

Reality and Surreality in Management Education: Linking Praxis to Practice through Pragmatic Pedagogy

Lawrence Loh

This paper examines the disconnect between university education and the professions. Recognizing the differences in the “real” world of practice and the “surreal” world of the teaching institution, it develops a pragmatic framework for educators to integrate academic “praxis” with professional “practice” through pedagogy. Specifically, a bridge framework is built along three dimensions – means, methods and messages. Drawing from personal classroom experiences, such a framework may be applied to inject reality into the surreality of learning and to change the education experience for the better.

Field of Research: Management Education, Changes in Education

1. Introduction

How many times have you been told you don't learn in the university; learning takes place in the so-called “real world”. It is as if the university is an imaginary world (“surreal world”), often touted an ivory tower. It is as if education has not been serving its societal mission. In fact, a former U.S. Commissioner of Education, Francis Keppel, himself an educator and Harvard graduate, once said: “*Education is too important to be left solely to the educators*”.

The education conundrum is perhaps more protracted in the various professions of business and management. What the professors are excited about, on the reason of being at the cutting edge, seem to be rooted in a largely different lingo set than their counterparts in practice. While the research often delves in the frontiers of knowledge creation, such cannot often be said about the teaching, where it, over the course of time, may tend to turn stale. Just consider a provocative utterance of management guru Peter Drucker: “*When a subject becomes totally obsolete we make it a required course*”.

A key challenge for university education lies then in bridging disconnect between what is taught and what is practiced. How do educators change and emulate practice in the classroom? But another challenge faced is that practice is imperfect too – professionals make their worldviews based on subjective perceptions, compounding the difficulty for the universities even more so.

2. Literature Review: Conceptual Clarification

Popular business literature has often been skeptical of the educational institution. For instance, a recent *BusinessWeek* article is alluringly titled, “You Can’t Learn Management in a Classroom”. This was written by a top-selling business author (Handy, 2008), who paradoxically was himself an executive business student at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Is learning in a modern university less than real, perhaps “surreal” in nature? What is surrealism? Surrealism is characterized by elements of surprise, unexpected juxtapositions and illogic (Breton, 1924).¹ The surrealist style sees imageries from the vantage point of the subconscious and makes creations often without intending to achieve logical intelligibility. It draws on the wellspring of imagination to join rationality with dreams and fantasies and in the process attain absolute reality or surreality.²

Maybe somewhat like the surrealist tradition, the academia is often viewed by critics to have strayed out of the real world in attempts to liberate imagination and exert efforts so as to scale the frontiers of research. Many a leading university has indeed gained its reputation through research at the expense of teaching, especially in North America and Western Europe.

Academics have made attempts in varying degrees to inject reality in teaching. In doing so, they have used multiple teaching methods which collectively may be termed as “praxis”. Aristotelian in nature, the notion of “praxis” refers to the process by which a theory, lesson or skill is enacted. It is a way for the teacher to frame the external world through the body of knowledge articulated in the course of learning. It is the teacher’s own methodical conception of the actual practice outside the academic setting (see also a critique by Freire, 1970).

A widely received praxis used by educators is experiential learning, pioneered by David Kolb, which draws on diverse styles in a cyclic framework that can be applied to different settings, especially adult education, informal education and lifelong learning (Kolb and Kolb, 2005).³ The developed experiential learning circle comprises four elements: concrete observation; observation and reflection; formation of abstract concepts; and testing in new situations.

Perhaps a stream of inquiry that injects a profound impact on the way scholars view business school teaching is the field of critical management education. This stream aims to enhance the instructional paradigm and methods vis-à-vis managerialism and corporatization, both tenets of which have been associated with the vagaries of capitalism (see Perriton and Reynolds, 2004). Critical management education embraces multiple perspectives from a myriad of stakeholders, including issues in environment, community, labor, diversity and other societal concerns. It delves on the social and moral imperatives of education and in fact draws from the root disciplines of critical theory (traditional

Loh

and contemporary schools), critical pedagogy and critical management studies (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Boje and Al Arkoubi, 2009). The critical management education stream, together with the root disciplines, are indeed extremely rich and perceptive and base its utility on the notion and tenets of “criticality” in various situations and settings. However, the application to business school teaching can be difficult and complex as numerous assumptions and perhaps ideologies may have to be imbibed and incorporated deeply into the educational content and process for the benefits to be derived.

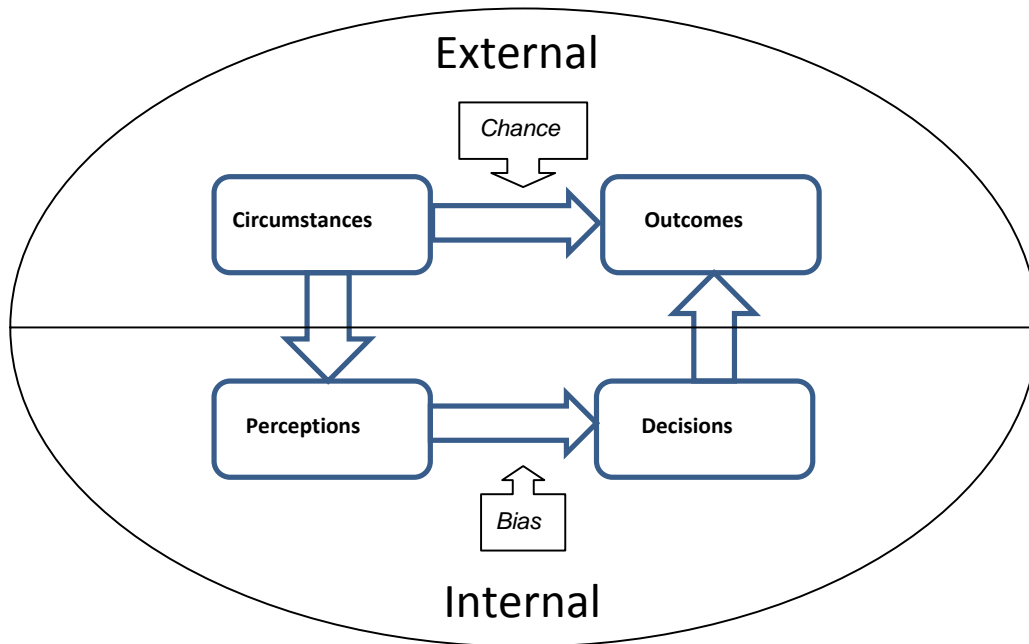
On a more practical level, the case study method has been employed to bridge education with real settings (Barnes, Christensen and Hansen, 1994) – this has even been applied in various disciplinary contexts such as social sciences (Campbell, 1975; Grant, 1997) and engineering (Mustoe and Croft, 1999). Such an approach is often predicated on a constructivist tradition (Fosnot, 1996) and more specifically to the leveraging of technologies (Hung and Nichani, 2001; Jonassen, Peck and Wilson, 1999), including connectivity platforms like the web (Brooks, 1997). With the advancement of rich means and media to facilitate learning, the student has access to capture the essence of the world in various classroom environments (see Alavi, Yoo and Vogel, 1997).

3. Methodology: Problem Definition

This paper addresses the problem of educators in formulating and implementing effective educational curriculums and techniques that are relevant to the respective professions. A conceptual approach is taken to first highlight the problem, and then a discussion is made to develop a solution through a proposed conceptual framework.

For many educators, having an adequate praxis is a way out to link teaching to practice. However, there are associated difficulties as managers in the business world make decisions based on subjective perceptions of objective circumstances. These perceptions are clouded with personal bias internal to the decision-maker. The decisions made then affect actual outcomes which are driven by external circumstances and influenced by chance events (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Decisions Are Based on Perceptions



A paradox thus arises. The professions, though operating in the objective “real” world, make decisions based on a subjective perceptual world (Figure 2). On the other hand, the academia tries to model the objective “real” world through its instructional praxis, which is often rooted in a “surreal” representation (Figure 3). The mismatches constitute a paradox of realities, and mitigating this divergence is a challenge confronting many institutions of higher learning, particularly the profession-based schools.

Figure 2. The Paradox of the Professions

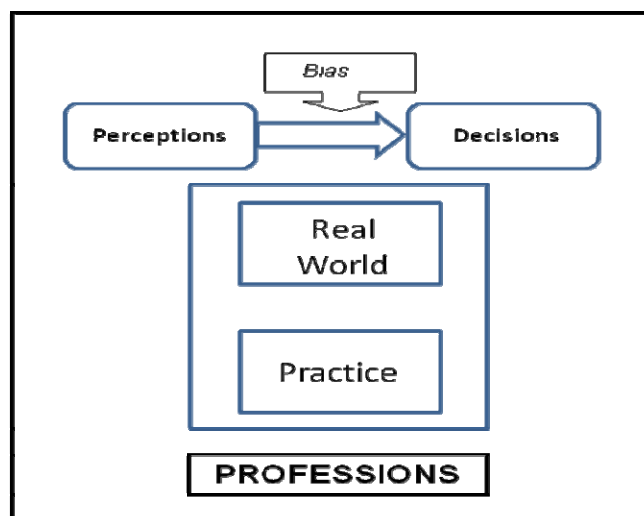
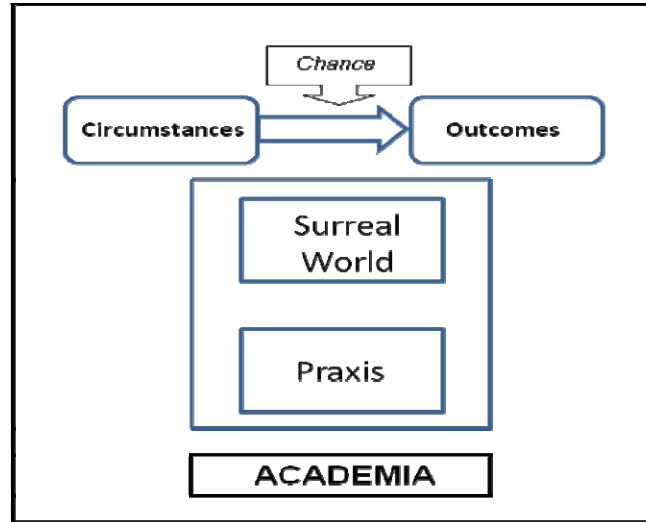


Figure 3. The Paradox of the Academia



4. Discussion: Conceptual Framework

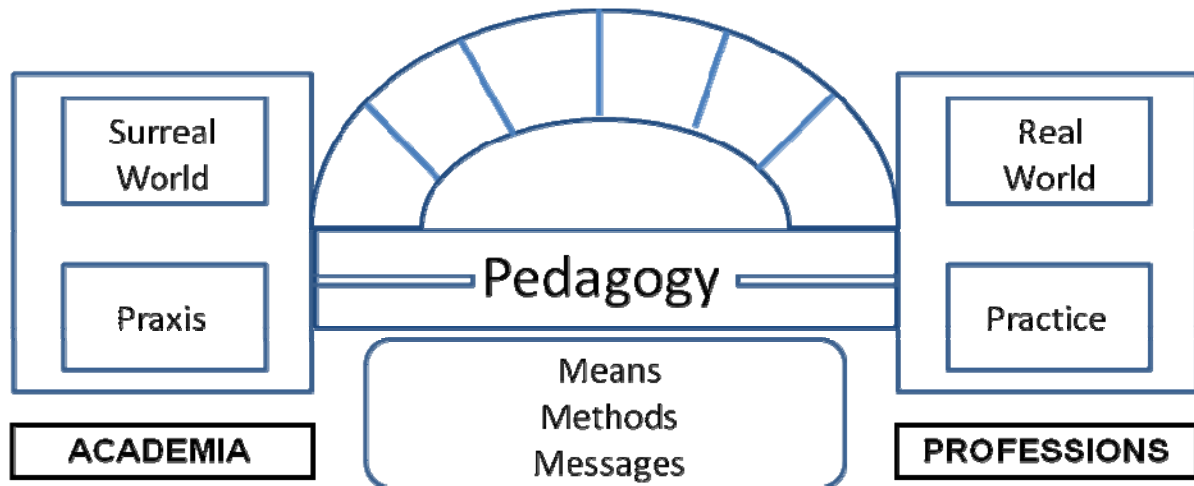
Praxis is a natural response to apply theory to practice. It is a logical personal apparatus to systematize an approach to reach out to the external environment. However, it may be too broad and rigid, and more significantly, it is often fraught with risk, as it sometimes mandates a person to make a subjective critical judgment about how to act in any particular situation (Carr and Kemmis, 1986).

A more practical response is to take the specific approach of pedagogy *per se*. Scholars have myriad definitions and views on what pedagogy is all about. Let's just look at the Webster dictionary. "Pedagogy" is: (1) "the principles and methods of instruction"; (2) "the profession of a teacher" or (3) "the activities of educating or instructing or teaching; activities that impart knowledge or skill".⁴

What do all these lead us to in practical terms? How do university teachers stand on pedagogy to integrate the real and surreal worlds, to sieve out praxis to emulate practice?

Figure 4 depicts a proposed conceptual framework of the pedagogy bridge.

Figure 4. Bridging Academia and Professions Through Pedagogy



Based on actual classroom teaching in a business school, a three-dimensional approach to operationalize the pedagogy bridge is developed. This is based on the spectrum of innovative pedagogical methods such as case study or technology-mediations, and rooted in the constructivist tradition. The model is highlighted in a “3M” framework of means, methods and messages as follows:

(1) Means

The first dimension of means refers to the various ways that are employed to relate the classroom to the real world. These may be the multi-faceted channels that exist in aiding actual managerial decision-making. Examples may include multi-media means of laying out assignments beyond print media such as online sources, podcasts, video-casts or even classroom conversations (as we know managers do often receive information and instructions over informal cocktails or chance elevator meetings).

(2) Methods

The second dimension of methods emphasizes the relentless incorporation of real-world happenings to the classroom. Facts and cases under study are invariably historical in nature and students need to cultivate the instinct and habit of keeping with the latest applications. Current affairs that deeply contextualize the lessons are apt.

Loh

(3) Messages

Herein lies the challenge of ever-changing context. It is difficult to play the game when the goal posts are constantly shifting. The solution is to have a “rolling” syllabus such that the messages are flexible and adaptive, while cultivating a level of certainty upfront to exude a sense of security amongst students. The syllabus is stressed to be a means rather an end to achieve learning outcomes.

Synthesizing the three dimensions, it is instructive to allude to a cube analogy, a Rubik-Cube perhaps, where components of each dimension interact intensely and adaptively with those of the other dimensions.

The model goes beyond the rooting of management in emerging disciplines, particularly those along the “critical” traditions. While this can be a limitation in itself, the injection of real world perspectives is often a pragmatic venture adapted to the relevance of the real situations and settings. Complexity is reduced and a neutral refocus is made on the basics of effective management – how management education can emulate the management world so as to circumvent the challenge of decision making and to contextualize the classroom experience accordingly. In some ways, the pedagogy is to imbibe the appropriate features of critical management education while staying practical and even simple to the mission of education.

The 3M framework was operationalized in the author’s teaching of an undergraduate course on Business Policy and Strategy. Specifically, a variety of means as mentioned earlier was employed. Student feedback indicated that these means, particularly multimedia, created a more realistic learning setting beyond the usual print media. Podcasts and video-casts were welcomed as richer stimuli in enhancing individual understanding and class interaction. As for methods, students valued the emphasis on current affairs and appreciated the real-time realism when contemporary events were used in assignments, case studies and tests. On the messages, students were continually challenged when the learning contents were rolled out to be attuned with the fast changing business environment, especially during the volatile global economic crisis of 2008.

5. Conclusion

This paper is a preliminary attempt to develop a simplified instructional pedagogy for linking management education to business practices. A conceptual framework was built and tested based on the personal classroom experience of the author. It is probable that more extensive analyses and verifications are required to fine-tune the model for robust use in a broader array of contexts and courses.

Loh

The skeptic of education often quotes the Irish playwright, author and poet, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900): "*Education is an admirable thing, but it is well to remember from time to time that nothing that is worth knowing can be taught*". Maybe Wilde is right, if there is a dichotomy between the real world of practice and the surreal world of praxis. Within management education, critics are indeed pointing to the lost cause of business schools (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002).⁵

Sound pedagogy may obliterate the quandary and change the paradigm for education. Perhaps there is a pawn of truth in the wisdom of the world's longest ever reigning chess champion (from 1894 to 1921), Emanuel Lasker (1868-1941) who posed this gambit: "*Properly taught, a student can learn more in a few hours than he would find out in ten years of untutored trial and error*".

Oscar Wilde or Emanuel Lasker, who do you believe? As a follower of the sport, I believe in chess.

Notes

¹ The surrealism movement, with its rich heritage and complex tenets, began at the turn of the last century in the 1920s and draws primarily on the thematic visual artworks and writings of its followers. For a broad introduction see <http://www.surrealist.com/>; <http://www.surrealism.org/>; <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Surrealism>.

² There is also a baggage of political ideologies associated with surrealism that is based on socialism and communism, although we can safely separate the "pure" art philosophy and focus on the conceptual notions.

³ The website, <http://www.infed.org/>, with an apt homepage slogan "*exploring informal education, lifelong learning and social action*", provides perspectives on praxis in education.

⁴ See <http://www.webster-dictionary.org/definition/pedagogy>. The word "pedagogy" draws from its Greek roots which mean "child-learning". Interestingly, there is a rejection of this terminology by advocates of adult-learning who favor the concept "andragogy" which means exactly what they advocate (Knowles, 1988). Accordingly, executive students in graduate programs of profession-based schools are invariably adults and should not be subject to pedagogy. But then, that is another story altogether. For all intent and purposes, we can take an all-encompassing interpretation of pedagogy to connote learning for all ages.

⁵ See the monograph (Dery, Mailhot and Schaeffer, 2006) for an excellent treatise on the debate of the usefulness of the business school.

References

- Alavi, M., Yoo, Y. and Vogel, D.R. 1997. "Using information technology to add value to management education", *Academy of Management Journal*, vol. 40. no. 6, pp. 1310-1333.
- Alvesson, M. and Willmott, H. (Eds.), 1992, *Critical Management Studies*, Sage Publications Ltd., London.
- Barnes, L.B., Christensen, C.R. and Hansen A.J. 1994, *Teaching and the Case Method: Text, Cases and Readings*, Harvard Business School Press, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Boje, D.M. and Al Arkoubi, K. 2009, "Critical management education beyond the siege", in Armstrong, S.J. and Fukami, C.V. (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Management Learning, Education and Development*, Sage Publications Ltd., London.
- Breton, A. 1924, *Manifesto of Surrealism*. [<http://www.tcf.ua.edu/Classes/Jbutler/T340/SurManifesto/ManifestoOfSurrealism.htm>.]
- Brooks, D. 1997, *Web-Teaching: A Guide to Designing Interactive Teaching for the World Wide Web*, Plenum Press, New York.
- Campbell, D. 1975. "Degrees of freedom and the case study". *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 178-185.
- Carr, W. and Kemmis, S. 1986, *Becoming Critical: Education, Knowledge and Action Research*, Routledge Falmer, London.
- Dery, R., Mailhot, C. and Schaeffer, V. 2006. The war of the world: the MBA under attack. HEC Montreal, Montreal. [<http://www2.hec.ca/recherche/publications/cahiers/2006/06-09.pdf>]
- Fosnot, C.T. (Ed.), 1996, *Constructivism: Theory, Perspectives and Practice*, Teachers College Press, New York.
- Freire, P. 1970, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Continuum Publishing, New York.
- Grant, R. 1997. "A claim for the case method in the teaching of geography". *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, vol. 21, no. 2, pp. 171-185.
- Handy. C. 2008. "You can't learn management in a classroom", *BusinessWeek*. January 25. [http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/content/jan2008/bs20080125_786369.htm.]

Loh

- Hung, D. and Nichani, M. 2001. "Constructivism and e-learning: balancing between the individual and social levels of cognition", *Educational Technology*, vol. 41, no. 2, pp. 40-44.
- Jonassen, D.H., Peck, K.L. and Wilson, B.G. 1999. *Learning With Technology: A Constructivist Perspective*, Merrill Publishing, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey.
- Knowles, M. 1988, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education: From Pedagogy to Andragogy*, Prentice Hall Regents - Cambridge Adult Education, Englewoods Cliff, New Jersey.
- Kolb, A.Y. and Kolb, D.A. 2005, *The Kolb Learning Style Inventory – Version 3.1 2005 Technical Specifications*, HayGroup – Hay Resources Direct, Boston, Massachusetts.
- Mustoe, L.R. and Croft, A.C. 1999. "Motivating engineering students by using modern case studies", *European Journal of Engineering Education*, vol. 15, no. 6, pp. 469-476.
- Perriton, L. and Reynolds, M. 2004. "Critical management education: from pedagogy of possibility to pedagogy of refusal", *Management Learning*, vol. 35, no. 1, pp. 61-77.
- Pfeffer, J. and Fong, C.T. 2002. "The end of business schools? Less success than meets the eyes", *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, vol. 1, no. 1, pp. 78-95.