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The Role of Critical Thinking in Multicultural Management Programs

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Introduction

There are thousands of managements programs and lecturers, but are their programs managed in order to achieve critical thinking? The first aim of this paper is to ask if and how multicultural management programs achieve a learning outcome where the average student really have the skills of critical thinking. This is not yet a research based paper, merely reflections to be developed further. The Second aim is therefore to lay the foundation for further literature studies / reviews and ask the same for European business schools and their multicultural management programs in general.

Management and managers already influences Europe in almost every field of expertise. Thus, it is important critically reviewing how managers are educated. I suggest a balanced multidisciplinary approach in order to improve the level of critical thinking within multicultural management programs, finally reflecting upon whether European higher education will succeed in distributing necessary resources if to approve.

This is merely reflections at an early stage, not a paper ready for publication. However, the discourse of critical thinking is of major interest and importance, and I therefore take the chance of sending them nevertheless, and promise to develop the reflections further.

Today's system of mass education and BSc and MSc classes with students recruited internationally is politically embraced in Europe. This may indeed be a pillar of securing Europe's future and democratic development. However, it adds to the complexity of teaching and if to succeed in educating a new multicultural class of managers able to be critical one may indeed ask if all the knowledge, skills and learning outcomes put into programs are buzz- word-outcomes of the Bologna process or real improvements of studying. Most program managers and lecturers certainly do their best, but being critical, is this good enough?

Firstly, as globalization an internationalization are of major importance to almost every form of modern management, I concentrate on studying multicultural recruitment to English taught management programs in Europe. This recruitment adds to the complexity of teaching in several ways: a) Language complexity (ref). Except for UK, the continental European universities offer these programs in another language than their official national language, thus the majority of lecturers and professors are required to teach in their second language¹. Except for Anglo-Americans, students are required to understand the subjects of the program as they actually are taught in English. b) Cultural complexity (ref). The cultural mix of backgrounds has an impact on the learning environment in class; this increases the general pedagogic problem of making the taught subject of relevance and of weight to the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (ref).

Secondly how to define management programs? For the purpose of our questions of multicultural recruitment and critical thinking, it is sufficient to say they are general management programs either by name or by content and offered by business schools and universities in Europe, here geographically defined as the European Economic Area (EEA).

Thirdly, the scope of this paper is not to evaluate the scale of the problem, i.e. critical thinking within the number of institutions and programs offered, but to discuss if and how can we measure whether and to what extent critical thinking is included in these programs, and if the candidate actually achieve this as a learning outcome.

¹ The study includes programs from UK and continental Europe.

Critical thinking and management programs

Scholars seem to agree that the idea of thinking critically can be efficiently developed, from Sokrates critical and ironical questions to modern researchers like Thayer-Bacon (Thayer-Bacon, B. 2000) with her constructive ways of thinking² or Abrami³ et.al. with their meta-analysis, suggesting there are some approaches systematically more efficient than others, namely the combination of dialogue in classrooms, exposure to authentic problems and mentoring (Abrami et. al. 2015). Critics of this also contribute fruitfully to the discourse. A pragmatic like Anderson⁴, (Anderson, H. 2001 Educational Theory) says that critical thinking as a concept “requires its adherents to assess claims by reference to evidence and argument”, I find this particularly attractive, because to my understanding this in many ways is an important part of our pedagogic challenge in higher education. In order to achieve the needed level of knowledge, skills and general competence the students must make use of relevant arguments tied to evidences, evaluate their weight, draw conclusions and act accordingly. This is not an attempt to reduce teaching or lecturing to a pure instrumental performance; the social activity by students and scholars together in classrooms and when being mentored over real problems also contains important moral functions; or being concerned with the principles of right and wrong behaviour within the context of their particular study and/ or profession. In other words, the process of finding evidences and arguments of not only relevance, but weight and to draw conclusions also contains moral elements. As an example we can look at the climate change; there is overwhelmingly consensus among scientists that human activity contribute to climate change. This is evidently so, but how should the world’s nations, their leaders and population act? This is a question of moral. If it is an ethical foundation to produce the better for the most (Mill J.S. 1863 Utilitarianism) if we can avoid a gradually worsening climate, and avoid making living conditions unbearable for increasingly more and more, the right thing to do is to reduce pollution in accordance with advices based on science.

Does this have anything to do with management programs? I would say so, if not directly, indeed indirectly. Managers’ and their first priority and decisions to operate efficiently and maximise profit for the few will often contradict the environmental conditions for the many. A well- known example is the export of eggs from Netherlands, in 2015 worth 786 MUSD (cfr. www.worldatlas.com). Using airplanes for transportation is not exactly emission friendly and even the most optimistic fans of new technology seems to accept that enough sustainable bio-fuel is not available for this industry within the near future (IEA transport energy and CO2). We could go on from one industry to another and find similar examples. The problem is not necessarily global trade as such, but an incomplete international legal system not forcing the polluter – the egg-producer in our example - to pay the real costs of production and sale, and here we may include health- and social costs caused.

We could go to other areas than the environment, particularly interesting these days are tax evasions, an industry generating tax shifts to tax havens for more than 600 billion Euros every year according The Guardian (Zuckman, G. comment on paradise papers 8th Nov. 2017). Even if this is legal, leaving profit with no or very low taxation to multinational companies, does not give good prospect for the future funding of modern welfare systems. Legality is also politics, and politics could change. Western democracies seem to have an obligation to take upon themselves to fight this battle.

Knowing all this, and knowing that there is nothing new in managers that makes suboptimal decisions on behalf of conglomerates, higher education has an obligation to educate managers with the ability to see their own decisions in context and act in accordance with moral obligations. I.e. to think critically or look at evidences and arguments, and draw conclusions of how to act.

The questions I rise is firstly if international multicultural management programs in Europe do carry out such a combination of critical thinking and moral standing? Secondly if these programs take the multicultural aspect as such into context with regard to a) Language complexity (ref). Except for UK, the continental European

² Thayer-Bacon, B. (2000) Transforming Critical Thinking: Thinking constructively. New York, NY: Teachers College Press

³ Abrami, Phillip C., Bernard, Robert M., Borokhovski, Eugene, Waddington, David, Wade, Anne and Persson, Tonje; Strategies for Teaching Students to Think Critically: A Meta Analysis. Review of Educational Research, June 2015, Vol. 85 No. 2.

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universities offer these programs in another language than their official national language, thus the majority of lecturers and professors are required to teach in their second language⁵. Except for Anglo-Americans, students are required to understand the subjects of the program as they actually are taught in English. b) Cultural complexity (ref). The cultural mix of backgrounds has an impact on the learning environment in class; this increases the general pedagogic problem of making the taught subject of relevance and of weight to the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (ref).

The business schools and their management programs

Financial Times (FT) ranking of the top 100 world leading business schools, name five European among the top ten. In all about 30% of these 100 are European. (FT-Global MBA Ranking 2017). In addition comes of course, all the other universities in general with their business schools and management programs literally educating thousands

The program curriculum would mostly consist of commercial aspects, as well as methods of writing academically and search for evidence and arguments. It seems to be a standard of 120 ECTS for 2 year master programs within European business schools, and to provide subjects of 7,5 European Credit Transfer System-points (ECTS). Master of Business Management programs (MBA) are often of one year (3 semesters) and 90 ECTS. Typically basic finance principles, strategy, marketing and economics, not to forget communication and sometimes a dash of law. This observation leads to the fact that these programs do not educate technicians or engineers, auditors or commercial experts, or indeed legal professionals, but aim at educating managers. Well, is management a profession to be taught? And, if it is? What is the risk of being too shallow or too superficial in trying to show that managers do need insight in various fields in order to become successful, but with only 7,5 ECTS pr. subject or 25% of a semester's work-load one may ask if these programs use enough time to mature real understanding of the complexities of any taught subject.

International recruitment to management programs

Competition among candidates to international MBA-programs surely differ, from the FT top 100 which in the absence of better criteria, pick the best graded ones from undergraduate programs, to the more typical school where required average level generally is stated as a minimum of 70% cumulative average of the maximum grade. Alternatively, minimum average grades of C. International recruitment are for some programs restricted to a maximum of 50% foreign students.

Questions asked

Looking at the first question with regard to the combination of critical thinking and moral standing. We can start with observing that even though there is a risk of shallowness when teaching a variety of 7,5 ECTS modules, good management programs learn their students' techniques for analysing problems. The candidates entering the job market – and being employed to manage – share the same vocabulary and skills – which “*in sum accelerate on-the-job learning and productivity*” (Greebaum, S. 2005).

There seems to be an accept that management programs is about professional education, but on the other hand not educating professionalism in sciences (Mintzberg H. 2005). There is an important distinction between management programs, and professional educations within medicine, engineering, law or nursing. All of these have strict and codified knowledge to be learned; so would master exams in international or national accounting, but not so for management programs.

The typical multicultural management program offered by business schools and universities in Europe to some degree would contain the combination of dialogue in classrooms, exposure to authentic problems and mentoring. The latter typically in the form of a written thesis. Is this enough, to accept that they really learn how to think

⁵ The study includes programs from UK and continental Europe.

critically or to gather evidence, arguments and conclude how to perform the right actions? The answer depends on who you ask – Mintzberg being rather critical to the majority of programs and holding a position that teaching the students with little or no managerial experience subjects and concepts of efficient production and services, may learn them how to calculate, but not to draw the right (moral) conclusions and act accordingly. As Mintzberger says, teaching the wrong people at the wrong time would give unwanted or wrong consequences (Mintzberger H. 2005). Although there is so far little or no research stating a clear causal connection between the tax evasion brought to evidence by the paradise papers (cfr. The Guardian articles nov.2017) and the essence of management education, I dare presume a clear correlation between the number of managers with an MBA or similar educations and their direct involvement in decisions in favour of using tax havens. One argument here is that this is evidently the very opposite of contributing to the better for the many or giving the society that made it possible to make profit in the first place, an opportunity to evaluate a fair level of taxation. For the sake of an open and informed discussion, there is at least one solid argument for the use of tax havens; who says that democratic institutions per se is the best way of securing the optimal use of the resources, i.e. the better for the many? Some private fortunes, companies and wealthy families have survived wars, risk of confiscation and the like, in order to use their insight for production and employment. That may be, but still the point of open, democratic societies balancing power, is that the alternatives systematically have proven to give more misuse of power. There are indeed moral individuals and good managers with justified decisions and actions, which are to be expected! We may not blame MBA-educations for the negative sides of globalisation and imperfect legal systems. However, I think it is a plausible question asking whether these educations contribute to gather evidences, arguments and act in the right way. In addition to instrumentally learn young people how to increase profit, the programs could lecture how democracies legally may balance the power of some of the world's biggest multinational companies and richest individuals, and how they use a "*myriad ways in which tax can be avoided using artificial structures*"? (The Guardian articles nov.2017, as revealed by Guardian and 95 media partners worldwide into a leak of 13.4m files from two offshore service providers and 19 tax havens' company registries).

Secondly the question if these programs take the multicultural aspect as such into context with regard to a) Language complexity (ref). Except for UK, the continental European universities offer these programs in another language than their official national language, thus the majority of lecturers and professors are required to teach in their second language. Except for Anglo-Americans, students are required to understand the subjects of the program as they actually are taught in English. b) Cultural complexity (ref). The cultural mix of backgrounds has an impact on the learning environment in class; this increases the general pedagogic problem of making the taught subject of relevance and of weight to the students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations (ref).