

Exploring Management Education through the Lens of Situated Learning

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Introduction

QAA guidelines state that the objective of a Master's degree in business and management is to 'educate individuals as managers and business specialists, and thus to improve the quality of management as a profession', and that graduates should have 'the ability to convert theory into practice from a critical and informed perspective so as to advance the effectiveness and competitiveness of employing organisations' (2007:2). The guidelines suggest a 'best of both worlds' manager who can integrate the timely decision-making and commercial acumen, normally linked with the business world, with the critical reflection and analytical rigour associated with academia. The purpose of this paper is to explore how management education, particularly the Masters in Business Administration (MBA) and management centred Masters courses at London Metropolitan University can achieve such a challenging goal in the light of Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's work on situated learning.

Situated learning and Legitimate Peripheral Participation

Situated learning is concerned with 'shifting the analytic focus from the individual as learner to learning as participation in the social world' (Lave and Wenger 1991:43). Key to this is 'legitimate peripheral participation' which relates to feelings of belonging to a 'community of practice' and to the individual's growing involvement within that social world, whether they are operating as an inexperienced 'new-comer' or an expert 'old-timer' (Lave and Wenger 1991:37). A community of practice is 'a set of relations among persons, activity, and world, over time and in relation with other tangential and overlapping communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991:98). Wenger (2000) argues that we are not members of a single community but a host of communities and that each forms part of our own personal identity, e.g. as mother, employee, or member of a religious group. Communities themselves have logical boundaries such as a particular workplace team but are also part of larger set of related communities. Rømer (2002:236) notes that 'most of the major professions are characterised by a plurality of full participations'.

Situated learning (context-specific) vs. Transmission (content-specific)

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that there is a difference between learning as internalisation and learning through participation in social practice. Internalisation is defined as the gaining of knowledge through some process of 'transmission and assimilation' (Lave and Wenger 1991:47). Learning through practice emphasises that what there is to know is subjective, contextual and constantly evolving. Management guru Henry Mintzberg (2004:11) argues that 'management is not a profession' at all and comments that:

...because grade schoolteachers can easily carry their skills from one classroom to another they can still be called professionals. But not so managers, who can hardly carry their skills from one function to another within the same organization, let alone across organizations or industries.

Mintzberg (2004) argues that it is difficult to learn about management in a classroom because it concerns experience, judgment and intuition. Many management students undertake Master's level study to prepare for a more senior role or a move to a different organisation, so how can management education support them in their journey? How can universities meet the QAA's (2007) challenge to improve the quality of management as a profession and add value to employing organisations when, as Mintzberg (2004:11) argues, management is a profession where 'little of its practice has been codified'? Management quality cannot be improved through a transmission model, or at least not solely through this approach, as there is little agreement about what that body of knowledge should even consist of.

Situated Learning and Identity

Lave and Wenger argue that 'learning and a sense of identity are inseparable: They are aspects of the same phenomenon' (1991:115). An example of this is provided by Handley et al. (2007). Junior management consultants, who had been attending consulting meetings but were operating as virtually silent observers, were then given a challenging task of their own which they described as 'like climbing Everest in two days' (Handley et al. 2007:185). After the task was completed their confidence and their contribution in other meetings increased significantly because they had been 'able to develop their identity and practice' (Handley et al. 2007:185). Whether Master's level management education can develop an individual's sense of identity as a management professional may well depend on the extent to which the activities that students undertake are perceived to closely reflect the 'real-world'. The consultants in the example clearly felt that success in their task would equate to success in other tasks within the firm and thus their confidence and sense of identity as a successful professional was enhanced. However, does it follow that success in making a classroom presentation would equate to success in making a presentation in a 'real-world' situation? An answer to this is beyond the scope of this brief paper

but there is a growing body of knowledge on authentic learning and assessment which focuses on activities which link academic experiences with real-world experience (for a good example see Ashford-Rowe et al., 2014).

Situated Learning and Discourse

Andrew Northedge (2003) explores academic knowledge communities of practice and their discourse through academic papers and scholarly debates. He argues that knowledge 'arises out of a process of discoursing, situated within communities' (Northedge 2003:19). He suggests that for a knowledge community 'the primary target of learning is the ability to participate in what is said' (2003:20). A challenge for management education is the conflict of style and values between academia and the workplace. Northedge argues that workplace discourse, 'tends to be brisk, assertive, businesslike and institutional; whilst in academic discourse it is unhurried, speculative, analytical and uncommitted' (2003:24). Developing individuals who combine the 'best of both worlds', who are comfortable with both a management and an academic discourse, is a difficult challenge. Much of the commonly taught content of management courses, such as SWOT or PESTEL analysis, has become part of popular management parlance. However, there are undoubtedly tensions; for example, whether a course should culminate in a dissertation which privileges an academic discourse, or a management consultancy project that is more practitioner oriented.

Communities of Practice and Management Education

Mintzberg (2004:18) is not entirely against management education and argues that aspiring managers should: '...find an industry you like, get to know it, prove your potential, and practice management. Then get educated in management'. Gaining experience and then reflecting on it through education helps to consolidate practitioners' experiential learning and enables them to draw conclusions from their disparate experiences. This is particularly useful for students who have extensive management experience or those who are employed whilst studying. Wenger (2000: 227) argues that new experiences can also benefit existing communities of practice,

...sometimes we have been with the community for a long time... We are thoroughly competent, in our own eyes and in the eyes of our peers. But something happens. We are sent overseas. We go to a conference... We meet a 'stranger' with a completely different perspective... We come back to our peers, try to communicate our experience, attempt to explain what we have discovered, so they too can expand their horizon. In the process, we are trying to change how our community defines competence... We are using our experience to pull our community's competence along.

Wenger (2000:230) argues that 'without the learning energy of those who take initiative, the community becomes stagnant'. Therefore management education might be treated, not as the primary community of practice, but as an opportunity to step outside a workplace community and return to it with fresh eyes and new insights. Whilst benefitting the individual, this may also enable students to critically reflect on existing practices at the organisational level and initiate company-wide improvements. There are exceptions, for example, in Kriner et al. (2015) doctoral adult education students successfully develop a community of practice in order to develop their identity as scholars rather than students. However, most students do not join a course primarily to be inculcated into a scholarly community but as a means to enhance their participation within workplace communities of practice. Lave and Wenger (1991:99) argue that:

in most high schools there is a group of students engaged over a substantial period of time in learning physics. What community of practice is in the process of reproduction? Possibly the students participate only in the reproduction of the high school itself....there are vast differences between the way high school physics students participate and give meaning to their activity and the way professional physicists do.

Conclusions and Practical Implications

Management education can improve the quality of management as a profession by developing graduates who have a strong sense of identity and a sense of belonging within management communities of practice. For example, experiences on the course that reflect 'near real-world' or authentic experiences can help to build competence and confidence; such as in the case of the junior management consultants very practical exercise in their own workplace (Handley et al. 2007). Management education can also help 'new comers' to understand the different discourses of both the business world and academia so that they are fluent in both and can 'convert theory into practice from a critical and informed perspective' (QAA, 2007:2). This might include specific classroom discussions around this topic (see Northedge 2003 for useful guidance) or simply a good mix of assessments that don't all demand copious and immaculate Harvard referencing. Finally, Master's level education can and should provide an environment for students to reflect on their own management experience, to share and make sense of these experiences, and bring new insights back 'so as to advance the effectiveness and competitiveness of employing organisations' (QAA, 2007:2). This can be encouraged through a participatory teaching style, and through activities that call for reflection on the student's previous experiences or application of theory to the student's own workplace. In this way management education might develop managers who embody the best of both the academic and business worlds, who can develop from 'new comers' to 'old timers' within their own communities of practice, and who embody a strong sense of both individual identity and community belonging.

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