Post-Experiential Education: from Knowledge to ‘Knowing’

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Abstract: Business schools are not - as they can not be - ‘knowing-oriented’. To investigate this controversial issue we were drawing on experience in training, coaching and consulting with corporate learning leaders of Fortune 500 companies. Our aim is to suggest an approach about how to transform corporate education on the main pillars of our bridge between the ‘know how’ (the world of university), and the ‘know when’ (the world of corporation). The paper serves as an exploration from knowledge to ‘knowing’ investigating 1) alternative educational structures in the corporate context, 2) ‘knowing-based’ competence development and decision making processes and 3) different ways of knowledge increase.

Keywords: post-experiential education; corporate university; knowledge increase

1 The Gap in Knowledge Increase

Post-experiential education which stems from the universities’ post-graduate courses is primarily ‘knowledge-oriented’ while our agile reality asks for not merely knowledge-workers but for individuals who are in the state of ‘knowing’:
knowing how to interpret their knowledge. Universities can make their students familiar with basic concepts but they can not deliver the knowledge which shall be implemented in on-the-job contexts. Post-experiential education is not - as it can not be - ‘knowing-oriented’, thus there is a gap between the ‘know how’ (concepts brought from the university) and ‘know when (on-the-job context in a corporation). The problem is that we do not know how to bridge the gap between the ‘know how’ and the ‘know when’, therefore there is a need to explore the building blocks of this transformation concerning

1) alternative educational structures in the corporate context,

2) ‘knowing’-based competence development and decision making processes,

and in particular,

3) different ways of knowledge increase.

This paper aims to draw attention on the necessity for the redesign of corporate education programs, as the real-world needs of companies in the global marketplace and the shortfalls of today’s MBA programs call for an extreme makeover.

We came to realise that high-profile business professionals are reluctant to come back to the business schools. They don’t want to hear the same models for the third time from the same lecturers and they are certainly not interested in artificial case studies. They try to avoid attending corporate trainings also. This is the case even though they are eager to learn and they understand the importance of knowledge increase. Management, as Mintzberg writes, is “a practice that blends a great deal of craft (experience) with a certain amount of art (insight) and some science (analysis)” [1]. Traditional MBA programs tend to overemphasize the science part, thus the new breed of business professionals leave upon their graduation with the knowledge of how to apply formulas to situations, thinking that management is all about that. Business schools are letting young talents go as trained professional managers with a rare grasp of management science. Management, says Mintzberg, “is not a science, nor is it a profession. It is something one only learns by doing, and no one in a business school does any doing” [1]. Furthermore, these newcomer bright young managers are not just inexperienced but antsy. From the moment they graduate and they are officially available ‘on the market’, they start looking for a better job. Research findings [2] based on face-to-face interviews and two large international databases created from online surveys of more than 1,200 employees show that “today’s most-sought-after early-career professionals - 30 years old, on average, and with strong academic records, degrees from elite institutions, and international internship experience - are constantly networking and thinking about the next step, even if they seem fully engaged. And employee-development programs aren’t making them happy enough to stay” [2].
In the course of this survey young managers shared how their employers helped them develop professionally and what they would have expected from their employers. They indicated on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the highest) the importance of certain items and to what extent these are provided by the employer. The results indicated some considerable gaps. The biggest expectation gaps in fact were found in the areas of training (1.31), coaching (1.64) and mentoring (1.66) [2] which also accords with our statement about the necessity to overcome the gap in knowledge increase.

2 Taking a DIY Approach to Graduate Education – Corporate Universities

Corporate institutions with own internal educational branches, universities or academies have been in existence for more than thirty years and since then there had been developed various approaches to identify what a corporate university is. According to Jeanne Meister, “a corporate university is the centralized strategic umbrella for the education and development of employees and value chain members such as customers, suppliers, and dealers. Most importantly, a corporate university is the chief vehicle for disseminating an organization’s culture and fostering the development of not only job skills, but also such core workplace skills as learning-to-learn, leadership, creative thinking, and problem solving” [3]. We found that there is no standard definition for a corporate university, because most cited thinkers as Jeanne Meister, Annick-Renaud Coulon and Mark Allen [4] have defined this phenomenon in different ways, and because each corporate university is as unique as the organization it serves, so the only and ideal corporate university model does not exist.

Talking about corporate universities, the expression of ‘university’ was more wide-spread in the United States than in Europe, but whether it is called a university, an academy, or a centre for excellence; the distinguishing features are the same. “A corporate university is a strategic developer of human capital that is aligned with the business goals of the company, an organ for transmitting corporate culture, and a catalyst for knowledge creation and transmission. Like the academic model upon which it is based, the corporate university creates a mechanism for the exchange of existing knowledge and the creation of new ideas, while fostering a sense of community and shared purpose” [4]. Guthrie’s article describes the case of the two most established corporate universities: McDonalds’ Hamburger University and GE’s Crotonville [5]. These famous examples as CUs could have been differentiated indeed by the fact that besides education they were focusing on corporate culture and identity.

In the course of creating the programs of more summits specifically designed for corporate universities and corporate learning, we have gathered a vast amount of
data and insights from Europe- and US-based industry practitioners. Based on our own research and on the trends published in some industry leading magazines (Chief Learning Officer Magazine, Human Relations, Strategic Management Journal, Organization Science) we were close to the problem definition. Post-experiential business education, which is at the heart of a corporate university, can make two fundamental mistakes: the first is to attempting to be a school; the second is not attempting to be a school. Thus the term of corporate university has always been a double-edged sword. The ‘university’ approach is a key driver in moving companies beyond a siloed structure of traditional trainings to a central model of education within the organization which is moving increasingly to informal learning. This also changes the requirements towards learning leaders: traditional *trainers* have to become more and more *coaches*, *mentors* and *the new experts of informal learning*. Along with these shifts, many corporate universities were and are struggling to bring a real job-specific, company-specific business perspective to organizational learning.

The university introduces concepts and the web of relations between them and creates an ambience for curiosity, while the corporation puts the new concepts into their context and validates them in these contexts. The problem is that we do not know how to get from ‘know how’ to ‘know when’ so we suggest to build a bridge between the two, the world of university and the world of corporation. Building this bridge was and is continuously in demand. It had been articulated also by more than 100 senior-level corporate learning practitioners from the industry who were part of the audience at the Corporate Universities and Ac@demies Summit (2012 in Paris; 2013 in Brussels), which is by now the annual event with the highest attendance of CU-relevant stakeholders in Europe. Its diverse community includes by now Vice Presidents of HR, HR Directors and Managers, Heads of Corporate Universities or Academies, Directors of Learning and Development, Directors of Corporate Education, Directors of HR Planning, Directors of Talent Development, E-Learning Managers, Business Development Managers, Chief Innovation Officers, Deans and Professors. In terms of industry variety, the attendees represent multinational companies from various industries. In 2012, we put the Corporate Universities and Ac@demies Summit’s main focus on *Dynamic Knowledge Increase in Changing Times* and 21 sessions were addressing the concepts, contexts and practices in different organizational settings. When we decided about putting *change* in the centre of our knowledge increase theme, we accepted the paradox: “a conceptual framework for making sense of change (namely, the stage model of change) cannot deal with change per se, except by conceiving of it as a series of immobilities; it makes sense of change by denying change” [6].

In the case study of the European Foundation of Management Development (EFMD), we were taken on a journey about how we are moving from an industrial society into a knowledge society where Knowledge Work and Knowledge Workers are playing a key role. According to the findings of EFMD’s study [7],
there was a need to put the Knowledge Worker’s highly specialized knowledge, non-routine, ability of working across boundaries and high level of autonomy in the centre of innovation processes of our knowledge-based era. The knowledge increase focus had been reinforced also by EFMD’s insights on learning to apply existing knowledge and to create new knowledge with the combination and recombination of knowledge.

A different case study from the corporate context, delivered by the former Vice President of Motorola University was giving a glimpse of how change influenced the evolution of their corporate university which is globally recognized as a pioneer and leader in corporate education. A brief history of the US-based telecommunication giant is outlining here the most important phases of the change which are essential to understand the key drivers of running the Motorola University as a business. In 1979, Motorola created the Motorola Training and Education Centre (MTEC) to satisfy training needs and help the company build develop an internal training system which had been followed by setting up corporate-wide training plans and training investment policies. (...) In 1989, Motorola decided to elevate MTEC to university status and after rapid expansion (in Japan, Korea, China and Latin America), Motorola University (MU) set up the College of Learning Technologies (CLT) and established operations in Central and Eastern Europe which had been followed by decentralized operations and transforming the organization based on functional responsibilities. In 2002, MU changed its business model providing training and consulting services to Motorola’s suppliers and partners, and in 2005, it created five institutes dealing with the five major fields of the management process. Finally, with the proliferation of Six Sigma, which was originally developed at Motorola, MU began offering public courses on this topic. As of 2011, MU no longer provides courses to the public and at present, Motorola Solutions Learning is the owner of external training strategies and offerings at Motorola Solutions [8]. This study was set out with the aim to prove that corporate universities were being conscripted directly as training grounds for the corporate workforce and how a corporate university could serve not only corporate-profit agendas begging constantly for getting financed internally, but could have become franchises in their own right, reconfigured to corporate management and consumer models while delivering a name-brand product.

In order to keep up also with the fast-paced social dynamics of corporate education, more than 20 sessions of a next Corporate Universities and Ac@demies Summit were designed around the central topic of ‘Social Learning Ecosystems’ in 2013. Turkish Airlines shared a case study [9] of the 30 years old Turkish Aviation Academy and the integration of the Harvard ManageMentor, a demand-driven, comprehensive and engaging program, which was considered to be distance learning’s missing ingredient. Turkish Aviation Academy used Harvard ManageMentor to complement its existing programs and provide just-in-time
learning opportunities in 44 critical areas while heavily integrating social learning features.

As another example of social learning ecosystems in a broader sense, Volvo presented the start-up of the Volvo Car Academy in China, addressing primarily how the transfer of competencies gets organized. In this process, Volvo’s key priorities were to develop leaders for a global market (through their Aspired Leadership Program), to understand the competence needs of tomorrow and act on these today (at the Volvo Car Academy), as well as to build an efficient and engaging organization based on collaboration (with tools i.e. Designedaroundyou@work, Knowledge Sharing Platforms) [10].

Before we would get more into the details of the presented cases and lead practices which might have worked in organizations of various industries (telecommunication, aviation, automotive) and remote regions (US, Europe-Asia, China), we would like to introduce the essential concepts for understanding ‘competence’ and its ‘knowing’- based applications.

3 Competence: Knowing How to Interpret

When we say that someone is competent, we mean a person who can handle issues in a knowledgeable way, who can accomplish something and deliver a certain level of performance. However, being competent is distinct from simply being knowledgeable - competence is about knowledge put into action. Nobody can be simply competent about what they are knowledgeable about, regardless of everything else. Two different people with the same actionable knowledge will not deliver the same performance and even the same person may be sometimes competent and on other times not. Particularly if this competent person is moved to a different environment, they may well underperform. The reason is that “competence is not the same as knowledge and it is not even an entity but a dynamic relationship of three entities: the knower, the knowledge and the context. This also means that learning cannot lead to competence; it requires learning as well as applying what was learned in a real life context, then reflecting on this experience, going back and learning more, applying the increased knowledge and so forth, iteratively moving between learning and experiencing” [11]. This explains as well why efforts to develop a competence dictionary that identifies and describes generic competencies used in a wide range of jobs [12] failed, as competencies in real-life are rather context-specific.

According to Polányi’s original idea published in the frequently cited book ‘Personal Knowledge’ [13], competence implies the ability of know-how within a certain domain and the ability not only to submit to the rules but also by reflection influence the rules of the domain or the tradition. Competence is thus not a property but a relation between individual actors and a social system of rules.
Leading it back to the original problem definition, there is a serious limitation arising from this: no school can produce competent graduates in this sense of competence.

As a possible alternative, competence-based transformation can be applied in the corporate context, starting with smartly prepared business decisions in order to reach the ultimate goal: taking the short-cut to performance-based knowledge increase outcomes in our more and more agile reality. According to Charan in the November 2013 issue of Harvard Business Review, the decision making process will not become smarter because more and more data being analysed, it takes more than analytics and the good CEOs know that [14]. Smartly prepared business decisions are born on the basis of ‘knowing’. Cunliffe and Coupland, for example, argue that we create sense “if we can find justifications (narrative rationality) for our and others’ actions. Leaders ‘shape systems of meaning’ to justify ‘privileges and rewards’ and then show how this shaping looks like” [15]. Decision-makers of today are no longer facing with lack of data. They have to determine the structural complexity of the problem and they are often struggling with ‘soft’ data. The use of knowledge based systems [16] helps to combine hard and soft data. It helps decision-makers who want to make smarter decisions, shape systems of meaning and make the inference process more transparent. “If you use the right tool, the odds of making a good decision go way up.” [17] Drawing on our shared experience about this competence-based transformation in the decision making process, we argue that it is high time to raise the odds and take this approach in post-experiential corporate education as we cannot expect any time soon the generations who are being taught at MBA programs just now.

4 Different Ways of Knowledge Increase

Before we can assess whether we are on the right way of knowledge increase, it is important to define more clearly who can be the decision maker in this regard. A possible answer is that this person has to have transdisciplinary knowledge, stemming from transdisciplinarity by which “people work jointly using a shared conceptual framework that draws together discipline-specific theories, concepts, and approaches, to address a common problem” [18]. Drawing on this framing, our current paper seeks primarily to address the knowledge increase process what we would like to elaborate in more detail. Based on years of teaching (which represents in this sense the business schools), coaching (which represents the corporation) and the international corporate learning thought-leader feedbacks (which represents the current lead practices) we suggest that transformation on the bridge between ‘know how’ (world of university) and ‘know when’ (world of corporation) can be interpreted with the various methods of knowledge increase, the ways on the individual’s learning path.
This section describes three theoretical perspectives about the methods, in that sense the different ways of knowledge increase which are at the same time the different realizations of the transformation on the bridge.

4.1 Training

Basketball players practice passing the ball until they don’t have to think about it during the match when there is no time for that. If players should think about how to throw the ball during the match, they could not focus on the opponent and its 'there and then' play. It is not worth practicing the opponent’s play as the dangerous opponent will play as it should be played ‘there and then’. We can give the chance for paying attention, assuming that we don’t have to think about passing and receiving the ball. The only thing worth practicing is the contextualization of concepts. This is a heuristic process. Being familiar with and using concepts is like throwing the ball where your teammate will be – with your eyes closed.

Those endeavours make no sense which aim to imitate the Saturday’s match against the opponent. The opponent, whose players can be imitated by your ‘bench’ is not opponent at all. If one of your players from the bench could play what the opponent's starting five will play, you should not prepare for that game. If anyone could imitate the decision making mindset of the opponent, you should not prepare for a conversation with that opponent. There is one more important thing: you should not care, either, what kind of concepts the opponent’s decision-maker is using.
The trainings are not supposed to invent the situations. They rather have to help participants ‘there and then’ to create a situation in which participants are able to contextualize concepts and even the non-existing ideas. Trainings are designed to facilitate learning by those being trained. Methodologies can be instructor-led or self-directed and include classroom instruction, simulations, role-plays, computer or web-based instruction, small and large group exercises.

4.2 Coaching

Business professionals are already short of time and busy with running their daily operative work, thus they would not be able to read all the new concepts in their field and they do not have the time to figure out which ones are relevant for them ‘here and now’ or ‘there and then’. They want the coach to do this filtering for them and bring them the relevant fresh concepts of the gurus. Business professionals sometimes need to discuss their dilemmas with someone who cannot be their colleagues as they do not want to expose their doubts. It also cannot be the competitor as they do not want to expose their ideas. What business professionals want from the coaches are to help them

1) update their knowledge with relevant new concepts,
2) apply their knowledge in a new context,
3) (re-)arrange their few thousand known rules and
4) make their knowledge transparent for themselves and for their executives.

We argue that business professionals want to have dialogs with someone who understands the broad context and can help them to apply their knowledge in different contexts.

4.3 Mentoring (P2P)

Coaching and mentoring are different terms, although used quite interchangeably. A coach is typically non directional and does not provide advice. The coach enables individuals to apply their knowledge in a new context and via the use of encouraging and questioning techniques helps elicit the answers which are within the coached person. In contrast, a mentor is “an expert who provides guidance and advice within a more developmental relationship. Mentoring requires flexibility of the mentor and their ability to use a wide range of techniques to guide the mentee. Peer mentoring takes place when the mentor is not in a position of authority over the mentee” [19]. For example, in a corporate university or academy all learners play the role of a mentor. The mentors are guiding their peers based on life experience and their professional expertise within the business area. While mentors and mentees may not be professionals, their experience allows for the direct knowledge transfer and contributes to one’s knowledge increase,
considerably reducing the learning curve. Educational Psychology Professor Alison King explains that “peer learning exercises as simple as having students explain concepts to one another are proof of social constructivism theory at work; the act of teaching another individual demands that students clarify, elaborate on, and otherwise reconceptualise material” [20].

According to Siemens [21] we start to understand how technology can reshape the co-construction of knowledge. The advancement and spread of technology led to a new theory called connectivism. Behaviorism says learning is about changing our responses to stimuli; cognitivism defines learning as a process of managing and recalling memories; constructivism says that learners create knowledge and meaning in order to understand their experience of the world. All of these theories describe “learning as a process that is contained inside the individual, but the new theory of connectivism proposes that the knowledge we can access by virtue of our connections with others is just as valuable as the information carried inside our minds” [21]. Most importantly, and most specific to our digital and social reality is the idea that ‘know-how’ is becoming supplemented with ‘know-where-to-look’ and contemporary theories of feedback-based adaptive processes i.e. experiential learning, learning from others and variation/selection [22] that emphasize the relevancy the new ‘know-how-to-interpret’ as a more essential part of learning.

5 Discussion

The main contribution of the current study is to join the discussion whether the gap in knowledge increase can be addressed with a competence-based DIY approach to corporate education. The results of the investigations while teaching, coaching and consulting with more than 200 international corporate learning leaders are starting to lead us to a grounded path of transformation while moving from ‘knowledge’ to ‘knowing’ and bridging the gap between the ‘know how’ (concepts brought from the university) and ‘know when’ (on-the-job context in a corporation).

According to McAteer and Pino’s statement about the evolution of corporate universities [4] more generations can be differentiated. First generation corporate universities with the traditional university model, lecture-like delivery methodology and classroom instruction were followed by second generation corporate universities. These applied more diverse, innovative learning methods, more learner-generated knowledge as opposed to centrally managed knowledge, while starting to build on informal learning and moving towards cross-functional collaboration. Within this perspective we would like to propose a third generation of corporate universities and ‘strategic partner’ schools which have to be built on competence based-transformation and the curriculum of which can be organized
around five cornerstone concepts: “the process for designing postgraduate curriculum for business as quasi-algorithmic (1); the steps as quasi-heuristic (2); the conception of education as quasi-incremental (3); the vision of the ‘big picture’ of the curriculum as quasi-abductive (4); and the abductive ‘big picture’ is quasi-validated (5)” [23]. These concepts have somewhat softened boundaries but their meaning in a corporate university or other corporate learning function seems to be a promising way to respond those wanting to make smartly prepared business decisions about educational structures in corporate contexts and ways of knowledge increase on the basis of ‘knowing’.

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