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A Pragmatic Business Education:
The Return of Common Sense

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Abstract

Business education in the higher education has in recent times focused upon the needs to chase research funding from the Research Assessment Exercise which has polarised the Ruskin 17 and the rest in terms of perceived quality and outputs from research outputs. This paper argues the case that the major thrust of business education is based upon "hard" facts and the "bottom line" despite business leaders calling for more of the soft skills of the business environment to be taught. Therefore this paper returns to the origins of business modelling and addresses the challenges the notion that the business research endeavour has to follow the objectivist/quantitative paradigm thinking as a means to gain credibility amongst its peers and that competing ends of the paradigm continuum of quantitative and qualitative research should be the new way of tackling business problems and formulating solutions. Whilst both extremes of these worlds views are not in themselves in valid human constructs it has to be acknowledged that undertaking investigation into human affairs is not a dichotomous journey and that the "Third Way" located within the pragmatic paradigm has much to offer those who engage real world, practitioner-based research. Moreover the link between what C Wright Mills coined as the "self-methodologist" has much in common with the tenets of the pragmatist philosophy of researching and understanding the world(s) that we inhabit. Therefore a thesis will be advanced that draws together the sociology of C Wright Mills and that of the "Third Way" as a means to re-awaken what the research endeavour is really trying to achieve.

What is Wrong With Business Education?

Business education has for many years been subject to criticism that it lacks relevance to real world problems and that even the flagship of North American and British Universities the MBA has attracted some to declare its death and irrelevance. As Alan Sugar is moved to note in his book The Apprentice regarding training and education states:

> *'Training and education are very important. Education trains the brain – certificates prove you can think – and provide some very important skills, but….theory is no substitute for practice and, as anyone who spends even the briefest time with me will testify, I do not rate an MBA above high-street experience in business. If you want to learn, if you want training, get out there and do it, in the good old school of hard knocks.* **While you're still sitting at home reading a book, the next generation of entrepreneurs will be out there hustling'***.*

The above sentiments ring true of many postgraduate students who follow the certificated route of the MBA, however many executives still clamour for the acquisition of such a well recognised qualification – both in the private as well as the public sectors, seeing this as a passport to better and greater things. Whilst Alan Sugar puts to the sword the notion of MBA's above experience, and who am I to argue with an esteemed and successful businessman, another management guru of our time Gerry Robinson whilst extolling the virtues of the practical over the theory alludes in his book to the Six Secrets of Successful Management as:

1. Leadership;
2. Taking Charge of the Future of Your Business;

3. Getting Commitment from your Work-force;
4. Doing the Dirt – Once;
5. Rising above the Detail;
6. Communication.

These six points are based in the practicalities of running a business and many MBA programmes cover this material, so we have to ask ourselves as James O'Toole puts it in his recent paper: How Business Schools Lost their Way, why are MBA's so maligned and loved at the same time for their practical utility is indeed questionable. Perhaps a starting point can be found in both the North America and British education system which puts much stall upon the vast amounts of information that is delivered and used as outputs in terms of research – the good, the bad and the ugly. As O'Tool rightly identifies there has been a preponderance of business schools to churn out irrelevant research which ahs translated in to curriculum design and teaching delivery. This is not the universities' fault, the problem lies in the way such institutions are adjudged to be excellent or otherwise. The formula is usually the higher the quality an institution is deemed to produce the more research funds it attracts. Thus instead of producing "dangerous research" as C Wright Mills once proposed we instead regress to the mediocrity of a large and deep swamp of research outputs that do not have relevance nor is read by practicing business managers. The objective of such outputs are to meet the requirements of "excellence" as deemed by the academic community, thus we have created a dysfunctional state of affairs whereby business schools are not producing real outputs that have a ready utility and the world of business views universities as being "out of touch" with their needs. Small wonder that many corporate institutions have now set up their own research communities as a response to the needless verbiage of the higher education community. As O'Tool rightly points out 'By allowing the scientific research model to drive out all others, business schools are institutionalising their own irrelevances. We feel that this will be a difficult problem to correct because many business professors lack enough confidence in the legitimacy of their enterprise to define their own agenda. For example, business economics journals today are practically indistinguishable from traditional economics journals. And, not to be "out-scienced", management researchers now focus on technical issues that the look and feel of topics studied by their peers in the harder disciplines'. These sentiments are congruent with my earlier compliant of the over quantification of management education that purports to follow a scientific model of the world. So what is to be done about this "unfruitful" situation? I am proposing a return to the sociology of C Wright Mills who offered in a very practical sense the unification of all disciplines, the starting point of which is that at the door of organisational and business research. Whilst Mills' sociology espouses the multi-discipline" and "big picture" view of life – he couched the notion of "private problems and public issues", his thinking is in fact part of a wider philosophical position, that of the American Pragmatists, an overview which is now given.

Pragmatism: A Return to the Real World of Business

Pragmatism according to James is a paradignmatical position that puts action over theory and advances a methodology that supports the "getting the job done" as opposed to one that focuses upon differences of positivistic and interpretist divides. Indeed this has lead some for example Patton to challenge the notion that this divide is an over inflated and unnecessary did that takes our attentions away from the actualities of the world we live in as a means to solve every concerns and issues. As Mills notes 'we should be our own methodologists when addressing private problems

and public issues and that methodological differences are of no importance in the affairs of man'. Pattern contends that pragmatism offers a coherent worldview, an anchor of stability and certainty in the real world sea of chaos and that operating narrowly within any singular paradigm can be quite limiting. Lincoln and Guba (1985) who advocate that naturalistic inquiry can only take place within this worldview can be a restrictive endeavour and as Boruce and Rindskopf (1984:21) assert that randomized experiments are 'the standard against which other designs for implicit evaluation is judged'. Thus this anti-singular paradigm stance it is seen as being of more use than locating oneself within a narrow "paradigm silo". Thus a study within the pragmatist project is judged upon its quality upon the tenets of its indented purposes, available resources, procedures followed and the results obtained all within a particular context and for a specific audience (Pattern, 2003). Thus the orthodoxy of "methodological pureness" is foregrounded in favour of "methodological appropriateness" which recognizes that different methods are appropriate for different situations (Pattern, 2003). Thus the "pragmatic method" is one that is 'to try and interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences' (James, 1906).

The notion of pragmatism was founded by Pierce (1878) and is derived from the Greek word pragma which means action from which the words "practice" and "practical" are derived and is the belief that our really rules for action. However the pragmatic method can trace its routes back to Socrates and Aristotle. As James (1906) notes 'Locke, Berkley, and Hume made momentous contributions to truth by its means'. As James also notes:

> '*Pragmatism represents a perfectly familiar attitude in philosophy, the empiricist attitude, but it represents it, as it seems to me, both in a more radical and in a less objectionable form than it has ever yet assumed. A pragmatist turns his back resolutely and once for all upon a lot of inveterate habits dear to professional philosophers. He turns away from abstraction and insufficiency, from verbal solutions, from bad a priori reasons, from fixed principles, closed systems, and pretended absolutes and origins. He turns towards concreteness and adequacy, towards facts, towards action and towards power. That means the empiricist temper regnant and the rationalist temper sincerely given up. It means the open air and possibilities of nature, as against dogma, artificiality, and the pretence of finality in truth'*

Thus the thrust of James' argument leads to the unification perspective that science and metaphysics would come closer together and would work hand in hand, a notion posited in recent times by other supporters of pragmatism in the quest for doing"fruitful research" (see Tashakkori and Teddlie; Cheryholmes; Cresweell; Bryman; Pattern for examples of this debate within the context of the research arena).

Rorty (1982) has noted that 'Among contemporary philosophers, pragmatism is usually regarded as an outdated philosophical movement-one which flourished in the early years of this century in a rather provincial atmosphere, and which has now been either refuted or *aufgehoben'*. As he further notes:

> '*The great pragmatists - James and Dewey-are occasionally praised for their criticisms of Platonism (e.g., Dewey on traditional conceptions of education, James on metaphysical pseudo-problems). But their anti-Platonism is thought by analytic philosophers to have been insufficiently rigorous and by non-analytic philosophers to have been insufficiently radical'.*

According to Rorty (1982) the tradition which originates in logical positivism the pragmatists' attacks on "transcendental," quasi-Platonist philosophy need to be sharpened by more careful and detailed analysis of such notions as "meaning" and truth."' He notes that:

> *'For the anti-Philosophical tradition in contemporary French and German thought which takes its point of departure from Nietzsche's criticism of both strands in nineteenth-century Philosophical thought-positivistic as well as transcendental -the American pragmatists are thinkers who never really broke out of positivism, and thus never really broke with Philosophy'*

As such people are concerned with the need to enquire due to a need to know by doubt or some need. As Magee (2005:186) notes in his evaluation of Pierce 'This leads to us to evaluate our problem-situation, to try to see what is in the situation what is wrong'. As James contended: What is the point of theorizing? What difference does it make? Why is it important to deal with the intellectual problems that theorists bother about? (Popkin and Stroll, 1993). As Rory (1982) notes 'For the pragmatist, the notion of "truth" as something "objective " is just a confusion between: (i) Most of the world is as it is whatever we think about it (that is, our beliefs have very limited causal efficacy); (ii) There is something out there in addition to the world called "the truth about the world". Thus the pragmatist wholeheartedly assents to (i)- not as an article of metaphysical faith but simply as a belief that we have never had any reason to doubt -and cannot make sense of (ii). When the realist tries to explain (ii) with (iii) the truth about the world consists in a relation of "correspondence" between certain sentences and the world itself. Thus the pragmatist can only fall back on saying, once again, that many centuries of attempts to explain what "correspondence" is have failed. As Rorty (1982) further argues 'The pragmatist agrees that if one wants to preserve the notion of "correspondence with reality" then a physicalistic theory of reference is necessary - but he sees no point in preserving that notion'. Thus the pragmatist has no notion of truth which would enable him to make sense of the claim that if we achieved everything we ever hoped to achieve ' by making assertions   we might still be making *false* assertions, failing to "correspond" to something'.   As such pragmatists' intellectual activity has as its purpose the attempt to resolve difficulties that arise in our attempts to deal with experience (Popkin and Stroll, 1993). Leads to James' notion of "cash-value" of a claim that is given any philosophical claim which is true what difference would it make if it were not true or not. Thus if a theory has no cash-value it would not make any difference whether it was true or false and would not affect anyone's actions.

The instrumentalist view posits the notion that theories are only instruments that we use to solve problems and that theories should be judged in terms of their success at performing this function. Thus as Popkin and Stroll (1993) note many classical theories have no cash-value as they cannot deal with and solve problems that have foreseeable consequences – as such a theory is true only if it works. As Pierce has stated 'The real, then is that which sooner or later, information and reasoning would finally result in'. As Magee (2005:187) notes in his assessment of Pierce 'Knowledge is an instrument, perhaps the most important instrument for survival that we have: we use our knowledge. And because the most useful thing about is its explanatory powers we will rely on it, as an explanation, for only so long as it yields accurate results; if we start running up against difficulties with it we will be able to reconcile these by the application of other appropriate tools and techniques as a means to accomplish our desired quest for useful knowledge.

The Return of the "Self-Methodologist"

It was C Wright Mills in his highly acclaimed publication the Sociological Imagination that attacked the dogma of what he saw as the de-skilling of the research endeavour from that of an intellectual craftsman to that of a mere "technician" who was to be "procedurised" and "inculcated" within the bureaucratic research machine of social sciences that pervade much of American second world war sponsorship. This approach for Mills was abhorrent and restricted the human capacity to think about what he coined as "personal problems and social issues". In other words he railed against the diminution of the individual thinker and researcher in the mist of the mass centralisation and state ownership of knowledge and of its dissemination. However it can be argued that within Mills seminal text he was in fact alluding to if not directly to the earlier forerunner of the pragmatic individual who eschewed the theoretical nonsense of conflicting paradigm positions in favour of "getting the job done". As Patton has noted there has been an over emphasis upon the division amongst academics and much mis-chief making in the diversionary debates of methodological pureness. Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998:22) allude to such a position themselves noting that 'Our best scholars have always been more interested in investigating the questions that they have posed than the specific methodologies that they employ and the paradigms that underlie these methods'. This over preoccupation that propounds within our academic institutions are it can be argued the root of the problem rather than the light that shows a revelatory path in our search for truth. It would appear that if we are not to create more "technicians" of the research endeavour, both great and small we must as Kuhn would have recognised be prepared to undergo a paradigm shift in the way we teach and deliver research methods within our seats of learning. We must as it were embrace Plato's cave and refrain from our own prejudices and dogma if we are to produce creative individuals who can as Mills would have approved of "think for themselves". However it the unfettered approach of Mills that we should first return to. Although a free and natural thinker of the widest and original type he saw problems as an inter-connectivity of disciplines, each of which used and informed each other in the quest to solve the problem of the day. Not for him were the irrelevant debates and niceties as to whether we should or should not mix paradigms and methodologies, for him all of the available genres of these types were available to the human endeavour to solve "our personal problems and social issues" – a theme he constantly returns to within his work. Thus Mills' sociology was not bounded within a reductionist – paradigm way of thinking, his was one of holism. This latter issue is a problem that concerns those who work in and research their professional environments and constantly ask: am I allowed to stray into the mixed methodological and paradignmatical positions. The latter is perhaps an easier position to accept and adopt for most as it offers professionals within their environments the familiar tools and ways of thinking about real work problems and eschews the mono-methodological positions of well know research practitioners who denounce such as an undertaking as being "impure" and that to mix methodologies some hoe diminishes the research being undertaken. The mixing of paradigms is much more problematic. Whilst methodology is bound by the epistemological debate the paradigm debate concerns ontological issues that in the minds of many theorists cannot be resolved. But what are we to make of such a monolithic stance in view of the fact that some of the greatest thinkers have not concerned themselves with such "artificial" divisions. It can be argued that it is because of these divisions have been ignored by these types of people that great strides in human understanding have been made, instead they have concerned themselves with the affairs of man that are of great import and not of a trivial nature. The foregrounding of the common sense above academic posturing and the privileging of language are for Mills the important issues. So what we ask is the implications for the self-methodologist? In the light of

Mills' discourse upon his "On intellectual craftsmanship" – an appendix that resides within the Sociological Imagination, the implications for practice-based researchers cannot be ignored. What follows is a discussion of what might be termed an approximation to Mills' ideal of the "self-methodologist" and perhaps is an approach to solving real life problems that he might approve of if he was alive today. This approximation is couched under the term "mixed methods" residing with a paradigm that is congruent with Mills' view of the social world, that of pragmatism.

Organisational Research as Puzzle Solving

It was Kuhn who coined the notion of puzzle solving when research endeavours to uncover "scientific" insights in the world around us and it can be argued that organisational research is in the "battle field" of puzzle solving and eliciting "solutions that work" in their quest to satisfy internal and external demands that are made upon them. These "puzzle solving" activities manifest themselves in the various guises of decision-making, regulation, people centred issues and so forth. As such pragmatists who wish to gain insights into the workings of organisational life link the choice of research approach directly to the purpose of and the nature of the questions posed (Creswell 2003). Organisational research is often multi-purpose and a "what works" tactic will allow the researcher to address questions that do not sit comfortably within a wholly quantitative or qualitative approach to design and methodology. Supporting this Darlington and Scott (2002) note that in reality a great number of decisions of whether to take a quantitative or quantitative research approach are based not on philosophical commitment but on a belief of a design and methodology being best suited to purpose. The pragmatic paradigm as a set of beliefs, as previously illustrated, arose as a single paradigm response to the debate surrounding the "paradigm wars" and the emergence of mixed methods and mixed models approaches. It is pluralistic based on a rejection of the forced choice between post positivism and constructivism (Creswell 2003). These beliefs can be listed as:

> a) Pragmatism is problem centred and concerned with what is practical and applied, rejecting the dependence on metaphysical concepts (Creswell 2003)

> b) Pragmatism has an ability to embrace the use of mixed methods and model designs through "mixing" at points during the research process i.e. design, collection and analysis, adopting aspects of the quantitative and qualitative approaches (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998)

> c) There is the use of both inductive and deductive logic simultaneously expressed as a cycle of inferences and method (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998). This contrasts with post-positivists operating from a wholly deductive or theory driven position and constructivists from a wholly inductive or theory generative position

> d) There is a belief that research can operate epistemologically (the relationship of the knower to the known) from both a subjective and objective viewpoint; the position on epistemology is viewed by pragmatists as points along a continuum rather than separate epistemological positions as in the case of post-positivists or constructivists (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998)

> e) There is the acceptance of axiology (values) as an aspect of inquiry. Data gathering is influenced and results are interpreted from a value point of view this is not perceived as problematic. In the case of constructivists inquiry is

value bound and in those holding a post-positivistic position values although recognised thought to be open to control (Tashakkori and Teddlie 1998)

f) Finally when pragmatists consider the area of ontology (the nature of reality) there is a move away from an objective reality of the post-positivists and the multiple constructed reality of the constructivists to a belief that there is an external reality but that this "truth" cannot be pinned down (Cherryholmes 1992)

The pragmatic paradigm has what Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) and Creswell (2003) see as an "intuitive appeal", a permission to study areas that are of interest, embracing methods that are appropriate and using findings in a positive manner in harmony with the value system held by the researcher (Creswell 2003). For these reasons it is argued that the pragmatic paradigm can be adopted for the purpose of any type of organisational study as it is congruent with the mixed quantitative and qualitative approach taken by many practitioner-based researchers who are lead to believe in the standard texts concerning research methods that they must locate themselves within pre-constructed paradigm boxes. Thus the pragmatic perspective puts at ease the researchers concerns and complaints that their research fits neither of the extreme ends of the qualitative-quantitative continuum on which the "paradigm wars" has been fought upon for much of the latter half of the 20th century. Pragmatism is an appeal for the common sense over common misconception.

Business Education and the Challenges of Using the Mixed Methods Approach

There are however a number of issues related to adopting the mixed methods approach to research (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). The most major has been covered above, the ability to find an acceptable paradigm stance, as proposed by the single paradigm thesis or the compatability thesis Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003). Secondly is the embedded methods argument (Bryman 2004), this argument is related to the paradigm argument, if methods are linked to paradigms by epistemological and ontological commitments then the use of mixed methods designs (mixed methods and mixed model research) is neither achievable nor desirable. Even within those accepting the possibility of mixed quantitative and qualitative designs there is disagreement (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003). Amongst others issues theorists disagree on; the criteria used to assign typologies (Creswell 2003), the nomenclature with similar designs being assigned differing labels and confusion in the area of inference (validity). There is however agreement on the basic terminology, than the answer to many questions is only possible through the use of mixed quantitative and qualitative designs, the possibility of using QUAN and QUAN methods to answer objective value neutral questions and subjective constructivist questions, also to answer inductive AND deductive questions, to mix orientations at the point of question, method and inference (Tashakkori and Teddlie 2003).

Implications for Business Education

Following in the footsteps of Dewey what are the consequences and implications of a pragmatic approach to a business education? For those working in the practitioner-based research environment whose outputs must have the tenets of rigour as well as practical utility to its recipients are two fold.

Firstly those responsible for delivering and designing academic curriculum have to adopt the "Plato cave" mentality and whilst acknowledging the polarisation of research approaches along the quantitative – qualitative continuum have to be aware that they do not fall into the "paradigm trap" and be open minded about the mixing of these two extremes within the same studies (Armitage, 2005). Whilst those such as Guba and Lincoln (1988) argue that the internal consistency between these two research approaches and their associated logic, or paradigm militates against methodological mixing of different enquiry modes and data collection strategies cannot be dismissed, we cannot ignore the practical imperatives that necessitate the practical research endeavour. Thus gather the most relevant data and information must take precedence in the quest to establish the reality of real life situations, and whilst many will argue that the mixing of such dichotomous positions is untenable the question has to be asked: Why cannot the human consciousness deal with multiple paradigms within the same study? This has lead Patton (1987) to note that 'The intellectual mandate to be open to what the world has to offer surly includes methodological openness. In practice it is altogether possible to combine approaches and to do so creatively'. He further notes regarding the issues of deductive and inductive methodological purity cannot be found in a single individual researcher that '[Yet] in practice, human reasoning is sufficiently complex and flexible that it is possible to research predetermined questions and test hypothesis about certain aspects of a program while being quite open and naturalistic in pursuing other aspects of a program'.

The second implication concerns the education programs and processes that practitioner–based encounter and the notion that this type of endeavour is a puzzle-solving activity. This brings together two points of views: those of Thomas Kuhn and C Wright Mills. The education of researchers should start with the former and proceed to the latter as they form the bedrock onto which intellectual argument and thinking rest, acting as both succour and guide in the swampy mists of practitioner-based research. It is not advocated that those designing research design and methods curricula start their quest for educating creative individuals in the art of research within the standard research texts. I am not playing down their value or worth as valuable sources to reference the actual methods of research, but many of this type do not educate individuals to be creative and "self-thinkers" in other words puzzle-solving is reduced to a "handbook" where solutions are to be found to problems that are encountered within the research journey. This does not help any of us, as an over reliance upon the "distilled" views of the research endeavour are built within a narrow reductionist perspective by the respective author(s). As C Wright Mills noted in the early 1960's there was and still is a tendency to reduce knowledge and its acquisition to the status of a technical and taken for granted activity that requires upon the part of the producer and consumer of such not to question its veracity rather than the "high" professional art form that it deserves if we are to develop our individual and social wellbeing. Thus I advocate we rename research as "Puzzle-solving using creative and rigorous methods of inquiry", and it is this latter proposition that we leave the to the world which is the most difficult within

the confines of an ever increasing regress of society that advocates "fast-knowledge" in the way same way that it has advocated and embraced "fast-food".

Conclusions

The problem of contemporary business education and its failure to satisfy those who take part in its process have to contend with the fact that the emergence and development is not viewed as having a natural home within a discipline. Its status as a lesser "academic discipline" is due more to its ownership and control; from those who produce business education new business models form those who use them – the academic and the business practitioners. In other disciplines it can be argued that this degree of separation is not as apparent especially those that reside within the traditional sciences such as physics, chemistry and the like. Even the social sciences whilst being more subjective and less sure of its focal theories its level of respectability still exceeds that of that given to business models which are viewed with a degree of sceptism. As Grey (2005) notes 'The context for the development of management education was very much that of the emergence of complex, large-scale industry, and, associated with that, the growing separation of ownership and control'. As such the dominant business education is dominated by textbooks, case studies and simulation, especially on MBA programmes. Thus as Watson (1996) notes we have a 'contract of cynicism' whereby students accept, and faculty delivers, knowledge which both know to be virtually useless (Grey, 2005). Thus the contention is that if we are to change the way business education and schools operate in North America and in Britain we have to challenge the very nature of who owns the "intellectual and morale high ground" and the separation of control and ownership of business knowledge has to be acknowledged by both academia and business alike if there is to be a more productive relationship between these two sides of the business environment. Thus I propose that academic posturing should give way to the more pragmatic approach which emphasises pluralism to decision-making and especially problem-solving. What I advocate is a business education that bases itself within a framework of pragmatic research as espoused in this paper that is relevant to students and their employers, and not as mere play things for academic amusement. This is not to say that we destroy the existing business models, but it does mean that we must challenge the rationalistic basis on which they are conceived. In other words the scientific basis upon which they were developed is a false one as we live in a subjective and ever changing environment – a paradox that it seldom ever discussed, acknowledged or challenged.

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