Preface to the Special Issue: Bringing the Humanities and Liberal Learning to the Study of Business

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This special issue joins an on-going conversation about humanistic management education. In 2011, Amann, Pirson, Dierksmeier, Von Kimakowitz, & Spitzneck published *Business schools under fire: Humanistic management education as the way forward*. Treating the phenomenon of management education as a case study or narrative worthy of our time and attention, the authors make a persuasive argument for “how business schools can get out of the line of fire” by identifying problems, analyzing root causes, proposing solutions, and ultimately reflecting on “the implications of this next generation management education model for the administration of business schools as well as their core tasks of research and teaching” (p. 472).

One conversational thread in the discussion – the importance of narrative – emerges as the focus of the second issue of the *Humanistic Management Journal*. In the opening editorial, “Better Stories Needed: How Meaningful Narratives can Transform the World,” Pirson (2017) writes:

The stories we tell each other matter. They allow us to engage with what we consider legitimate and relevant. What is it that we recognize and value in our stories of our shared cultural narratives? It is important that [*sic*] examine with rigor the stories we tell about ourselves as human beings and our connection with each other and nature at large. At this point of time, we need to understand which stories frame our endeavors better. Given that humanity’s survival as a species is at risk we must unpack misguided frames about who we are and what we organize for. (p. 3)

In its recent BELL (Business, Entrepreneurship, and Liberal Learning) study, The Carnegie Foundation (2011) identifies one paradigm and narrative that informs much of business education; namely, that of the “efficient market”:

Typically, students are asked to learn and apply standard business concepts without their origins and broader significance. When concepts are taught in this way, students tend to

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see them as corresponding to some objective reality instead of tools created by human beings. This problem is exacerbated when individuals remain embedded in a single conceptual frame over an extended period of time (as the dominance of the efficient market model in business almost ensures), coming to treat the model as real even if they are aware at some level that it is not (p.75).

Such a blinkered approach to the study of business deprives students of exposure to the broader social, cultural, and ethical dimensions of their professional choices and relationships. This blinkered approach also undermines the development and education of our students because responsible management and ethical leadership require a deep understanding of a complex and nuanced world rather than simple manipulation, however skillful, of an abstract conceptual schema. Moreover, responsible and ethical decision-making in professional practice calls for an awareness of the multiple potential frames for business choices and the ability to couple market considerations with a broader range of values.

A New Narrative

Much of the debate about the integration of the liberal arts and business education tends to lapse into longstanding Cartesian dichotomies such as theory/ skills, mind/ body, academic/ vocational, and thinking/ doing. A central premise of this special issue is that these dichotomies are problematic. This special issue seeks to find more common ground and to transcend these dichotomies among educators in the liberal arts and business by providing creative, critical, and practical ways to develop and educate future humanistic managers and leaders within a rich array of institutional contexts. In the following pages, we are delighted to present articles that embody the best of original research, practical applications, and reflective essays on the subject of bringing the humanities and liberal learning to the study of business:

- In the opening article – “The Value of Doubt: Humanities-based Literacy in Management Education” – Ulrike Landfester and Jörg Metelmann (2020) question the contribution the humanities could or should make to management education and put forth the concept of “Critical Management Literacy.” They argue that the main contribution of the humanities to business education is “the cultivation of epistemological doubt” so that students are prepared “for the complexity and indeterminacy of reality” and hone “ethical reflectivity.”
- In the article that follows, “Systems Thinking as a Tool for Teaching Undergraduate Business Students Humanistic Management,” Stephen Deets et al. (2020) makes a case for systems thinking as an attractive way “to ground business students in the natural sciences and the liberal arts, develop their complex problem-solving skills, and thereby reinvigorate management education in ways that prepare students to ‘render service to humanity’.”
- Moses Pava links humanistic management theory and religiously grounded business ethics in his article, “Humanistic Management and Religion: A Case for The Constructivist Approach to Jewish Business Ethics.” Pava (2020) looks at three ways of doing Jewish business ethics – the traditionalist, integrationist, and constructivist – and advocates for the constructivist approach. He explains, “For the constructivists, the role of Jewish business ethics is not to judge business from the outside”; rather, the role is “to actively participate

and contribute to an expansive dialogue with other business ethics voices, centered on the construction of new and evolved forms of business as a human enterprise.”

- In “The Effect of Live Theatre on Business Ethics,” David et al. (2020) take an empirical approach to assess the impact of live theatre on ethical reasoning. Their findings lead them to recommend theatrical performances as a novel pedagogical tool in ethics education of our business students.
- In a kindred article, “Paired Courses: Using Liberal Arts to Improve Business Education,” Litton and Wacker (2020) discuss the pedagogical merits of pairing a business course with a liberal arts course that students are taking concurrently. The paired courses strengthen the students’ “analytical thinking, understanding of multiple framing, and reflective exploration of meaning” through various activities that are provided for use by other instructors.
- In “The Importance of the Discussion Method in the Undergraduate Business Classroom,” Jonathan Ying (2020) argues that a particular classroom technique—the discussion method—is critical to the integration of liberal arts, science, and business curricula because the technique cultivates critical thinking, the ability to recognize patterns and make connections, articulation in oral and written texts, and generative learning.
- This special issue concludes with an essay entitled, *The Light on Hartman Green: Natural Scientists, Business Education, and an Ecological Business Paradigm*, by Timothy W. Sipe. Sipe (2020) reflects on the effort “to enhance business education through broad infusion of the perspectives and content of the liberal arts” and notes that the emphasis has been on integrating the social sciences and humanities. Sipe, a natural scientist, recounts a pivotal moment that inspires him to call for more engagement by faculty in the natural sciences and for “transdisciplinary re-visioning required to transform business teaching, learning, and practice into a new paradigm consistent with ecological reality.”

The predominant story informing the relationship of the liberal arts and business may still be one of difference, as the articles included in this special issue often attest. In the process of working together on a grant funded by the Teagle Foundation, we found ourselves developing a new and richer narrative, one based on identity. As our work progressed, we came to see it not simply as an integrative effort applied to two seemingly disparate realms, but more deeply as an aspiration to reimagine a fundamental unity underlying the best of liberal education and the business world.

Revealing this fundamental unity here requires bringing to the fore the underlying ethos that animates these two practices. In such an ethos, we find the ways in which the best impulses of business and liberal education overlap. Each in its own way calls the status quo into question. Each rewards innovation and is necessarily forward looking. Each seeks a deeper understanding of our world, a better grasp of possibilities, the transforming insights that enable progress.

Bringing this underlying, animating ethos to the fore in the context of curricular reform is certainly challenging. Yet difficult though it may be, this challenge is also inevitable. For however much those of us who teach in business fields or liberal arts disciplines might pretend otherwise, we both live in the same complex, multifarious world. Our attempts to build conceptual walls, cabining off one part from another, eventually reveal their cracks.

In taking on this challenge, we wished to address the debilitating impact on the higher education of an unreflective narrative of difference. Sullivan et al. (2016), for instance, highlight the dangers of segregating an unfettered intellectual exploration from its possibilities for instrumental significance. Such a dichotomy, they write, “makes it hard for students to conceive of higher education as both intellectually adventurous and yet serious, shaping a life

that embraces responsible worldly endeavor, but is also open to wonder and exploration. ... The result is a serious problem: a higher education that is weak in a capacity that matters deeply, the ability to prepare citizens who both care about the world beyond themselves and have the wherewithal, through professional skill, to contribute to it" (pp. 31–32).

From “Knowing” and “Doing” to “Being”

The path forward for such a mutual transformation draws on two contemporary movements, currently emerging within business schools and fostering the traditional ideals of liberal arts colleges. The first movement complements the often-prevalent focus on student knowing with an equally vibrant emphasis on student doing. Illustrations of this movement include the rise of experiential learning and service learning courses across the curriculum. Curricular innovations like these take into account the disciplinary content, theories, and models students learn as well as the more broadly focused skills they acquire in such areas as creative thinking ethical reflection, and collaborative work. The second movement explores how embedding student knowing within student doing ultimately transforms students’ being, their basic comportment – evident in their dispositions, values, and aspirations – that they adopt towards their world. Datar et al. (2010) summarize the transformation of business education by these two contemporary movements:

The core of our conclusion is that business schools need to do two things if they are to develop effective leaders and entrepreneurs ... : reassess the facts, frameworks, and theories that they teach (the “knowing” component), while at the same time rebalancing their curricula so that more attention is paid to developing the skills, capabilities, and techniques that lie at the heart of the practice of management (the “doing” component) and the values, attitudes, and beliefs that form managers’ worldviews and professional identities (the “being” component). (p. 7)

By attending more fully to their students’ ways of being in the world, business schools are opening up a richer set of linkages with liberal education. The shift in emphasis from “knowing” to “doing” as the entry point for students pursuing their education is important to note. Knowing follows closely here, but in a different way. When we begin with doing, knowledge is not pursued discretely within disciplinary silos, but in a more integrated, ever widening, and incremental manner, subject to continual reevaluation as students test successive hypotheses in addressing the challenge at hand.

We should attend closely to the distinctive character of the “doing” at the core of the underlying, animating ethos of both business and liberal education. Both the dynamic pragmatism of business and the creative spirit of liberal learning represent a kind of doing – a set of skills and capabilities – that is not confined to the present state of knowledge, that is, to the models or frameworks that have previously come to the fore.

At its best, the dynamic pragmatism of business takes a Deweyian approach, what Statler and Salovaara (2016) have called “humble inquiry” (p. 212), involving an intentional bracketing of a priori models or frameworks as potential hindrances to illuminating and responding effectively to new business situations. While the dynamic pragmatism of business brackets pre-given models or frameworks at the starting point of inquiry, the creative spirit of liberal learning probes and reimagines such models or frameworks, exposing their lacuna and limits. In short, students enter the study of business with open minds, but not empty heads. As

illustration, students may go into Appalachia and work on consulting projects for non-profits or the mayor of Rainelle in West Virginia. While they may get experience with managing the client relationship, project management, logistics, and budgeting, they also have the opportunity to learn about labor history, the history of income inequality and class conflict, or the history of extractive industries and their impact on regions. As a result of this doing, students have the opportunity to reflect on their being as humans located in sociocultural and temporal space. Ruth W. Grant (2010) notes how “a humanistic education emphasizes individual judgment, the power of reason, and the questioning of ‘received wisdom’...” (p. 290). Thus, similar to the pragmatism of business, liberal learning is not beholden to received knowledge or prior authority, but rather opens up new possibilities.

Thus, integral to both the doings of business and liberal education is an intentionally sustained creative openness. The deeper significance of embedding knowing in this dynamic of doing is the implication for students’ “being,” how it changes the nature of their fundamental comportment toward their external environment.

As Aristotle noted long ago, actions develop habits that evolve into character. And the character that evolves in students participating in such openly creative educational practices will be a basic problem-posing, transformational comportment towards their world. The transformational nature of this evolving comportment stems from a renewed and expanded sense of self-agency that students acquire through successful engagement with the challenges they encounter. We can imagine a set of habits that align with Aristotle’s categories of episteme (knowing) and techne (doing) and comprise phronesis/practical wisdom (being). For knowing, students might develop hyper-observance, curiosity, embracing ambiguity, and empathy for other. For doing, they might build their creative confidence, resilience, and ability to respond positively to failure. While management education and liberal learning tacitly entail these habits, we educators could do more to make them explicit (as we have made clear the importance of knowing mythology or doing capital asset pricing modeling).

Such a renewed and expanded sense of self-agency can ground liberal education’s pursuit of what’s worthwhile with business education’s deeper probing of what’s true; what Greenhalgh et al. (2021, forthcoming) call “the push and pull between the humanistic and scientific cultures of the academy; between enlightenment and vocation; ...between seers and those who see, insight and sight.” Now, the questions of what’s worthwhile and what’s true are infused with the more fundamental question of what difference the answers to such questions might make in the lives of those asking them. Such questions now engage what the authors of *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education* have called the reflective exploration of meaning. This entails an ongoing attunement to “what difference does a particular understanding or approach to things make to who I am, how I engage the world, and what it is reasonable for me to imagine and hope” (Colby et al. 2011, p. 60).

It is in this commitment to such a renewed and expanded sense of self-agency – to a new way of being for their students – that business and liberal education can find their common ground. The key then is to focus anew upon their distinctive ways of doing. For while historically business and liberal education have pursued different domains of knowledge, they are both fundamentally capable of embedding their pursuit of knowledge within their signature modes of doing and thus fostering the development of a distinctive kind of person – individuals who are ready to transform their world.

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