Crossing the theory/ practice divide: the emergence of a new world view and its implications for business education

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'If I cannot bend the Gods above,
then I will move the infernal regions'
VIRGIL

Our world is reaching a crisis as untrammelled growth leads to chaos in the money markets, global warming and violence. The purely rational worldview which began with Descartes is crumbling as we lose connection with ourselves and with others. We need to bring the rational back into relationship with the sensual and emotional. Bronwen Rees discusses.

THE world of business seems to be speeding up to a crisis. Never before has there been so much human contact across the globe. Networking is the name of the game, and successful managers are those who have international contacts, who can find themselves at home at any point in time or space. We dip into and out of meetings here, in Europe, in the US. But what are we actually *doing*?

At a personal level, stress levels have been rising. According to the Layard report on depression and anxiety, one in 6 workers in the UK is depressed and there are more people on incapacity benefit with mental health problems than there are unemployed people. Recently, the government, in an unprecedented move, allocated £170 million to the NHS for more 'talking therapies'. Whilst technology runs our world, apparently relieving us of filing and paperwork, in most organisations, we feel inundated by paperwork, or paperless based systems. We seem to be forever chasing our tails, racing from one meeting to the other, with rarely a sense of achievement. So technology, whilst it has brought apparently greater and greater communication at a global level, seems to be impacting negatively locally. This is probably due to the abstracted nature of technological communication. Whilst we may be in e-mail and global technological communication with

our international partners, the quality of relationships in the workplace has been eroded.

Technology not only takes us away from personal relationships 'back in the office', it also affects the nature of those relationships. Many modern managerial strategies, founded on technological systems such as competence systems, focus on measurement rather than relationship in terms of job reward (Rees, 2004). So technology not only manages product processes, it is also used to measure the 'relationships' between manager and managed. There is rarely a one-to-one conversation about how things are going, how we are working together. No, the psychology of individuals is laid bare on our management appraisal spreadsheets. Our 'performance' is graded by abstract and often seemingly meaningless sets of criteria such as 'orientation to customer'. We may be shopfloor workers, nurses, teachers, or call centre employees. Whatever the nature of the work in which we are engaged, whether it is by emptying bedpans, facing the emotional challenge of educating our young, or selling cars on the forecourt, our behaviours are assessed and rewarded through systems which grade and reward our performance on these abstract criteria. So, whilst we may jet about the world, our immediate relationships are mediated through paper and electronic systems: we do not engage in intellectual debate about our DBA's thesis, rather we are called to meetings to tell us how to fill in the annual monitoring form.

Further, with the growth of technology, the products of our efforts become less tangible; they are merely recorded on the virtual world of the computer, and beamed across the world through the e-mail. We no longer handle the products that we may sell. These are figures on the screen. Achievement is reached through manipulation of these figures. As these figures lose connection with the material world they become meaningless; an extra 0 on the spreadsheet. So a bit of fudging on the management accounts does not seem very important. The philosopher Habermas elegantly shows us how this 'systems world' has colonised our 'life world' and ethics (in Greek terms, the practical guide to leading a good life) is a question of how the organisation presents itself to the outside world, and how we can avoid blame. It becomes enshrined in codes of practice which bear no resemblance to our communication with ourselves or with others. For many, the meaning of their work is unintelligible, other than in the profit

and loss account which bears no relationship to their actual day to day working lives. At the same time, we hear about the effects of global warming, and the devastation that we are wreaking on our planet through the drive to increase the profit and loss accounts. Is our human contribution to be that of destruction? It is not surprising that the numbers of stressed and depressed workers is so high.

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Thus, despite the apparent increase in communication, we actually have less and less opportunity for relating face to face: our relationships are mediated through technology, monitored through systems of surveillance. We have no material understanding of the effects of the work we carry out, or of the effects or our actions on others. We usually do not see it. What lies behind the incoming e-mail? What human story is it really recounting? These are the conditions in which, whatever our values, ethics can play no real part because we have no overall sense of the conditions in which we work. If we cannot see, touch, taste, conceptualise the results of our actions, then we have no basis on which to make an ethical choice – and ethics is all about informed and aware choice.

Gap between business school offering and the actualities of the workplace

Some of the blame for this state of affairs, has, not surprisingly, been laid at the doors of our business and management institutes and universities. A recent report by the Advanced Institute of Management Research (2006) noted that:

- business school research is too abstract and irrelevant to the needs of practising managers
- business school teaching is too theoretical and not sufficiently focused on problems that managers actually face
- MBAs and business degrees generally do not produce well rounded managers with leadership qualities
- business education has made almost no impression on practising managers and has failed to impact business performance

This has been accompanied by a call in business schools for innovative ways of thinking about and delivering management education. In the discipline of management studies itself, a growing

demand for less abstraction is emerging in new areas of research, such as exploring the notion of culture which embrace Greek mythologies, for spirituality, or the growing recognition of the role of emotions in the workplace. For many years, action research and methods of self-reflection have informed a growing element of management theory. Theories of complexity and chaos jostle with traditional goal-oriented theories about strategic management. Jugglers, artists, meditators, and story-tellers are periodically brought in to businesses to attempt to relieve the high levels of tension. Whilst this brings a relief in itself, it still really fails to ask the famous anthropologist's question: what is happening here? And it does not offer sustainable, coherent ways of tackling the problem, since these ideas do not as yet carry critical mass for transformation.

The modern Western mindset: lack of relationship with material world

The latest perceived solution to this dilemma has been to attempt to bridge the theory/practice divide by bringing businesses and their needs into closer communication with the business schools. Indeed, this journal has been created as one vehicle for this task. However, I believe that the problem lies much deeper than a lack of actual communication between business schools and the community that they seek to serve, deeper even than a mismatch between the abstraction of the business school offering and business life, although these are highly significant and important symptoms. I believe that the dissatisfaction in the workplace, and divide between business school and community is symptomatic of a deeper malaise: that we do not have a bridge between the external world we see and the internal world of our own being.

The external world view that began with Descartes has evolved to such a point that we have lost relationship not only with ourselves, but with the universe outside us as a living, organic entity. When Descartes announced that 'I think therefore I am' he could never have realised that his recognition of the importance of the human mind would have lead to this complete rupture between human beings and their environment. The privileging of the rational has meant that while in the 20th century we ourselves have become the objects of our own investigation, the actual tool of our method – our cognition, and our actual being – is never actually challenged

or investigated. Whilst our philosophy leads us to believe that our reason can conquer all, the evidence of our senses, at the aftermath of the bloodiest century in mankind's history, global warming, and increasing world violence, shows us otherwise. The reality of our senses is denied by the myth of our rational progress. No wonder that many of us are diagnosed as depressed.

This is the double bind; we have been conditioned with an understanding that science underpinned by reason can solve all problems, but to acknowledge the fact that this does not entirely work, is to remove our safety blanket and throw us into the chaos of the unknown. We need a bridge to connect our reason with our sensual and emotional experience of the world, which arises through a developed inner world, fostered by relationship, not technology nor money. For the philosopher Tarnas, it is quite clear that there needs to be a relationship between the senses and the mind:

> *'Nature becomes intelligible to us through the human mind. A developed inner life is therefore indispensable for cognition.'*

Thus it is not surprising that there is a gap between theory and practice – it is endemic in our actual worldview. But quite clearly, this worldview is in a state of collapse.

For Tarnas, this is an aspect of masculinity:

> *'But why has the pervasive masculinity of the Western intellectual and spiritual tradition suddenly become so apparent to us today, while it remained so invisible to almost every previous generation? I believe this is occurring only now because, as Hegel suggested, a civilization cannot become conscious of itself, cannot recognise its own significance, until it is so mature that it is reaching its own death.'* (p. 445)

So what are the implications of this for business and business schools?

I think we need to tackle this issue on several fronts. The issue that I have raised here is a psychological and philosophical one, not to mention the operational and strategic aspects.

Firstly, we need to set up the conditions where we can actually challenge one another on our assumptions. This means that our dialogue needs to go deeper than a superficial exchange of abstract ideas couched in theoretical terms with no reference to the material

or social world: we need to unpack these ideas and get to fundamentals with them.

From the business school perspective, our research needs to begin with human experience, as well as the more abstract strategic thinking. We need to find ways of integrating our internal experience with the material world, and with the others with whom we interact. Business schools need to be talking to businesses: but not always necessarily at the levels of strategy, business plans or quality measuring processes. We need to be talking to one another about the impact of our actions on our own lives, and those with whom we come into daily contact. We need to consider the impact of our organisations on the communities they serve. We need to try and find ways of being honest about our experience both to ourselves and with others with whom we are in contact.

Long-term, sustainable processes and solutions

In short, what we need is a spectrum of interconnectedness: business schools should operate at the level of ideas – not just philosophy, but also at the level of practice and implementation. There needs to be a fundamental iterative process between business school and business practitioner that takes into account not only what is happening, but also how we are subconsciously creating what is happening.

This crisis is not only about business and business schools: to treat it as such is really to act with the same ignorance, and perhaps arrogance, that has led us to this point in the first place. This is not just a business crisis, it is about a crisis in our civilisation itself, of which business, of course, is a prime manifestation. For business educators and people in business, this will take more than simply a strategic plan. Just like the Greeks, we need to take into account once again the relationship between being human and the object that is being researched – whether that be product process, other organisations, other workers, and to build that explicitly into the processes of our research. We need to take our thinking down to deeper levels, harnessing the wisdom of mother nature rather than trying to control her. Only then can we really make sense of what is happening in our organisations and with our products. Only then can a business school offer up something that is truly of value to the business community.

This issue of *Interconnections* begins to address some of these

areas, with a caveat that this will be a long process. It is hoped that its form will address some of these ideas that have become disconnected from the reality that they are said to represent, and our wish is that this can become a forum where we can all challenge one another on our thinking and practice. This is a difficult, but also exciting time for business, and a radical challenge to the business school and the business community. But with dialogue and collaboration, we can consciously work with change and we can all take responsibility for ourselves and the worlds that we create, men, women, managers, employees alike.

References

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