice

In our reflections on the design process, we discussed how difficult we found it in the beginning of the process to articulate what we wanted to do. It was not until we got down to doing it – actively working with others to develop the design and to write the material – that things started to ‘click into place’.

As we noted earlier, the module team was sizeable and contained several different types of stakeholders. Tasked with leading and managing a large project such as this, we found ourselves challenged by the tension of needing to demonstrate our expertise while supporting collaborative work to accomplish the task. Eventually, we found a much smaller core of people to develop the learning design and to work with authors of the different ‘functions of management’ (e.g., Marketing and Finance) to write material for the substantial online part of the module.

Our reflections revealed that we saw our success as much more about collaborating with others than about being experts in our relative fields. We became learners, learning from one another and thus living the collaborative and peer learning we hoped to engender for our students.

What was really nice was when I felt I could be myself and be honest, and that happened during the Management Development Activity development....the roles broke down and something much more collaborative and organic started happening.

This process helped me to see how much there is to learn from each member of the process – no matter how differently they look on the aims of the project... Working with colleagues who have many different perspectives helped me to find this

integrative voice much more so than if I had undertaken the work on my own. Innovation comes from so many unexpected places!

A fundamental perspective we held for both the writing and teaching aspects was to help students see the ‘messiness’ of management and that there are multiple, often contradictory, theories of how management is to be practiced (as reflected in the module title). We threaded this idea as a main integrating theme through the online material, while showing how each of these discrete ‘functions of management’ are, in fact, interrelated and co-dependent (thereby opening up the focus of their learning). Although OU tutors play less of a ‘lecturing’ role in student learning (‘lectures’ offered primarily via traditionally written materials), the locus of learning (and control) has been placed in the hands of students who are encouraged to debate, critique, and test ideas in their practice and in peer discussions.

Peer learning has become an important part of a constellation of contemporary pedagogical tools (Boud, Cohen and Sampson 2001). As a distance education institution, the OU designs its curriculum with a blended learning approach (Graham 2005), and since the late 1990s, the OU has used online student forums as a way of giving a place for students to learn from one another (Quintas and Fowle 2002). The ‘locus’ or place of learning has evolved from a simple didactic tutor-student relationship (or academic-student relationship via module materials) to groups of peers sharing their practices, experiences, ideas and reflections with one another in the forums. Our own collaborative learning mirrored the learning process we incorporated into the module and became an important locus for our own learning:

I also think that although teaching often feels like a solitary process, the communities of practice built up in developing this module have been extremely important in challenging my views on what works and what doesn't and what is suitable knowledge or input...this experience will help me to push boundaries even more in the development of [other] modules.

I remember that we had originally considered tasking one person to do the integrative [online] narrative. However, as we went through the process, the integration became very much a group project and collaborative work among many different people on the design team. As we developed this integrative theme, authors enthusiastically ‘took up the cause’.

Wasn't it great when that started to happen!

[It was] one of the very best parts of this whole experience for me
– the email discussions among us. Those were awesome!

Much of the integrative narrative is not necessarily 'written' but takes place in periodic online discussions students have with one another and facilitated by their tutor (so students are essentially writing their own integrative narrative). In the beginning, these discussions are relatively infrequent in the early 6-week units, but later units of this 12-month module utilise ongoing discussions. In one unit, where students learn about environmentally sustainable operations, students share their understanding of and reflections on key ideas that they first read about, then research on the internet, then study in their own work settings. In another unit (Project and change management) they share and comment on each others' risk registers related to their projects, which they eventually submit for assessment along with a short reflection on what they learned from the collaborative process during the unit. Although the first cohort of students has not yet reached this unit in the current module's presentation, we suspect and hope that the reflections on peer learning will be extremely useful given our own experiences of reflecting on the collaborative learning we have done ourselves in our own practice and its positive influence on creating an integrated narrative.

The locus of Practice-based learning – focusing on theory!

Another aspect that we have identified in our reflections as crucial for our own learning has been the locus of the practice setting as a place for learning. Our early discussions of the learning design were elemental. That is to say, we knew which elements we wanted to include (and those that were required), but figuring out how they all fit together was much more challenging. For example, we knew we wanted students to do a work on an evidence-based initiative throughout the module and through which they could apply their learning on a continual basis and tie this practice-based learning element into the whole MBA programme. This is a third way that that locus of learning expands the typical face-to-face/online blended pedagogy to include the student's workplace and other student-situated learning environments:

I think [our design] challenges received practice and gets students to see things from different perspectives and through others' eyes as well as their own. It also gets them to challenge

the orthodoxy of the materials and ideas in light of their own context and experience.

They start to appreciate theory when they see it in action...The fact that students are consistently encouraged to test out the ideas in their practice makes what they are learning much more connected to reality and practice than the ivory tower of academia. However, I think that – ironically – this creates a greater appreciation of theory. It is a very active design...how much room is really needed for action – maybe even more than we give them?

In this sense, therefore, the term ‘locus of learning’ takes on the physicality of practice-based learning approaches whereby students can contextualise their learning in their practice and develop an appreciation of ‘the wisdom of learning in the midst of action itself’ (Raelin, 2007, p. 513). With our own experiences of practice-based learning, we have acknowledged being ‘lovers’ of pedagogy rather than experts (Gherardi 2009), and our own locus of learning was within the team and the organisation:

In effect, we were doing practice-based learning. We had all of these models to follow, and pedagogical theories on which to base our practice. But in the end, it was the doing of it – the testing it out in practice and seeing what worked and what didn’t work that made it real (and capable of being accomplished!). So all this time we have been talking about practice-based learning as an academic endeavour – that it is the practice context that is used to learn the academic theory – but really practice-based learning is learning about one’s practice and the theory is a bonus or way to frame it...So our own practice-based learning that we did through developing the module was to become better teachers...

I think this is the big difference between writing a textbook and constructing a learning experience. With the former, there are lots of models to compare with. You know what needs covering and how to cover it, and once you have it on paper you have an

idea whether it will work or not. With the latter, you do really need to try it out and put yourself in your students' shoes. So part of the practice is not just the production but actually thinking about the reception and the experience – so yes, I think the practice-based learning for us was to make us better teachers.

Through the practice-based element of the module, we have emphasised critical analysis and critical engagement with the management ideas they are learning. Consistent, yet primarily anecdotal, evidence in terms of our former MBA programme indicates that many students still did not grasp the meaning of 'theory' even once they had undergone several modules on the MBA programme. When tasked with using theories in their evidence-based initiative in the capstone module, some students still did not understand how ideas were related to practice. Theories were taken at face value, and students lacked the skills to critique the theories, ideas, concepts, and models they had learned.

We therefore made critical analysis a primary focus for learning in the new module by scaffolding learning about theory (e.g., starting with 'What is management theory?' and moving on to successively complex questions about its use, critique, and evolution) throughout the module. Concurrently, we ask students to think about their practice from the outset and have them begin work on a scaled-down version of the evidence-based initiative assignment they will complete for the capstone.

While we did not endeavour to create a 'critical management' module, per se, we do invite students to critique the ideas they are learning by holding them up against their own practice, their peers' perspectives, and to read and study academic critiques. In so doing, we hope to present management perspectives as an evolving and emerging set of ideas with which a practicing manager can tailor to his or her own situation.

Again, through our design, we hope to broaden the focus of learning for the students – beyond assimilation of theory to understanding its utilisation and critique. We broaden the locus of learning to the students' workplace environments so that their learning is set in context. However, perhaps more important than these places of learning is to 'leave room within the programme, at the border of the programme, for the unprogrammable, for the uncalculable' (Derrida 2001 in Dey and Steyeart 2007, p. 455) thereby providing space (an undefined locus) for students to become the action learners and reflective practitioners we envision they will become.

Discussion – contribution, limitations and implications

We anticipate that as we move deeper through the reflective process and perform more rigorous inquiry into the learning design that we will contribute to pedagogical theory in two main ways. Firstly, we hope that our experiences can contribute to a renewed vision of how an MBA programme's learning design can better help students to appreciate how theory, information and reflection can become a part of their professional identities as practicing managers. Secondly, our reflections on the development process can contribute to the discussion of the roles of management educators as facilitators of learning.

Contribution

While the concepts of locus of learning and focus of learning contributed to our reflections and analysis in unintended ways, they have helped us to articulate and organise our thinking about the student's learning journey and our own learning journey. Locus and focus provided us with a methodological framework for our autoethnographical dialogue and helped us to make connections between practice (our students' and our own) and theory, including pedagogical perspectives.

As a response to Mintzberg (2004) and Raelin (2007), as well as other criticisms of the MBA as a whole, our paper suggests some ways that we, as educators, can reflect on our own practice in terms of the expertise we bring to our teaching, the methods we facilitate learning and the ways we learn from one another in our practice settings. The ways forward for MBA development may actually be much more reflexive than originally thought. Instead of simply thinking about how to broaden the locus of learning for our students, we should also consider how we broaden our own locus of learning as management educators. One of us mused in our reflective dialogue: 'I think I understand these three issues (integration, self-directed learning, and practice-based learning) better now than when we started. [Participating] has influenced my practice.' By stepping away from our expert roles, we were able to empathise better with the student's learning journey.

Similarly, our focus was broadened considerably – moving beyond the content and expertise we used as safety nets, we endeavoured to collaborate with peers in sensemaking activities, which helped us to integrate the management perspectives we want students to learn and the learning experiences we hoped they would experience in practice. Our collaborative approach helped us to shed (in part) the expert role and to become facilitators of learning. To Raelin's (2007) conclusion about an epistemology of practice, that it 'transforms learning from

the acquisition of the objective rules of wisdom to one that appreciates wisdom of learning in the midst of action itself' we offer the additional criterion for our own appreciation learning in our practice.

We hope that by capturing our early experiences that we have shown how such learning in new places, contexts and contents can support the innovation that we intend to achieve in our MBA programme and in MBA education, in general.

Paper limitations and future development

This paper is necessarily limited in scope due to the autoethnographic data we employ. One critique of autoethnographic research is that it is not analytical and too experiential (Atkinson, 2006; Delamont, 2007), yet Ellis and Bochner (2006) claim that an analytical stance is actually problematic in uncovering the richness of the autoethnographic experience. We recognise the challenges in using autoethnographic data, but also value the way that it allows reflections to emerge. As academics we often do not have the opportunity or means in academic writing to be willing to reveal our vulnerabilities and share institutional and organisational challenges that we face. In the spirit of collaborative learning, reflective practice and collaborative learning, such reflections can help the field of management learning to become self-reflexive and respond to the criticisms and challenges so frankly stated by Mintzberg and colleagues.

Another very important limitation of this paper is that it is time-bound so that our reflections, while potentially valuable, are limited to a snapshot of where we are currently in the process. The module we discuss is still being delivered to its initial cohort of students and therefore we cannot be sure that any assumptions or conclusions we make on its efficacy or the effectiveness of the design are indeed valid. Moreover, our reflections are retrospective, rather than made at the time, so our perceptions of the process can be clouded with current challenges and situations and may not be remembered accurately. However, we believe that there is value nonetheless in surfacing these tensions, challenges, and reflections as part of an overall review of practice-based learning and hope that readers find value for learning in their own practice.

As part of our reflective dialogue, we discussed what we still wanted to question and what we thought still needed work. Interestingly, our initial reflections on these issues focused mainly on the kinds of questions that could be answered through evaluative studies, e.g.:

- Have students gained an appreciation of theory and how will this help them in their management practice?
- Do students have the grounding they need for the rest of their MBA studies?

- Do we have the practice-based element right?
- To what extent are we developing self-directed learning?
- To what extent are we really working with the challenges of 21st century management or are we actually producing universalisms?
- What does our design mean for MBA education, in general?

It wasn't until our dialogue that questions and implications for the development process emerged, such as:

- Will this collaborative process continue into new projects and module developments, or will the learning be lost? Will the emerging communities of practice continue or fade away?
- How can we best disseminate our learning?

We think both sets of questions are necessary in order to successfully address the criticisms of management education because the learning process and resulting reflections indicate to us that management educators and their pedagogical perspectives are as much a part of the solution as redesigning what we teach and how we teach it. Designing a new pedagogy is just one drop in the ocean – and we not only want ripples, we want waves.

Appendix 1 – Questions for our reflective dialogue

1. What did you find as the three most challenging aspects of creating/implementing the learning design?
2. What do you think are the three top successes of the module (in general, not necessarily only related to the design)?
3. How has participation in this process influenced your own teaching practice?
4. What questions do you still have or what still needs work?

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