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Making management (more) relevant: breaking down disciplinary walls and pursuing neglected independent variables

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Different Places, Different Spaces: Making Management (More) Relevant by Ignoring Disciplinary Boundaries and Pursuing Neglected Independent Variables

Proposal for a Themed Issue of JME: Insights, Provocations, and Next Steps (RMLE)

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Abstract

The Walls Project members encourage educators to broaden management teaching beyond individual and organizational variables and outcomes to systemic variables and outcomes. We focus on discovering independent variables that have social and environmental impacts and are currently neglected. The Walls Project was founded by six individuals who met at a RMLE Unconference in 2017, and decided to share pedagogical materials, examine them for commonalities, and present their findings at the MOBTS conference in 2019. This article summarizes these materials with an eye to revealing several variables of consequence, such as socioeconomic status and belief in economic growth, that are studied and taught infrequently in business schools. We suggest that researchers examine business curricula for similar neglected variables, study their impact across systems levels, and then develop them pedagogically to enhance management education that has a social and environmental impact.

Keywords

socioeconomic status, sustainable growth, systems thinking.

> Our inquiry is not why business failed in a long-recognized function, but why it did not rise to new heights required by novel conditions. --Wallace Donham, 1933.

These words, written in an attempt to understand the failure of management to stem the Great Depression, seem eerily prescient as today's companies, and management education, face the grand challenges of a society and a planet hurtling towards ecological carrying capacity in the aftermath of a global pandemic and concomitant recession. Donham's indictment came with a recipe for reform for students of business: "They have a fine understanding of their own business, too little grasp of their industries as a whole, almost none of the relation between their particular interests and our general social and economic structure and far too little grip on the social consequences of their activities." Donham argued that the responsibility for helping business leaders "to see things in wide relations" fell to the university. He believed that the university is uniquely situated to train business leaders to solve societal problems because its "environment enables us to build bridges to other faculties giving access to a wide range of specialized disciplines outside narrow concepts of business but essential in its largest problems" (1933, p. 433).

Donham's concern for the fraught relationship between a parochial business profession and a deteriorating society could not be more emblematic of our current situation. Yet, his prescription for remediation, though not adequately heeded in the 1930s, remains viable and compelling to business schools today. Indeed, his critique of management education has been expanded in foundational work, in more recent times, by French & Grey, (1996); Cunliffe et al., (2002); Donaldson (2002); and Tourish (2019), while his call to action has been heeded by

scholars including Berry (1997), Reynolds (1999), Mintzberg & Gosling., (2002), Clegg & Ross-Smith (2003), and Grey (2004). Following in those footsteps, we introduce a new project.

The Walls Project

One developing avenue for Donham's conversation – "to see things in wide relations"— is the Walls Project, the brainchild of a group of management educators interested in rethinking traditional disciplinary boundaries and enlarging classroom discourse with a set of new, consequential topics. Our story begins with RMLE 2017 when we discovered that each of us, in our own fashion, was attempting to lower the silo walls that continue to constrain management education, in both research and teaching, and that delimit students' perspectives on organizations within complex systems. We all wanted our students, soon to be future managers, to think more broadly on how their own knowledge of self within systems could impact their decisions. Our shared intent has been to encourage businesses to focus on seeking a higher and broader purpose.

Although our group represents diverse disciplines, we have discovered that all of us use exercises (we will use this term to include activities) that introduce new and neglected independent variables of consequence. Even in our discipline-specific courses, each of us seeks to encourage and enrich student learning and empathy by exploring systemic issues. To this end, we each use exercises that are grounded in data and theory from management research and other disciplines, such as sociology, economics, and political science.

By meeting and writing together, the Walls Project members have discovered neglected independent variables that have consequences for organizational processes, and, in the classroom, we have highlighted the impacts of these variables on individual and organizational

decision-making. We are primarily interested in variables that are systemic, such as income inequality, economic philosophy, political party, region, and wealth. Any of these may affect such important dependent organizational variables as leadership, motivation, commitment, and organizational culture. Examples of such pedagogical approaches include Cohen (2012), who, in the context of the classroom, discusses changing behaviors and attitudes toward mutually beneficial outcomes. Also, Thor et al., (2014), in an ethics exercise, demonstrate impacts on students who lack direct experience of the unethical decision making by others.

We make no claim to knowing in any systematic way what new and neglected independent variables are most consequential, whether in our classrooms, companies, or societies. However, the fact of our mutual interest suggests that developing such an explanation could be an area of impactful intellectual and pedagogical research. We also believe that our initial agenda and the further development of our goals could address this challenge imaginatively, and embolden other educators, regardless of discipline, to adopt exercises that will challenge students to understand how their individual actions (or inactions) can have impact at the level of systems.

Developing Experiential Exercises

After finding each other at RMLE 2017 and discovering our common threads, we proposed and delivered a PDW at the 2019 MOBTS conference at Ramapo College. We provided workshop participants with a brief description of our exercises and the intended outcomes that would become the basis for classroom discussion and personal reflection. Participants then engaged in mini versions of these exercises and discussed how faculty could

adapt some of their own teaching to enhance their students' experience of independent variables of consequence. What follows is a brief description of the experiential exercises that we presented.

- **Exploring Socioeconomic Diversity -** This exercise seeks to increase student intellectual risk taking by increasing psychological safety and belonging between students from different socioeconomic classes. Students form two concentric circles with inside and outside circle partners facing each other. In these intimate pairs, students discuss their family's assumptions, values and resources in 2-minute answers to instructor prompts (i.e., What do your parents hope for you with regard to your schooling and future work? Have you ever worked for money? Have you ever volunteered for a charity for a significant amount of time?). At the two minute mark, the instructor calls time and the outer circle moves one person to the right to create a whole new set of intimate pairs for a new question. This exercise encourages students to reflect on their own socioeconomic values and status and consider their assumptions about others' status, which in turn may increase their awareness, understanding and appreciation of people from different socioeconomic classes.
- **Social Impact Management Proposal Project -** The idea that the purpose of business is to chase profits is an historical, social construction. To counter this assumption, one of our members designed a management course that offers participants an opportunity to help local businesses (re)discover their societal purpose. Students identify local companies that have been more solely focused on profits, and then develop a Social Impact Management (SIM) Proposal that could inspire a move towards a more inclusive

bottom line. The SIM Proposal project provides management students with an experiential learning opportunity that hones their critical thinking, analytical, and communication skills while potentially facilitating social impacts that local businesses can make to better their communities.

- **Belief in Economic Growth: Opening reflexive and experimental spaces in the classroom -** The inherent antagonism between socio-economic and environmental sustainability brings up front the need for an honest and vocal debate on the plausibility of the ideology of perpetual economic growth as a primary objective for society (Bell, 1976). GNP growth, international competitiveness, and corporate expansion remain top priorities for political and economic power holders, often to the point of obsession. To these ends, corporations build incentive systems to boost sales, and business schools promulgate success stories of entrepreneurs who tout consumerism and capitalize on the practices of planned obsolescence.

  The purpose of this exercise is to create reflexive and experimental spaces that dismantle taken-for-granted (and fashionable) assumptions about the current economic system and stimulate critical thinking. The *reflexive space* is created with the purposefully provocative debate question that follows the introduction of conventional management thinking that reconciles growth and sustainability - is "sustainable growth" an idea that contradicts itself under a new respectable facade, while doing nothing but preserve a profit seeking modus operandi of the corporate world? The *experimental space* comes into being when students are provided with multidisciplinary materials from anthropological, philosophical, biological, and sociological literature and asked to use

these materials to prepare their propositions on how to make sustainable growth an achievable ideal beyond what is currently offered by corporate champions of CSR. After the presentation of teams' propositions, students write a reflection piece regarding their personal beliefs about sustainable growth, including how those beliefs reflect the culture of their current company (or, a typical company), and how they might deal with resulting conflicts.

- **Are You the Problem?: Understanding Both Sides -** Students often assume that victims of fraud or unfair competitive advantage are "stupid." To promote student understanding of such automatic attributions, we use a large set of exercises that expose students to situations in which they might either be the decision maker impacting others, or the impacted party (victim). These exercises include topics such as unfair competitive advantage, fraud (we run a Ponzi scheme in class), collusion, and informational asymmetry, as well as exercises that demonstrate how cognitive biases and conditioning can impact decisions. Whether the student participates actively in an exercise or opts to be an observer, all students must write a reflection piece on what happened, how they or others reacted, how they felt, and what actions they might take in the future if placed in a similar situation. We have found considerable improvement in the student's understanding of how behavioral issues and personal attributes can impact the development or enforcement of good governance and management policies.

Summary of the Walls Project to Date

In sum, the Walls Project PDW team presented several impactful independent variables seldom discussed in business schools in order to bring down disciplinary walls that impede

research and pedagogical innovation, and, of course, learning. We posit that introducing such variables as socioeconomic diversity, the purpose of business, the assumption of economic growth, and empathic corporate governance enhances management education. Our approach in and of itself is not new. Earlier writers have made similar points , even using the language of "the walls" (see Hirsch & Weber, 2003; Strand, 2011). We were not aware of this prior usage when we named our group.

What *is* new is that our interdisciplinary, international group has coalesced and its members have developed a mutual affinity in the contexts of two conferences, and now a publishing outlet suggested by RMLE and its journal partner. Some of us have adapted others' exercises for their own classrooms. Working together, we have strengthened our belief that tearing down the walls among disciplines and helping students think systemically in a fast-changing world are especially timely. We hope to continue contributing to this sort of change in business education and we invite you to join us.

Implications for Future Research

In terms of research, we see three areas to pursue. At base, we believe that it is past time for academics to promote research and insights in a way that will impact society for the better. Instructors should encourage learners to think about how personal frameworks, motivations and biases impact their decisions for both their organizations and society, and how they can better use their knowledge and skills to serve broader interests.

Research-To-Practice Connections

A logical first step in a Walls Project research agenda would be to collect information from other business faculty who use similar types of exercises to advance independent variables of consequence and help students understand interdisciplinary links and societal impacts. To ground such projects, we suggest drawing on existing research that identifies the organizational importance of such systemic variables. Management education scholars may draw inspiration from feminist pedagogy (e.g., Luke & Gore, 1992; Marshall, 1999; Shrewsbury, 1997) and the pedagogy of the oppressed (Friere, 1970; Wieler, 1991) in tying together lessons of the grassroots for broader societal transformation.

Similarly, such reviews could draw on the economics literature, inspired by research such as Restakis (2010) on the healing role of economic cooperatives; Roulet & Bothello (2020) on the degrowth movement at the grassroots level and beyond; Sassen (2014), on how the primitive accumulation of late capitalism has led to brutal expulsions in all corners of the globe; and even Gluckman & Hanson (2019), on the unintended consequences of human innovation and technology. Classroom consideration of current economic models with regard to enhancing life and career satisfaction may follow (Giacalone & Promislo, 2019; Rhodes, Wright, & Pullen, 2018). Building on literature reviews, scholars of pedagogy could fashion significant learning experiences (Fink, 2013) for the business classroom. For example, in the sustainability area, such pedagogies include action research (Benn & Dunphy, 2009) and developing particular skill sets (Hiller Connell, Remington, & Armstrong, 2012; Kearins & Springett, 2003).

Theory development will follow. For example, a paper on the theme of leadership might compare organizational and systemic (institutional) leadership to describe their commonalities and differences and suggest which aspects of each should be taught in an increasingly

interconnected world (André, 2020; Bolden & Gosling, 2006; Carroll, Levy, & Richmond, 2008). Another promising stream of research could emerge around the theme of alternative ways of organizing that have sustainability issues at their core (e.g. Ostrom, 2015) and go beyond established ways of thinking about sustainability as "a triple bottom line" (Landrum & Ohsowski, 2017; Wright & Nyberg, 2015).

Practice-To-Research Connections

A second area of research would draw on academics and/or practitioners sharing their personal insights working across the boundaries of individual/group and societal systems. A focus of this area might be cross-level research that highlights the reality that individuals are embedded in both organizations and societal institutions. Insights from the SoTL in the servant leadership arena would be germane (see, for example, Fenton–LeShore, 2005; Barbuto & Hayden, 2011) to questions such as: How does a CEO lead in both the company and the community? How does a professor meet curricular demands while also providing societal context? How are multiple levels of engagement discussed and practiced in the classroom? With regard to the contextualities of socioeconomic status in the classroom, Bradley & Corwyn (2002) summarize the importance of bridging socioeconomic divides while Amoroso et al., (2010) highlight the harm classroom diversity exercises may create. Fortunately they also offer practical advice one could use when designing classroom interventions to test.

Drawing on first-hand experiences, observations, questions, and/or insights, qualitative research could identify new variables of consequence and suggest how they might be influencing organizational processes and outcomes. For example, a researcher might invite academics who

have developed cross-level or cross-disciplinary exercises, activities, and courses to share their experiences – whether good or bad (see Chew & McInnis-Bowers, 2004). On the practitioner side, a study that examines how the moral identity of working mentors influences student protégés (Steinbauer et al., 2020) would spark further research about their reciprocal influence. The information gathered from these contributions could be used as a basis for a meta-analysis on the impact of experiential learning on contextualizing the self in a societal setting.

Resource Reviews

Lastly, the Walls Project members encourage resource reviews as described in the *Journal of Management Education,* (Power, Roth, & Aldag, 1993; Keough, 2012). Resource reviews include appraisals, notes on the outcomes of adopting a resource, reviews of multiple resources on a topic, comparative reviews, and, particularly relevant to the Walls Project, reviews of one resource from multiple perspectives. For inspiration, see Cooper et al., (2004) on applying entrepreneurial learning to real life ventures; and Vaughan et al., (2011) on students' use of interactive media for learning both inside and outside of the classroom).

Relevant reviews would appraise innovative pedagogical materials that demonstrate the connection between micro/macro organizational behavior and societal issues, or that otherwise enhance systems thinking in all of our classrooms at all levels. For example, a reviewer might wear two hats—one that targets the company or organization as the audience of an exercise, and one that targets society (or certain institutions) as that audience—to demonstrate how these different foci affect classroom practices and student learning.

Finally, assessing the full set of exercises that are already vetted and published on a particular topic would move the field forward. For example, what characterizes the set of exercises on leadership and sustainability? the set on the personal experience of governance? the set on neoliberal economics? Researchers should consider a range of issues, from how accurately the set reflects basic research to how it has been received in the classroom. What are the most commendable practices in the set? What missing pieces should be pursued?

Conclusion

Collinson (n.d.) notes, "A large and perhaps growing proportion of academic papers…are irrelevant – literally useless – in any real business context" and, "A wide range of non-academic experts, practitioners, consultants and journalists – some credible and some not so – are challenging this hegemony." The Walls Project team has brought together academics in a way that will encourage breaking down the siloed thinking that many of our present curricula encourage.

With only six in our original group we have witnessed what our deliberate "guerrilla tactics" to break down barriers and encourage reflective practice have done to inch forward an agenda to meet societal needs. We are encouraged by our direct experience, and we invite others to share and contribute to the continual development of relevant research and innovative teaching that our students need in a changing world.

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