

The Embedded Academic: A Management Academic Discovers Management¹

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1. Abstract:

In this autobiographical essay, I reflect on three years living a double life as both a management academic and a manager of a department. In particular, I think about the relevance of my own course material to doing a managerial job. Much to my amazement, I found that I rarely used management theory and instead it was my training as an academic that was most helpful to me as a manager. In the concluding section, I consider how I intend to change my management teaching to make it more relevant and useful for prospective and current managers.

Key Words:

Management theory, management skills, critical thinking, research skills, application of theory, rigour and relevance.

2. Introduction

For the past three years I've been leading a double life. One life was as a management academic in a business school where I ran a suite of management, leadership and HR courses and conducted research. This was something I had been doing for sixteen years. The other life was as a manager of a department in the Human Resources (HR) division of the same university. I ran the team that conducted most of the university's in-house surveys, studies and evaluations. These were two completely separate jobs, in different parts of the university with different offices involving different people. I was only able to cope with both jobs because the support I received to run the department made doing my academic job much more manageable. In addition, having done the academic job for so long, I am embarrassed to say that I was doing much of it on auto-pilot.

During my double life, I often found myself reflecting on the relevance of the things I was teaching in my day-to-day job as a management academic. I was managing a team of about six people (it varied around this number during my tenure) dealing with the everyday problems of line management. I was also working within the HR division and liaising with senior management in the department and the university. I was exactly the sort of person I was developing and delivering management courses for. So I was curious to know what aspects of the material I was teaching others I would naturally use myself. This autobiographical essay reflects on my time as an embedded academic and my assessment of the utility of management, leadership and HR materials that are commonly taught in business schools. My intention is to agitate and prompt discussion.

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3. My Background

As this is an autobiographical essay, I should begin by saying a little bit about myself so that you know how to interpret my comments. My upbringing was completely unremarkable. I went to a comprehensive school in Wolverhampton (for non-UK readers, a comprehensive school is a typical high school and Wolverhampton is a large town in the industrial heartland of the country) and straight to university for my undergraduate studies in politics and modern history. I found work at a small record company in Wolverhampton where I worked for eighteen months doing all the backroom jobs (purchasing, accounts, warehousing, distribution, production etc.) before moving to London to work for a large record and tape manufacturer. After that, I had a succession of jobs in a six year period. I worked in a record company in the centre of London, a credit card company that was a subsidiary of a large American bank, an investment bank in the City of London, and finally as an executive search consultant in a two-man company.

At the end of this string of jobs, I decided to do a full-time MBA. This went well and I found that I enjoyed academic work. So I found a job as an ESRC Management Teaching Fellow (a scheme designed to help experienced managers get into business schools) and sixteen years later, during which time I completed a PhD, I progressed through the ranks at the same university. In the final three years at this university, I occupied the two roles described earlier. I have now moved on to my current university to take up a chair in organisational behaviour.

Looking back at my chequered career history, I am amazed how naïve I was when I began work. On my first or second day in work, my boss asked me to send someone an invoice. Not wanting to look stupid in front of him, I waited until he was out of the room before I asked someone what an invoice was. But I was a quick study and during the eight years I thrived in work environments; but all of this came from learning on the job. I had taken no courses and gained no qualifications in management, so the MBA was my first exposure to management theory.

4. Rigour and Relevance

The courses I have been running for the past sixteen years are emblematic of the mainstream of management and business courses run in business schools around the world. I say this with some confidence. My school has AACSB, AMBA and EQUIS accreditation and it delivers courses to thousands of students primarily through supported distance learning. These are tutored locally by part-time associate faculty, many of whom have full-time jobs in other universities. The traditional course model comprises workbooks authored by central faculty supplemented by readers, textbooks, face-to-face and online tutorials, online conferences and discussion groups, and residential schools. In a traditional course model, the workbooks are the core material and they contain the main teaching. These are high quality products that contain excellent overviews of a particular study area. The university regularly finds itself in court defending its copyright of these materials. It is not uncommon for other universities to build their own courses around our workbooks. Hence, my previous employer has a reputation for being a leader in setting the teaching agenda.

The mainstream position of my previous university is further emphasised by the way courses are developed. Generally speaking, a group of academics come together as a team to build the course. This committee structure, coupled with the large body and broad spectrum of students, has a tendency to curb rash and innovative approaches and to opt for 'safe' material, so the courses tend towards accepted and proven theories and approaches. The result is courses high on rigour. The challenge that all course teams face is how to make their courses relevant. In the business school, the usual response is "reflective practice".

Reflective practice involves an explanation of a theory, model, concept or idea and then asking the student to 'apply' it to their own circumstances (Fenton-O'Creevy, Knight & Margolis, 2006; Mintzberg, 2004). Sometimes this is done as a thought exercise, other times it has a more practical element with students directed to observe things in the work place or to gather data relevant to the theory (Hawkins and Winter 1995). For example, they might be asked to interview someone about his or her motivation and then to categorise and explain their motivation through the lens of a particular theory. In essence, the relevance dimension of the courses is theory-driven.

Being intimately involved in the design, development and delivery of management and HR courses, I have been immersed in many of the mainstream management and HR ideas over sixteen years. Initially, my varied business background had been very useful in helping me understand the contexts of my students, but after sixteen years ensconced in academia, with only occasional dips into the 'real world' for tutorials, residential schools and consultancy, I found myself increasingly detached from the realities of business. Having the opportunity to move into a managerial role gave me an excellent opportunity to reflect on the utility of these ideas for my own students. It was an opportunity to explore both the comparative and absolute utility of these ideas, particularly those related to people management.

5. A Management Academic Discovers Management

In my embedded role, I managed a team of people, most of whom were young, skilled and ambitious. Most were new to their roles and new to work. Much of my time was spent acclimatising people to work or the organisation's ways of doing things, developing their skills and knowledge bases, and routine line management activities. Much of the work of the department was designing and running evaluations, surveys and studies to help the university better understand itself and the performance of its processes and policies. Most of these studies required the attention of more than one person, so I spent a lot of time managing multi-person projects involving various stakeholders. I therefore had a co-ordination role in addition to the line management one. In essence, it was a middle management role that was typical of those occupied by my students.

Reflecting on the course theory that I used in my day-to-day management job, I am surprised by how irrelevant most of it was. I do not recall ever 'using' any of the main management theories that I had been teaching over the previous decade, e.g. insights into the nature of managerial work by Mintzberg (1973) and Fayol (1916), the two-factor Herzberg (Herzberg, Mausner & Snyderman, 1959), Vroom's (1964) expectancy theory, and the contingency theory of leadership by Fiedler (Fiedler, Chemers & Mahar, 1976). I

certainly never thoughtfully or systematically applied them; not openly or even privately in the ways that I thought about problems. They may be useful theories to include in a management course to promote discussion, self-reflection and insight, but they were not used by me in the day-to-day management role. Once or twice, I experimented by trying to use a simple theory such as a force field diagram only to be politely 'talked over' and ignored. I got the distinct impression that people were thinking 'I knew we shouldn't have allowed an academic into the department' despite being surrounded by bright people in a university setting. Similarly, the less grandiose course ideas such as checklists, vignettes and activities were also irrelevant. To some extent, almost all of the management theory that I had been so immersed in over the years had very little impact on the way I performed my managerial role.

My understanding of management theory did help me in one way, but it was not in the way I expected. By and large, I am a plain-speaking person. I find it uncomfortable to speak in jargon. Abusing a common saying, my upbringing was to call a spade a shovel, not a manually-operated excavation implement. As a result, I find myself attuned to management-speak and bristle when someone bandies about words with imprecision (cf. Watson, 2003). Having been immersed in management theory, I was able to clarify what people meant when they seemed to be using terms injudiciously. For example, I remember a new manager in a department announcing to his staff that he wanted to make the department a 'high involvement' one. The staff in this administrative department appeared somewhat taken aback and I wondered whether he really meant that in this support department he really wanted everything that high involvement entails: e.g. energy, rapid response and high levels of internal competition. I gently asked if he could clarify how he was using the term and when he did, it was clear that he was thinking about something much less extreme.

Some course ideas did find their way into my thinking and I was surprised by which aspects did. I have never been a fan of management war stories or pop psychology thinking that these represented a non-theoretical approach that should be derided. I used to argue that such approaches are context specific, non-theoretical and therefore offer more entertainment than illumination. Nevertheless, it was some deontological nuggets² (i.e. aphorisms about the right way to manage) that most influenced my managerial behaviour. One example comes from the emotion literature or, more precisely, one of my students reflecting on how his morning starts. He told me the story of how he and his colleagues knew what the day will be like by the way their boss walked across the car park. If he appeared happy, it would be a good day, if he appeared miserable – his usual state – it would be a bad one. From this, I always made an effort to be cheerful first thing. I realised that as the manager, my demeanour would have a considerable impact on the way my staff felt and with highly motivated staff, I realised that an upbeat, happy workplace would be advantageous.

Another nugget I used related to my dress. Theory says that if you want to get promoted, you should dress according to how people making the decision dress (Adler

² Having declared myself 'a plain-speaking person', I am well aware of the irony of introducing this new term. I have done so because I wanted to express something precisely. Deontology is a non-theoretical approach where values or morals are used to advocate a particular course of action. So a deontological nugget is an expression I have coined to capture those short statements that stick in the mind about the best approach to behave.

& Elmhorst, 1999). So I started wearing a suit and tie every day. Sadly, this strategy did not work and the double life ended with a move to another university, but the nugget did shape my behaviour.

Another nugget was the idea of putting oneself in other people's shoes. This idea is so simple that it hardly warrants the epithet 'idea', although its roots are in the Golden Rule (i.e. should treat other people as we wish to be treated ourselves) that is a core part of most major religions (Armstrong, 2006). I found it crucial in all sorts of ways. It helped me judge how much latitude to give staff, how much monitoring they needed, when to give them more responsibility, how to invite people on to our studies, and how to present the department's achievements, to name just a few.

One final nugget was Mintzberg's (1973) observation that interruptions are part of a manager's job, not moments when you are stopped from doing it. More than this, interruptions are the key moments when the real job of managing people is done. I tried to keep this in mind every time someone put his or her head round the door, or I received an email, or the telephone rang. This was when I was a manager in the purest sense.

Given that such nuggets had always been an anathema to me, I wondered why they are so compelling. Several ideas come to mind. First, they are simple and uncomplicated, which contrasts strongly with the complexity of much management theory. Second, they provide clear and unequivocal guidance for action, which again contrasts with much management theory. Third, they are self-chosen snippets that align with my own values. As such, they have meaning for me, they are easily remembered, and they represent my own beliefs about how I should manage.

If this was the limit of the usefulness of my management courses, I would despair. Initially, I thought it was; I thought that I was engaged in a futile occupation that had little impact on people, which triggered thoughts of getting out of academia altogether. However, after a year or so, I began to realise that I was using a suite of softer skills that I had picked up through being a management academic. These included observational, critical thinking, analytical, data gathering, communication, intrapersonal and interpersonal skills and also some character-related factors such as confidence, responsibility, an ethical stance and the ability to stand up and defend what I believe in.

I found myself a lot calmer in my management role than I had been before entering academia. Occasionally one of my staff would make a mistake. My response would be to reassure the person and then to find out, calmly, the exact extent of the problem. Usually things were not as bad as the person had first thought. For example, one junior team member received a horrid looking bounce back message when he sent an email to every member of staff in the university on behalf of the University Secretary, one of the most senior people on campus. Thinking that a similarly nasty looking message had gone out to everyone (it was very unclear what had gone out) was quite a jolt for the poor chap, who turned white and then green. My response was analytical and I encouraged him to investigate what messages people had received (fortunately they had received nothing) before putting him in contact with the computer people to ascertain the nature of the problem. This is a simple example and, on the surface, might just appear commonsense. But before my academic career, I would probably have been

as freaked out by the problem as the junior member of staff. I am unsure how my management theory would have coped with this situation – perhaps something on the control loop or structured decision-making (Cohen, March & Olsen, 1972; March, 1978; Simon, 1960) might be relevant – but it was my investigative skills, developed through my research training, that kicked in and were really helpful³.

In similar vein, I found that my general approach was not to jump to conclusions and instead I tended to wait until I had the information I needed. Perhaps I had just lost the impetuosity of youth, but on reflection, I believe it was my academic training, especially my research skills training, that had altered me. In project meetings, I was able to ask questions that got to the heart of the matter and I often found myself pulling streams of conversation together. When starting a new project, I would use my interviewing skills to encourage the ‘client’ to talk about their goals and what they hoped to get out of the project. When interviewing applicants, I would keep going on a topic until I had the data I needed to assess the applicant against the selection criteria.

One thing that I noticed was the way I was able to find holes in people’s arguments. ‘Holes’ is perhaps the wrong word as it has destructive connotations. What I mean is that I could see when the conclusions that people drew were not properly substantiated. In some senses, I found my thinking a lot clearer and a lot more critical (in a good way) and I put this down to research training and the way I learnt how to test hypotheses. In short, the rigour of research was one of the most relevant things I was using on a day-to-day basis as a manager.

6. Some Conclusions

My time as an embedded academic gave me a tremendous opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of my management teaching. What I learnt shocked me. I came to the conclusion that all that I most revere, that is theory-driven content, was at best irrelevant and at worst dangerous (in terms of what it could do to people’s perceptions of me). I certainly had not expected the commonsense management nuggets to be so influential. But, for me, the big lesson was the importance of my own academic training in helping me to be effective as a manager. Understanding how to construct a research question and then test it, knowing how to gather, analyse and present data, knowing when you do not have enough information to draw a sensible conclusion and knowing how to be objective and letting the data draw you to conclusions were fundamental and applicable across all contexts.

These insights have completely changed what I would now wish to teach prospective managers. I have realised that most of what I was teaching managers was knowledge about management and organisations. Most of the theories are explanations of what happens; e.g. what managers do, what motivates people, how organisations are structured. I wrapped up these ‘understandings’ in the guise of wisdom about managing in organisations. But I now realise that this was a disingenuous sleight of hand. Knowing what managers do is not the same as lessons for managing effectively. Knowing what

³ I am conscious that another explanation to my calm and measured response to this apparent crisis might have been simply to do with greater age, maturity and confidence. Regardless, it was my research training that was the useful skill in tackling the ‘crisis’.

motivates people is not the same as knowing how to motivate people. Knowing how organisations are structured is not the same as knowing how organisations should be structured.

The problem, of course, is that there is no universal way to do these things. Each one depends on innumerable factors that intertwine and interact in incredibly complex ways. And making things worse, every situation is different and changing with every passing moment. But I have learnt that the situation is not hopeless; I believe that generic research skills can help people analyse and understand their workplaces. In addition, there seems to be a place in the management educators' armoury for intellectual and cognitive development and for intrapersonal skill development. These are all generic skills that will help managers regardless of what context they find themselves in.

Consequently, I will delete almost all of my current content; it will no longer be a theory-driven course full of the reliable masterworks by the revered greats. There are times when I will use this material for self-reflection and to promote discussion, but it will not be the centrepiece of my management courses. Instead, it will mainly perform the function of anatomy classes in the education of doctors; namely, it provides a language to describe the environment and important background knowledge that underpins organisational analysis. This is where I would situate reflective practice with students who are in managerial roles.

I will not teach the deontological nuggets as these are so particular to each individual. They might cut through the complexity of management theory and its concomitant cognitive overload to provide guidance that is easily remembered and utilised, but people have to find their own salient nuggets. Instead, part of my course will attempt to help students surface their own values and explore how these will be received in different environments.

But the core of my teaching will be focused on intellectual, cognitive, research, and intrapersonal skill development. I will begin by talking about the nature of knowledge and understanding. I will not use the words 'ontology' and 'epistemology', except with doctoral students, but that is how my course will start. I would spend a lot of time working on my students' critical thinking, the analysis of arguments and advocacy skills. I will move on to research design and how research questions are established; i.e. how do you know this is the question to ask? To gain acceptability, I may not use the term 'research', but I will look at identifying and defining important and critical issues. Naturally, I would teach research methods, e.g. interviewing, questionnaires, focus groups, archive and document analysis, but I would do so in a management and business context where students use them to understand various work-related issues. Again, this mechanism will help make the approach acceptable. To my eyes, these tools and skills will stand managers in good stead for the rest of their lives and provide an intellectual base upon which they can build.

Standing back from my advocated approach, I notice that it has particular qualities. It offers no absolute answers to managerial problems. Instead, it assumes that every management situation is different and that the most useful skill that I can develop in managers is the ability to analyse and understand their own contexts, to construct

arguments and engage in debate. My approach also holds that the organisational domain is a constructed one and my course will help develop the ability in managers to contest and fight in this environment. And crucially, I hope to develop skills and abilities that are transferable across all management arenas and a large number of other contexts as well.

This approach is well suited to the nature of business schools. Business schools are unusual creatures on university campuses. Whereas all other disciplines have their roots in a base of theory, management schools are based around a context (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002, 2004). Business scholars shamelessly poach ideas from disciplines like economics, psychology, sociology, philosophy, ethics, physiology and neuroscience and apply them in organisational settings. It is a natural and important first step to teach our students how to apply ideas to their own situations and a crucial component of this is developing the ability to analyse and understand the environments in which they are working.

At this point, I should add a note of caution that is relevant to all first person reflective research. These are my insights and my conclusions. Other people in the same situation will no doubt use many of the course ideas that I found so irrelevant. They may naturally apply these ideas and find great value in them. Given that these ideas have developed over many decades of management education, I would be naïve to think otherwise. In fact, as I reflect, I think a more defensible conclusion is that I am the idiosyncrasy. Another criticism that might be levelled at me is that being so highly-attuned to management theory, I may have internalised it to the point where I have become unaware of the ways it is influencing my actions. If so, I might have been using management theory at an unconscious level being only aware of those skills and techniques that were unusual, such as research skills, for the environment. All I can say in my defence is it was my research training that was most useful to me and these were skills I used regularly and often. I have tried to find examples of using management theory, but nothing comes to mind. I cannot even recall situations where it might have been useful. As I observe other managerially-trained managers in the workplace, I do not see them employing these mainstream theories either.

Finally, I must say that being an embedded academic has been a revelation to me and it has caused me to question everything I teach. Experiencing the pressures of management, the nature of the work and the types of decisions managers have to make made me realise how irrelevant most of my teaching had become. It is an experience I intend to replicate in a few years time and it is an experience I would recommend to others.

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