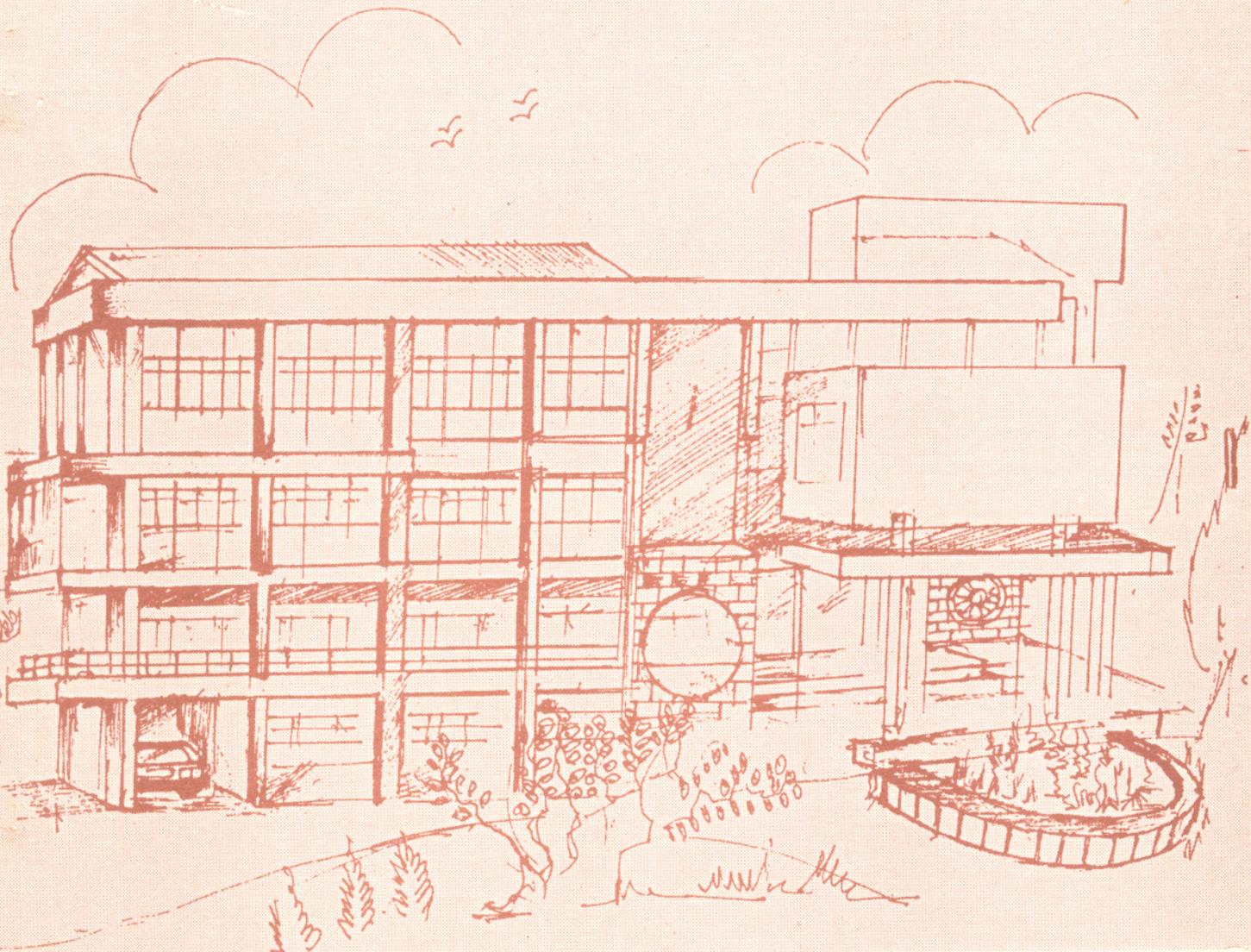




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## Working Paper Series

### Challenging certain Pedagogical Givens in MBA Education



## **Challenging certain Pedagogical Givens in MBA Education**

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## **Challenging certain Pedagogical Givens in MBA Education<sup>1</sup>**

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# Challenging certain Pedagogical Givens in MBA Education<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

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This paper challenges eight “givens” that seem to form the dominant pedagogical worldview held by students and academics alike in management. While experience and reflection of the author is the foundation of this paper, it is buttressed by thoughts and findings expressed by scholars and thinkers from diverse fields. These eight “givens” are posed along with alternatives that fit with what a knowledge society demands resulting in eight dialectics.

The eight dialectics are

- Prescriptive vs. Descriptive
- Seeking others’ examples vs. Seeking own theories
- Dichotomized vs. Dialectical thinking
- Perpetrating Action vs. Transforming Action
- Knowledge getting expended on supply vs. Knowledge enhancing on sharing
- Referencing: Begrudged recognition vs. Finding kindred souls
- Language as instrument vs. Language as reality
- Conceptual Self vs. Existential self

This paper is meant to trigger reflection and deeper discussion on Pedagogical assumptions and practices in higher education. While the paper is “coloured” by management education, it is hoped that the insights gained here have application to other areas of higher education, and through a “backward domino effect”, on early education pedagogies too.

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**Key words: Management Pedagogy, Purposive Pedagogy, Critical Pedagogy  
Pedagogical Preparedness while Entering Higher Education in  
Knowledge Societies**

It is cliché to state that we are entering a new age where old assumptions are constantly being challenged. But, perhaps, it is no cliché to state that the area where the challenge is most trying is “education”, the simple reason being that the educational arena is where the most intangible, and yet the most powerful, of all resources (human knowledge) reconditions, redefines, recreates, and entirely reshapes human beings.

And today’s educational efforts cannot be free from the techno-social context in which we operate. How do we prepare our students to take on the challenges in world where their values, cognitive means, thoughts and will are all being constantly shaped and defined by

bionic men and women, cyber artefacts, object-oriented lingo, seamless communication, and unimaginably new forms of stimuli and response demands?

Briefly, and most generally, we see three dominant forms of responses. Deliberately I draw the differences amongst them sharply to highlight the extreme points to view to drive the point home:

- a) The first group of individuals responds to these changes with nostalgia towards the past and scorn towards the future. This fatalistic group may, typically, invoke theories of “Pralaya” to believe for themselves (and make efforts to convince others) the futility of human endeavour that has produced, and is producing, the kind of changes we are now being seized with.
- b) The second response is one of scorn for the wisdom of the past. For this group all solutions of mankind would be technological. A corollary of such thinking is that human values are entirely contract-based, ethics is purely relativistic and technology shall emancipate humans.
- c) The third typical response understands that we need to break from the past; a past that was conditioned by instincts of power grabbing, communication through rhetoric rather than reason, pandering to human fears and the justification of the use of force. It also admits that there are huge difficulties with most alternatives that have been conjured up by us, we humans. It admits of the limitations we have placed on ourselves, but ultimately believes that humans are transitional beings (Sri Aurobindo, 1952) with an evolutionary future in them.

## **Objectives**

It seems that responsible education should now shift focus from getting students to think, act and feel the “right” way, to seeking ways that will make students taking “ownership” for their education - A self-driven approach towards learning wherein the students feel deeply that is something in here (the university, college and the campus) that should be worked upon eagerly and passionately that will help him/her in life to be fuller and happier individuals and social beings. For this we need to

- a) Create a climate of greater intellectual excitement where discovering, creating and re-creating oneself, others, and the world around, become a passion.
- b) Encourage a more holistic/ integrative approach to learning so that student can bring to bear what he/she learnt to the task of living and working (and in fact, being oneself and being a social entity) well after leaving formal education.

This will require a tremendous amount of a) intellectual freedom b) hard work, c) self-discipline and d) maturity on the part of students. And, as educators, we have to provide the direction, guidance and an enlightened space within which such freedoms, potentiality identification, character and skills development would blossom.

In short, the efforts of educators would be to influence and mould student action and reflection to liberate the young minds from the prisons that have been erected by societal conformism where the locus of control lay outside the person.

What are the governing aspects of this malaise? In paper identifies eight of them. Each of these is presented with the possible shift that should take place to move away from conformist education. For instance, the first one is about prescriptive vs. descriptive. This paper posits that there has been an excessive prescriptive orientation and the “pendulum” should now swing more towards the descriptive. And so on with the other seven points.

### **1: Prescriptive vs. Descriptive**

Management learning has sunken to being viewed as a series of prescriptive guidelines. There is inadequate ability and appreciation of description. On the other hand, education should encourage the student towards seeing reality, the world out there, in greater clarity and help him or her represent (describe) it in terms of symbols - language or mathematics - in a better way. Education is a constant process of creating and recreating the symbols to match (as best as possible since the reality cannot be the symbol itself) the reality out there. After all no description can ultimately match the richness of reality and all human efforts are knowledge gathering, irrespective of discipline, admits of multiple reality. (McWhinney, 1997)

Excessive preoccupation with the “prescriptive” is a sign of expediency, impatience and treatment of the student as “the other” whose job is to only “do as I tell you.” The prescriptive mindset, which the student imbibes, would spill out to their practices in industry too.

Freire (1970) says, “Every prescription represents the imposition of one individual’s choice upon the other, transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed into one that conforms the prescriber’s consciousness.”

There has to be model-building efforts such as in Operations Research with one clear optimal solution. Certainly, given certain conditions, there are rational ways to arrive at optimal solutions that do not vary across decision-makers. Such models are useful in the right hands but we should be aware of the potential of models and theories that generate convergent thinking to become vehicles for reinforcing the prescriptive mind-set. We should not miss opportunities to convey to the students that these models are only a few among many descriptive possibilities.

This paper posits that the “prescriptive” and “descriptive” are at not completely at odds with each other. The two should be made complementary For instance, Corner (1997) explains how decision-makers should start with the descriptive and then move on to the prescriptive.

## **2: Seeking others’ examples vs. seeking own theories**

There is a tendency on the part of the student to “seek other’s example” rather than “seek own theory”. He or she values information rather than meta-understanding from the information.

By seeking the so-called practical example, the student obtains a surface confirmation for the argument on hand in the class, but misses out on how the “variables” in the meta-model indeed work amongst themselves. In the final analysis, value of education lies in creating rich conceptualisations of reality as models with the flexibility to change them when new data comes in. This ties in with the argument of Hatano and Inagaki (1992) for whom true learning happens only when cognition has been “desituated” through construction of conceptual knowledge.

In seeking others examples and not working out (in the mind) the theory behind the phenomenon, the student takes that knowledge is context-free. Unless the mind works out the logic of why an event took place, there is no learning. Without understanding the underlying logic learning through anecdotal stories may correspond to sitting in front of a TV with a rabid rhetorician holding the viewer hostage... intellectually speaking!

## **3: Dichotomized vs. Dialectical thinking**

In emphasizing management decision making, reinforced by the nature of the decision-making models that we bring into the classroom, we are inadvertently reinforcing an “OR”

mentality, or dichotomised thinking. A mind trained exclusively on the decision-making paradigm precludes possibilities of “this AND that” or dialectical thinking. Examples of the AND thinking that have generated useful idea in management (that now has become truisms) are for instance, the idea that a firm simultaneously, and without conflict, can serve the customer AND the shareholder, or that growth and stability could BOTH be had at the same time etc. This is the essence of entrepreneurial thinking (Zander & Zander, 2000) which applies irrespective of the objectives (whether for material gain, super-ordinate goal fulfilment or something else) pursued.

For creating solutions to new problems, a healthy “AND” mentality is useful. It brings in appreciation of variety, healthy attitude towards pluralism and it generates an inclusive mind-set. When we look carefully we also can see that dichotomised thinking precludes the student from seeing shades of grey, or in other words, seeking “intrapolative” solutions.

There is also the issue of creativity. While creativity would be touted as out-of-box thinking (some kind of lip service), there is, as it is, plenty of scope for “intrapolative thinking” that would generate interesting solutions. This can come only with dialectical thinking that incorporates, as much as humanly possible, the benefits of both “extremes.”

“AND” thinking does not mean being able to achieve both ends all the times. “AND” thinking is dialectical thinking wherein one is opening up to the possibility of BOTH ends as a historical progression aided by human intervention; for instance, progression of firm’s responsibility towards different stakeholders as a continuum from historical shareholder include the customer too, to employee, to the environment etc.

#### **4: Perpetrating Action vs. Transforming Action**

Perpetrating action seeks not to disturb the status quo while transforming action busts the boundaries. Perpetrating action is acutely conscious of the boundary (roles of persons, their political power, resource constraints etc.). Transforming action is sharply targeted on results.

Perpetrating action is inward looking which transforming action is outward looking. Perpetrating thinking and action neatly circumscribes situations into prisons of constraints while transforming action challenges existing constraints and moves on to achieve results.

The circumscribing nature of existing pedagogy is apparent in the way students use some of the models in projects etc. For instance, in many assignments we see students trying to neatly fit a theory to the reality they are supposed to describe. In other words, reality viewing is circumscribed to the model or theory on hand. The student does not see the model as yet another way to further understand the confusing reality out there. This way, theory is an instrument for suffocation. Perhaps when we overemphasize the precise use of models too many times a kind of habit sets in. A habit of taking an abstract model and mechanically applying it to situations that promotes boundary-respecting thinking and action.

Implications on risk averseness, entrepreneurship and getting things done under adverse circumstances etc. is obvious. Fortunately for the area of management, current thinking in the area is deeply aware of the limitations of old mental models that revere the status quo [See Turner (2000).]

### **5: Knowledge getting expended on supply vs. Knowledge enhancing on sharing**

All true learnings are ultimately about a) development from within and b) greater ability to negotiate with the environment. These goals are lost out while treating knowledge as commodity that is lost out on being parted with. One way to overcome this problem is to get students to spend more time on mind-expanding activities rather than techniques acquisition. The argument is that with an expanded mindset, skills will automatically be acquired when occasion demands. While we can't take this idea beyond a certain point, it is quite clear that, at present, the importance attached to techniques is excessive.

Mind expansion that seeks to share knowledge and sees knowledge expanding on sharing will have positive impact on the ability to give and take in group projects, and by extension, in development of team skills.

### **6: Referencing: Begrudged recognition vs. finding kindred souls**

We need to convince students that while writing papers etc. referencing should not a matter of begrudged recognition but a process of finding kindred souls who are thinking in a manner akin to oneself.

We need to convey that intellectually getting a handle on anything is a difficult pursuit and that in assignments even if the students can come with a very small new angle (or even nothing new) it is still worthy of something. By educating the students on how to reference and write a decent paper we will be conveying a strong message. At least for some, writing from “within” rather than copy from here and there should become second nature.

One cannot but recall the acknowledgement graciously bestowed by the celebrated Harvard scholar, Lin Yutang (1937) upon the friendly squirrel that regularly darts by at the place where the author did most of his writing of the book, “Importance of Living.” Not all persons may show such sensitivity, but a certain recognition would make pursuit of knowledge (and actions) much more worthwhile. Who can forget Albert Einstein’s words, “If I have seen farther than others, it is because I was standing on the shoulders of giants.”

### **7: Language as instrument vs. Language as reality**

I think management educators, in the name of practicality, has unwittingly reduced language as pure instruments for communication. Language is something “outside” oneself that has only advocacy value. We have to get the students to understand that language is, in fact, reality itself. Through words we develop our own conception of reality. And that reality is the truest reality for each one of us.

Communication is only a small aspect of language. Its sense-making role has to be re-emphasised (Weick, 1979; Morgan, 1998)

There are major implications. For instance, we could conclude that while Power Point slides are useful to trigger points in a presentation, it cannot substitute language. Excessive emphasis on presentation sends the signal that form is everything and that, in Management, knowledge is purely reductionistic. The pain and joy of constructing images and crafting possibilities with the aid of language, and creating results, would be badly missed out.

### **8: Conceptual Self vs. Existential Self**

Conceptual self (Neisser, 1997) is the “rational actor” in social situations, who is driven mainly by normative orientation (Gone, et al, 1999). It corresponds to the role and image ascribed to the individual (by oneself and influenced by others). This self is in constant

interaction with others belonging to various social groups. The consistency in roles and images brings stability to social situations. Give and take are expected of, developed and completed, based upon the conceptual self. Excessive preoccupation with only the conceptual self brings about an excessive preoccupation with judgment, evaluation, playing the “politically correct”, playing the martyr, playing the victimised, playing the contrarian etc.

As opposed to this, the existential self (Kotarba et al, 1987) is a bundle of subjective experience of the person concerned. In the individual, the rational and the non-rational mix lending subjective meanings to situations the individual faces. The world out there may be anything, but it is the experience of the individual persons that bring authenticity to the experience. In other words, the essence of the collective reality is nothing but the subjective experience of the individuals.

The American Indian poet sought the understanding of the existential self through the following”

It doesn't interest me what you do for a living.  
I want to know what you ache for, and if you dare to dream of meeting  
your heart's longing.  
It doesn't interest me how old you are.  
I want to know if you will risk looking like a fool for love, for dreams,  
for the adventure of being alive.

.....

(*The Invitation*, inspired by Oriah Mountain Dreamer, Native American Elder, May 1994;  
Quoted from *SQ: Spiritual Intelligence the ultimate intelligence* by Danah Zohar and Ian  
Marshall)

Both the conceptual and existential selves have to co-exist in harmony so that a healthy mix of what is and what ought to be are present in communication and social exchanges. These two apparently opposing realities (or indeed, selves) require nourishment and encouragement in education. It appears the latter is forgotten in most of our educational endeavours.

Let us see how the idea applies to life for aspiring MBAs. Take the “Objectives” Section of Placement Application Form of some MBA students. Every one of the students talks about the “contribution” he or she would make to the organization etc. which no

discussion, whatsoever, on what oneself wants. It appears that despite all inputs on psychology etc. there is little discussions possible through the application vis-à-vis the existential self. I believe this lack of opportunity for self-specific discussions is true within and outside classrooms too.

Individual aspirations, and dreams (nay, individual differences and angularities themselves) are things to be discussed and appreciated within oneself and in others. This requires unveiling the real self. One of the purposes of education is to provide an arena for such unveiling. Open discussion about oneself can generate awareness and bring out of conflicts that each of live with.

This is what liberation education should do. Let individuals articulate themselves better. We will not be creating more selfish persons this way. We would be creating self-confident and tolerant individuals. Not letting off the steam of existential secrets creates pathological self-absorption.

This lack of focus on self in any deep sort of way has major implications for managerial action and performance. For instance, in negotiations those with such hesitations would be able to inadequately conceptualise their true needs and communicate the needs effectively. This may unnecessarily break down negotiations.

Ability to respect and shift focus onto existential self when required has also implications on individual autonomy, maintenance of internal locus of control, self-confidence, learning ability and positive attitude towards oneself and others.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Education is a life-long process that should liberate the humans from the bondage imposed by habits and hubris. This has been the challenge of education in the past and will continue to be so in future. However the elements that will need to be addressed would change from time to time. We are at a threshold of epochal changes, and as educators we have to embrace positive change brought about by post-industrialism and information technology. There is no way to do this than by questioning the existing fundamentals that have long outlived their usefulness, identifying alternatives and working proactively on them.

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