

# Management Education: Classifying Business Curricula and Conceptualizing Transfers and Bridges

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## Abstract

Traditionally, higher academic education has favored the acquisition of individualized conceptual knowledge over context-independent procedural knowledge. Applied degrees, on the other hand, favor procedural knowledge. We present a conceptual model for classifying a business curriculum. This classification could inform discussion around the difficulties associated with issues such as assessment of prior learning, as well as transfers and bridges from applied degrees to baccalaureate degrees in business education.

**Keywords:** Management education, Curriculum classification, Transfer, Bridge

## 1. Introduction

Business education is facing significant discussion around the appropriateness of its method to prepare students for their future challenges as managers and leaders of our organizations (Chia, 2005; Chia & Holt, 2008; Donaldson, 2002; Ghoshal, 2005; Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Pfeffer, 2007). Our approach to management education today is in response to criticism in the 1950s that management studies lack a scientific foundation (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). Commerce and management students are trained to break complex and ambiguous problems into functional silos such as finance, HR, and marketing, and then to address the issues within these silos. Such an approach to business education might have been sufficient in an era when businesses were organized according to function. Recent changes in the business environment, however, have outdated the functional approach with other organizational forms of work. Such forms include, but are not limited to, organizing in teams and networks, and across customer bases or common processes. This change is not yet reflected in management education (Feldman, 2005). The development of abilities for independent critical and adaptive thinking, as well as interpersonal skills, has not been receiving sufficient attention (Chia, 1996; Fenwick, 2005; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002).

Proposals for improving the situation include a call for studying management as a socially organized rather than a technically determined activity (Adler, Forbes & Willmott, 2007), and focusing on the development of sensemaking and critical thinking capabilities (Perriton & Reynolds, 2004). Likewise, criticism of the current dominant process of teaching has resulted in integrating management education with managerial practice (Feldman, 2005).

In addition to the above demands on the content of management curriculum and its teaching methods, business schools face increasing lifelong learning demands from adults with non-traditional educational backgrounds (Information and Strategic Services Division, 2002). Although such issues are common for educational institutions in general, some characteristics of business education require a specific approach, different from the humanities and social sciences. Management and business education are well grounded in theoretical frameworks and also in application to practice (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002).

Many adults have extensive learning experiences that happen outside the boundaries of the higher education system. In business education, these experiences include self-learning from practice, attending corporate education classes, or studying in management-diploma programs. The learning outcomes from such experiences

may be similar and equivalent to the learning outcomes of courses offered at higher education institutes. Recognizing this experiential learning and giving advance standing to such students is now encouraged by both government and society (Information and Strategic Services Division, 2002; Hammil & Sutherland, 1994).

Most higher education institutes in Canada have developed policies to acknowledge prior learning. However, there is recognition that Assessment of Prior Learning (APL) remains a challenge for many institutions (Wolfson, 1996). The question is how to ensure that the level of an individual's learning is sufficient for access or exemption.

## 2. Ontology of Knowledge

The literature in education relates the difficulties associated with assessment and appreciation of prior learning to the ontology of knowledge (Marzano & Kendall, 2007). On one side of a continuum, knowledge and skill acquisition are seen as objectively measurable, aggregative, context-independent and, hence, "transferable" (Trowler, 1996). Figure 1 depicts the other side of the continuum, where knowledge and understanding are viewed as constructed by each individual and integrated into their cognitive structures, which are themselves derived from particular experiences and ways of seeing (Glaser, 1984; Trowler, 1996). This distinction has been manifested in the works of Piaget and Vigotsky (Piaget, 1962). Various terms are used to express the notion of this continuum. *Procedural knowledge* refers to knowledge of formal language or symbolic representations and knowledge of rules, algorithms, and procedures. *Conceptual or propositional knowledge* refers to knowledge rich in relationships and understanding, a connected web of knowledge, a network in which the linking relationships are as prominent as the discrete bits of information (Papert, 1980). These are also referred to as *explicit versus tacit knowledge* (Polanyi, 1966).

There is a relationship between our pedagogy and our view of knowledge (Glaser, 1984; Trowler, 1996; Hein, 1991). If we consider knowledge to be context-independent, then we organize it in the most rational way possible and present it to the learners. The objective is not to ask the learner to construct his or her own world (Hein, 1991).

However, if we view knowledge and understanding as constructed by each individual (Palincsar, 1998), then we look towards all these learners to each create his or her own theories that explain their experiences. Here we follow a pedagogy in which we provide learners with the opportunity to experience and construct their own worlds. Mediated experiences (Dewey, 1896) and events will be central to learning.

By definition, conceptual knowledge cannot be learned by the mechanical repetition of something; it must be learned by thoughtful reflection. However, learning is an active process where the learner experiences the world and constructs meaning out of it (Palincsar, 1998). We can, therefore, view the two concepts of knowledge as two dynamic forces operating on a curriculum by their continuing interaction. Although we may emphasize one of them, our pedagogical approach includes both concepts.

## 3. Ontology of Management: Practice versus Profession

Much recent debate in management education has focused on the relationship between profession and practice. This debate centers on the ontology of management: Is management practice or profession?

Gosling and Mintzberg (2006) advocate that management is practice, not profession. They advocate that "management education should be restricted to practising managers, selected on the basis of their demonstrated performance" (p. 420). Pfeffer and Fong argue that

although a scientific approach may be useful for the study of management, it is not at all clear that it helps in teaching management: 'The practice of management is best taught as a craft, rich in lessons derived from experience and oriented toward taking and responding to action' (1996: 9). But as Leavitt noted, 'business schools have been designed without practice fields.' (1989: 40)

Based on this discussion, we observe that management curriculum should contain both practice and profession. Again, here we view the two concepts of management as two dynamic—even conflicting—and complementary forces operating on management curricula.

## 4. Conceptualizing Management Education Curriculum

Having discussed the ontology of knowledge and the nature of management, we can introduce our typology of approaches to designing a management curriculum. The typology revolves around these two dimensions: the ontology of knowledge and the ontology of management. What is important to note is that the tensions on each dimension are complementary, and that a curriculum will contain all four dimensions. The orientation for each dimension will, however, be different. This difference results in the two dimensions generating five types.

#### *4.1 Reflective Practitioner*

The first approach to curriculum development emphasizes practice over profession and conceptual over procedural knowledge (Figure 2). Learners are reflective practitioners. Concrete examples include the Gosling and Mintzberg (2004) approach to the pedagogy of management education.

#### *4.2 Reflective Professional*

The second approach to curriculum development, depicted in Figure 3, emphasizes profession over practice and conceptual over procedural knowledge. Learners are reflective academics who develop personalized knowledge. Concrete examples include curricula that prepares students for academic professions.

#### *4.3 Professional Practitioner*

The third approach to curriculum development, depicted in Figure 4, emphasizes profession over practice and procedural over conceptual knowledge. Learners are organizational designers in training. They have a set of tools and skills that they can apply to concrete and specific problems. Concrete examples include management training that prepares consultants, accountants, and auditors.

#### *4.4 Objective Practitioner*

The fourth approach to curriculum development, depicted in Figure 5, emphasizes practice over profession and procedural over conceptual knowledge. Learners are practitioners dealing with straightforward managerial routines. Concrete examples include a management diploma education that prepares front-line supervisors.

#### *4.5 Balance*

From a conceptual view, a business education curriculum may be a balance of all four forces, although whether that is possible requires further thought.

### **5. Discussion**

Traditionally, higher academic education favors the acquisition of individualized conceptual knowledge over context-independent procedural knowledge (Cantwell & Scevak, 2004). This preference is reflected in the distinction between universities and institutions that offer applied degrees. The assessment of conceptual knowledge is by definition difficult, as this kind of knowledge must be personalized and integrated into the individual's cognitive structure. Here, the assessment of prior learning is also difficult, as the learning has often happened outside the boundaries of an academic system, and is based on experience and skill outside the context of business school assessment and credit. For business schools, the practice-profession dimension adds complexity to the picture. Was the acquired knowledge practice-based or professionally oriented? In the province of Alberta, Canada, undergraduate business education is provided through a co-operative arrangement between several providers. Universities have been mandated to deliver four-year undergraduate degrees in management and business, while colleges have been mandated to provide two-year programs. These programs take two different forms. The university transfer program mirrors the university's first two years of the degree program (typically one year of general education and one year of introductory business courses). The career diploma program consists of applied management studies leading to direct employment. Increasingly, the four-year degree programs are granting diploma graduates up to two years of credit towards a degree. So, even though the two shorter programs are very differently designed, students from both can enter the third year of a degree program.

#### *5.1 University Transfer to Degree Program*

University transfer curriculum focuses by definition on transferable knowledge; there is a one-to-one transfer from courses taken in a university transfer program to a degree program. Curriculum orientation has focused on the development of professional practitioners. The academic culture associated with this is reflected in course outlines where the learning outcomes and methods of evaluation are specified in detail. Each assignment is accompanied by a grading sheet that is used to evaluate students' submissions; there is little room for subjective evaluation.

Transfer from this curriculum to a third-year management curriculum is smooth if the orientation of the management degree is also on professional practitioners. If the degree orientation is towards reflective practitioners or reflective professionals, the program should facilitate changing student attitudes. In this case, then, the first curriculum should encourage reflective learning and include courses that prepare students to become self-directed learners.

### 5.2 Management Diploma to Degree Program

As the orientation of a management diploma curriculum is towards objective practitioners, transfer into the third year of a management degree should always include preparing students to become more reflective and professional. For such adults, assessment of their prior learning could minimize the worth of what they have learned. Depending on the orientation of the degree, the bridging or laddering should facilitate a change in the attitude and orientation of such students towards reflective and self-directed learning. Such a bridge could include courses focused on introducing students to sense-making, dealing with ambiguity, and critical thinking.

### 5.3 Management Competencies and Orientation of the Degree Program

There is agreement in the literature on management education that development of competencies should be an essential part of management education (AACSB, 2008). What we should pay attention to here is that the underlying set of competencies is different for each orientation of the curriculum. Competencies such as writing, presenting, case study, group work, and ethics could be the heart of a curriculum focused on practicing professionals. Such competencies are essential for professional consultants, accountants, auditors, and so on. A curriculum oriented towards reflective practitioners should be based on competencies such as teamwork, influencing skills, organizational awareness, and ethics, which prepare students for dealing with others, the people side of management.

## 6. Conclusion

The presented model suggests that it is possible to consider management as both practice and profession. It is also possible to meet the demands of both the social and academic worlds and, depending on the orientation of the curriculum, to bridge or ladder practice-based transferable management knowledge with personalized conceptual knowledge. So, what might it take to move us in that direction? We realize that this model is not final, and invite more research and discussion around the various program types and their relationships to allow for more laddering or bridging.

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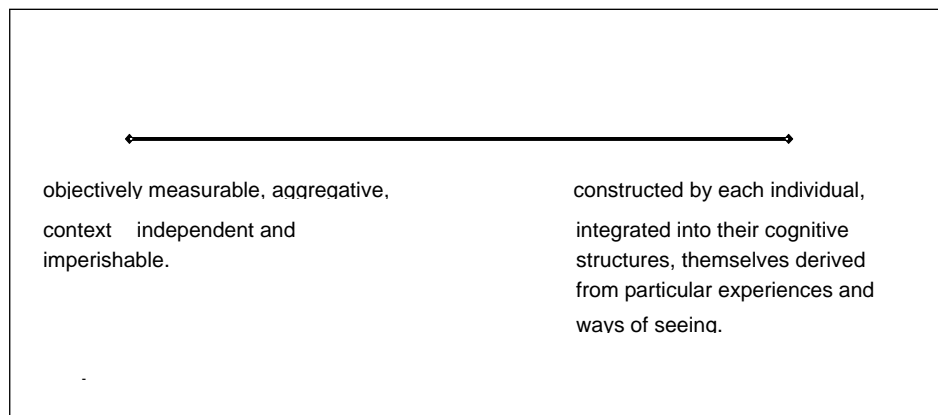


Figure 1. Ontology of Knowledge.

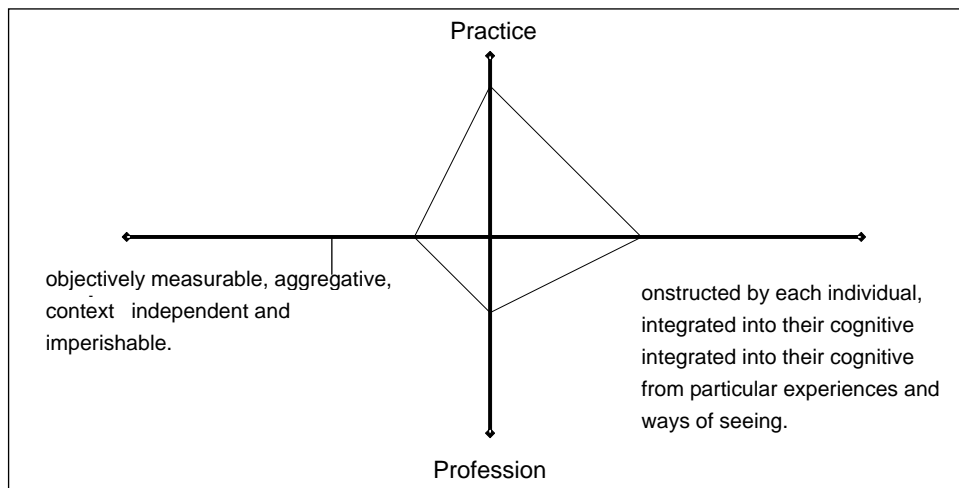


Figure 2. Reflective Practitioners

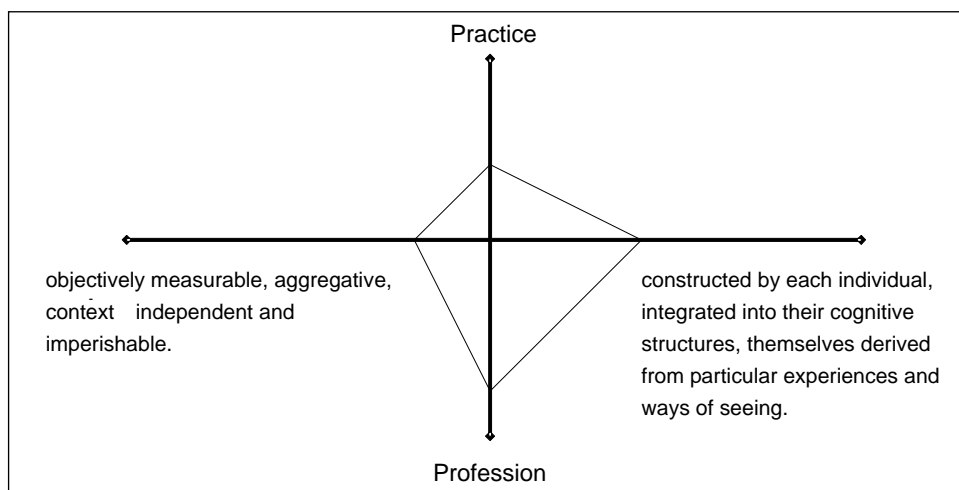


Figure 3. Reflective Professionals

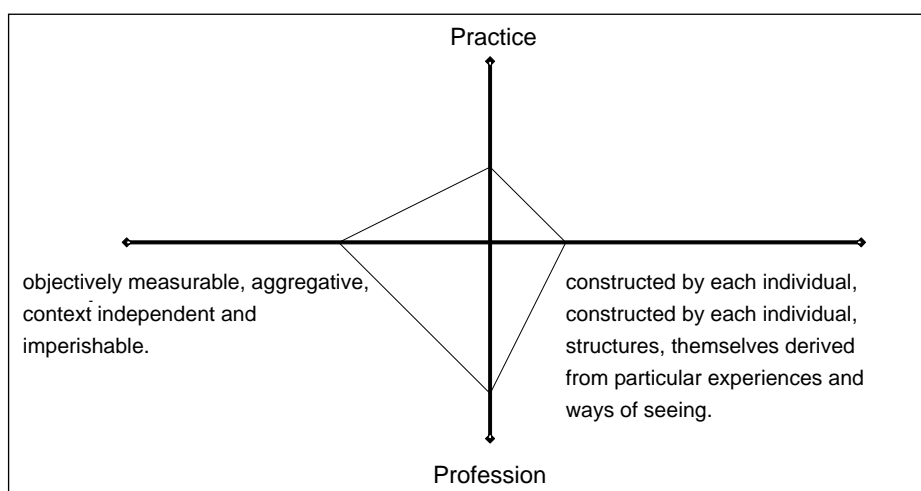


Figure 4. Professional Practitioners

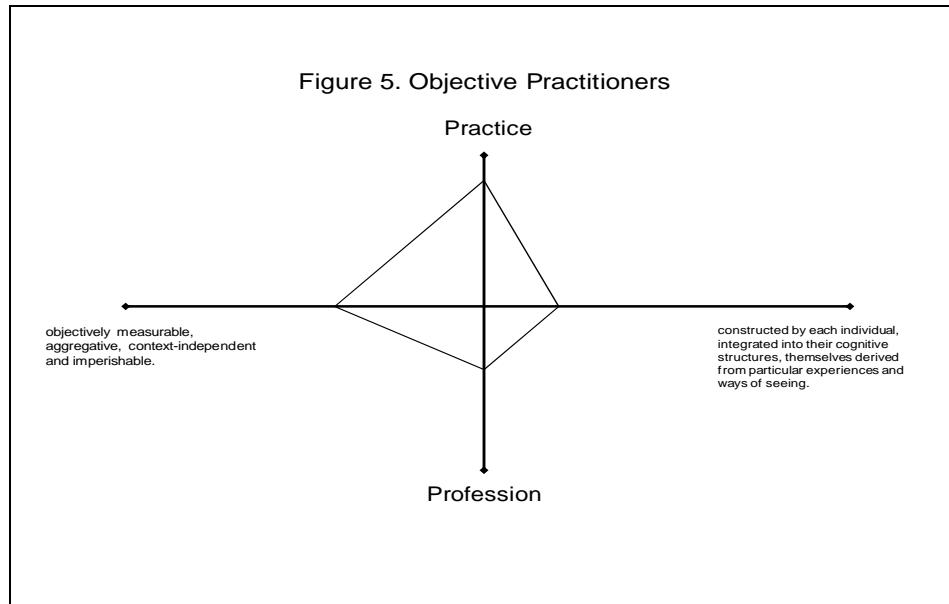


Figure 5. Objective Practitioners