

FUTURE OF B-SCHOOLS: EXTINCTION OR METAMORPHOSIS

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Abstract

Information and communication technology has transformed industries such as retail and newspapers, but business schools have largely continued to function the way they always did. b-schools will, inevitably, experience the impact of e-learning and MOOCs, and student expectations from b-schools will shift towards providing experiences and linkages. Will b-school be able to transform? Will b-schools -as we know them- survive? This paper proposes another possibility metamorphosis by unbundling of b-schools into six related but independent services. An organizational entity may provide any one or all of these six services namely- Content creator, Content curator, Course catalyst, Community cluster, Career connect, Certifying citation. Moot question is: Extinction or Metamorphosis?

Key words: *Future of B-Schools, B-Schools, Extinction or Metamorphosis*

Evolution of society and growth of capability of ICT has led to disruption in industries such as retail and newspaper. Education, including business education, has not seen a similar disruption. Of course, it has been changing. Examining these changes, Thomas (2014) opines “The heyday of booming demand for an MBA degree is behind us. Uncertain demand, and even a falling application in some quarters, is making the MBA programme a less than reliable source of income”. Author looks at the trends and emphasizes the shift from specific to general. “There is still ferment about curricula over-emphasis on business and analytic skills and under-emphasis on skills such as leadership, problem framing, problem solving and integrative thinking...Business programmes are going to focus less on business disciplines and actually be delivered by creating a lot of other support activities: oral and written communication, ethics, leadership and other things that we can add that make people more productive, more diversified, training them not so much in the disciplines but also in how they can make decisions related to certain core areas such as marketing, finance and so on.” ICT has a clear role in supporting the changing need. In the words of Thomas (2014) “Business schools must embrace e-learning and blend technology-enabled learning with more conventional face-to-face models of instruction.” This begs the question- Are we close to the time where b-schools as we know them today will cease to exist? A form of institutions which survived (or thrived?) for about 200 years will disappear? Or at the least change substantially. Will we see lectures in videos, on-line exams, group learning by chatting on laptop, the award of degree by a testing and certifying agency, and job-hunting happening on portals?

Let us look back and see why young people do join b-school? Educators expect a student to develop three competencies: to gain knowledge (fundamentals of book-keeping principles), develop skills (preparing a presentation) and shape attitudes (innovate to meet target using available resources). The triumvirate of competencies: Knowledge, Skills and Attitudes is present in wide variety of situations, including the management education. In actual practice management teachers ask their students to attend lectures, case-studies, group work, simulation games, role plays etc. Of these, lectures are most widely used. Lectures come in several varieties: plain speeches,

chalk-and-talk with heavy reliance on the blackboard (be it black, green or white), powerful power-point presentations, or videos and discussions. Students, on their part, join the b-school looking for a good, well-paying job. They value the time spent and friends made in b-school. The friends may occasionally include an exceptional teacher. It is conceivable to imagine an MBA pass-out saying 'My MBA was great but the classes were totally useless'. This is further strengthened by the belief of the students that they can google everything anyway and inability of professors to distinguish knowledge from information.

Impact of ICT

The technology keeps marching and it impacts everything. Telegrams are only in folklore, the ubiquitous Dak has all but disappeared, newspapers are recasting themselves for an era where most readers know the headlines from TV news bulletins, before they get the newspaper in hand, Indian Railways is well aware that traffic flows not only on iron rails, it is also flow thru wires (or indeed in air) to their computers, and ticket booking website of railways is amongst top dozen website of India. Of course, most book lovers know that they can browse books and buy them without stepping out of the house. But the core of the way we teach our students has remained unchanged for centuries: One teacher on podium, sixty odd students in front, some of them listening intently, most partly tuned, some chatting on sly, some sleepy, some bored, some lost! We wonder how same kids become so lively while sipping tea in the evening.

A technology led revolution in making is availability of on-line course material. Massive Open On-line Course (MOOC) add a totally new dimension in learning efforts. The motto of one such initiative is "Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) are free online courses available for anyone to enrol. MOOCs provide an affordable and flexible way to learn new skills, advance your career and deliver quality educational experiences at scale." (Mooc.org, 2019) With availability of inexpensive connectivity, the lecture which was done at some place sometime, is available any place, any time for the student, at zero or near-zero cost. The MOOCs are Massive, so technically, it has virtually no limit for scalability. A student will not be denied a course- saying "course is full". Imagine an opportunity to be taught by best professor to every student who desires to take the course. Prima facie, MOOC appear to be a very good option. It holds the promise to substitute a live teacher by technology at least for a significant part, leading to cost reduction, as well as, ensuring consistency (same quality performance every time) and availability (time and place chosen by the student). But if we dig a little deeper, we get a more complex picture. We find studies indicating that spread of on-line education will be slow, and digital content will play supplemental, albeit important role and hybrid/ blended courses, and flipped classrooms will gain popularity. (McPherson&Bascow, 2015)It would also lead to more questioning of instructional practices, and closer monitoring of pedagogy used. Faculty may resist large scale use of material developed elsewhere. The moot question remains- Is MOOC a substitute for live teacher, or, is it a substitute, though a more potent one, for the text book, or is it something in-between. Extent of disruption MOOC will cause to the existing class room model of teaching will depend on what MOOC is able to replace- the teacher or the book.

Of Knowledge, Skills & Attitude- MOOCs seek to address knowledge transfer. Skills are always learnt more easily by practice and handholding by a buddy, rather than a teacher. Skills really need a practice arena, not a classroom. Professors have often turned noses on lowly ‘Training’ - distinct from mighty ‘Education’. Even today students tend to look for channels outside of b-school, for skill building (such as certification for agile project management).

Alternative models

For a management educator (indeed for any educator) shaping attitudes of the students is probably most important, and at the same time, most difficult task. Attitudes may be learnt by copying people we hold in high esteem and wish to emulate (for instance punctuality in reaching office). Trying out an idea and consequent reward or punishment is probably the most potent way of forming of attitudes (‘importance of meeting target for the month’). A school may use opportunities in experiential learning (learn-by-doing) to shape the attitude of the students. A lot of attitude formation today is shaped by interactions with senior students and are handed down as the dogmas of management world and, of course, ‘imbibing’ the culture of the institute, by the students, rather than any planned or conscious activity of the institute.

Let us look at the possible shift in imparting Knowledge, and building of Skills & Attitudes. MOOCs will propel us to use more and more of ‘canned’ lectures, and need for teachers will reduce. Instead we may need teaching assistants/ facilitators/ buddies to help students individually and organize/ manage group processes.

There may be alternative models of equipping the learners. Internships, or, on-the-job-training is one such possibility. This has been time honoured method of learning. Probably the only structured way to hone instinct. It is used intraining scions of billionaires entering business and newbies joining a craft such as making of earthen pots. Another interesting possibility is Research based education. (Telfer, Joseph & Oviler, 2018) It has a promise to increase relevance of higher education to work, plus excitement and motivation to the student to discover what they need and be better prepared for future challenges. Research ought to enrich the programme and lead to *higher* education, not merely *more* education. Telfer and Oliver(2018) elaborate on the promise “We must balance what they need as individuals – confidence, resilience, self-belief, entrepreneurial-ism, etc. – with what their employers expect of them: loyalty, commitment, passion, innovation, etc. Striking this balance, while maintaining a commitment to the core values of higher education, is a challenging exercise, but research- based education gives us *tools* that can help”. Given, importance of collaboration in real life, learning to work with disparate groups is valuable to students. They will learn ‘how’ to learn; make mistakes and learn from mistakes. Double loop learning- critical thinking and creation of a metal model by student, rather than adapting the model is important. Research based learning holds the promise to positively impact three key skills- confidence, resilience and innovation. Both students and employers appreciate importance of these traits.

Social context

Getting closer to real life, and soft skill training needs a social context. b-schools have largely followed American model, which may not be entirely appropriate for other

economies. For instance, observing it for Chinese management education Zhu and Aspling (2015) state

“China's management education is in need of transforming from an imitation of the American model to a sustainable development model.

Initiatives taken for new innovative programmes or for establishing totally new business schools could be based on the sustainable management education model and a social market economy approach”

Similarly, thinking about innovations for Indian b-schools, we need to consider fundamentals as well as Indian realities. Examining it, Rao (2016) says “Management education is both an art and craft – the art can be acquired in classroom learning while the craft can be acquired from corporate experience. You cannot become a crackshot unless you lose some ammunition. Hence, the management graduates must work in a challenging corporate environment to evolve as effective managers and leaders. The management education equips them with theoretical framework to face the challenges. It serves as a guideline only. The real managers and leaders come out from the challenging corporate world” This is built on views of Henry Mintzberg “Trying to teach people who have never practiced is worse than a waste of time – it demeans management’

In India, we find that management education emphasizes theory and not practical education. Case studies- closest we can reach to lab in management education- are inadequate for relating theory to practice, especially for students without industry experience. A large number of students in India reach MBA without any experience, and it hampers their ability to learn and benefit from management education. Management education in India is mostly faculty centric and without effective interface with industry. It is no surprise that number of management graduates do not rise to the expectation of industry and do not find jobs. Rao (2016) opines “there is an immediate need for creativity and innovation in management education in India. What worked in the past will not work in the future”

From the perspective of students, the biggest gain of higher education is the job at end of course, which is their pot of gold at the end of rainbow. Employers use b-school as the first filter of talent, and a convenient place to conduct the recruitment process. Most of the time employers are lot more particular about general skills (broad familiarity with world of business, communication, problem solving) then specific knowledge (ability to find discounted cash flow) so they will use the b-schools but are unlikely to demand, or, encourage b-schools in present form. They are likely to be amenable to use alternative channels to find talent. Other gains which students look for- the formal recognition of education (the MBA degree) can easily be a testing and certification process- the way open universities have been doing it for decades. Friendships and living experiences are by-products of current system of imparting education, and obviously cannot be the ground for sustaining the b-school.

So, it is easy to conclude that all elements or components imparting knowledge, certification, match making by the employers can be present, as a stand-alone on-demand service rather than part of package- ‘b-school’. With MOOCs offering material similar to our b-schools, the spiral leading to extinction of b-school, is a possibility.

Conclusion

Do we conclude that countdown for extinction of b-school has begun? Reputed professional bodies have reached similar conclusions. For example, in the context of central and east Europe Kundrotas (2018) notes “We started exploring the null hypothesis: there will be no business schools in the future. Personally, I am satisfied with this idea. However, some people at our table argued that there will be some type of business school. All sorts of information will be available online. The business school of the future will be based on tacit knowledge. This is something that you do not get from the Internet. What I have in mind is leadership and team building skills, as well as experience and wisdom. Somebody suggested that we should add ethics to this list and I agree”.

Is there a case to think about and facilitate transitioning from present ‘integrated’ b-school to ‘unbundled’ services? A single agency may provide all these services and take pride in calling itself b-school, old style. Or, an agency may choose to specialise and offer only one of these services. Let us look at the roles which may emerge if the unbundling really does take place.

Content creator: Content creator is primary source of knowledge. (S)he is ‘big’ world renowned professor or an institution providing platform to world renowned professor. I hesitate to call it employment. In this scenario these Professors may be treated like ace players being wooed by clubs. Content creators may publish the content for learners and offer it free of cost or for subscription; **Content curator:** Content curator tweaks the content, so that it is ready to use by a learner. This may involve organizing content as courses and lessons, or, including a social context- for example fit for business in China. Content curator may have a commercial relation with the content creator; **Course catalyst:** Course catalyst is connecting role for various services and main interface with the learner. b-schools may morph into this role by default. Course catalyst provides or recommends content for Knowledge acquisition, provides or recommends peer group and/or expert trainers for Skill building, and provides or recommends context and activities for honing of Attitude. Similarly, Course catalyst may suggest other services- **Community cluster, Certifying citation and Career connect;** **Community cluster:** Building a network, mingling with the class mates, cross pollination of ideas with co learners, gathering facts and folklores, practising and participating in co-curricular activities for learning or pure fun are some of the gains of joining a good b-school. In my view, in unbundling of services, these will be most difficult opportunities to find. One possibility is emergence of geographies where Course catalysts may prefer to locate, somewhat along the lines of areas in big cities designated by authorities for education, or, a medium size city creating a name for niche activity. Clusters may have multiple Course catalysts, and may emerge as preferred location for other services, as well; **Career connect:** Students join b-schools looking for well-paying jobs. Clearly there is scope of emergence of a service connecting the job seekers and job providers. Many recruitment web-sites have dedicated facilities for fresh pass outs. Service may grow to substitute the placement cells of b-schools. Third party screening services, partly driven by artificial intelligence may also emerge, reducing the recruitment costs. Career connect are likely have strong linkages with match makers such as job portals; **Certifying citation:** Finally, businesses, larger society and above all governments may need an easily verifiable method to check who is an MBA. Services authorized to give

certifying citations may emerge. At least some of them are likely to be government owned/ controlled, and have degree granting rights, recognized by law. Citations may include not only the certificate ('meets are requirements for award of an MBA') but the pedagogy ('by research'), accolades ('best project in'), co-curricular achievements ('ace debater') and community cohort ('interned in best traditions of') as well.

Are we headed to see extinction of b-schools? Metamorphosis of b-schools? Unbundling of services, and emergence of Six C- Square, as described above?

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