
Management Education in France: A Critique of its Didactic Paradigms

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Abstract

This article is a critique of the didactic methods being used by management educators in France. The article explains the state-of-the-art practices in French management education, highlighting its need for providing life-long education to managers and its struggle to integrate the demands and requirements of its three constituents namely the practising world, the management education, and the corporate management development systems. The article concludes with recommendations of specific actions for the use of 'reflexivity' in improving the pedagogy and teaching management discipline by focusing on its objectives and expected outcomes of management education.

Keywords: *Managers, Management education, Managerial learning, Reflexivity*

Introduction

Management learning is a juxtaposition of three different interpenetrating worlds that are visible namely management education, management development, and managerial practices. This often leads to the creation of communities of discourse and practices which are often incoherent. Management learning as a discipline attempts to provide meaning to learning scattered in various directions. In France, the world of management education practices can be observed in higher education (Garel and Godelier, 2004). It is characterized by a desire to organize the education of future managers and prepare them individually in advance for their future managerial roles and tasks. In the world of management education, there are several actors concerned with the development of managers. They are acting on a variety of levers such as organisations, work environment design, structure or learning project, etc. (Dufour and Plompen 2006). The world of management practice places the learner in confrontation with real problems facilitating an opportunity to develop his/her managerial skills.

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Managerial Problems of the Educational Continuum

The first part of the article outlines the limitations of management education and the consequences thereof; demonstrated with the example of the developmental journey of three managers. The second part describes what would be a critical view of management education. The third section introduces the concept of reflexivity and explains how the process of reflecting on one's own abilities could help in correcting the errors as and when they occur. The concluding part recommends specific actions for the use of 'reflexivity' in improving the teaching of management, especially by focusing on objectives and expected outcomes of management education.

This section delineates the journey of three sales managers and the examples demonstrate the educational continuum of the managers who followed different paths to achieve a leadership position. The illustrations show the impact of environments and individual dynamics in learning sales management. The first example is that of a 46-year-old sales manager in an industrial enterprise. This is the path of a 'heir' within the meaning of Bourdieu (1979). In his family, he has the opportunity to meet business leaders who serve as role models. He gets the right international exposure and opportunity to develop business acumen during several family-based business trips. Discussions on business matters that take place within the family educate him to enhance his world view of business. His business interest is often and naturally driven by the ambition of his parents and quite likely that he receives good education. Once integrated, the school provides a new opportunity to discover the world. Lessons learnt from sport and physical education also tend to add value in this model for success. It is followed by internships, overseas visits, learning of foreign language, associational activities, etc. which test teamwork. Experiences in handling full-scale projects stimulate imagination and confidence. Soon, he joined as head of an international sales force. His emulation of a boss created an insight leading to success. The conformation of predefined roles provided the first benchmarks. After this first experience, there was a steady increase in his organizational careers that followed later.

The second illustration is that of a manager aged 47 years in the distribution of food commodities. His remarkable experience takes place within a continuing education programme. He had imbibed managerial thought and practice from his education and later gained work experience. During the first part of his career, he learned the skills of a seller and had demonstrated potential and was soon spotted by a mentor in his company for consistent performance. Changes in function and scope of his work also contributed to

his professionalization process. Besides, he accessed continuing educational programmes and enjoyed the learnings from the coaching. During the course of time, he encountered events, people, team work and professional situations which impregnated his representations of leadership. He became progressively a convincing leader. He could easily put himself in service to others to advance shared objectives. At each level, his leadership skills were gradually increasing and developing which contributed to this performance positively.

The third illustration is the journey of a commercial manager in the business of insurance. After many hesitations and vocations in sport, politics and even acting, he stabilizes his interests. He completed his diploma from a little-known business school and an unexpected encounter opens the door to an insurance company. Encouraged by this initial success and impressed by exemplary salary figures, he takes pleasure in his profession. He understands about successes and failures. The reflexion about his weaknesses was his main learning. Based on the experiential learning, he builds a working method and deduces a means of understanding others. With time and practice, by trial and error, success eventually becomes dominant. Eventually, when he was 36 years old, his talent got reflected and shaped him into a young boss of a sales force leading several hundred employees. By the dint of his curiosity, he gleaned the skills necessary to cope with a variety of situations he encountered. He created an original vision of leadership and invested in what was a unique approach. This singularity attracts the members of his team and he gained recognition for his leadership skills.

These three illustrations shows how a relationship with knowledge is taking place in close association with the identity of the manager, identity for himself or attributed identity. The trajectories of managers work closely with their life choices and their way of understanding leadership. The ways in which managers are seeking to learn are plunged differently due to differential educational environments. Therefore, these three sales managers share high disjunction when observed in the three worlds of management mentioned earlier namely – management education, management development and managerial practices. Both life's experience and socialization process of managers act as a key factor in their development. Their exposure to educational models also might account for the differences in their approaches to gain academic knowledge and enhance their self development process. While the initial education focuses on academic knowledge, continuing education operates as remedial and experiences of life remain uncertain to attain management position. Table 1 shows the impact of the educational

continuum in terms of managerial identities, relationship to knowledge and learning approach encountered.

Table 1: Impact of Educational Continuum and its Relation to Knowledge

Life Stages	Higher Education	Internal promotion	Experience
Career path	Organizational path	Technical expertise	Tribulations and uncertainties
Identity	Identity is assigned by compliance of role (proof of the potential early and speculative)	Identity is confirmed by the accession process (must demonstrate by its results)	Identity of self-doubt (living proof to confront a normed reference)
Relation to knowledge	Knowledge is classified, institutionalized, it must meet standards of restitution	Knowledge is utilitarian and practical; it is used for positioning	Knowledge is intimate; it fulfills a personal challenge
Learning approach	Epistemological content	Socio-professional adaptation	Psychological self-development
Anticipated way in becoming a manager	To be a manager is innate	To be a manager is the result of a learning	To be a manager is the result of meetings

Source: Author

These career paths are embedded in models of management education. The ranking of models for management education identified for the U.S. and proposed by Bolden (2007) include four groups namely academic liberalism, liberalism experiential, experiential vocationalism and experiential critical. French practices in schools seem to focus on the first three models. The first one is based on a presupposition of scientific management and acquisition of concepts and theories through case study and experimentation. The second one is the development of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1994) through group work and personal development work. The third model seeks to develop interpersonal skills in line with the organizations. The fourth model aims to empower managers helping them to dare and think critically. However, France seemed to exhibit resistance to use of critical view, which could eventually result in preference for the formal ways of access to managerial positions and exclude the recognition of managerial knowledge acquired by experience. According to Bellier-Michel (1997), management training can be regarded as performing a function of adherence to values and beliefs of the business and enhancing the feeling of belonging to a class by itself. With this point of view, the educational function is often put forward but still at the bare minimum. What is at stake in training is largely about the relationship between the manager and the organization. Events

happen as if the training was a way to make connections and identities oriented towards productive purposes. Everything occurs as a continuity and extension of management education. It may include the involvement of managers and influencing the ways of doing, thinking, feeling, interpreting the world, how to interact with others or ourselves, manner of dressing, attempts to fashion, etc. develop a legitimate body hexis (Bourdieu 1979) thus transforming everyday details to perfect disposition. When managers are exclusively equipped with a vision tool, they are hard pressed to lead teams (Robin, 1994; Mintzberg, 2005).

Critical Analysis of Pedagogical Approaches

Based on the secondary information through internet sites, of the 37 business schools in France from the 'conference of the grande école'¹ and their brochures, the author collated information on pedagogical practices, diversity, management style, etc. The schools differed in learning styles, contexts of implementation, objectives pursued and overall effectiveness. Adopting theoretical approach alone with abstract conceptualization seemed to have limited scope. Opportunities to provide practical approach in higher education through management school is immense, but often remain unutilised and unexploited. For instance, the latency between the end of the training for students and their influence on management practices would be 2 to 10 years. Proximity to the practice and practitioners is therefore essential (Mintzberg, 2005). Even reflections prove to be a critical aspect of learning management. At times, management would simply refer to the learnings of the language of the administration. Reconciliation of the teachings and practices requires teachers and researchers in management to take the practice perspective in education seriously (Hendry, 2006). Management teaching practices tend to focus on transfer of knowledge between the teacher and students. Although enhanced by teaching strategies such as case study method, group discussions, etc., the pedagogy in general remains far away from the development of the human dimension of the managers. Implementation of educational practices if inadequate could affect the objectives pursued by the school (increased awareness, rise in the rankings, and search for profit), students (choice of a label and acquire a culture), and also teachers (pedagogical commitment, career ambitions, and mono-discipline concern). Therefore, one of the modes identified to confront the learner with the complexity of the undertaking refers to the organization-linked training which requires construction of meanings. When such a system exists, alternating between 'on the job learning' and 'theoretical approach' offers a means for cross-fertilization. Real times and places of learning allow a consideration of human problems (Angot et al.,

2008; Hahn et al., 2008). The integration of a larger inquiry into learning, the approach to joint construction projects between the company, the future manager and the team are true learnings spaces (Pougnnet and Lemmet, 2009). This approach however requires a membership of actors beyond the place of a syllabus.

Critique of Training

As regards training, the main criticism of the training focuses on the low consideration of individual temporalities. Training is characterised mostly in terms of knowledge transfer through face-to-face interaction in a room outside of company time with profusion of practices, methods and tools. The implicit reference to a particular model of training is based on the triptych: structure/objective/programme. It offers the opportunity to meet and exchange ideas with multi-corollary cross-pollination or propagation models. There is multiplicity of approaches used to boost training which include the practice of sponsorship, internship, co-training, project-based learning, learning through research, civic projects or social cultural immersion, institutional pedagogy, cross observations, mentoring, etc., although the courses and training are identified in the presence of an instructor. Face-to-face training remains popular in France especially among makers of business formation. However, there seems to be a lack in terms of content based on the criticism of the modality of training as established by Baron (2009). The first criticism refers to the slow penetration of new ideas that are scientifically validated and research-based. The second criticism points to the introduction and approximations of the concepts, including the scientific legitimacy which is weakly sought in the corporate world. The third refers to the over valuation of the power which is more attractive, but invests less time and effort by learners in terms of thinking and assuming ownership.

These three phenomena give way to ideas that are convenient, approximate and of practical use. The observation of more specific management education, as deciphered in the course offerings, reveals a centering on the manager and his relationship with the acquisition of technical methods and tools to dominate, control, and motivate another. The other is being placed in the position of an object to move in the desired direction by the organization, starting with an intention of personal development (Brunel 2004). For instance, the 2-8 days training on 'leadership learning' as per the panorama in 43 catalogues of French short courses in 2008 serves as an example. The promise of these training sessions is expressed in the titles of the courses namely; 'analyze and develop leadership, ' be a

leader of yourself', 'be a leader in action', 'be the leader of multi-cultural state', 'four roles of leadership', 'build and develop your leadership', 'expand leadership, relational leadership and authority', 'two dimensions of leadership and management styles of Hersey and Blanchard', 'leadership project leader', etc. The programmes carry with them a global moral and adaptive view. However, they seem to forget the question of empathy, the gift or understanding of their social environment. The focus is more on self-engineering making oneself an object more than a job consisting of ethical experience that identifies its limitations of the former and builds as a subject (Ehrenberg, 1991; Ebguay, 2008).

Developing a Critical View of Management Education

Armstrong and Fukami (2009) argue for the importance of changing educational priorities to enhance entrepreneurial imagination. To exit conformist solutions, he proposes teaching analytical skills for problem solving to make way for a paradigm shift. Cunliffe et al. (2002) state that the critical questioning of management practices prevail both in the social and intellectual domains. They argue that business schools take over the legitimacy of producing elite managers. The challenge for them is to help managers to be more critical in a profession which encourages them to be spontaneous. To do this, they encourage educators to maintain distance with what they teach and how to do it so that they can introspect. This effort requires greater reflection on their part in order to develop a certain amount of self-reflexivity. It is important that teachers and trainers are equipped with this trait before asking their students to be moral practitioners or critical thinkers. Cunliffe, et al. (2002) and Duarte (2009) refer to reflexive skills as based on the sociological imagination that encourages contextualization of organizational phenomena. Critical thinking allows an individual to use reason to understand the historical origins of a phenomenon. Duarte includes reflection as a cognitive process to use past experience to imagine new situations, establish connections to have insights, and make fair decisions. Critical thinking allows one to go beyond the obvious facts which are appearing or suggestions commonly made. Reflexivity describes the activity of empowerment to a situation, making each one responsible for what he/she does. These issues highlight pedagogical ways of thinking and calls for more humanity, collaboration and ethics in management. Such a process which calls for a 'life long learning' within the meaning of a set of theories and methods to teach management in line with specific managerial knowledge is not prevalent in France. Hence, training proposals in the catalogues of specialized agencies and management school appear to be just a potential vehicle for learning the duties of a manager.

Efforts should be made to identify the potential contributions of the individual/student at the right time of the educational continuum. A didactic managerial approach could look into the purposes of managerial learning in terms of moments in the life of the individual. It will articulate methods in an educational continuum. Finally, it encourages the modalities of capacity building among the managers who learn from situations. The didactic managerial approach designs a stimulating learning environment in which the individual could fully commit himself/herself beyond the only cognitive approach. The study classifies the learning environments (See Table 2) based on the stimulation provided, engagement in learning, the nature of knowledge engaged and postures that enable the learner.

Table 2 : Stimulation of Learning Environments and Learners Posture

Learning Commitment	Nature of Knowledge	Learners Postures
Cognitive	Knowledge-oriented, theoretical and cognitive content	<i>Agent</i> of a learning process – the learner interprets the world
Cognitive and physical	Knowledge-oriented towards relationship and physical involvement	Physically engaged in action – the learner becomes an <i>actor</i>
Cognitive, physical and emotional	Knowledge - inhabited, acted, and incorporated	Taking into consideration his/her feelings – the learner becomes a <i>subject</i>
Cognitive, physical action, emotional and identity projection	Ontological knowledge	Builder of its knowledge – the learner becomes an <i>author</i> and convenes its identity

Table 2 describes how a learning environment would act upon the dimensions of learning (cognitive, physical, emotional and identity), the nature of knowledge (theoretical, action, incorporated and ontological) and postures (agent, actor, subject and author). When the learner is looking at the action, he/she changes the direction of his/her relationship to knowledge. This change in relationship to knowledge is tied with a managerial maturity. The manager attributes more meaning to the situations he/she encounters and the maturity is possible by increasing reflexivity. Schön (1994) states ‘When someone reflects on the action, he becomes a researcher in a practice setting’. It does not depend on categories derived from theory and technique predetermined but he builds a new theory of the case. ‘Learning to learn’ should be an ingredient in any programme design, to give managers access to a greater autonomy in their conquest of new fields

of knowledge. This proposal reflects the culture of 'learnance' advocated by Carré (2005). It can be satisfied by the development and improvement of the reflexive dimension of learning in the management programme designed. It further urges self-direction in learning guaranteeing greater empowerment (Cunliffe, 2004). To achieve this objective, Gray (2007) offers exposure to processes namely storytelling, conversation or reflective tools such as reflexive metaphors, the study of critical incidents, maintaining reflective journals, grids diagnosis, the concept mapping, etc. Following these remarks, there is the need for investing more time on reflexivity-based teaching. Solutions to these critical issues may not be found in a particular management discipline (marketing, finance, etc.) as the aims, status and issues are more complex and interwoven.

Conclusion

Bellier-Michel (1997) states a common belief: 'We do not make a manager you are or you are not a manager, it's about personality, temperament.' We suggest several areas to create a managerial learning. Firstly, it would specify that the managerial knowledge is complex beyond the single deviation in management discipline. It would then establish benchmarks, that include not only cognitive but also physical, emotional and identity issues, to assist each recipient in the function of a development process. To develop the posture of an *agent*, a learning process should articulate the educational continuum and propose different targets for different types of educational experiences. To develop the *actor*, it is important to recognize the commitment in the action. Indeed, the managerial dimension requires social recognition and may be more marked by the creation of rituals such as first team, first managerial position, the first participation in steering committee, etc. If the consideration of emotions and feelings are taken into account, then the learner's subjective topic, involvement and teaching methods become more important than rationality. Finally, the managerial function deserves a development of reflective practices to develop a conscience of his/her managerial relationship with oneself. In the end, to create a position for the author, identity resources should work in a learning discernment, i.e., answering the questions such as what is it to be a manager; what kind of manager would you be? In summary, we must take into account social and environmental purposes and not exclusively economic rationale. Personal experience is often overlooked in training programmes, which is quite essential in terms of practices. It is therefore necessary to articulate the formal and informal learning, which involves developing pedagogies of experience, the alternation of the project, mission or training, etc. Open learning arrangements leading to alternative sources of knowledge has

led the education system to depart from the logic in favour of vertical and horizontal thinking. This requires a certain way of looking at the nature of managerial knowledge and to develop it. Rather than teach the problems and solutions, one need to apply a method of teaching managerial knowledge by developing a flexible learning environment which is liable and predisposed to the provisions of learners rather than the knowledge of trainers.

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END NOTES

- 1 The conference of the grande école' is a very small club of elite schools.