

School for Business Pros: Conceptual Framework for Designing a Post-Experiential Post-MBA Business Education

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ABSTRACT

It is the fourth time that we create a new management school. Every time it was different and every time we have learned a lot from the process of curriculum design in harmony with the voice of the times. In this paper we outline the process of curriculum design through our latest experience in creating the Strategic Partner School in Hungary. Although there are important characteristics of the Middle-East European market for post-experiential business education taken into consideration, the meta-level of the process, i.e. how to identify the relevant characteristics can be applicable well beyond the area in which this study originated. Naturally, our way is not the only right way of curriculum design but our aim with this study is to stimulate thinking and discussion rather than selling a recipe.

Keywords: *curriculum design, post-experiential education*

1. INTRODUCTION

In this paper we are outlining a process for designing postgraduate curriculum for business. Our departure point is the dissatisfaction with the common practice of curriculum design for postgraduates who are interested in achieving knowledge increase in the field of study where they obtained their original degree and they are aspiring to acquire knowledge above and beyond what they learned in their previous studies. So we are aiming at designing a refresher course in the sense of updating the existing knowledge with new achievements in the field thus becoming up-to-date in the knowledge domain. Unfortunately, we observed, together with a number of academics in the business area, that the postgraduate courses in Middle-East Europe (MEE), particularly those labeled ‘refresher’, are often not more than the abbreviated versions of the undergraduate courses – the available time of studies is shorter thus the delivered teaching material is smaller and it typically does not go substantially beyond the undergraduate curriculum. Even in the best cases the only difference is that the teaching is somewhat more focused on business examples as the students are expected to have some business practitioner experience. We have developed an approach which aims at designing a curriculum for business practitioners who are willing to go back to the

school in order to increase their knowledge and at the same time making it sure that the developed program has a unique selling point. We introduce our novel conception of curriculum development for such educational program through our example of developing the ‘Strategic Partner’ post-experiential and post-MBA school in Hungary – it was through the development of this school that we discovered that it entails a research process. Our argument is organized around five cornerstone concepts:

- The process is *quasi-algorithmic*, meaning that is sort of algorithmic but not exactly
- The steps are *quasi-heuristic*, meaning that they are sort of heuristic but not exactly
- The conception of education is *quasi-incremental*, meaning that is sort of incremental but not exactly
- The vision of the ‘big picture’ of the curriculum is *quasi-abductive*, meaning that is sort of abductive but not exactly
- The abductive ‘big picture’ is *quasi-validated* by the conditions of a particular recipient; meaning that it is sort of validated but not exactly.

In the next section we describe how we use the above concepts in terms of ‘working definitions’ – similar to the previous points these will not exactly be definitions but almost. This introduction of the basic concepts we want to operate with is followed by the main argument of the paper describing the process of curriculum design.

2. PROCESS OF CURRICULUM DESIGN

In this section we introduce a couple of concepts which are essential for understanding the curriculum development for a business school in MEE as we describe it here. As indicated in the previous list, we use somewhat altered, usually softened, versions of the concepts – therefore we introduce our working definitions the use of which is limited to this paper. It would perhaps be more accurate to say that these concepts are depicted than described as we are not providing proper definitions but rather somewhat metaphoric explanations. They will have somewhat fuzzy boundaries, but their meaning will be sufficiently clear to enable the mental operations we are engaging within the subsequent section.

The problem we are engaging with is described by using a metaphor. The cuckoo is a strange bird who is not making its own nest but rather placing its eggs in other birds’ nests. So we start from a couple of people (the cuckoos) who are developing a new curriculum (egg) and then trying to find a recipient (nest) to run the school to success (get the baby-cuckoos out of the eggs, nurture them to get strong and fly). Why are we using this metaphor? Because we cannot describe the problem precisely. We do not understand it clearly [1]. At the moment, we can only say that we do not know how to get the cuckoo’s egg into a nurturing nest.

Such problems need to be handled as a whole as they cannot be broken down into components small-enough to be easy to handle. However, sometimes we can identify (at least some) components of the problem, even though their boundaries are not sharp, they

often overlap and the relationships between them are less than clear. This is called near decomposability [2] [3]. We need to introduce the cornerstone concepts to tackle such problem and to have the chance of arriving at a meaningful solution – although such solution is usually not demonstrably correct, let alone the only correct one. Of course, this notion also applies to our work presented here – this is certainly not the only right way of designing a curriculum, but we have found it useful and we hope that others may benefit from it as well.

2.1. Quasi-Algorithmic Process

In a complex system there are many great independent agents interacting with each other in many great ways. [4] If we were able to isolate these agents, understand each of them on its own and map all their interactions we would have a chance to create processes that can be described by algorithms. However, in complex systems this is impossible. As noted above, however, near-decomposable systems can more or less be taken apart; in such systems it is possible to describe processes in more or less algorithmic ways. We call such processes quasi-algorithmic.

2.2. Quasi-Heuristic Steps

If we zoom closer into the steps of the quasi-algorithmic process, we find a resemblance with the complexity that led us to the quasi-algorithmic process; not unlike in fractals [5]. This means that the steps in themselves are still too complex for complete explanation of what and why we exactly do then and there. When we cannot explain why we do what we do in a particular situation, we often use heuristics. These are ‘rules of thumb’ for the use of which we do not have proper explanation apart from a vague idea that they *often* work in *similar* situations – while we cannot specify what the similar situations are, how often the heuristics works or what kind of solution they lead to. *“Heuristic, as an adjective, means «serving to discover».”* [6] Heuristics should be rooted in *“experience in solving problems and experience in watching other people solving problems”* [7] and they lose their appropriateness when inherited without the experience and applied in mechanistic ways. If developed and used appropriately, heuristics can be very useful *“If you take a heuristic conclusion as certain, you may be fooled and disappointed; but if you neglect heuristic conclusions altogether you will not make progress at all. The most important signs of progress are heuristic.”* [8] What we call quasi-heuristic steps here, is more or less heuristic – we can provide some explanation for most of them but such explanation is certainly not the only one possible, often incomplete and may contain heuristic elements themselves.

2.3. Quasi-Incremental Education

Before Kuhn [9] introduced the paradigms in (scientific) disciplines, the growth of knowledge was regarded to be incremental; i.e. following the pyramid conception of Comte [10] and Mill [11]. The pyramid conception implies that any new knowledge always builds on previous knowledge, all of which is regarded as valid. Kuhn’s paradigmatic approach assumes that, apart from building, sometimes the growth of knowledge also entails destruction or even leaving the location of building. When

applying these approaches to knowledge increase of individuals, the pyramid conception can be called incremental as it builds on the learner's existing knowledge. Radically new knowledge, however, which would contradict everything one knows, could not be acquired as the learner would have nothing to connect it to [12]. Therefore we argue for quasi-incremental knowledge increase and thus quasi-incremental education, meaning, that the new knowledge builds on the existing knowledge of the learners but it will also contradict and dismiss some of it.

2.4. Quasi-Abductive Big Picture

The notion of abduction as a form of reasoning was introduced by Charles S. Peirce as an alternative to deduction and induction as both of these are prone to the fallacy known as the 'problem of induction' (e.g. Russell [13] [14] and Popper [15] [16]). Peirce [17] suggests that if we observe something we find surprising, we should 'guess' an explanation which, if true, could account for the observed facts or, at least, some of them. So the form of the inference is the following [18]:

The surprising fact, C, is observed;

But if A were true, C would be a matter of course,

Hence, there is reason to suspect that A is true.

Of course, there may be multiple explanations appropriate for explaining the same set of facts; which one we choose is also part of the abductive reasoning. Usually Occam's razor is used, which in this case means that everything else being the same, the simpler explanation is better. Bateson [19] adds that abductive reasoning also includes, once having found an explanation we are happy with, trying to find additional observations that are consequences of the same explanation. The idea of a quasi-abductive big picture in this paper means a big picture that is arrived at by means of abductive reasoning but also discussed between peers and therefore interpersonally reasoned – so it is more or less abductive but not completely.

2.5. Quasi-Validation

The idea of validity is inheritance from experimental sciences and is concern with the question of where a particular knowledge applies – i.e. what is the domain of validity. It is closely linked with the notion of generalizability, which refer to extending some knowledge beyond the domain in which it has been obtained from. Some of the underlying concepts of validity only apply in a positivistic approach, although some requirements also make sense in the non-positivistic world. One of these is internal consistency which we consider also a necessary condition in our view of quasi-validation. Where the quasi-validation departs from all other approaches of validity is that it is only concerned with one single instance of application at a time and the validation process is evaluation of the quasi-abductive big picture in terms of the conditions of that single instance.

3. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

We watched executives struggle with doubts as they could not know the outcomes of their actions in the chaotic world of business. Their world is not deterministic, they cannot control everything and often they do not even know how to distinguish good from evil in a particular situation.

We are not offering a philosophy course the outcome of which is simply a better understanding of the world. We need business people with the right haste/patience ratio: their primary focus should be better understanding of their business and of their role in the strategic thinking process; but they need to be professionals facing real business problems keen to find their way out of the woods.

With post-experiential business education we are going to explore the conflict situations the executives face. According to Mintzberg's [20]; Mintzberg & Lampel [21]) understanding of the management education, where MBAs are producing business analysts and not managers, let alone executives, we introduce a novel approach in teaching executives who are not satisfied with the 'traditional' MBA courses.

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