

# Investigations into the Mismatches between Management Education and Practice: Agenda for Future Study

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## Abstract

There has been a growing view that the problem with MBA program has been a discernable theory and practice divide with the need for business education to develop at the pace and scope of business practice and an emphasis on developing managerial skills and competences – especially those required in complex and turbulent environments present in the 'real world'. The paper presents a literature review covering the issue of the management theory-practice divide.

*Keywords : Managerial Skills, Knowing - Doing Gap, Theory - Practice Mismatch*

## Introduction

Worldwide, management education is one of the fastest growing segments of higher education, and India is no exception. In recent times, particularly, after the onset of the economic liberalization in the early 1990s, the growth in the number of management institutes<sup>1</sup> has outpaced the growth of the demand of professionals with management degrees, leading to an unprecedented competition among them to differentiate themselves through both process and outcome quality parameters. This is evident from the prime importance the institutes place on placement of their graduating class of students, apart from admission criteria, rigor in coursework, academic training and research output of the faculty, etc. Ranking and rating agencies have also influenced this trend by making placement in terms of quantity and quality as one of the most important factors in their methodologies.

However, in the long-run, the image and sustenance of an institute depends on the contribution of its graduates to the economy, among others. In recent years the terms “responsive college” or “adaptive college” have been increasingly in usage. It has become apparent that Higher Education institutions need to be able to accommodate more readily the needs of society in general and the local community in particular; to identify and respond to demands, both of current and prospective students and of commerce, industry and government (Younis, 1990). In spite of their success commercially, there are questions raised about the relevance of MBA education and doubts cast on its effect on both the careers of the MBA graduates and on management practice as a whole. This has brought the 'theory-practice gap', defined as the mismatch between the relevance of knowledge obtained through academic pursuits and the ability to make better decisions and action taken on the basis of knowledge (Davenport et al, 1998).

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<sup>1</sup>In this paper, the terms 'management institutes', 'business schools', 'b-schools' or 'business management institutes' are being used interchangeably.

Essentially it refers to the gap between the acquired knowledge and the application of the knowledge to the workplace in the realm of management. Students may have derived knowledge about management, but, as some critics of management education point out, they are most likely lacking in the knowledge about their own capacity to take action, or more simply, how to take action. This disparity or discrepancy is referred to as the 'theory-practice gap' in this study. Knowledge that is disconnected from action is not only not useful but also dangerous, asserts Chris Argyris<sup>2</sup>. It is well-recognized that professional curricula must include activities that help integrate theory with the skills needed to manage unanticipated problems and policies in business.

Traditional approaches to management education have conceived of two separate encapsulated learning arenas: the university and the organization. The former provides cognitive, intellectual frameworks or theories and the organization teaches, often informally, skills in applying those theories to practice. Too often individuals participating in management education and development programs have been seen as moving from one arena to another in sequential fashion. Yet as Yavitz (1982) has pointed out, to cover a continuum of learning requires a better articulation and integration of universities, management schools and corporate education, as well as an orchestration of professors, line managers, and professional trainers. This necessitates a fusion of the two arenas. However, the present study focuses on exposition of the gap through a comprehensive literature review of the various proponents of 'knowing-doing' gap in management education, more particularly in MBA education, rather on the solutions to the apparent mismatch.

### ***The Background & Relevance***

Concerns have been raised from various quarters about the apparent dichotomy of the two perspectives of management domain – education/theory and development/practice. Management education reports of the late 1980s, considered to be very comprehensive and landmark studies after the Foundation studies (more about the Foundation studies later in the Literature Review section) of the late 1950s, for example, suggested that MBA programs did not produce individuals who were able to perform managerial work to a satisfactory standard in practice (Constable and McCormick, 1987; Porter and McKibbin, 1988). The inadequacy was attributed to a number of features of MBA programs including an overemphasis on quantitative and analytical subject areas and almost a total neglect of 'softer' areas or skills such as people management, interpersonal abilities and leadership skills (Cheit, 1985; Lataif and Mintzberg, 1992; Linder and Smith, 1992). Indeed, Leavitt (1989) argued that the MBA degree 'distorts those subjected to it into critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts and shrunken souls'.

In view of the dynamism and growth in the sector, post 1990 period has seen a considerable increase in the awareness of the need for relevance in terms of alignment between theory and practice in management education in India as in the global arena. It is becoming increasingly important for managers to be able to think and react effectively towards situations presented to them by the dynamic environment. The application of acquired programmed knowledge is no longer enough for problem-solving or decision making unless supplemented with skills acquired as a result of work experience or as a result of a conscious

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<sup>2</sup> Reasons and Rationalizations: The limits to organizational knowledge by Chris Argyris (Oxford University Press, 2004)

appreciation of the way the real corporate world works.

Management or business education is one of the fastest growing sectors of higher education in India. The huge demand for B-school graduates is amply reflected in the burgeoning number of institutes for business education. The last decade has witnessed the widespread adoption of management programs by traditionally engineering program offering institutes. Even, some of the IITs (Indian Institutes of Technology), premier technology institutes of India with global recognition, have started offering management courses in their campuses, mostly with the creation of schools of management, separated from the traditional engineering and technology departments. On the demand side, business schools have become so much the 'in-thing' these days that most employers now consider it a minimum qualification for many white-collar jobs. India is unique in which an MBA degree is considered a career-starter, though the number of students with work experience joining a program is now on the rise. In the developed world, notably in the UK and the USA, in contrast, it is considered a mid-career enhancer. It is an option that a chosen few consider after learning their basic skills in the real world of business. The theory-practice gap, as defined and explained earlier in the Introduction becomes a much bigger issue in such a situation as in India.

## **Literature Review**

### ***The Knowing-Doing Gap***

Criticism of business schools and management-related scholarship is not a new phenomenon. Ever since its inception, legitimacy objections from a wide range of other university-based academic disciplines had to be countered (Engwall, 2007). The epistemological debates

concerning the performance of business schools have persisted over the years. McGrath (2007) has commented that “these debates seem to have created somewhat of an identity crisis for business schools, threatening their ability to balance quality scholarship with practice-relevant activities”. However, in spite of this crisis, business schools have been able to attract increasing number of students evident from the soaring enrolments over the years.

The essence of Pfeffer and Fong's (Pfeffer and Long, 2002; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002) argument is that schools should be assessed in two fronts, their contribution to the production of academic research and their contribution to management education. They pointed out that “there is little evidence that mastery of the knowledge acquired in business schools enhances people's careers; even attaining an MBA has little effect on graduates' salaries or career attainment.” The authors further argue that schools fail on the research front as they neither deliver rigor nor relevance and, according to Starkey et al. (2001, 2004), they fail on the teaching front because they have conspicuously failed to 'generate critical thought and enquiry about business and management'.

The concern about MBA graduates' disconnect with the social realms of the organizations is very aptly described in the following statement: 'Organizations are living social constructions. The MBA graduates must recognize the complexity of social milieu in organizations and how they constantly change and morph the organization. As clean and predictable as we want theory to be, we need to recognize the reality of chaos in ourselves and our organizations. We need to acknowledge and integrate social networks within an organization, which often are more powerful and influential than the formal organizational

structure.' (Myers, 2008). A deep understanding of this relates to the alignment of theory and practice.

Earlier, since Gordon and Howell's (1959) Ford Foundation Report<sup>3</sup> and Carnegie Foundation Report<sup>4</sup>, business schools, mostly in the US, have been condemned and criticized for not being able to balance rigor with relevance, and at most times, being too academic. Later, Mintzberg (2004) and others outspokenly criticized business school curricula ([Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006] and [Mintzberg and Lampel, 2001]). The term 'ivory tower' came to symbolize the failure of business schools to adequately provide what the business world needs in the graduates. 'Bennis and OToole (2005) said "business programs face intense criticism for failing to impart useful skills, failing to prepare leaders, and even failing to lead graduates to good corporate jobs." Further 'Bennis and OToole proclaimed that: "Instead of measuring themselves in terms of the competence of their graduates, or how well their faculties understand important drivers of business performance, business schools measure themselves almost solely by the rigor of their scientific research which is largely not grounded in actual business practice". In fact recent studies reported in Bloomberg Businessweek (2010) show a negative correlation between long-term corporate performance and the presence of MBAs in a company's C-suite<sup>5</sup>.

The METF<sup>6</sup> (Management Education Task Force, AACSB) report maintains that two broad problems confront all management education

institutions: the need to focus on basic management skills such as communication, interpersonal skills, leadership, and change management; and the need to enhance relevancy by designing outward-facing curricula. (BizEd, May-June, 2002). Business professional who have a stake in the business school outcome, like academicians, recruiters, researchers, students, and regulators, more or less agree that realigning business school curricula with corporate needs is an imperative now. Economically too, this makes sense. As Boyatzis et al. put it: "While billions are spent trying to develop competencies each year, the results have been less than satisfactory. This does not even measure the millions of person hours spent in pursuit of competency development through performance reviews, training programs, coaching sessions, or workshops and courses in graduate or executive education" (Boyatzis et al., 1995c).

The genesis of the debate is in the dichotomous views about management education in the corporate and business schools. Business schools in general believe that the knowledge, skills and attitude that the students imbibe while they do their MBA in the schools go a long way in making them proficient in their workplace. This however is just an assumption. More and more corporate managers lament that the MBA graduates are not adept enough to face corporate challenges without going through substantial orientation and training in the organizations. They argue that the faculty is generally removed from practice in most business schools. Policies in the schools concerning collegial advancement, to some extent, are responsible

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<sup>3</sup> Ford Foundation sponsored the landmark study of higher education for business in the late 1950s.

<sup>4</sup> Carnegie Corporation sponsored a study similar to Ford Foundation study done by F.C. Pierson in 1959.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/blogs/mba\\_admissions/archives/2010/09/study\\_ceos\\_with\\_mbas\\_deliver\\_so\\_performance.html](http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/blogs/mba_admissions/archives/2010/09/study_ceos_with_mbas_deliver_so_performance.html)

<sup>6</sup> Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business. 2002. Management Education at Risk: A Report from the Management Education Task Force, <http://www.aacsb.edu/publications/mef/METFReport-ExecutiveSummary.pdf>

for this disconnect. "More recent articles conclude that in order to get promoted in business academia, publications in the leading journals is key; contributions to practice, in or out of the classroom, are not important" (Seggie & Griffith, 2009). Reibstein et al. (2009) said "most promotion and tenure decisions depend on articles published in leading journals and, to a lesser degree, on teaching and service; it is time that promotion and tenure decisions take contributions to the advancement of practice into consideration."

There is evidence to suggest that academic research has had, and continues to have, little effect on management practice (Ford et al., 2005; Brannick and Coghlan, 2006; Starkey and Madan, 2001). These concerns are far from new. There have been references going back to the early 1980s expressing concerns that academic research had had 'little effect on the life of organizations' and that more effort needed to be applied to achieving 'greater utilization of organizational research' (Beyer, 1982: 588 cited in Vermeulen, 2005: 978). Ghoshal (2005) even went as far as to suggest that bad management theories were actually destroying good management practices. He also blamed the recent scandals in the corporate as contributed by the business school method of imparting knowledge. (Ghoshal, 2003). Further, Ghoshal et al (1992) had advocated executive programs to bridge the gap between the corporate and the academic views of the world. As Rynes et al. (2001) argue, executives rarely turn to academics or their research findings to solve problems and academics rarely turn to practitioners when they are trying to frame research questions or 'for insight when interpreting their results'. Weick (2001) also argues that the relevance gap is 'as much a

product of practitioners wedded to gurus and fads as it is of academics wedded to abstractions and fundamentals.

Raising the issue of business schools loosening the connectivity with business world, Jeffrey Garten, dean of the Yale School of Management, said in a New York Times interview, "It's extremely difficult to figure out what to teach in a two-year course, to reflect today's realities, let alone what the world will look like 10 or 20 years from now when the graduates reach their stride in terms of their careers."<sup>7</sup> Researchers compare course-value perceptions of educators to those of business professionals and discovered sizable differences. "Achieving practical relevance requires the integration of practitioner concerns, challenges, and problems to the management process" (Augier, 2006). Unfortunately, some business schools concentrate heavily on knowledge building exercises only, and the consequence is that they are threatened on the edge of irrelevancy. According to a survey (Raymond and Kimberly, 2008) conducted among business professionals and educators from the Society of Human Resource Management and University of Texas, Austin throughout the United States, academicians believe, in line with the genesis of scientific management, that emphasis and importance must be accorded to measurable and overtly quantifiable issues that are crucial for quality scholarship, while practitioners and professionals strongly oppose this and want the emphasis to be placed on softer aspects of people-management, development of skills, competencies and abilities.

In recent times, Ellson (2009) remarked that "whilst there may be exhortation of the benefits

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/06/19/business/yourmoney/19advi.html?ref=jeffreiegarten>

of practitioner learning, few institutions can obviously and straightforwardly claim teaching staffs that either offer wide experience of business practice or a pedagogy that reflects authentic and legitimate practitioner learning.” Thus, an apparent gap remains between the training provided at most business schools and what is needed in jobs. This situation hurts business students, business schools, business firms, and in some way, the society, in general.

Elliott et al. (1994) raised a pertinent question whether there was a mismatch between MBA programs and business needs. Starkey et al. (2004) argue that there is a need to reinvent business schools 'geared to developing skills in reflective, collaborative and analytical thinking as well as action mindsets that enable managers to negotiate the complex tensions that exist between the conceptual and the concrete'.

Bailey and Ford (1996) assert that “business schools appeal to one another as scholarly communities through a plethora of academic journals that are divorced from the challenges of everyday management”. Theoretical research without practical implications remains the rule of the day in average business schools with limited resources and short-sighted vision. Former MIT Sloan School Dean Dick Schmalensee<sup>8</sup> wrote for a 2006 Business Week editorial that .....”we need to make business-school research and MBA education much more attuned to meeting today's and tomorrow's management challenges”.

Pfeffer and Fong (2002) note “a large body of evidence suggests that the curriculum taught in business schools has only a small relationship to what is important for succeeding in business.” The presumed value of raising the standard of

professionalism behaviors among business undergrads is not expected to be controversial in this day and age. It is rooted in insights like those articulated in Mintzberg's *Managers Not MBAs: A Hard Look at the Soft Practice of Managing and Management Development* (2004), and related works specific to undergraduates in a variety of disciplines.

But, as Dilworth (1996) predicted in his paper: Universities will be increasingly challenged to have curricula consistent with the business ecology of the times. Globalization will add to the pressure. But, even as late as in 2009, findings have suggested that behavioral competencies indicated by managers to be most critical are the very competencies least represented in the required MBA curricula (Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009).

### ***Bridging the Gap***

Even in India, the issue of theory-practice gap has been a long raging one. Rajsekaran and Rajasingh (2009) have concluded that “the perception gap between industry and faculty must be bridged to improve the employability of students and enhance the quality of higher education”. Another set of authors from the sub-continent, Hamatteh and Jufout (2003) suggested that “a national level committee, comprising members from educational and industrial sectors be formed to match the demands and needs required by the labor market with the educational portfolio”. They further suggested ways and means of doing this. According to them, the gap can be bridged by regular analysis, practical skill-level assessment, revision of the curriculums to focus more on practical and industry useful skills, etc., among other methods. This model has a very

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.croassociation.org/node/786>

useful byproduct – i.e. reduction of training expense, particularly the pre-employment and deployment training that typically strain the already pressured training budget of companies. Obviously, it also enhances the proficiency level of graduates, leading to trust in the educational sector.

Zahid (2008) concluded that “higher education and industry linkages should remain alive for constant updating of courses. By creating the partnership between universities and industry, both can benefit from resources of each other”. Paliwal (2009) has focused on “coordination among the efforts of academia, industry and the government. He emphasized on instilling the traits which are expected by the prospective employers”. Hayes (2006) stressed the need for instilling fundamental management skills among students, while Yorke et al (2004) suggested that employability skills be a part of the curriculum in the management courses. Earlier, Reilly (1982) had cautioned b-schools to have more relevant skills taught in MBA programs.

In their widely acclaimed book, *Rethinking the MBA*, Datar and his co-authors, albeit in an optimistic tone, have reminded business schools about the importance of 'doing' and 'being', along with 'knowing' as essential ingredient of managerial success. Based on their heavily empirical study involving academicians, practitioners, students and alumni along with in-depth case studies of six highly ranked business schools in the world, they have called for a need for rebalancing. 'Management, after all, is a practical art; it involves getting things implemented and executed through people and organizations. For this reason, it requires more than knowledge alone. Moreover, that knowledge must be grounded in readily applicable frameworks that will help students

translate the theories they have learned into practice. As we have argued in several places in this book, students must be provided with critical skills and perspectives; they must be schooled in doing and being as well as knowing' (Datar et al., 2010).

## **Future Research**

Like the rest of the world, in India, although business school enrollments have soared and business education has become big business, surprisingly little evaluation of the impact of business schools on the profession of management exists. Concern about the theory-practice gap is widespread. Despite these concerns, Rynes et al. (2001: 342) also identify a paucity of empirical research on why the gap has been created and is being sustained. So, research into the reasons why such a gap exists is a worthwhile endeavor. There is evidence to suggest that these gaps are wide and are widening further but little good research has been done to explain why these gaps exist and what can be done to close them in the Indian context. It is clear that we need more relevant, rigorous and operationalisable research to address this issue.

Though there has been some research done in the US and in the UK, however, no study on management education in India has been done to assess the theory-practice gap in management education from a 360 degree perspective covering the perceptions of various stakeholders of management education – viz. students, faculty, and managers with regards to this knowing-doing gap.

With the growth in the demand for management graduates in India like the rest of the world, corporate bodies have been recruiting MBA graduates in quite large numbers in various managerial or executive roles. Competitive

pressures have compelled these corporates to expect results from the newly recruited graduates almost from almost Day 1 of their entry to corporates with minimal training or orientation. The performance of the graduates depends on their ability to transfer the inputs they would have received in their institutes to the workplace. The ability or the ease of this transfer of knowledge and skills depends in turn on the relevance of their education to the realities of the workplace. But, little study on the relevance of management education in terms of the skills that the programs impart to the students has been done in India.

The extant literature has amply stated the existence of a theory-practice gap in the field of management studies. However, a systematic study is needed to assess what this gap actually is, how the various stakeholders view this gap, and whether there is a way to integrate the different perspectives in the management education methodology so that there is alignment in the students' expectations and the corporate expectations of students' skills. There is a dearth of studies on the ways and means to bridge this theory-practice gap. No quality study has been done on the Indian management education market.

Worldwide, not much has been done so far to bridge the gap. "To address the MBA program impact, as of the early 1990s, only a few management schools had conducted student-change outcome studies which compared their graduates to their students at the time of entry into the program" (Albanese et al., 1990). Though generic outcome studies have been done by quite a few business schools, there is a need for specific outcome studies like studies of a business school alumni performance vis-à-vis their academic inputs, or perception of academicians and employers or prospective

employers on student skill enhancement. "Some schools have examined the student-change from specific courses"(Bigelow, 1991; Specht and Sandlin, 1991). Such replication studies can be done with Indian business schools, students and programs.

Yet another strand of research can be undertaken on the key issues involved with regards to learning. First, whether the first type of learning (cognitive understanding) is a necessary prerequisite to the second type of learning (ability). One might be an expert sprinter or swimmer without a cognitive understanding of the process of sprinting or swimming. Does this mean we should focus more on the acquisition of skills and less on cognitive understanding? If so, what is the role of an instructor? What this line of argument boils down to is that the coach has to be better at playing the game than the members of his team. If so, what can be done to make sure our faculty acquire, renew, or hone these skills?

Such efforts as above will hopefully (a) establish the link between management education and management development, (b) enable institutions to be more relevant to the corporate who are actually their primary customers, and (c) bring out a road-map for business schools and corporate to work together to enhance the relevance and utility of the MBA degree, by whatever it is referred to in India, like PGDM, PGDBA, MMS, PGDBA, etc.

Essentially what is needed is a body of theory that will explain why these gaps exist and have persisted and a body of theory that will help to identify how to close these gaps. So, identification of the gaps, the reasons thereof, and the ways and means of closing the same are of utmost importance. Pragmatic academic research needs to integrate both the 'why'

(theories to develop understanding – episteme or 'disinterested understanding') and the 'how' (theories of action to guide effective implementation – techne or craftsmanship). (Worrall et al., 2007).

## Conclusion

### *Why 'Bridging the Gap' makes sense*

Management education is undergoing a sea change with liberalization, globalization, and privatization happening across the spectrum of higher education. With the foreign university bill in place, Indian management institutions have to rediscover themselves to face competition from foreign institutions that are likely to set up campuses in India. There is likely to be fierce competition to attract and retain talent. Students will become much more discerning given the fact that higher education will be more expensive. Competition to attract and retain talent, both among students and faculty, will make quality a critical variable.

Bridging the theory-practice gap in management education will go a long way in:

1. Helping the students make an informed decision while choosing an institution
2. Improving the quality and relevance of management education
3. Extending the shelf-life of learning tools, techniques and models

Apart from the immediate benefit mentioned above, since Global Competitiveness Index of World Economic Forum includes as a variable the quality of a nation's management schools, the study will contribute to enhanced competitiveness of India. World Bank also uses nations' scores on the above variable as a part of its Knowledge Assessment Methodology

(KAM), which helps nations identify means to transition to a knowledge-based economy, and India aspires to be a leading knowledge based economy.

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