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The Triumph of Nonsense in Management Studies: A Commentary

By Kai Peters and Howard Thomas

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Professor Dennis Tourish's recent essay (*AMLE*, March 2020) provides an analysis of why business schools and management education are perceived to be in a state of crisis. This commentary focuses on one important aspect of Tourish's criticism of the management education field; namely, the quality, value, and appropriateness of the field's research in advancing knowledge. His main criticisms are that the failure of management research arises from its extremely strong focus on theory development, its inadequate writing, and the formulaic, template style and formal structure of research papers in leading journals. Indeed, the rules and practices underlying the development of this portfolio of management research seems to have been defined by academia itself.

Quoting, for example, the *Academy of Management Journal* guidelines and Information for Contributors as evidence, he argues that "to a greater extent than can be found in other disciplines, major management journals insist that papers must make a contribution to theory." Yet, such theoretical contributions are often sparse or minor adaptations of existing theory, and the papers themselves are cautious, dull, and unreadable. And they are also lacking in inspiration or imagination.

To bolster his argument, he dissects a number of published papers that offer little of practical relevance, academic insight, or meaning. His characterization of such research in management studies as "nonsense" and "meaningless" was also addressed in a recent review of Tourish's book in the [6]: "It is hard to believe that anyone, bar other academics, reads this stuff. So, what is the point? How many chief executives base their strategies on theories gained from a management journal? Everyone would benefit if managerial research were clearly written, based on real-world examples and realistic about its applicability."

Clearly, the value and impact of academic research in management studies is increasingly being questioned by both academics and management practitioners ([1]). In summary, and again quoting from the [6]: "Too much modern management research is a mass of inconsequential jargon, tailor-made to appear in leading journals. Academics are judged on their ability to get papers published in these periodicals and business schools are ranked on their ability to employ the most prolific of these academics."

SO HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POSITION?

We raise here serious questions about how we reached this position in our field. The answer goes back to the history of business schools and its attempts to clarify its identity and scientific legitimacy as an academic discipline. Numerous authors, notably [10], [16], and [12] have tracked the evolution of business schools from a historical perspective. They point out that in the late 1950s, the Ford and Carnegie Foundations sponsored reports on management education ([7]) focused on strengthening management education. These reports noted that business schools were too much like "trade schools" and lacked intellectual and academic legitimacy.

Maximum legitimacy for education resided in a university, and so management education should be a credible university subject too. Gordon and Howell formulated policies and ideas that advocated a

broad research and discipline-led focus for management education. In addition, they favored hiring candidates with doctorates, championed analytical rigor and problem-solving ability, endorsed the scientific method, and stressed research and knowledge creation. This set of prescriptions, in turn, stimulated a massive growth in scholarly, discipline-based academic research, grounded firmly in economic and social science disciplines and published in new high-quality journals. These were created to reinforce the “science of management” and included journals such as *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Management Science*, and the *Journal of Finance*.

This was, however, an unwelcome turning point for those business educators such as [5] who favored research pathways of a somewhat more pragmatic and relevant style. In fact, to this day, the tensions between rigor (scientific, logical positivism) and relevance (practical, applied research) still exist. [2] in a well-known article, examine how business schools lost their way, and [17] describe management educators as having “physics envy,” and ask why “business schools have embraced the scientific model of physicists and economists rather than the professional model of doctors and lawyers.” Nevertheless, the positivist model of management education has become the dominant design despite persistent and growing criticism about the value, role, and purposes of business schools.

What transformed management education even more profoundly was the advent of rankings of business schools by media outlets such as *Business Week* and the *Financial Times* in the last 2 decades of the 20th century, especially the *Financial Times*’ list of their 50 assessed “best” journals. The rules of the metrics games were thus embedded around Gordon and Howell’s ideas about logical positivism as a business school design.

Sadly, the overarching vision of Gordon and Howell about broad, intellectually robust, and relevant research together with an educational agenda of balanced, academic excellence, and effective interdisciplinary scholarship has been highjacked by faculty publishing in very narrow, discipline defined, peer-reviewed, so-called A-journals in each of the management disciplines. In addition, Gordon and Howell’s underlying objective was to create a unique knowledge base for management education, and while arguably they may have succeeded, without a socially regulated institutional framework for management (as in law, medicine, engineering, etc.) they could not create a profession of management with a more trustworthy, respected management cadre.

So, our current position as management educators is as follows: We have been criticized for our failure to establish business and management as a legitimate academic discipline ([2]); for our role in de-professionalising management and promoting managers as “hired hands” lacking ethical standards ([10]); for the increasing gulf between, on the one hand, business academics and academic rigor, and on the other hand, managers and professional management practice ([13]); and also for our lack of innovation in exploring the management process and improving the teaching of management ([11]).

IS THIS POSITION ENTIRELY BAD? WHAT SHOULD WE DO ABOUT IT?

We believe that the professionalization of business schools and the creation of a grounded, well-designed, and scientifically based curriculum is worthwhile and a very good development. We think, however, that the process has gone too far.

For a faculty, the main objective and the focus of their existence is publication in the top journals. This is prompted by the rankings, and also by a research assessment culture that has grown in many countries (e.g., the Research Excellence Framework in the UK). But the unpalatable truth is that there are too many journals publishing too much research, most of which is barely read and very often has no impact whatsoever.

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In most business schools the promotion of faculty members today is almost entirely based on their research performance in peer-reviewed journals. The journals with the highest reputation are often very quantitative. Thus, even a sensible management question like “Should I outsource or should I invest directly in a foreign country?” which for most managers is a question about relationships, trust, political stability, communication, and feel, becomes a question that has been tackled academically with econometric models most people do not understand.

We are not making the case that rigor is unimportant. We could launch a similar tirade against simplistic airport books or popular strategy books of the “Good to Great” genre ([4]), which string together a series of anecdotes rather than applying a sound, rigorous research methodology, whether quantitative or qualitative.

SO HOW DO WE CHANGE?

What we would ideally like, as management educators, is a situation in which academics do sound research and managers read that sound research. As we have demonstrated, at the moment, there is an enormous gulf between the two audiences. Managers tend to read popular books and magazines. Academics read journal articles and write, for better or worse, academic articles for themselves.

Alan [9], in an excellent article, carefully points out that the gap between rigor and relevance is essentially about the tension between the academic quality of academic research and its consequential impact and insight about real-world issues. In particular, he quotes Bennis and O’Toole, who argue strongly that an imbalance in business schools has developed between “scientific rigor” and “practical relevance,” with the former very much dominant in the business school world. He quotes these authors again in relation to the operation of research systems in business schools: “The dirty little secret at most of today’s best business schools is that they chiefly serve the faculty’s research interest and career goals, with too little regard for the needs of other stakeholders.... some of what is published in A-journals is excellent, imaginative and valuable. But much is not.”

We agree with Bennis and O’Toole that the challenge is to rebalance the business school in terms of rigor and relevance by recognizing that a business school is a professional school like law or medicine and not a pure academic discipline such as chemistry or physics. Indeed, Irwin points out that Simon, in his 1967 paper on the business school as a problem in organizational design, noted that a professional school must bring the world of practice together with the disciplines so that practical management problems “rub” against theory. As Denise [15] puts it: “A business school should resemble neither a trade school nor a physics department but instead mix scientific knowledge and applied problems in a fashion that students can build on throughout their professional careers.”

Overall, the challenge of relevance and rigor and the debate around qualitative and quantitative research continues. Faculty members remain under tremendous pressure to publish. Although excellent articles appear, others are unintelligible. Conversely, faculty members are under pressure from students and executive education participants to contribute practical guidance for practicing managers. Combining these two pressures in the above order of importance is a challenge. Thus, some faculty concentrate on research. Others opt out of the journals game, concentrate on books and teaching, and suffer the academic consequences.

Unfortunately, the number of business school academics who engage in deep collaboration with managers and management practice is far fewer than those who seek to write theory-based articles for A-journals. Some schools have created dual-career pathways between research faculty and professors of practice to rebalance this situation. Great insights are generated in business schools, but we need faculty who can contextualize their research and translate this into the context of organizations.

We favor a solution in business schools where academic faculty produce rigorous, meaningful research, and managers feel more motivated to read and apply that research. We echo the sentiments of Don [8], who posed the extremely appropriate question in the following terms: “What if the Academy actually mattered?”

To address this challenge a recent paper on the “Essence of Scholarly Impact” ([3]) gives an enlightened summary of responses and parallel suggestions for changes in research activity, obtained from a study of 700 academic members of the Academy of Management. The following key findings emerged:

First, the top-five indicators of research prestige were publications in top journals, citations by other researchers, research as the basis for a scholarly book, the ability to attract competitive research grants, and finally, achieving publications in practitioner-focused outlets.

Second, these researchers also point out the need for a stronger recognition of impact on management practice, the belief that interdisciplinary research can have a much greater impact than narrowly focused disciplinary research efforts, and that such items as rankings and journal lists do not adequately reflect the quality of research, despite being used widely by academic institutions to evaluate faculty contributions.

The survey concludes with some valid recommendations. Business school academics need to:

- Engage more deeply with practitioners to attack meaningful problems faced “on the firing line.”
- Create broader definitions of impact beyond simple counts of A-journals and citations.
- Place much greater weight on publications in practitioner journals.
- Invest in incentives to improve impact through the translation of research for practitioners and responsible research audiences.

In closing, we’d like to point to two signs of hope for research in the Academy. Both are driven by public research funding bodies. The first is “Plan S,” the open source publishing initiative launched in September 2018 and endorsed by 12 European countries’ funding bodies. Plan S requires publicly funded research, potentially including the background data, to be diffused in open access journals. This will at a minimum shake up the publishing game. The second related development, primarily in the United Kingdom so far, is the introduction in 2014 of impact case studies as a part of the Research Excellence Framework. Whereas the publication of an A-journal (4* in the UK) article in the 2014 review provided funding to a business school in the range of \$13,000 annually for the subsequent 7 years, a 4* case study, which, *nota bene*, could arise from any published research, not necessarily a 4* journal article, generated over \$60,000 annually—basically 5 times as much ([14]). While assessing research output for impact is a much greater challenge than assessing journal “quality” or bibliographic citations, the introduction from public body funders is surely writing on the wall for the Academy to think about the public good rather than only about self-selected performance criteria. The UK’s upcoming 2021 REF will surely accelerate this trend. Interestingly, there was not a single 4* impact case study coming from UK business school research in 2014, while there were 198 altogether across the other subject areas. One nevertheless lives in hope.

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