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PROFESSIONALISM: A MORE RESILIENT APPROACH TO DEVELOPING THE PROFESSIONAL MANAGER?

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ABSTRACT

This essay suggests that professions as structures of learning and institutions of expertise development combine the learning of a body of knowledge (learning as internalization) and learning via socialization (learning as participation). It highlights the weaknesses of education provided by business schools with a focus on the lack of ethics, that is a prominent feature and characteristic of the classic professions, and suggests that professionalizing management practice would require a fundamental reconceptualization and re-organization of how expertise is developed in the management field today.

KEYWORDS

Learning, professionalism, management

HOW DO LEARNERS BECOME EXPERTS?

Lave and Wenger (1991) seminal work on situated learning as legitimate peripheral participation informs us of the value of learning as participation in a social practice (p.49). Here, learning and the act of mastering a practice are not reduced to the internalization of a body of knowledge that is consumed by the novice in a classroom, i.e. outside the social context in which the practice takes place. According to Lave and Wenger, understanding learning as a process by which a learner internalizes knowledge ‘establishes a sharp dichotomy between inside and outside, suggests that knowledge is largely cerebral, and takes the individual as the nonproblematic unit of analysis’ (p.47). In other words, the conventional view of learning assumes that a) there is a coherent body of knowledge that can be taught and absorbed outside the context within which it materializes and is practiced, and b) as long as the learner can absorb and assimilate the knowledge which is transmitted to them, they will be able to practice and become experts.

For Lave and Wenger, this view of learning, i.e. learning as internalization, is misguided, because it neglects the socially constructed and negotiated character of meaning. They suggest that an alternative to learning as internalization is learning as participation. Here,

a) there is no sharp dichotomy between inside and outside, and learning occurs through participation in the social practice that the learner is seeking to master and develop;

b) knowledge is not only cerebral, but socially constructed in practice and an extensive set of relationships;

c) the individual is not seen as the nonproblematic unit of analysis, but as the agent who will change and transform, i.e. construct and maintain identities that will allow them to master and develop the practice that they are learning.

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In other words, Lave and Wenger's approach to learning acknowledges and at least provides a path to transformative learning. It takes into consideration that knowledge and the individual who aims to master and develop an area of practice are in constant change and processes of negotiation and renegotiation are at play that are powerful enough to give rise to new identities and agents within the practice (Ashcroft and Kreiner, 1999; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Contu and Willmott, 2003). The individual finds him/herself in a set of varying, changing, and developing relationships and exchanges which all serve as indicators of what the practice is and can be in the future. The individual does not apply knowledge, but negotiates and renegotiates existing knowledge and meaning within specific circumstances. He/she is intertwined, fundamentally embedded with the practice and in the relations in which practice occurs.

However, a key characteristic of processes of extreme socialization and indeed one of the most significant criticisms of the work of Lave and Wenger is the presence of authoritative power relations (Contu and Willmott, 2003; 2006). Learning via participation in a wider, ever-changing set of relationships implies a sense of care and duty from established members of the community towards the novice. It requires relationships of trust where established members of the community allow the novice learner to act autonomously, and behave with beneficence, fidelity, justice and non-maleficence towards the novice (Scaife, 2001). In the absence of a sense of care and duty towards the novice, the novice may be exploited, required to learn in uncertainty, and his/her self-respect and sense of personal worth may be undermined by the established members of the community (Lovett, 2010). By implications, the novice's chances of becoming an expert in the field will be limited (Handley et al., 2005) as they may be preoccupied with managing a wide range of interests (Konstantinou and Fincham, 2010) fending off authoritative behavior that undermines their sense of self, only to replicate what they have learnt, i.e. behavior of domination and unfairness, when they find themselves in a position of power in the community (see Mutch, 2003; Contu et al., 2003). In other words, learning via participation in the social context in which the practice occurs seems to be a more transformative way of developing experts than is learning via internalizing a body of knowledge in a location that is removed from the practice that is to be mastered. At the same time, however, it is likely to expose the novice to an unsafe, prejudiced and debilitating context, where the key learning is that of authoritative behavior of domination, and excellence in practice becomes a matter of secondary significance. In this case, learning - of even the highest level - will not constitute the development of an expert, but merely the development of a politically savvy identity that knows enough about practice but is primarily expert in managing social relationships for survival rather than excellence in practice.

So do we have other options for the development of experts? One alternative is via a profession. A profession is social structure or a body of experts who apply esoteric knowledge to particular cases, and the aim of the profession is to safeguard quality, competence, integrity and a level of ethical concern in practice (Abbot, 1998; Muzio et al., 2013). A profession can be seen as a community of practice of experts that addresses both learning as internalisation and learning as participation. The novice attends a number of years at the university and thereafter their socialisation in the practice is taken forward as they work closely and learn from established members of the community. As an example, in the case of doctors, the General Medical Council in the UK outlines that this process of university and practice based

learning requires no less than 10 years of elaborate instruction and training and is concluded via rigorous examination and registration with the profession that provides the license to practice. Professions, as structures of learning and institutions of expert development, recognise and combine the learning of a body of knowledge (learning as internalisation) and learning as participation. As such they can be considered as advanced learning structures and institutions of expertise development, as they afford their members with the privilege to claim the right to work in an area of practice – a jurisdiction - based on a combination of learning processes that address the disciplinary and social dimensions of learning and expertise development. that is, structuring expertise via a profession is a more complete way of learning.

There is however one more reason why professions may reflect advanced learning structures and institutions of expertise. In comparison to commodification and organisation (of which Lave and Wenger's community of practice can be an example), professions put forward a set of ethical/professional values and ideals that they claim to serve (even though the reality may be indeed very different!). In principle, the ethical/professional values or ideals that the profession is built on (for example, health for the doctors, justice for the lawyers, etc.) should be endorsed by all members of professionals and experts. And when this is not the case, the implications are clear - one is stricken off the register and is no longer licensed to practice. In other words, the novice is – at least in principle – embedded in a context in which adherence to a set of ethical/professional values and ideals:

- a) are mandated,
- b) reflect a prerequisite to claiming expertise if one wishes to practice in an area of work, and
- c) based on which the practitioner is held accountable.

In comparison to professions, ethical/professional values and ideals are emergent in communities or more loosely defined networks of practitioners, which means that learning and expertise development will be structured and institutionalised in more democratic ways which are likely to be based far more significantly on the social dimensions of learning and expertise development, and less on the disciplinary dimension. An example here would be open source coding (for example, the development of the Linux code) where experts in code building from around the world came together and established values of openness and transparency in a community of practice.

In comparison to professions and emergent communities and loosely defined networks of practitioners, ethical/professional values and ideals are displaced when expertise is commodified and replaced by profit maximization. And when expertise is organised, ethical/professional values and ideals are once again displaced by a focus on efficiency. Table 1 summarises the role of ethical/professional values in different institutions of expertise development.

Professional values and ideals in different institutions of expertise development (Abbott, 1988; Johnson, 1972; Lave and Wenger, 1991)				
	a) Professionalism	b) Participation	c) Commodification	d) Organisation
Ethical/ professional values and ideals...	... are defined and the expert is held accountable (Abbott, 1988)	... emerge democratically via loose networks of practitioners. Experts are included and excluded via adherence to group/socially embedded values (Lave and Wenger, 1991)	... are defined by the owner of the commodity, usually the client. The expert commodifies their expertise and is concerned with the economic return of the commodity (Abbott, 1988)	... are displaced by a focus on efficiency and economic return. The expert delivers their expertise in an organised, efficient fashion (Abbott, 1988; Johnson, 1972)

HOW DO MANAGERS BECOME EXPERTS – THE ABSENCE OF PROFESSIONALISM

In the area of business, professionalism in the classical sense is fundamentally restricted. There is no professional body that develops, organises and monitors what being a professional manager is. There is no professional body:

- which oversees the content and execution of management degrees delivered by universities in different countries around the world,
- which allows an extensive period of socialisation into the profession under the supervision of experienced members of the community
- which examines and licenses members in the profession and practice.

So expertise is developed via participation, commodification and organisation. This means that the novice manager learns outside a professional community which supports and represents a set of ethical/ professional values and ideals. Indeed, a recent study in the role of the practitioner in professionalism found that top project managers and entrepreneurs experience an unmediated relationship with practice (Konstantinou, 2015). The project manager is face to face with the competition, the market, the client, the need for unique & pioneering work and the stresses of project work.

You're only as good as your last project. [...] If you don't deliver, no-one's going to come and speak to you again, if you fail in some way. It's quite vicious. It might not even be your fault.

Managing Director, Events Management

Here, there is no way of formalising achievement, career paths are defined by the organisation or at one's own initiative rather than via a professional path, there is no professional knowledge based on which mistakes can be distinguished from negligence by a body of experts. In other words, managerial work is not professionalized and there is no independent body with the legislative, regulatory and executorial power to define and legitimize the knowledge that would constitute the basis of expert managerial practice. By implication, expert managerial practice is designed, defined and legitimized based on the principles and priorities of the market and the client (via participation, commodification and organization), rather than being occupationally defined. This, by definition, constitutes the

basis of patronage rather than professional, expert practice, and ethics are displaced (Johnson, 1972). In other words, the notion of professionalism in management is - in principle – diluted, and as such the modern manager - broadly defined - is deprived from professional institutions of management expertise development.

THE ROLE OF BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Following the financial crisis of 2007, business schools – the institutions that have played a fundamental role in educating and developing management professionals and leaders – have been severely criticized. The main argument here is again one based on the importance of professional ethics, and it suggests that business schools a) promote a singular emphasis on competitiveness that is narrowly defined in the frame of shareholder value and short-termism, and b) fail to prepare their graduates to handle ethical dilemmas and make difficult decisions (Morsing and Rovira, 2011). Textbooks in business ethics narrowly define the purpose of management practice as taking care of the shareholder (Fryer, 2015), and in this regard it has been argued that business school education is detrimentally deprived of any fundamental focus on issues of diversity, social responsibility and business ethics more broadly.

This approach also seems to be disappointing business students who are increasingly *equally devoted* to profit-making/competitive *and* ethical practice as students and members of the public or citizens. For example, industry reports have shown that fairness and ethics in the workplace are as - if not more - important for millennials than recognition and opportunity (Knights, 2016). Similarly, it is noted that since the 1980s ‘the [US] electorate had shifted from class-based polarization toward value-based polarization’ (Inglehart, 2016: 5) and that values are becoming increasingly important in the decision-making processes of the public. These suggest that, in management education, addressing narrowly defined business priorities only is necessary but no longer sufficient for students. Modern professionals who study feel the need to be highly marketable, mobile, competitive, *and* make a valuable, worthwhile and meaningful contribution to their practice, their working environment and colleagues, their clients and the society at large (see Konstantinou, 2008). They reflect individuals who are willing to change their lives, uproot their families, quit their jobs to study in order to understand how *they* can change and redefine their own working reality, their practice and the existing status quo – which has led to the financial crisis, climate change, and the impoverishment of working life. Increasingly they choose to start their own business and disengage from the corporate world, identity and work ethic; for example, in 2015, the UK Parliament issued a research publication outlining the factors that have led to the self-employment boom. They are interested in courses that will help *them* become unique at whatever it is that they choose to do, whilst at the same time instilling in them good professional principles (quality, integrity, competence and ethics, Hodgson and Muzio, 2011) that will support their personal and professional development, and increase their competitiveness amongst their peers in their future careers. Again, Inglehart (2016) suggests ‘in today’s postindustrial society, a large share of the population is already highly educated, well informed, and in possession of political skills; all it needs to become politically effective is the development of an awareness of a common interest’ (p. 10; see also Wuthnow and Shrum, 1983). And similarly executive development students write ‘*because of the program, I*

have decided to devote myself in the tasks of advanced education and the food shortage issue. I have been studying and searching in this field for a while and also realized the importance for the near future. I have convinced a couple of investors to start with me on these two tasks. More importantly, I am excited about being part of it and hoping to have some contribution' (Email memo, 2016).

In this context, the more critically aware interpretations of managerial practice have seen management as a socially constructed practice only – i.e. practice that is defined at the intersection of human agents, the organisational context and practices of knowing (Tsoukas, 1996). By implication, firstly disciplinary knowledge is seen in competition with workplace/practitioner knowledge, and universities are criticized for pathologising other forms of knowledge. Scott et al. (2004) write 'all other forms of knowledge, including practitioner knowledge, are considered to be inferior [to disciplinary] or mistaken versions' (p. 44). Secondly, ethical/ professional values and ideals are assumed to be defined democratically via processes of participation in a wider business community and/or specific organisational environments, whereas in actual fact they are either considered irrelevant or defined via organisation, i.e. management practice is reduced to a means of achieving efficiency toward client priorities and any further philosophical considerations are deemed irrelevant.

In combination, a singular preoccupation with the socially constructed nature of managerial practice and the division between disciplinary and workplace knowledge, and the distinctive lack of attention on business ethics deprives us from an understanding of what the end goal of managerial practice may be, other than efficiency. And, perhaps more importantly, deprives managers from the development of their critical thinking and analytical thinking abilities in the classroom and a learning community of experts. Learning disciplinary knowledge (via internalisation) is one way of learning; situated learning is another. Being able to master and combine both in practice requires strong critical thinking abilities which will enable the manager to bring together the lessons from the past (disciplinary knowledge) and the present (situated knowledge), and - far more importantly - make the refined, subtle discriminations that Dreyfus & Dreyfus (2005) and Blanchot (1989) talk about and that constitute an expert, professional self *in practice*.

So, why are we depriving:

- Business students from an education that pays equal attention to disciplinary and workplace learning, and that supports or actively encourages their ability to think critically?
- Business students from the opportunity to work under supervision by the most experienced members of the academic community (senior academics and professors) while they can be being paid and earning a living and we push them in employment at their early 20s to deal and handle the client in the marketplace?
- Business students from the opportunity to be inspired and contribute to society in the way that professionals can do (at least in principle)?
- Management practice from a strong involvement with business ethics?

Why are we allowing:

- Business graduates to enter the field and execute important work without examination by the best in the field?

Why do we have such low expectations from the contribution of management to society? Is management and business studies about efficiency only? Could it be more? What if we argued that disciplinary knowledge and workplace knowledge are equally important, and took up Scott et al.'s call for the hybridity of knowledge that is the case in the traditional professions? What if we argued for the introduction of ethical/ professional values and ideals in our discussion about management practice and studies? In other words, what if we professionalised management?

WHAT COULD IT LOOK LIKE?

The simple answer here could be that the professionalization of management can take note of the ways in which medicine and law became professionalised and follow a similar path. To be called a professional manager, it could be made mandatory to attend management studies at university, work under the supervision of senior management academics in practice as a means of becoming socialised in the field, and finally it could be made mandatory to sit rigorous examination and be allowed to practice management only once licenced. This approach would include disciplinary and workplace/practitioner knowledge in equal measure, support learning and the development of expertise in the classroom (via internalisation) and the workplace (via participation), help aspiring professionals establish a network of collaborators that they can consult and work with during their extended training and regulate entry and membership in the profession at the beginning and throughout one's career. From a slightly more critical perspective, the professionalization process would reflect an overarching discourse which would mould and shape the novice self into the professional, and would be encountered with resistance as a technology of expertise and logic which seeks to dominate all other forms of expertise development in the management field (Konstantinou, 2015). Successful candidates would be normalised, whilst others would be branded as outcasts and quickly marginalised (in the same way that students drop out of medical school, aspiring lawyers fail their bar exams and PhD candidates fail to become Doctors of Philosophy). But is this all? Not quite.

- Professionalising management would require an institution of expertise development – a profession of management – that could be trusted by aspiring management professionals, and by the people in the society and other organisations (Giddens, 1990; 1991).
- Professionalising management would require management professionals to claim an area of work, a jurisdiction, against and in competition with other professions, such as engineering and accounting, on the basis of persuading audiences (the public, government and clients) that they hold the expert knowledge, values, ethics and norms that constitute professional management practice (Abbott, 1988).
- Professionalising management would require that the production of managerial knowledge occurs within the profession and not the organisation, and that the commodification and colonisation of managerial knowledge would become the prerogative of the profession which would distribute this knowledge on the basis of public interest (see Freidson, 1986; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001).
- Professionalising management would require management academics to stop commodifying and colonising managerial knowledge for organisations and the

government, and focus on supporting the profession through ‘serious reflection and the possibility of opening a dialogue about the future role of business schools and academics in the construction of what, ultimately, becomes management knowledge’ (Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001:951).

- It would require managers to trust the profession as an institution of expertise development and forgo feelings of professional insecurity associated with perceiving managerial knowledge that is produced in universities as irrelevant to practice; and extended, long-term training as unnecessary (see Gendon and Suddaby, 2004; Konstantinou, 2015).
- It would require an emphasis on ethics, rather than rule and regulations, and the invisible hand of the free market, and by implication a convergence of education, government and industry towards an ethically defined purpose for management and an understanding and development of who is the *professional manager*, i.e. what constitutes the identity of the professional manager (Bordass and Leaman, 2013).
- Professionalising management would require a renewed understanding of trust and of the notion of accountability in one’s professional life, where the classic professions (for example, law, medicine, and accounting) aimed at developing trustworthy experts – the professional – who were relieved from institutionalised/bureaucratic forms of control and supervision, and worked unsupervised by self-regulating and self-managing (Baroness Onora O’Neil, BBC Reith Lectures, 2002; Cheng, 2012; Mieg, 2009).

From a more philosophical standpoint, professionalising management would require the development of an understanding of what is good management? Is it management that contributes to society, to the individual, specific individuals and groups (such as shareholders)? Is it efficiency? Is it effectiveness? Is it coordination? At the moment, we have no end/ideal to management practice that could constitute the basis of the professionalization of management practice and expertise. For example, Bordass and Leaman (2013) write about building professionals that they ‘have no shared sense of purpose, no shared identity and no equivalent of the Hippocratic Oath’ (p.2).

What could be the key traits of good work? Blanchot would argue, that work is the involvement with an ideal and therefore the ideal is the focus of the work. Work that does not relate to an ideal is not work, it is mere effort. It is purposeless and it cannot be productive, it cannot be useful or beautiful, it is pointless. The work is ‘genuine’ (prologue) in that it remains the same even when it is displaced, very much like Beethoven’s 9th Symphony or Mahler’s Adieu which when performed out time and place – say, in London in 2014 by the London Philharmonic Orchestra - still convey the meaning behind the music and words and remain relevant to the human psyche. The work is ‘infinite’ (pg. 22) in that it is not known to the artist; it is greater than the artist and its beginning and end are not known; it constantly evolves in history’s ongoing movement; very much like a portrait of a woman with her child gives different reflections every time it is drawn. And finally, for Blanchot, the work just exists – ‘it is’ (pg. 22) – it approaches an ideal. It is neither finished, nor unfinished; it has no defining criteria, so it can’t be finished or unfinished, it can only exist. Contradictions do not exclude each other in work; nor are they reconciled, in the same way that a Picasso painting hosts both perfect and imperfect brush strokes without them ever cancelling each other out. In

the same way that Parmenides talks about the ‘unit of antitheses’, Smock’s translation of Blanchot refers to work as the ‘unit of contraries’ (pg. 30)– work involves the presence and absence of different elements and ideas; relevant and irrelevant features; signs of perfection and failure all at once. So Blanchot would suggest that the work that the professional manager performs is her involvement with an ideal, and that good managerial work is genuine, infinite and approaching an ideal.

CONCLUSION

This essay has argued that managers develop their expertise in management outside a professional community, and has argued that, as an institution of expertise development, a profession is more advanced as it combines the disciplinary and social dimensions of learning. It has focused on the lack of ethics in management education in business schools and has argued for a focus on professionalising management practice. The implications of this suggestion are fierce, would require a fundamental reconceptualization and re-organisation of the way that we think about developing experts and professional managers. However, in its absence the impact of business on our societies, the global economy, the planet and the quality of working life persists. Managers with no disciplinary and/or socially constructed understanding of their practice are still entering the field and are making decisions and influencing their teams, their organisations, society and the planet. Managers with no obligation to act in accordance with a set of publicly spirited ethics are still acting on our behalf, and allocating resources for purposes that are defined within the narrow boundaries of the organisation-client relationship. Managers who may have never been engaged in a debate about the purpose of their work (Konstantinou and Muller, 2016) are still talking about targets, goals and objectives of business. In light of these ideas, even if the implications of professionalising management practice are fierce, perhaps we should be asking isn’t the existing status quo the most expensive, riskiest, the most unethical, irresponsible and least sustainable way of developing expertise in management?

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