

that education *should* be idealistic. Robin Wensley proceeds by commenting that Mintzberg has little more to say in this book compared to previous offerings, yet recognizes that Mintzberg does credit the innovation apparent in European institutions. He, too, puts the MBA within a broader context, one of a research establishment subject to institutional pressures. The review proceeds to the views of Lex Donaldson, who is the most critical, challenging the objectivity of the book and the general lack of research into management education. His challenges examine the importance of experience, the tacit nature of managerial knowledge, the roles of traditional lecturing and grading, the worth of prescription, the commitment to science and, in particular, the role of scientific research as a foundation for management education. Pfeffer replies to Donaldson, and Donaldson in turn responds to Pfeffer.

Comments and other views are more than welcome. If sufficiently additive, informed and topical, they will be published in a later issue.

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The Aim of Management Education: Reflections on Mintzberg's *Managers not MBAs*

'Education is the acquisition of the art of the utilization of knowledge.'

Alfred North Whitehead (The Aims of Education, 6)

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If I had my way, every management academic involved in teaching MBAs should be required to read Alfred North Whitehead's *The Aims of Education* and especially the chapter on 'Universities and their Function'. Only then will they begin to truly understand the central point that Mintzberg is making in his controversial and provocative book. Both Whitehead and Mintzberg speak out forcefully against the passive ingestion of 'inert ideas' that passes for management education. Writing nearly 70 years ago, Whitehead noted a worrying trend towards 'mental dryrot' in institutions of higher learning, a trend well criticized in Allan Bloom's (1987) *The Closing of the American Mind*. 'Education with inert ideas is not only useless: it is above all things, harmful – *Corruptio optimi, pessima*' (Whitehead 1932: 2). It produces 'minds in a groove' (Whitehead 1926[1985]: 245). Both Mintzberg and Whitehead argue against the 'silo-type' disciplinary mentality which characterizes the typical MBA curriculum. To be mentally caught in a groove, says Whitehead, is to live in contemplation of a given set of abstractions that are inevitably privileged and mistaken for reality itself. A 'Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness' (Whitehead 1926[1985]: 64) ensues and this manifests itself in business schools that confuse neat business specialisms for the integrative practice that is management.

The gap between symbolic representations and living reality is an unbridgeable one and the tendency to mistake representations for reality pervasive and widespread, particularly in the dominant Western culture. Here, notions of

objectivity, completeness, finality, linguistic adequacy and hence precision in the use of language are especially valued and emphasized. *Logocentrism*, a logic of self-identity and simple location, prevails, and the method of analysis and representation dominates intellectual life. We are obsessed with breaking down phenomena into their component parts, representing them by linguistic symbols and then reconstituting wholes out of these part-elements. 'We are good at it. So good, we often forget to put the pieces back together again' (Toffler [1984], in Foreword to Prigogine and Stengers' *Order out of Chaos*). The alphabetic system is the underlying inspiration for this ingrained analytical attitude (McLuhan 1967; Ong 1967). One major consequence of this analytic orientation is that accuracy of representation in the form of tables, taxonomies, theories, concepts, certifications, reports, accountabilities, plans, etc., take on a life of their own independent of the actual activities they purport to represent. Indeed they frequently become more important than practice itself thanks to an Aristotelian legacy which elevates knowledge over practice: 'it is not being practical that makes them wiser but their possession of an account and their grasp of the causes' (Aristotle, *Metaphysics*: 5). Not surprisingly we mistake the map for the territory, or 'eat the menu instead of the dish'. It is this kind of abstracted theories and knowledge that is produced and disseminated in business schools.

One major outcome of the typical MBA program is that the inexperienced MBA student arrives at the practical scene with his/her head full of concepts and ideas about management even before he/she encounters the real world of business. This is a worrying reversal of learning priorities: 'In the Garden of Eden Adam saw the animals before he named them: in the traditional system, children named the animals before they saw them' (Whitehead 1926[1985]: 247). Similarly, in MBA programs students are taught concepts and theories before they have ever encountered live managerial situations. They are misled into believing that they 'know' about management despite lacking real-world experience. What is missing in MBA programs, including those that pride themselves on using case studies, is the need for students to take ownership of the naming, framing and sense-making processes: carving out, labelling and taking responsibility *for themselves* within the 'blooming, buzzing confusion' (James 1911[1996]; 50) that is the real world of the management practitioner. Case studies are helpful for well-defined problem-solving, but the more urgent problem facing the practising manager is how to most appropriately frame and define the 'case' problem in the first place.

Both Whitehead and Mintzberg emphasize the importance of education as the productive welding of *imagination* and *natural experience*. Mintzberg's IMPM program (to which I have had the privilege of contributing) is exactly this attempt to relate intellectual ideas and frameworks to managerial lived experiences. It uses the detached educational opportunity to leverage the learning of practising managers by deliberately creating a reflective space and context in which practical experience is re-examined and re-evaluated against a backdrop of new insights and ideas. Both Mintzberg and Whitehead saw the need to preserve the connection between knowledge and experience. In this way a fact absorbed is not just a bare fact: 'it is invested with all its

possibilities. It is no longer a burden on the memory: it is energising as the poet of our dreams, and as the architect of our purposes' (Whitehead 1932: 139). What the IMPM does is to develop an in-depth understanding of the real dilemmas and predicaments of management practice. Understanding engenders conviction and commitment to a cause and steels the resolve in times of doubt and challenge. If anything, deep understanding consoles us of our rightness and galvanizes our will to stay the course in the face of mounting pressure to conform to popular opinion. It helps the practitioner resist the urge to act prematurely and to endure the open-endedness and ambiguity of an unfolding managerial situation. This is a capacity that the poet John Keats called 'negative capability' (Chia and Morgan 1996). Yet this negative capability which fuels the *will* and resolve to achieve a desired outcome is not identified as a pedagogical objective in most MBAs. *Will* is what enables 'managers to execute disciplined action, even when they are disinclined to do something ... An insatiable need to produce results infects wilful managers. They overcome barriers, deal with setbacks, and persevere to the end. With willpower, giving up is not an option' (Bruch and Ghoshal 2004: 14).

A proper management education process not only informs but evokes and 'awakens' our sensibilities and awareness to the inherent contradictions, dilemmas and predicaments of managerial situations. Knowledge is undoubtedly important, but even more important is a heightened sensitivity to local situations. Management achieves outcomes *through* people. And people have hopes, aspirations, anxieties, preferences and fears that are not always expressed or articulated. They have to be patiently and sensitively elicited. A certain degree of *naiveté* (what the Japanese industrialist Konosuke Matsushita calls a 'sunao' mind) in dealing with sensitive situations can sometimes be helpful, since a headful of knowledge can often get in the way of understanding human inclinations. The central message Mintzberg makes in his latest book is that the problems of management can only be meaningfully discussed, analysed and pondered upon by managers who have already found themselves in a confusing variety of managerial predicaments. Only in relation to *their own* stock of experience can the practice of management be assessed, evaluated and learnt from. As someone who has had substantial first-hand experience in managing a business operation prior to entering academia, I have every sympathy with Mintzberg's views that it is quite inappropriate to teach management to people who have no experience of managing. Managing is firstly and fundamentally the task of becoming aware, attending to, sorting out, and prioritizing an inherently messy, fluxing and chaotic world of competing demands that are placed on a manager's attention. It is creating order out of chaos. It is an art, not a science. Active perceptual organization and the astute allocation of attention is a central feature of the managerial task.