

Can we afford 'business as usual'?

Bronwen Rees discusses the debates raging around the content and delivery of business school education. She likens the current state to an organisational sickness, which needs to be fully diagnosed before we can redesign our curricula.

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The consequences of the economic meltdown that we have been witnessing over the past two years, are just beginning to roll out. As with any crisis, people are now beginning to look around and find external agents who can be blamed for the discomfort and even distress that has been experienced in every quarter of the globe – and at every level; economic, social, environmental, spiritual.

A further, and more insidious, consequence has been demonstrated in a recent report which states that mental health problems, rather than material problems, are one of the UK's biggest problems, with over 25% of the population suffering from mental health issues in their lifetime. Whilst these undoubtedly have familial and social causes, the Layard Report of 2007 made some connections between mental health and the workplace. Stress and depression are the most common reasons for long-term absenteeism. Part of the problem then has moved from the material to the mental/emotional. This is as much a symptom at an individual level, as it is at the systemic level. There is then, a relationship between individual distress/discomfort, and the institutions/organisations in which they work.

Quite justifiably, the bankers have been the first victims for the public's displeasure, closely followed by the MPs in the UK whose expenses have been drilled through, and lamentably discovered wanting. A rumbling dissatisfaction is now emerging around the role that the business

schools have played in the crisis that few saw coming (with an exception of *Interconnections*, as we have been closely following the unfolding crisis). One of the earliest and informed views came from Stefano Harney, a reader in strategy and director of global learning at Queen Mary College, London. His examination of the 2331 articles published in top business and management journals during 2003 and 2004 concluded that scholars paid 'little attention' to pressing issues of broader relevance to the business world, including areas such as the distribution of wealth, the environment, war, workers' rights and equality issues. He criticised leading business and management researchers, saying their work tended to focus on solving 'small technical problems' such as product placement and supply chains. 'The best business schools should be questioning themselves as to what part they may be playing in the current financial crisis' said Dr Haney, and 'The business schools did very little to educate and challenge the so-called culture of greed and of bonuses that seem to have dominated the city'.

This article appeared in the *Times Higher Education* in 2008 and was followed a year later, by another in the *Economist* of September 26th 2009 which began: 'This has been a year of sackcloth and ashes for the world's business schools. Critics have accused them of churning out jargon-spewing economic vandals. Many professors have accepted at least some of the

blame for the global catastrophe. Deans have drawn up blueprints for reform.

The result? Precious little.'

Further, a recent article in *People Management* blamed the business schools for fostering the risk culture that has 'helped bring the world economy to its knees'. So despite media coverage, like the bankers, are we at business schools going to continue to act as if it were 'business as usual'?

Acknowledgement of what has gone wrong

Whilst a culture of blaming and shaming is not going to address the current crisis, but would merely result in increasing polarisation and probably an exacerbation of the mental health issues, it certainly is time that those of us employed in business schools examined our role, both individually and collectively in contributing to the negative aspects, so that we could plan our action ahead, and therefore take a conscious part in the shaping of a more positive collective future.

Easily said, especially as we have collectively created a system that has quite clearly run out of control. We are both the creators of this system, and those who bear the consequences. The challenge here is being prepared to take responsibility, and accountability whilst not passing the buck up or down the line. To do this, requires a real examination of 'intent' – are we acting from fear or greed? Or are we acting with a more social aim? Many mental health disorders arise from a denial of the truth of what is happening – and it seems to me that the time has arisen for us in business schools truly to take stock of where we are now, and part of this is to acknowledge that there are vested interests in doing 'business as usual'. Business schools, by and large, have done very well from the curriculum that has been delivered.

I don't believe the 'intent' has necessarily always been 'greedy', but it perhaps has been unexamined – and why would anyone want to rock the boat, whilst it is providing ever more

food and nourishment? It has rather been one of ignorance and fragmentation (another symptom of mental health disorder), and the ignorance has arisen with a lack of systemic thinking, a blind denial of the finiteness of the earth's resources, and a shifting of the lens to questioning and blaming those 'over there'. For example, the recent debate that has opened up over the scientists' overwhelming data on climate change – has succeeded in distracting a necessary debate over how we work together on clearly addressing quite obvious problems, to issues around data and statistics. Why would the main argument be about *whether* climate change is caused by human activity – when the fact of the matter is that climate change *is* happening?

More importantly, is *how* this is happening, and what, if anything can be done to address it, or what we can do to organise in the face of the blindingly obvious. Of course, the way in which human activity contributes to climate change is an important piece of research in working out whether and how we need to take action – but to question whether this is happening is to assume that there is *no* relationship, material, mental or spiritual between ourselves as human beings and the environment which supports us. And this is perhaps one of the most damaging characteristics of the late modern psyche. These are also the characteristics of psychopathic behaviour, where a wounding goes so deep that the person cannot empathise, or be in relationship with him or herself, and therefore is not in any relationship with those around them. Is this where our intellectual debate has come to rest?

The suffocation of measurement

It is this competitiveness over spurious matters of fact, that has distracted ourselves from a spirit of care, and in fostering a well-balanced and empathetic relationship between ourselves and our environment. It is this same dominant 'right/

wrong' approach that is the devil in our business school education. Is there anyone, in any context or workplace, who has not complained that, despite the advent of new technology, we are suffocated by procedural and rigid forms of measurement, that have little to do with the actual jobs that we perform? This managerial fetish means that we have become one another's prisoners, passing paperwork up and down the line, so that accountability is an ever-shifting goalpost. So, where does the buck stop?

And if this is the case, how can we, in all integrity, offer up an education that should be questioning the world, when we do not, at least in public, question the structures which we have created within our own workplaces? As the targets which we set ourselves get ever more out of reach (much like the spiraling debt) then our own level of dysfunction arises. Again, a systemic symptom here of inflation and/or narcissism – a psychosis that eventually shifts to its opposite – collapse and depression. We simply cannot continue with this level of dysfunction, as the rhetoric gets ever louder, whilst the reality is that little is actually happening.

In the light of all this, however, there is hope. In the first article of *Interconnections*, I argued that what was required as a new worldview, and that underneath the detritus of the rhetoric, there is new growth, and this is coming about from many different quarters – local and global, intellectual and activist, as we slowly acknowledge how it is we have shaped the rigid and brittle nature of the world that the banking crisis has exposed.

A holistic approach

What is required above all, is a holistic approach, that can take a helicopter view of the business school, and its relationship to the institutions it both serves and creates. This requires a radical shift in worldview that can provide a coherent understanding of what is happening, and a basis

for the unfolding of a more sustainable and ethical business education, that can play a role in the evolution of business, to avoid the revolution that is brewing.

The clues to this shift and transformation, I believe, lie in the relationship we have to matter – or in other words, to the earth, to our bodies, to our relationships. We have lost a positive relationship with matter, knowing only how to exploit and appropriate it, and have found solace in the abstraction of the intellect. However, the intellect, or the mental, merely provides us with ideas about what reality is, or some type of conceptual representation. As we have lost touch with 'matter', with an embodied sense of being, we fail to create solutions and collective actions that nurture matter, and this leads to physical and mental breakdown, and destruction of the environment that surrounds us. Again, a reflection of this with mental health is appropriate. When we lose connection with ourselves and our feelings, we distract ourselves in patterns of addictive behaviour in order not to feel the grief and pain entailed by this loss. Just as individuals we have lost connection with ourselves and indulge in addictions, then as organisations, and educational establishments, we distract ourselves through addiction to endless paperwork, and meeting of abstract criteria that have lost all relationship to what the business school is about, and why we are doing the work that we do.

Shifting up a level

This leads to what I consider could be the underpinnings of a business education that addresses this imbalance, and which could help evolve a business school offering from what has worked in the past, to what is needed in the future. The main principle would be to go back to a fundamental stance of inquiry rather than problem-solving. Einstein said: 'You cannot solve a problem on the

level at which it was created', so we need to adjust and change our view to embrace the 'whole' view, without losing sight of what is happening on the ground. So a systems approach would enable us to hold both the larger system (nation, society, organisation, group, individual) and to observe what is happening at the edges of these systems as they interact. These nodal points are points of transformation, and it is here that the potential creativity of a system resides – at this point there is relationship and therefore emotion and feeling. Unlike in the past, when these boundaries were hierarchical and change was imposed from one system to another (from senior to junior management for example) these boundaries are becoming more and more fluid, and the really skilled business practitioner will be the person who can easily negotiate and perform in these interstices. To go back to the mental health field, this can be compared with the 'transitional state' as defined by the psychologist Winnicott, who noted that it is in this place of freedom from the mother, with enough room to explore and play, that a child can learn to become independent and creative – yet still knowing that she/he is still connected to the mother. If a child/business practitioner is confident in these areas of unknowing, yet also supported by the organisation with which they work, then conscious, positive change and creative relationship is possible – very different from the 'winning of hearts and minds' that dominated 80s and 90s change management policies. Here people in one system were expected to change in line with the goals and vision of the person at the top. In these nodal points lie many ethical, philosophical and scientific issues: what is the nature of this boundary? Who else is here?

Can we play together? What are we trying to do here? What happens if...?

A spirit of inquiry and intellectual risk-taking

So, what we are trying to do is to help the trainee business practitioner inquire into the unknown, and set up a learning loop that can then be fed back to the organisations, or different systems in which that person is engaged. Management here is not about the management of a fixed piece of knowledge, but is about the inquiry into processes of change and how these are constructed, with no particular outcome in mind. The key is the ability to ask questions, and the confidence to stay with the answers. That way, there is a harnessing of joint energies creating the synergy that we so often lose in competitiveness. Flexibility, openness, clarity, directness are just some of the qualities that would need to be taught.

In addition to developing and honing new tools of inquiry, the trainee business practitioner would also need to be able to use these tools for looking into the nature of the environment in which he or she is operating: this means that our fundamental curriculum could change to embrace the new science, new forms of economics such as different forms of exchange that are not wholly based on money and profit. On the one hand, the challenge is formidable. On the other, it is exciting and inspiring to be able to find ways of developing these. In our new Centre for Transformational Management Practice, we are developing new curricula, new approaches along with our international and local partners. It is collaboration, not competition, that will drive forward and transform our business schools, in a spirit of humility, emergence and inspiration.

Any comments on these articles are most welcome, as are offers of contributions to our next edition.

If you wish to become part of the *Interconnections* community, and informed of any forthcoming seminars and opportunities for dialogue, please contact the editor, Bronwen Rees: dr.bronwenrees@ntlworld.com