

Developing critical strategic thinking in HE students

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Introduction

This paper is based on an evaluation of Strategic Management, a core module of the MBA Programme, carried out in 2002. MBA students and lecturing staff were asked about their experiences of teaching this module. The questions were framed in order to capture their perspectives on the notion of student-centred learning, this being a guiding principle of the University's teaching philosophy.

Organisational and political context

My experience of teaching Strategic Management led me to question two aspects of the module. First, I wondered whether the module was sufficiently demanding for advanced study at Masters level. My sense from reading the module's published aims and intended learning outcomes was that the module belongs to the 'traditional' paradigm of 'curriculum as content' (Toohey, 1999, pp.49-50), with an emphasis on delivering *techniques* of strategy analysis. Second, I questioned the level of student engagement: students seemed overly dependent on didactic approaches to learning. Taking these two considerations together, the module *aims* seem to fall short of meeting the broader aims of the programme (MBA Student Handbook's, 2001/2) of

'provid[ing] intellectually rigorous and vocationally relevant programmes ... which enable students to develop their capacity ... to synthesise, reflect upon, and to challenge previously held perceptions' (p. 17), '[where] much of the learning is based on student activity and contribution rather than students' passive acceptance of information' (p. 25).

This suggests that, based on a commitment to student-centred learning, students will develop a range of capabilities, including: building practitioner competences; a critical intellectual outlook; and reflective learning. Together these elements constitute 'critical strategic thinking', a notion that draws in part on the concept of critical thinking as comprising abilities and dispositions, as developed by Ennis (1987). The addition of *strategic* here is to suggest, in the context of business and management, an emphasis on translating thinking into practice, through both reflection and the ability to apply concepts. However, at the module level, the elements of critical strategic thinking seem to have become diluted, so that the module seems more narrowly focussed on developing students' ability to use concepts mechanically and largely uncritically.

Drawing on these general observations this evaluation was conceived with two aims. First, to assess the extent to which Strategic Management students are being provided the means to develop critical strategic thinking. Second, and equally important, to assess the extent to which students are engaging with those means.

This commitment to student-centred learning, and the acquisition of relevant training and education is reflected in wider political and social debates. Few would argue that MBA programmes in general provide a rite of passage for those aspiring to senior management positions, whether in industry or public administration. The UK body charged with setting and monitoring qualification standards, the Qualifications Authority Agency (QAA), regard 'Masters programmes in business and management [as] hav[ing] an over-riding objective of helping to improve the quality of management, leadership and business practice in organisations' (QAA Subject Benchmarks for Masters in Business and Management, p. 1). The award of an MBA is a mark of professionalisation, suggesting that the holder has developed a level of knowledge, competency, and critical judgement appropriate for managing complex organisations.

Furthermore, following Forman and Johnston's (1999) review of current ideas on teaching and learning in business and management, it is clear that learning outcomes in most UK HE institutions reflect a commitment to developing a range of student capabilities, including: critical and analytical thinking; the ability to apply conceptual ideas; and personal and inter-personal skills. Teaching strategies of business schools seek to provide a context that will help develop these qualities, by simulating real-life business conditions in the classroom. These contextual features typically include working to deadlines, expecting active student participation, extensive use of case studies, designing work around groups or syndicates, encouraging a competitive spirit, providing leadership challenges.

At the same time, during the last decade, management thinkers and writers and policy makers have begun to regard knowledge and learning as the new key to economic growth and social wellbeing. This focus is reflected in the now commonplace references to the learning organisation, knowledge intensive industries, our increasingly knowledge driven society, and knowledge based economy. Moreover, in response to the Dearing Report, *Higher Education in the Learning Society* (NCIHE, 1997), Government has been developing policy instruments aimed at encouraging wider access to, and participation in, life-long learning (*Higher Education for the 21st Century*, 1998; *The Learning Age*, 1998).

The successful inculcation of life-long learning presupposes that individuals are willing and able to become independent learners, and that Higher Education, seen by Government as a key enabling mechanism, is capable of playing its part. In recent years the government has sought to establish or reform standards within Higher Education, in the areas of teaching practice (Institute for Learning and Teaching (ILT), and minimum qualification standards (through the QAA). One aim of these reforms is to ensure that teaching strategies include student-centred learning (Dearing Report Recommendation no.8).

Barriers to policy and institutional will

The existence of both political and institutional will does not guarantee that workers and students are willing or ready to take responsibility for their own learning. A number of factors influence student attitudes to, and capacity for, learning. First, learning is not neutral but politically charged. In his study of the Canadian pulp and paper industry Bratton (2001) found that workers were resistant to learning new skills. The acquisition of new skills resulted in a more flexible workforce, and was valued by both worker and employer. However, it also strengthened the hand of the employer relative to the employee, and weakened union power.

Second, how students approach study and their preferred learning styles profoundly affects how and what they learn. If the long accepted distinction between 'surface' and 'deep' learning (Marton, 1975; Marton and Säljö, 1984) remains valid, then where students employ surface learning, their intellectual development is likely to be more impoverished than if they employed a deep learning approach. From a constructivist (Piaget, 1950; Bruner, 1966) perspective, surface learning may help the student accumulate more facts, but this approach is less likely to result in any transformation of underlying concepts and thereby new understanding (Mezirow, 1991; Chalmers and Fuller, 1996). It is the interpretive flexibility of concepts that enables one's ideas to remain open to change through experience and reflection. The process of such experiential learning is captured in the well-known Kolb (1984) Learning Cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, conceptualisation, experimentation. Such transformation requires reflective thinking and experience.

Third, student motivation is important for academic success, though as Pintrich and Garcia (1991) show, the relationship is not straightforward. For example, academic success rests on a combination of intrinsic motivation on the part of the student and a positive assessment by the lecturer. Moreover, educators know, and Biggs's (1987) research confirms, that students often take a 'strategic' or 'achievement' approach to study, attempting to maximise their grade by adapting their study approach to the particular study context and to the method of assessment.

Fourth, as noted above assessment plays a significant role in student study strategy. Assessment also shapes intellectual development. Hager *et al* (1994) found the development of critical thinking to be negatively correlated with an 'achieving' study strategy, and positively correlated with reflective thinking. More broadly, Watkins and Hattie (1985) show that the type of assessment does influence student approaches to learning, for example pushing them toward a surface, deep, or achieving approach. Assessment strategies thus have a critical role in shaping the desired learning outcomes.

These factors suggest that the widespread adoption of student-centred learning advocated by government policy-makers and HE educators and administrators is problematic.

Evaluation design

As previously stated, this evaluation aimed to assess two aspects of critical strategic thinking: the existence of institutional commitment and supporting arrangements; and student readiness to develop the requisite capability. The notion of *critical strategic thinking* can be regarded as a three dimensional construct, consisting of:

- (i) Vocational competences: ability to recall and apply course concepts appropriately,
- (ii) Critical intellectual outlook: ability to critically evaluate course ideas and their assumptions,
- (iii) Reflective learning: ability to learn through reflection and synthesis.

The degree to which the module delivers along these three dimensions was assessed through examining the three module elements described below.

1. *Sufficiency of module aims and learning outcomes*

- (i) Whether the module aims reflect the MBA aims.

- (ii) Whether the module supports the broad university mission.
- (iii) Whether the module (as part of an MBA) reflects national HE standards for an MBA.

2. *Appropriateness of teaching philosophy*

- (i) Understand the MBA philosophy for developing students as future independent learners.
- (ii) Understand the teaching strategies of MBA lecturers.
- (iii) Assess the degree to which students take responsibility for their own learning.

3. *Sufficiency of assessment methods*

- (i) Assess the balance between summative and formative instruments.
- (ii) Assess how this balance is contributing to student development of critical strategic thinking.

The evaluation employed a variety of instruments including textual analysis of documents and focus group discussions with students and staff. It employed a range of criteria, representing the expectations of three key stakeholders: the QAA as the national regulatory agency for HE standards, the university management with responsibility for the MBA, and student expectations. Current published ideas and debates, raised in this paper, have also informed the evaluation.

Findings

These findings relate to the full-time programme, aimed at the manager with some business experience (though in practice students tend to be younger and relatively inexperienced), from an international marketplace.

1. Sufficiency of module aims and learning outcomes

The stated module aims highlight the intention of developing students' vocational knowledge and skills, refer to critical thinking indirectly, and are mute about developing reflective learning. The learning outcomes focus entirely on students understanding the techniques of strategy making. Furthermore, there was no indication that this work would be based on student-centred learning.

While the university mission was reflected in the Business School's commitment to developing life-long learners - presumably through student-centred learning strategies - this did not appear to be part of the module aims. Yet, the Business School, through its mission and Postgraduate Awards Scheme, together with the QAA, expect that MBA programmes be designed to enable students to develop vocational competences, think critically and creatively, and develop the capacity for reflective learning - all within the context of becoming independent and life-long learners.

While these higher level aims clearly identify the intention of enabling students to develop the three dimensions that constitute *critical strategic thinking*, the module aims and defined outcomes seemed to fall short of clearly carrying forward that commitment.

2. Teaching philosophy and student strategies

Student-centred learning means different things to different people (students and lecturers). In discussion with MBA staff two meanings emerged, one broad and the

other narrow. The broad meaning gave students responsibility for setting their own learning objectives and the freedom to pursue those objectives employing whatever means desired by the student. The more narrow meaning restricts the choice of learning objectives to those defined by the module booklet.

However, there was no clear consensus on the range of appropriate teaching strategies. In either case, managing student-centred learning was recognised as a resource-hungry strategy. Lecturing staff indicated that there are profound difficulties in delivering the strategy, for a variety of reasons:

- (i) Variation with preferred or natural personal teaching style (e.g., prescriptive approach),
- (ii) The quantity of course content to be delivered against insufficient classroom contact time;
- (iii) Limitations of the facilities (e.g., small classrooms);
- (iv) The cultural heritage of students (e.g., students from Asian countries with strong hierarchical cultures);
- (v) The distinctive profile of our students (i.e. large proportion of students with intellectual development needs);
- (vi) Students take an instrumental approach to their work (i.e. they just want an MBA and are not interested in acquiring or experiencing a student-centred learning process).

These obstacles to developing student-centred learning reflect several concerns. One is that the term is often used as a device for abrogating responsibility for teaching and providing adequate guidance and support; promoting student-centred learning is not a cheap option. However, even where the intention is genuine, adequate resources are not provided to meet the challenge. There is also scepticism that students are capable or willing to take responsibility for their own intellectual development, at least to the degree that is implicit in the notion of student-centred learning. The (social or cultural) context of students' previous educational experience often does not prepare them for it.

Some lecturers suggested that the aim should be to develop 'effective learners' rather than student-centred learning. What 'effective learners' might mean was not developed, but conceivably it would accommodate those lecturers inclined toward a prescriptive approach, and students who expect clear answers and structure. The implication is that lecturers would help students to discriminate between material, and students would adopt a study approach geared to securing the highest possible grade - as in Entwistle and Ramsden's (1983) 'strategic approach', or Biggs's (1987) 'achieving strategy' - rather than the ideal of a 'deep approach'.

The module employs diverse teaching methods, both for a change of pace and to provide students with a variety of ways of engaging with the course content. These included short lectures, small in-class group activities, group case study preparation, individual presentations, out-of-class topic research (for essays and class presentations), case analysis through adversarial-style argumentation (role play), plenary discussions.

Students were least comfortable with researching a topic independently and preparing a presentation on findings. They preferred lectures and handouts. The former provided a much more unstructured process than the latter. While acknowledging the usefulness of group activities which help them explore their individual and collective

understanding of an issue, students regarded such understanding as somehow less valuable compared with the lecture and the lecturer's views.

Students did not organise themselves into study groups, but they did consult each other on an *ad hoc* basis. Two particular group-working strategies emerged. One was the instrumental approach that revolved around the use of a *leading student*^[1] by peers habitually not attending classes. S/he provided feedback to habitual non-attendees on what class work had been done, and what needed to be done in order to pass forthcoming essay assignments. Two possible inferences may be drawn from this behaviour among habitual non-attendees. One is that some students take up employment (part- and full-time) during term time and prioritise their time accordingly. The other, more speculative, inference is that some students find learning through interaction, discussion and topic research too time consuming. They choose instead to rely on summaries from other class members.

The second group-working strategy raises a concern about student ethics. It is clear from reading some essays that certain students have shared ideas (a positive outcome). The worry is that some of these ideas have been copied from published sources without acknowledgement.

These findings suggest that there are important barriers to the realisation of *critical strategic thinking*. First, MBA lecturing staff do not share a uniform interpretation of the philosophy of student-centred learning, nor is there common commitment to its implementation. Second, student commitment to independent learning is weak, due to individual motivation and attendant approaches to study. Nevertheless, their taste for the experiential teaching approach (based on role-play, small group teaching, case-study work) increased through the semester. This experience accords with Perry's (1995) observations of MBA student preferences in an Australian university. Third, social and cultural antecedents play a critical role in the readiness of students to take responsibility for their learning. For example many full-time students are determined to hold paid employment while studying, either through necessity or career aspirations. This impinges on their study commitment. In addition, cultural antecedents also loom large for many students. This can be seen in the evidence that students from China and India seem uncomfortable with unstructured or semi-structured working (researching topics, case analysis) and challenging ideas (critical evaluation) in a student-centred learning framework. This observation supports an earlier study by Jones and Jones (1996) at another institution.

3. Sufficiency of module assessment method in use

In previous years assessment had been summative, involving the submission of a 'portfolio' of four short essays at the end of the module. There is no examination. The sequential (formative) assessment of student essays was introduced at the beginning of the module, replacing the approach of accepting a 'portfolio' at the end of the module. This was done because it was immediately clear that the prior assessment process had provided no feedback to students on their performance during the course, and therefore offered them no opportunity to learn and adapt. The assessment criteria have not been changed and students know that their essays will generate feedback on their display of knowledge, evidence of critical thinking, and written communication.

Student feedback and perusal of student essays suggest that sequential assessment provided a number of benefits for both student and lecturer.

- (i) Through written and individual verbal feedback students learn what is expected and over the semester produce better essays;
- (ii) In order to produce better essays students have to reflect on their own performance, draw on course ideas in a structured way, and share ideas with each other;
- (iii) Since assessment is through the essay students engage more quickly and closely with the course;
- (iv) The lecturer has an opportunity to directly influence individual learning;
- (v) The lecturer is not swamped by having to mark a large number of essays at once at the end of the course.

In this way students experience assessment as an interactive process, rather than the more linear and passive portfolio approach. While this formative strategy improved on the previous summative approach. There is a cost involved: providing individual verbal feedback is time consuming. Additional forms of assessment, including peer review and presentations, are being considered for future deliveries of the module.

Conclusions

While policy documents confirm an ideological commitment to student-centred learning, by not providing any practical guidance these sources give the impression that the process of independent learning is largely unproblematic. Yet this evaluation reveals that becoming independent learners is problematic for our students, for social, cultural, and motivational reasons.

Reflection on teaching approaches employed for the module, feedback from students and discussion with MBA lecturing staff, suggest that:

- i. Lecturing staff have differing interpretations of, carry differing commitments to, and experience differing obstacles to, student-centred learning strategies.
- ii. Most students perceive knowledge about strategy to be independent (objectively real), and recognise the assessment essay as testing the extent of their knowledge of facts and concepts. Students recognise the role of small group work as an opportunity to share and develop ideas, but tend to regard those ideas as being less legitimate than those presented by the lecturer.
- iii. While many students would prefer a diet of lectures, where such lectures provide clear answers, this need seems most keen among students with relatively little work experience. These students look to lectures to provide certainties, and as a substitute for their lack of business experience. Independent learning is perceived as getting in the way of reaching a fast and clear understanding of the issues.
- iv. Students do become more adept at critically evaluating ideas over the course, suggesting that through the formative assessment process they develop a critical intellectual outlook and reflective learning.

The findings of this study carry wider implications for Higher Education across the UK. These include how far government aims for life-long learning and independent learning are achievable, and whether such aims are congruent with the widespread HE institutional strategy of recruiting international students. These findings also highlight the need to monitor the quality and strength of linkages between institutional aims and objectives and individual degree programmes and constituent modules. The

development of such linkages is not likely to be straightforward, given differentiated attitudes among lecturers and students to student-centred learning,

Note

[1] A 'leading student' refers to those tend to get higher essay marks, contribute more in class, and are recognised as a better students by other MBA students.

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