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Teaching & Learning

Management as a contextual practice: the need to blend science, skills and practical wisdom

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Abstract

This paper contributes to the debate regarding whether or not management is, or should become, a profession. Using the principles of dialectic logic, arguments for the thesis that management is a profession and the antithesis that management is more akin to an art or a craft are critically reviewed. Aristotle's intellectual virtues *episteme* (science), *techne* (skills) and *phronesis* (practical wisdom) are introduced as a synthesis to this debate. Rather than characterizing management as a profession, it is argued that management is a *contextual practice* that requires a blend of all three intellectual virtues.

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Introduction

The so-called “relevance gap” in management education and research has become a topic of a substantial scholarly debate. Notable contributors include prominent business school academics (e.g. Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004; Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005), several past presidents of the Academy of Management (Hambrick, 1994; Huff, 2000; Cummings, 2007), the AACSB (2007) and The Economist (2007). Continuing along this line, *Academy of Management Journal* recently published a special forum on “Research with relevance for practice” (Gulati, 2007; Markides, 2007; McGahan, 2007; Rynes, 2007; Tushman and O’Reilly, 2007; Vermeulen, 2007) and the 2008 theme for the Academy of Management meeting challenges the business school community to ponder “the questions we ask”.

Closely linked with the “relevance debate” is the recent discussion in academic journals regarding whether or not management *is* or at least *should be* a profession (e.g. Pfeffer and Fong, 2002, 2004; Trank and Rynes, 2003; Mintzberg, 2004; Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Fryer and Gardner, 2007; Spender, 2007). Viewing management as a profession would have significant implications for both management education and research.

In this paper, arguments for and against management as a profession are critically reviewed. Following from this, Aristotle’s three kinds of knowledge or intellectual virtues: *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis* (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2006; Aristotle, 2004) are introduced, and



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these are discussed in terms of their relevance to the profession debate. We reach the conclusion that management students need a combination of science, skills and practical wisdom in order to thrive. The paper ends with a discussion of the implications for management education and research.

Characteristics of a profession

Before moving to a critical discussion of the “management as a profession” debate, it is important to define the characteristics of a profession. There is general agreement that professions contain three common characteristics. These are a professional knowledge-base, a professional ethos and training in professional schools. Each of these is described in a little more depth below.

First, professions have an established and codified professional knowledge-base that practitioners acquire through study and subsequently practice (Spender, 2007). This knowledge base is abstract and contains generalized knowledge that is portable, to a great degree, across contexts (Trank and Rynes, 2003). Application of the knowledge base is also linked to achieving higher performance. As a result, experts would typically outperform laypersons within a professional area (Mintzberg, 2004) and evidence-based knowledge and practice is held in high regard (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006).

Second, practitioners seem to be guided by some form of professional ethos concerning what is considered acceptable practice (Trank and Rynes, 2003). Ethos comes from the Greek word “ethikos” meaning that a person is showing moral character; hence ethos captures the ethical dimension of practicing a profession. Such a character is nurtured and enforced through explicit rules of membership and accreditation (Trank and Rynes, 2003; Fryer and Gardner, 2007), professional values and responsibility (Pfeffer and Fong, 2004), socialization (Pfeffer and Fong, 2004), and sanctioning mechanisms for violations (Pfeffer and Fong, 2004; Fryer and Gardner, 2007). As a result, professions hold certain rules of conduct as essential to the integrity of practice. The sole focus on economic results or other ultimate outcomes is thus rarely acceptable (Fryer and Gardner, 2007). Professions thus reject a purely instrumental focus on outcomes in favor of value-based ethics.

Third, aspiring and current practitioners receive training at professional schools (e.g. law, medicine and engineering), focused on practical components, rather than only functionally oriented

academic subjects (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005). Hence, professional schools typically draw on a number of core disciplines that distinguish themselves through their applied nature (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005). Commonly, faculty members are practicing the profession they research and teach and often they have parallel academic and professional appointments. Also, it is not unusual for faculty members to move in and out of the profession during the span of their careers (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). The views of faculty also carry weight in practice (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005). In addition, students might also spend periods of time as interns under the guidance of experienced practitioners (Fryer and Gardner, 2007).

Is management a profession?

The above characteristics frame the debate as to whether management can be considered a profession. A review of the literature shows that there are two primary positions taken by authors. In one camp, are those who support the thesis that management should be a profession (Trank and Rynes, 2003; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004; Bennis and O’Toole, 2005). Closely related to this standpoint is the call for relevant research that provides a scientific evidence base that can guide management practitioners (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006). In the other camp, are those people who argue for the antithesis that management is not, nor should it be, considered a profession. Authors taking this position instead prefer to view management as an art (Spender, 2007) or a craft (Mintzberg, 1987). Both the thesis and the antithesis convey insights of importance but they are paradigmatically different and antagonistic to each other. This paper explores whether a synthesis can be found by drawing on the wisdom contained in the Greek classics, and Aristotle’s (2004) *Nicomachean Ethics*, in particular.¹

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle separates out three different forms of intellectual virtues, which he calls *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*. *Episteme* refers to universal scientific, and context-independent knowledge. This form of knowledge appears to be highly suitable for professionalization. Advocates of the thesis that management should be a profession, based on a documented evidence base, are advocating an epistemic view of management. In contrast, *techne* is translated as art, craft or skills, and represents pragmatic context-dependent knowledge. This corresponds fairly closely to the antithesis that management cannot be considered a

profession based on the application of a documented knowledge base. Had this been the end of the story, Aristotle's ideas would not have offered a synthesis. However, he offers a third intellectual virtue – *phronesis* – which is often translated as practical wisdom or prudence (Flyvbjerg, 2001; Grint, 2007). It is *phronesis* that offers the possibility of a synthesis to the management as a profession debate.

Phronesis refers to pragmatic, context-dependent and ethics-oriented knowledge focused on value-based judgments. Flyvbjerg explains “[w]hereas *episteme* concerns theoretical *know why* and *techné* denotes technical *know how*, *phronesis* emphasizes practical knowledge and practical ethics” (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 56, italics in original). As such, *phronesis* brings a focus on balancing instrumental rationality with value rationality (Flyvbjerg, 2001). Given this, Statler and Oppgaard (2005) have argued that practical wisdom combines management behavior that is both ethical and effective. It is in fact the focus on analysis of values that distinguishes *phronesis*. Flyvbjerg argues, “[p]*hronesis* concerns the analysis of values – things that are good or bad for man – as a point of departure for managed actions (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 372). This appears to be of particular relevance to both management and to social sciences in general. The focus on practical wisdom that *phronesis* denotes might be the synthesis we need to transcend the thesis of management as a science and the antithesis of management as an art or craft. Based on this insight, we now return to our assessment of the management “profession” across the three categories of professional knowledge-base, professional ethos and professional schools.

The data regarding whether or not the management field has a professional knowledge-base is weak. Although there has been a lot of discussion about evidence-based management (Tranfield *et al.*, 2003; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006), design science (Romme, 2003; van Aken, 2005) and Mode 2 knowledge (Tranfield and Starkey, 1998; Starkey and Madan, 2001), surprisingly little evidence has actually been mustered on its behalf to show that management either has such a professional knowledge-base or that one would be useful or achievable. For example, Pfeffer and Fong (2002) did not find any evidence that possessing an MBA degree, or having high scores in MBA courses, were correlated with individual career success. The authors also found that “there is little relevance that business school research is influential on

management practice, calling into question the professional relevance of management scholarship” (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002: 78). Further, Mintzberg (2004) has argued that “knowledge about context is not as portable in management as it is in education or engineering or in medicine” (2004: 12). Rather than being about the application of a scientific evidence base, Bennis and O’Toole (2005) have proposed that most issues facing senior managers require judgment rather than analysis. Such arguments are closer to advocating practical wisdom (*phronesis*) instead of a purely epistemic view of management as a science. As evidence-based management is epistemic in nature, focused on meta-analysis of objective evidence rather than on value-based judgments, there are clear limits to what we can expect to get from the evidence-based movement in management studies. We view evidence-based management as a sound methodology to improve the quality of our epistemic knowledge base rather than as a tool to achieve practical wisdom. As an aside, it is important to note that in some management-related disciplines, such as accounting, finance, actuarial science and purchasing, scientific (*epistemic*) knowledge is central to study. Students in these disciplines are taught rules and procedures and have to pass “professional” examinations to qualify for entry to these “professions.” They contrast markedly to teaching in mainstream management education, which further highlights the challenge of applying epistemic knowledge to management. In conclusion, there is a strong argument that the management field has not developed a professional knowledge-base in a strict sense, nor convincingly shown that such a knowledge-base would be useful. Hence, while some talk about “evidenced-based medicine”, the promise of “evidence-based management” remains unfulfilled as of yet in mainstream management.

A similar conclusion can be drawn in regard to professional ethos as there does not appear to exist a strong ethos within the management field today. Accreditation bodies lack credibility and do not purport to defend a particular professional ethos. There are no shared professional values and no sanctioning mechanisms beyond the law and “naming and shaming” in the press and on the Internet. In fact, the management field is characterized by an almost exclusive focus on extrinsic outcomes, and it has even been argued that management education is attracting corporate mercenaries primarily interested in monetary rewards rather than the actual practice of management (Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004; Fryer and

Gardner, 2007). This is often discussed in relation to whether self-interest is the only driver of human behavior (e.g. Ghoshal, 2005). This is important given the process of double hermeneutics in the social sciences, which means that theories can become self-fulfilling prophecies if they legitimize and stimulate behavior (Ghoshal and Moran, 1996; Ferraro *et al.*, 2005; Ghoshal, 2005). Hence, if self-interest is legitimized as the sole legitimate driver of human motivations, our students might, in fact, become indoctrinated to behave in a more egoistic manner than their natural inclination (Sober and Wilson, 1998). There is, however, an emerging body of literature from anthropology, evolutionary biology and psychology that concludes that assumptions surrounding managerial rationality and the “economic man” might not be appropriate (Kahneman and Tversky, 1973; Sober and Wilson, 1998; Hauser, 2006). As a result, both Sen (1987) and Sober and Wilson (1998) have concluded that there is lack of evidence supporting commonly held self-interest convictions in much of mainstream economic and management theory. In line with this, it might in fact be harmful if management education advocates self-interest as the only worthwhile pursuit. While it can be concluded that a deeper sense of ethos does not seem to exist today in management education, it would be sensible to promote students’ development of an ethos going forward. This would also be consistent with elevating the importance of *phronesis* in relation to *episteme* and *techne*, which are already held in high regard in our business schools and universities.

The third area of interest is the training of managers in professional schools. Interestingly, the first business schools began with a strong link to business and were often closely associated with trades and professions. However, from the 1950s onwards these links have been gradually eroded away as business schools aspired to gain academic status and move away from their original standing as “trade schools” (Trank and Rynes, 2003; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004; Bennis and O’Toole, 2005; Spender, 2007). This has led to a greater separation between the practice of management and the research and teaching of management in business schools. As business schools have moved away from their origin as professional schools, there are sound arguments for a re-orientation for the future. This is also consistent with the call to increase the focus on developing students’ practical wisdom (*phronesis*). If the most important decisions facing managers involve the

application of value-based judgments (Bennis and O’Toole, 2005), phronetic training seems best placed to prepare students for their future careers.

The above discussion illustrates that management cannot be characterized as a profession today according to the same criteria that would be applied to professions such as accounting, law and medicine. Instead and consistent with Aristotle’s intellectual virtues, management must be viewed as a contextual practice that blends science, skills and practical wisdom. Such an approach has the potential to transcend both the relevance and the profession debates.

Contextual practice

In contrast to the natural sciences, the social sciences are deeply *contextual* in nature (Flyvbjerg, 2001). This means that management is a situated activity, which both shapes and is shaped by the context in which it occurs (Jarzabkowski, 2005). Hence, there is no such thing as decontextualized management. In fact, Spender has argued that “[t]here is no decontextualized but still practice-relevant knowledge” (Spender, 2007: 38). This contrasts markedly with other professions. For example, in medicine a surgeon may develop a new procedure and then apply it to all similar cases because, in essence, all contexts (i.e. human bodies) are largely the same. Another example would be an actuary who learns how to calculate risk and can use these skills across cases because the computation of risk stays the same regardless of the context. The same is not the case in management where taking an exclusively epistemic view, similar to the stance taken in the natural sciences, would not allow for the variation, complexity and multiple causation in every context. As suggested by Lawrence (1992), conducting problem-oriented research, grounded in specific contexts, might be a more promising avenue to pursue in contrast to mainstream deductive, theory-oriented research. Calls for a re-orientation towards local phenomena and issues have also been raised by a number of other scholars (e.g. Toulmin, 1990; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Meyer, 2006).

If management cannot be considered a profession, can it be considered a “practice”? That is, is management something that people do rather than an attribute of people or something that firms have? A practice has a less demanding set of criteria than a formal profession based on the criteria discussed above. Nevertheless, the term “practice” is particularly interesting as it contains the notion

of continual development – “practice makes perfect” – and that traditional forms of academic study are unlikely to achieve the desired learning. Practice-based professional learning is an interesting development as it sees workplaces, rather than classrooms as the primary location for management development (Hawkins and Winter, 1995; Fenton-O’Creedy *et al.*, 2006). In these environments, management students need a combination of *science*, *skills* and *practical wisdom* to thrive, which acknowledges the value of Aristotle’s three intellectual virtues to managers. This pluralistic approach to management (Ghoshal, 2005; AACSB, 2007) also corresponds with a trend towards interdisciplinary study (e.g. Shih and Chao, 2007). Similar to Gulati’s (2007) critique of the polarized relevance versus rigor debate, this is an inclusive stance rather than a confrontational one. The following section looks at the implication of this stance for management education and the research that is conducted in business schools.

Implications for business schools

Although the synthesis in this paper is to argue for an inclusive stance involving all three of Aristotle’s intellectual virtues, *techne*, *episteme* and *phronesis*, this section focuses on the practical implications of *phronesis*. The other two were discussed earlier in this paper and the notion of practical wisdom is less well developed in the literature.

The implication for *research* is that more attention needs to be given to concrete, local, timely and contextual issues (Toulmin, 1990; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Meyer, 2006). This increases the likelihood that managerially relevant questions are asked in the first place (Vermeulen, 2005, 2007). Problem-oriented, rather than theory-oriented, research appears to be a promising avenue to pursue (Lawrence, 1992). With a view of management as a contextual practice, it is also important that research focuses on managerial interventions or actions. Design science research has a lot to tell us in this regard given the preoccupation with understanding what interventions work for whom in what contexts (Romme, 2003; van Aken, 2005; Huff *et al.*, 2006). In addition, researchers should actively embrace the phronetic concern with values. This is in distinct contrast to the value-free research conducted within the objectivist research paradigms adopted by positivism and critical rationalism. As argued by Flyvbjerg:

Phronesis thus concerns the analysis of values – ‘things which are good or bad for man’ – as a point of departure for

action. *Phronesis* is that intellectual activity most relevant to praxis. It focuses on what is variable, on that which cannot be encapsulated by universal rules, on specific cases. *Phronesis* requires an interaction between the general and the concrete, it requires consideration, judgment and choice. More than anything else, *phronesis* requires *experience*. (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 57, italics in original)

The phronetic emphasis with “regard to things that are good or bad for man” (Aristotle, 2004: 150) means that scholars need to take sides and actively engage with the central issues of our time. The critic might argue that this degrades the very nature of “objective” science in favor of subjective “opinions.” However, Flyvbjerg has addressed this by arguing that:

At present, social science is locked in a fight it cannot hope to win, because it has accepted terms that are self-defeating. We will see that in their role as *phronesis*, the social sciences are strongest where the natural sciences are weakest: just as the social sciences have not contributed much to explanatory or predictive theory, neither has the natural sciences contributed to the reflexive analysis and discussion of values and interests, which is a prerequisite for an enlightened political, economic, and cultural development in any society, and which is at the core of *phronesis*. (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 3, italics in original)

In this regard, it is interesting to note that the gap between the social and the natural sciences have in fact been closing compared with the ultra-positivist standpoint adopted during the Enlightenment and in the 19th century. We can see this in the example of Cosmology and the “Big Bang” theory, which includes a substantial amount of philosophical argumentation in addition to “hard” scientific evidence. Hence, it is especially important that the social sciences do not aspire to outdated ideals about what constitutes proper science.

Does this somewhat “subjective” stance then simply imply that any “opinion” should be accepted to be as good as any in the social sciences? Clearly not as Flyvbjerg argues:

As regards validity, phronetic research is based on interpretation and is open for testing in relation to other interpretations and other research. But one interpretation is not just as good as another, which would be the case for relativism. Every interpretation must be built upon claims of validity, and the procedures for ensuring validity are as demanding for phronetic research as for any other activity in the social or political sciences. (Flyvbjerg, 2001: 130)

The implications for *teaching* are that management as a contextual practice must be closely aligned with the need for experience. There are similarities

with Flyvbjerg's (2001) discussion of *phronesis* and Gould *et al.*'s (1994) arguments that managers need to develop "feel" for their businesses to avoid destroying value. As a result, reflexivity is a key component of management as a contextual practice. There are several ways to encourage reflexivity. The most common method in business schools might be the use of case studies that confront students with managerial dilemmas or challenges. Business simulations and negotiation games are also sometimes used. However, such approaches suffer from a rather sterile view of reality captured in just a few sanitized pages or simulations based on just a few variables. Moreover, the student is detached from the "reality" of case studies and the impact decisions have on people, business, communities and the environment. A more appropriate alternative, when confined to the classroom, would be the use of visual (TV shows, cinema, etc.) and audio material (e.g. first hand recollections, memoirs) that brings contexts alive and allows students the opportunity to experience the complexity and causal ambiguity of management. We also believe there is great value in having students write in-depth case studies and ethnographies where they engage directly with practicing managers and then bring back this experience to the classroom.

A *phronetic* approach to teaching must combine reflexivity with realism (Grint, 2007). Hence, this approach suggests a teaching approach that confronts students with the actual practice of management. These include engagement with employees (managers, non-managers, etc.), engagement with those people interacting with organizations from the outside (e.g. customers, suppliers, shareholders, action groups), and in-company project work. Shadowing schemes and internships, which are commonly used in the medical and legal fields, are also relevant. In many ways, the *phronetic* approach calls for a re-emergence of the apprenticeship model of teaching whereby the management student learns "at the bench." The TV series, *The Apprentice*, offers an interesting glimpse at a form of learning where people are given a practical task and are then evaluated and debriefed on it. This could easily be adapted to bring out the learning component in an educational setting. Another form of apprenticeship model illustrated on television is the notion of *Faking It*. In this series, a person spends a month living and training with an expert in order to pass as "the real thing" in a realistic practical test at the end of the period. This approach allows not just for context (*episteme*) and

context-independent (*techne*) skill development, but it also facilitates the transfer of practical wisdom about the job.

Taking the apprentice model to its natural conclusion, management students would be learning in the morning and practicing in the afternoon alongside their professors. Student-built, or at least university-built, businesses may be the ultimate learning vehicle in this regard. In other vocational fields, colleges and universities build operating theaters to train surgeons, dark rooms to develop (pardon the pun) photography students and put on productions to give acting students an opportunity to perform in front of audiences. Why not develop organizations in which management students and their professors can work and learn side-by-side? Interestingly, some management schools have started to make such ideas a reality. An example is the Masters Degree in Entrepreneurship and Innovation at the University of Luxembourg. Practice is an integrated component in this program and students undertake an internship in one organization for the full duration of their study program. During the initial phase of their studies, students only spend 1 day per week in their internship organization. This is gradually increased during the program to reach fulltime status towards the end of the studies. Furthermore, students are not left alone to navigate the diverse worlds of practice and academia. Instead, regular group meetings are arranged involving the students, faculty and their industry mentors. This provides an arena to share experiences and to bridge the academic-practitioner divide. We believe these are the kinds of environments in which management students would gain their practical wisdom and emerge from college able to perform in a management role. We also believe that this kind of interaction positively contributes towards focusing faculty members on addressing issues of pressing concern to practicing managers.

Conclusion

The paper opened with an overview of the characteristics of professions such as law and medicine. We then introduced Aristotle's (Flyvbjerg, 2001, 2006; Aristotle, 2004) three intellectual virtues of *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis*, and discussed whether management could be characterized as a profession. We reached the conclusion that while management does not meet the formal criteria for a profession discussed above, our students would be well served by a combination



of science, skills and practical wisdom. *Phronesis* or practical wisdom offers a synthesis to transcend the restrictive arguments for or against management as a profession. Drawing on this suggestion, the paper ended with discussion of the implications for research and teaching.

While the opening of this paper covered traditional ground in the discussion of whether management can be considered as a profession, it ended in a perhaps unexpected and controversial place. In short, the use of Aristotle's intellectual virtues as a way to frame and synthesize this debate leads to the spotlighting of *phronesis* as a potential resolution to the crisis in business schools. *Phronesis* means practical wisdom and this means that management students must be placed in real organizational settings under the tutelage of people who can properly help them learn. Not only would such an approach radically alter the nature of management education, but it would also alter the nature of business schools, business school faculty and business school students. Business schools would have to establish new kinds of industry partnerships or perhaps even set up and run businesses in which their students can get "hands-on" experience and

the opportunity to make a difference to customers, staff and the businesses. Faculty would have to resemble the medical professor who practices in the morning and teaches in the afternoon. Another example is the way teacher education is set up in several countries with extensive internships in the classroom under the observation and coaching of both academic supervisors and experienced teachers.

The role would be guiding trainee managers and facilitating their learning. This apprenticeship model would also have an impact on students. Gone would be the days of rolling up to lectures, memorizing textbooks and regurgitating it all in examinations. Entry to a business school would be a commitment to engage in real work and to experience the thrill of business.

Note

¹Please note that it is Aristotle's intellectual virtues of *episteme*, *techne* and *phronesis* that we find interesting and we do not support some of his other beliefs, such as his support of misogyny or his views regarding slavery and democracy. Please refer to Morrell (2007) for these and other concerns with referencing the work of Aristotle.

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