



REINVENTING SOUTH AFRICAN MANAGEMENT STUDENTS AS STEWARDS OF DEMOCRATIZATION: A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

This paper challenges orthodox higher management education provided in South Africa. The reflections explored here are of a democratic and ethical nature: Democratic as it promotes a more inclusive concept of management education; and ethical because the new principles informing management action should explicitly address the welfare of the disenfranchised. Drawing from Freire's critical pedagogy, this paper proposes a reorientation of managers as an integral part of citizenship and by implication custodians of our democracy. Five recommendations for future management education are offered: (1) involvement in academic activism, (2) re-presenting ethics as an integral core, (3) promoting 'flexible' ideological perspectives (4) engaging in contextually relevant research, and (5) participating in community projects.

Keywords: Management education, Critical pedagogy, Management ethics, Academic activism, Community projects.

Received: 28 June 2013/ **Revised:** 18 September 2013/ **Accepted:** 20 September 2013/ **Published:** 23 September 2013

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite being one of the most unequal societies in the world, many local management scholars and political leaders in South Africa display an uncritical, conforming attitude towards the Western economic system as a standard to follow (Habib and Padayachee, 2000);(Narisah, 2002);(Stiglitz, 2002). And even as we bear witness to a major economic downturn in the West and consequently increased joblessness and the destruction of its communities, we remain in awe of their technological prowess and material affluence. Why are our political leaders and academics impressed by – and committed to – developing an economy of mass production and high technology? Why is the solution to our democratization couched in market fundamentalism a foregone conclusion? To safeguard our democratization journey we need to challenge

conventional wisdom and create a new conceptualization of management education. The intention here is to mobilize intellectuals, academics, students, open minded managers and corporations to deliver hope in gloomy times. Unless we tackle the crucial problems posed by conventional management education, any hope remaining in South Africa's democratization journey, will simply vanish soon.

Approximately 30% of the 760 000 student enrolments at South African universities are in the fields of business, commerce and management (CHE., 2009). Black students are the majority making up 62% of all enrolments while females make up 56%. Meanwhile there are indications of a steady increase in the number of black student and female Masters in Business Administration (MBA) enrolments (CHE., 2009). Although these institutions now attract a higher proportion of previously disadvantaged students given the demise of apartheid, contrary perspectives have not received much attention in the domains of higher management education.

The basic premise of this paper is that current management education is not neutral; students are being prepared for a so-called 'value-free' profession, by continuing the tradition of oppression. Drawing from Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970;1994;1999), this paper asserts that management education should encourage "a concern with .. prodding human society to go on questioning itself and preventing that questioning from ever stalling or being declared finished." (Freire, 1994). Freire (1999) critical pedagogy forges both an expanded notion of management education and action through a culture of transparency, debate and engagement (Giroux, 2004). This paper calls for renewing our interest in Freire's work at a time when management education has become a place of conformity and disempowerment. We need to urgently confront the currently distorted view of management education. If we do not revitalize management education, then like the previous generation, the minds of today's students will continue to be 'colonized', supporting another – perhaps much more pernicious – form of apartheid.

2. TOWARDS A CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF MANAGEMENT EDUCATION

Management education has to glean from a pedagogical approach that connects learning to social change – and educators need to provoke and challenge their students to critically engage with social, economic and political problems that hinder our democracy – so that students can act on it. Unlike conventional pedagogies, this process should not involve subtle coercion or indoctrination; it will emerge as students engage in a *culture of questioning* that demands far more competency than that prevalent in conventional rote learning which dominates most of management education (Mintzberg *et al.*, 2002);(Mintzberg, 2004). Management education should enable students to explore for themselves the possibilities of *what it means to be engaged citizens*, while expanding and deepening their participation in shaping our democracy. However too many of our students are unable to grasp that their consciousness are largely determined by the historical, socio-economic and political context, and by their cultural conditioning.

Classrooms should therefore be an inclusive and meaningful experience for students. We are obliged to provide our culturally rich *classrooms with an equal voice*. Critical pedagogy wants us to move away from the autocratic textbook culture to connect with the student's life. It gives primacy to student's experiences, to their voices, to their active participation in understanding the plight of their fellow citizens in furthering our democratization (Giroux, 2004). It is a form of education where participatory dialogue is a key methodology, and learning starts from and responds to the learner's lived experiences – and it leads to action (Freire, 1970;1994;1999). It is an approach that will broaden a student's sense of community, responsibility and social commitment. Critical pedagogy also recognizes the need for societal and economic transformation. It understands that *equity is in conflict* with the current political, economic, and cultural status quo – that fuels the growth locally of a small elitist oligarchy and globally of transnational capitalism. It encourages creative and emancipatory action based on reflection and dialogue with a collective of oppositional voices. It also captures the *absent voices* of those most impacted by the situation a particular management action is addressing. Critical pedagogy is uncompromising in its refusal to accept the suffering of fellow citizens. It is willing to *explicitly take sides* with those groups in our society who are currently disenfranchised from social and economic possibilities. If management education fails to acknowledge these voices, it will continue to perpetuate a 'monoculture of the mind' serving the interests of a few (Shiva, 1991).

3. FIVE APPROACHES TO TRANSCENDING CURRENT MANAGEMENT EDUCATION MYTHS

Management educators should empower the next generation to expand the possibilities of what it means to be an effective change agent – by expanding and deepening their participation towards a more substantive democracy (Giroux, 1988). This requires exploring alternative perspectives of how students should assume the stewardship of the country's human and natural resources. The remainder of this section draws from critical pedagogy and offers potential avenues for grounding democratization issues in the classroom.

3.1. Academic Activism

One of the fundamental tasks of educators in South Africa remains working towards constructing a more socially just nation (Derrida, 2000). Many of us will need to interrogate whose interests' we are serving by the way we have been serving up management education to our students. We also need to interrogate how it might be possible to understand and engage the diverse contexts in which management education has an influence – including those communities in our society that have been excluded in the past. Furthermore, we should view the role of *management education as a public good* (Shiva, 1991;2002). We also need to be directly involved in activism by re-positioning our scholarly publications so that they are *accessible to popular outlets*, or by *publicly addressing contentious subjects*. For instance, we need more case studies that critically

analyze morally dubious arrangements between the state and corporations. Lastly, we should invite our students to critically interrogate the transformative capacity of management practices in shaping our democracy.

3.2. Flexible Perspectives

Scholars should be mindful when advocating profit-making as the essence of democracy. Convincing students that the 'good life' is one's ability to accumulate material wealth is too simplistic. We should not be unreasonable when rebuking sentiments that promote government intervention and notions of a welfare state – especially when they are defined in a just and balanced way. We should also not rigidly contest the need for adequate representation of labor via the trade union movements. After all, despite the recent economic meltdown and corporate scandals such as Enron, Parmalat, and locally Saambou – interrogating the reasons behind corporate and recent *market failures are often ignored or glossed over* in our classrooms (Gioia, 2002);(Mintzberg *et al.*, 2002). Students must be exposed evenly to the interplay between the tensions of the dogmatic free market ideologies on the one hand with radical socially democratic ideals on the other. What is certain is that handing over power to either the managerial elites or state bureaucrats is not the solution to our problem (Stiglitz, 2002). Therefore we need to expand our conceptualization of management education with notions of human rights, economic justice, and civil liberties and participation (Dewey, 1903).

3.3. Ethics as the Cornerstone

While the need for better business ethics education seems obvious, standalone ethics courses are giving students a false impression of what ethics is all about (Crane, 2004). Given *the stop-gap treatment of ethics* in our curriculum, students are unable to draw a link between the seemingly neutral topics in management and their inherent ethical problems. One of the culturally chauvinistic response one encounters for treating ethics rather cosmetically, is the belief that *ethics cannot be taught*. Yet the same naysayers will profess that students are able to grasp leadership, conflict management, negotiations – and other arguably more complex behaviorally-based management skills. Unless we act more decisively by *packaging ethics more holistically* within the curriculum, students will believe that practicing managers have little or no legal and ethical responsibilities to society (Mintzberg, 2004); (Prinsloo and Beukes, 2005).

3.4. Contextually Relevant Research

Despite the need for us to apply our minds to contribute towards our democratization process, local management educators prefer to conduct 'politically arid and morally vacuous' research (Giroux, 2005;1988). Mainstream research is led by fads from the West and is still largely positivist and reductionist in orientation – dealing with simple linear causation with firm performance as the key dependent variable. The challenges of addressing issues pertinent to

global and local management challenges as it relates to furthering our democracy – which relies on explaining, understanding and transforming our unequal social context – are largely ignored. We need to shift from research that focuses on narrow corporate needs towards those that will meet the demands of research for the public good of the country. Management research should pay more attention to addressing *sticky problems* such as how we should repackage the post-apartheid economy, and address unemployment and poverty.

3.5. Community Engagement

Although community engagement is one of the core responsibilities of higher education, and despite clear policy mandates that community engagement is an important task, many higher education institutions continue to abandon this pillar (CHE., 2010). Service to the community is the ultimate responsibility of the future stewards of the country's people and resources. Yet many academics who are meant to guide these students, procrastinate, because of vacuous excuses such as the concept of community engagement 'lacks conceptual clarity', and that some institutions still require a 'better theorized understanding of the terms community engagement' (CHE., 2010). Management education must strive to use community projects as an *engaging method of learning*. Community projects can be an effective approach for holding management students responsible – for reflecting together – on their experiences, so that they broaden their personal view of their role in our democratization journey.

5. CONCLUSION

Management education in South Africa requires a painful re-examination. We need to craft an approach that is more sensitive to our historical legacy, and social and economic challenges – and in the process enhance our prospects for consolidating our democracy. This approach should involve students directly in the challenges facing our country. It should expose students to the knowledge, skills, and ethical vocabulary necessary for modes of critical dialogue, and civic participation – when performing their duties as stewards of the country's human and natural resources. Since our problems and consequently our solutions are unique, we should be developing educational conditions for our management students, to come to terms with how to take responsibility for their own ideas, take intellectual risks, develop a sense of respect for different perspectives, and learn how to think critically in order to shape the conditions for democratization (Giroux, 2004). Our journey still requires enormous work and an equal abundance of optimism. John Dewey was correct in arguing that 'struggling for democracy is an educational task' (Dewey, 1903). We should start with the appropriate education of the future stewards of South Africa's resources – its management students.

Funding: This study received no specific financial support.

Competing Interests: The author declares that there are no conflicts of interests regarding the publication of this paper.

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