

## **Professional education as an identity project of the self: the case of MBA study as identity-work. (0050)**

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### **Abstract**

The contribution of university study to vocational practice has been widely questioned and the “transfer problem” is acknowledged in diverse disciplines. Whereas management education is the largest area of post-graduate study in the UK, its contribution to practice has been subject to particular criticism. However, this paper demonstrates that evaluation studies have been constrained by searching for evidence of direct transfer. This research makes a unique contribution through an in-depth examination of manager-students’ learning using the lens of identity formation to show a more subtle and complex, but nonetheless powerful, contribution of formal education to practice. While the research demonstrates the importance of identity development facets of education, these facets are currently incidental to intended learning outcomes. Therefore, conclusions are drawn for the re-design of post-graduate, professional education to emphasise less the knowledge of the academy and more the wisdom of practice.

### **Outline of the research to be presented**

#### **Introduction and Rationale**

Business and management education has, in recent years come to dominate UK post-graduate higher education. 26% of all post-graduate students, both taught and research, undertake studies within this academic field. The MBA degree is the main qualification sought with an estimated 15,000 graduates each year from 130 UK providers. The formalisation of management education, as with education for many other professions, represents the replacement of the art or craft of practice learnt informally and socially in the workplace, with a science of subject and of pedagogy. I argue, however, that this replacement is an inadequate preparation for practice. In short, professional ‘wisdom has been lost in knowledge’.

This research has four key objectives. Firstly, the growing criticisms of manager education are examined. Secondly, the notion that developing as a professional such as a manager involves primarily a process of identity formation will be considered. A model for understanding the tension between structural forces for identity-regulation and agentic identity-work will then be appraised. Finally, evidence will be presented from a phenomenological case-study of executive MBA students’ identity-work associated with their study.

The value of the knowledge and understanding associated with university study for vocational practice has been widely questioned and the “transfer problem” is acknowledged in diverse subjects. Management education in particular has been subjected to particularly scathing criticism. In reviewing the literature evaluating management education Grey (2009) concluded that ‘there is absolutely no

evidence that taking a management course has any effect at all upon making people better managers' (134). However, this research will show that evaluation studies have been constrained by searching simply for evidence of the knowledge or cognition associated with formal study contributing directly to performance in managerial contexts. This research makes a unique contribution through an in-depth examination of manager-students' learning using the lens of identity formation to show a more subtle and complex but nonetheless powerful contribution of formal education to practice.

### **Theoretical frameworks**

Educationalists have tended to assume that vocational practice is built upon propositional knowledge and formal modes of cognition. However, the contributions of personal, practice knowledge and socially situated knowing are increasingly acknowledged. Management practice in particular is increasingly conceptualised as a socially situated and political activity requiring primarily relational and affective behaviours. Management has thus come to be understood as a form of being and management learning as a process of becoming a particular type of person. This research therefore engages with debates about the nature of identity and particularly the tensions between post-structuralist and humanist conceptualisations. The degree to which the self is a linguistic construct as implied by the former position is critically evaluated. While the complexity of identity theorising is acknowledged, the research focuses upon Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) notion of occupational identity development as a struggle between structural forces for identity-regulation and agentic efforts at identity-work.

Critical management scholarship suggest that an MBA education acts to regulate managers' identity, reproducing and maintaining compliant professionals. This position is appraised against the possibility that contemporary manager education in the UK provides resources for participants to build, sustain or repair desired identities, that is identities affording efficacy in work and life. Seminal studies such as Sturdy *et al.* (2006) and Hay and Hodgkinson (2008) will be challenged and theoretically refined.

### **Empirical inquiry and findings**

A broadly phenomenological approach was adopted to attempt to understand the realities of learning associated with MBA study. A case-study research design encompassed post-graduate students on a university's executive and corporate MBA programme. Respondents completed open questionnaires. The *prima-facie* ease of completion of a questionnaire ensured a high response rate and the generation of extensive narrative. Analysis of the data was iterative with deductive and inductive coding being undertaken in parallel.

The research reports findings affirming the conceptualisations of management as a social, relational and politically contested process. However, the main emphasis lies in comparing the identity-regulation impacts of the MBA with the resources for identity-work afforded by this form of education. For example, the manner in which discourses distinctively associated with the MBA were purposefully deployed by respondents in defining themselves as managers is considered. Thus, respondents, invariably narrated their selves in terms of being developers of staff, of having responsibility for delivering results and of being change agents.

Moreover, it is demonstrated that MBA discourses gave less experienced student-managers access to managerial communities of practice within their organisations.

Similarly, MBA study enabled those moving from being professionals to becoming the managers of professionals to make sense of what being a manager involved. For more experienced manager-students, the MBA validated their personal knowledge of managing thereby affirming that what they intuitively did was, indeed, what managers do. For all, the post-graduate study enhanced confidence in their practice through, for example, providing credibility with fellow managers.

A further set of MBA contributions to manager identity-work is assessed. The data suggests that significant learning from participating in the classroom community occurred for less experienced managers through their exposure to more established, role model, managers. These latter appear to have embodied the essence of being senior practitioners of the profession. Finally, through another aspect of role-modelling, the programme enabled the re-discovery of the self as a learner, as a learner of management.

### **Policy and practice implications**

Certain policy and practice recommendations will be advanced for manager education and the implications for vocational and professional education in general will be developed. Whereas, educationalists have traditionally focused on students' acquisition of knowledge and on the development of understanding, this research demonstrates the importance of the identity development facets of education. However, currently these facets are largely incidental to the intended learning outcomes of educational programmes. Thus, for example, the better integration of teaching and workplace learning using the pedagogies of critical reflection and action learning will be advocated to enable learners to better accomplish identity development. It is thus concluded that professional education needs less emphasis on canonical knowledge and more emphasis on the wisdom of practice.

### **References**

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