



## **PERSPECTIVES ON**

### **Intellectual challenge in contemporary business education – an oxymoron?**

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### About 'Perspectives On'

The '**Perspectives On**' series has been developed as an online resource to promote dissemination and discussion of contemporary issues in the business school sector.

The rationale is to provide an online resource which academics can access to find an informal overview of and informed discussion pertaining to a topical issue affecting learning and teaching at an international, national, university, faculty, department or module level. Although not 'research' papers, 'Perspectives On' submissions will be independently reviewed by the editorial team; to assist with writing submissions.

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## INTRODUCTION

Recent discussions in the UK on the nature of teaching excellence in higher education have highlighted the importance of intellectual challenge and maintaining academic standards in the curriculum. This may be of particular importance to business education, an arena often charged with a lack of academic rigour and challenge (Grey, 2004; Macfarlane & Ottewill, 2012; O'Byrne and Bond, 2014). In this learning and teaching '*Perspectives On*' paper we collect descriptions of how intellectual challenge is understood and realised in business schools, and in so doing explore the purpose and value of a business education and the implications for pedagogy and curriculum development.

## METHODOLOGY

Our research is based on a review of the literature on theories of intellectualism, intellectual challenge and intellectual development as well as a phenomenographic, empirical study involving in-depth interviews with 18 members of staff, and 19 first and final year undergraduates. Phenomenographic research seeks to understand individuals' experiences of a particular phenomenon via collection of descriptions; to represent different sets of experiences; and to consider the architecture or relationship between them (Akerlind, 2005). Staff and student participants were recruited from one location: a business school in a post-92 higher education institution. The interviews lasted between 30 to 90 minutes and sought to collect detailed descriptions of the phenomenon of intellectual challenge.

Findings were later reflected on in a knowledge exchange workshop with members of staff. Interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed; analysis was undertaken using Nvivo software. A coding framework was developed, initially to categorise descriptions of challenge. Codes here were the descriptions of the meaning of intellectual challenge, the conditions under which it occurs, the effects of intellectual challenge (including disengagement), and the strategies employed to negotiate it. In addition, we sought staff participants' perspectives on the business school as a site of intellectual challenge and what teaching intellectually challenging materials looks like. Further themes were inductively developed and reviewed by two researchers independently who then discussed their findings to support dependability of interpretations. As researchers were also members of staff in the institution in which the research was conducted, particular attention was paid to research ethics, viewed as an on-going concern and negotiation for the duration of the project.

## FINDINGS

### The experience of intellectual challenge

In a brief overview of the findings, the first year undergraduates experienced intellectual challenge in three distinct ways. Firstly, and perhaps unsurprisingly, intellectual challenge was described as tackling difficult activities *"defined by how hard you're finding the task"*, and that rising to such challenges required *"effort, time and concentration"*. Other experiences of intellectual challenge involved grappling with uncertainty and ambiguity in tasks that demanded *"new ways of looking at things"* and where *"there is often not just one way to solve a problem"*. A third set of experiences in this respondent group viewed intellectual challenges as deeply personal, sometimes involving personal transformation: *"a personal struggle"*; *"a problem that I have with something that I am deeply connected to so that it is very shocking"*. Although the first year students viewed intellectual challenge as an uncomfortable process, they considered it a legitimate part of a tertiary education and becoming a university student, *"like exercise - healthy but not enjoyable"*.

By contrast, the experiences of intellectual challenge by final year students were worded in much more pragmatic terms, and seemed instrumentally focused on the challenge of achieving good grades. There were relatively few descriptions of intellectual challenge in terms of personal development. Three distinct constructs emerged in terms of the intellectual challenge of achieving good grades. Firstly, there was the difficulty of tackling new-to-them knowledge areas, wherein they might need to understand a whole new vocabulary *"I didn't know what he was talking about, because I did not have the terminology like the others"*. This added stress of working in this new knowledge arena in a time-pressured environment: *"You've got 10,000 words' worth of work going on in one space of time"*; *"it's gonna take a long, long time to really understand what's going on"*.

The second construct focused on the challenge of finding out what is needed to get a good mark: *"figuring out what is important"*, *"structuring a good piece of work"*. This second construct linked with the third construct and involved the experience of anxiety with relation to independent learning. This was seen as risky: *"building something up on your own"*, *"it's challenging to bring it all together when it's on my own"*. These concerns, however, were not framed in discussions about personal growth and development but in terms of the necessity to follow the demands of assessors: *"I don't know whether I'm doing everything right, you know."*

Within these three constructs intellectual challenge was generally experienced negatively by the final year undergraduates; the consequences of not meeting the challenge were described as too great, particularly in terms of imperilling a 'good degree'. There was, however, one set of experiences that saw the idea of intellectual challenge as being about discovery of both self, others and new ways of

thinking and practicing. *"I think you come to Uni to understand why people are the way that they are and why they think like they do". "I think with intellectual challenge you personally grow more... learning something that will enrich your life"*. Here intellectual challenge was seen positively, and as fuelling personal growth. The relationship between these different final-year student experiences appears to be largely polarised between viewing intellectual challenge as risky and undesirable and seeing it as a springboard for personal growth.

Descriptions of staff experiences of intellectual challenge drew heavily on professional, academic identities. A mental stretch, as it was often described, could be challenging but also exciting and enjoyable: *"excitement", "very conflicting but I like it"*. Intellectual challenge was often experienced as a legitimate part of the academic process, such as writing or disseminating work: *"writing in a way that describes my contribution"*.

Our analysis identified three distinct experiences of intellectual challenge, but they appeared to form a nested hierarchy with one leading on to and forming part of another. First, similar to the first-year students, there is the experience of complexity - *"One element can be complexity of knowledge"* - requiring time and effort to surmount. The second experience is about venturing into unknown, risky spaces: *"having to try different things and many of them seem disappointing", "on the edge of something doable, but not without risk"*. To be successful requires resilience and persistence, and might lead to questioning fundamental assumptions. The third experience, again quite similar to the first year students, is about transformation, where staff experience intellectual challenge as leading to a revision of beliefs, assumptions and approaches: *"a different way of thinking", "the trajectory that I am on is not adequate or even mistaken, that's where the challenge arises"*, and as a route to selfhood, finding their own intellectual position and commitments, often described as a process of self-authorship: *"Thinking about the nature of self, the nature of power, and the nature of the relationship to society"*.

#### The Business School as an Educational Establishment

Although the emphasis in data collection was on gathering descriptions of intellectual challenge, we also invited staff participants to share their perspectives on the teaching of it – the challenge of teaching challengingly - and of the particular features and challenges of the business school as an educational establishment. The nature of business education has long been subject of debate with a polarisation of views swinging from teaching subject knowledge and techniques directly relevant to a student's future career to a more transformational process beyond the technician and competency-focused, that extends towards the development of the critical and reflective person (O'Donovan, 2010). Staff thought that business curricula should be intellectually challenging and developmental. However, some felt teachers should also remember, and therefore accommodate, that students

often come to learn skills with which, it is hoped, they will find employment, although most balanced this with the need for the provision of intellectually challenging, conceptual content. As two participants put it:

*"probably what we need to do is have a mixture of things that give that technical ability but also to have that intellectual challenge, maybe in the same module or maybe in different modules, [...] I don't think you can be constantly challenging the foundations".*

*"I don't think it is actually fair on students who are signing up for a vocational degree to move too far away from what they think they are signing up for – but I do think you should provide opportunities for them if they want to".*

Many participants commented on the development of the critical and reflective person as being in tension with student satisfaction. These participants acknowledged personal growth could be uncomfortable and result in poor student evaluations; highly problematic in the business school context of today. A context in which student perspectives on the quality of higher education are now a potent fixture in course and institutional rankings and becoming more significant in promotional decisions.

*"We want them to become a professional of some sort, with an ethical approach, with a conscientiousness, with a professionalism and so on, and that's harder and the students are less satisfied, [...] and so there's a temptation to run away from some of these things and to retreat into, 'Here's how to do an audit'".*

Business education was also considered problematic because it encompasses so many varied, divergent subjects with different epistemologies, and

*"students get very confused as it takes time to understand the framing, it takes time to understand what the different framings can be and therefore how to use them."*

### Facilitating Intellectual Challenge in Business Education

Staff clearly expressed the legitimacy of facilitating intellectual challenge:

*"... given we've got university status, it's our duty to examine things, to take things apart, and to give students the opportunity to take things apart...to look at the fundamental underpinnings of practice more than if it was just vocational".*

However, participants made extensive comments on the typical business school student and the effect this had on intellectual challenge in business education. There was an acknowledgement of

the difference in outlook and expectations of particular student cohorts. A sizable number of participants expressed disappointment by the lack of a culture of development, intellectual curiosity and appetite demonstrated by students, and the dominant focus on getting a qualification: *"our university students do not appear to have started their degree with a desire to learn stuff, or not from an intellectually challenging perspective"*. Another participant commented:

*"they're sort of vaguely interested in the topic that they signed up to study, but they're not going to go out of their way and read stuff in newspapers about it or ask challenging questions about how things work or really wanting to get to the bottom of how it works. There's always one or two that do, but the vast majority don't, only what it takes to get a good grade"*.

Because of this lack of interest and engagement some staff considered the first step was *"to offer the intellectual challenge in a way that hooks into the things they are interested in and that they can apply in their own practice."*

In the way staff participants talked about facilitating intellectual challenge, clearly it has contextual features. It depends on how teachers see their role, which in turn is linked to broader ideas such as the purpose of teaching, module and discipline, or the university. However, facilitating intellectual challenge is also grounded in notions of what would stimulate cerebral activity and the difficulty of doing this. Some see the need for teaching intellectually challenging content as pitching it to where students/learners are comfortable. Others deliberately do not make a distinction between the levels of intellectual development and present the material as something inherently challenging that students eventually will understand. However, all acknowledge the difficulty of creating engaging and intellectually challenging activities and materials. A participant worded this as follows:

*"It's incredibly difficult to present ideas without presenting them. To actually get [students] to think critically for themselves. You can't tell someone to think critically and to question things, it's also quite difficult to set it up to make them question. That is a massive challenge in bringing intellectual challenge into our teaching [...] Because if I just kind of pre-process it to such an extent that, you know, it's gone all flat, then there's no meat, there's no investigation, no challenge, then the learning just won't happen"*.

Many participants offered a scaffolded framework, the building blocks of which facilitate intellectual challenge in a number of contexts. *"Working out what students need to be introduced to, how to structure that, how to build... that journey."* However, there is a sense in which participants felt that what they teach was repetitive – they had to say the same low-level information many times for it to land.

## DISCUSSION

We observed a noticeable difference between the sets of descriptions of intellectual challenge from the first and final year students. Conspicuously, first year descriptions of intellectual challenge seem more aligned with those of staff. Like staff, first year undergraduates experience intellectual challenge as legitimately uncomfortable and bound up with self-hood. Our findings seem to suggest that as students progress through their degree studies they seem to become less open to the experience of intellectual challenge. There seems to be a loss in terms of students' willingness to engage with intellectual challenge, when it could be argued that a higher education aims to do the opposite where challenges of the intellect are accumulative leading to higher understandings of complexity.

There are a number of developments that could explain these findings. The achievement of an upper second class degree has become increasingly important to land a graduate job (Snowdon, 2012). This has fuelled a commensurate intensification of student instrumentality in terms of the achievement of high marks and 'good' degrees (Dean and Gibbs 2015). With the introduction of tuition fees, students expect a lucrative return for their money "*whether in academic quality, employability or the facilities offered to them*" (Grove, 2015). The value of a university degree has now become transactional and monetised, measured against the value of its enhancement to a student's future earnings.

Additionally, a marketised view of business education and various university ranking systems has led to increased pressure on universities and staff to deliver pass results. This increased focus on gaining a qualification rather than personal growth is mirrored in our findings, and worryingly intensifies as students progress through their degree. This alongside the increasing importance of student satisfaction seemingly encourages some staff to retreat from orchestrating educational experiences geared towards intellectual development and transformational learning to the provision of technical training, seen as more directly relevant to the workplace.

The challenge is to create business school curricula that are as intellectually rigorous as they are practically relevant, as stimulating as they are efficient, as leading to student satisfaction as they are challenging. The tensions between these objectives makes the design and delivery of business and management education inherently problematic, and one of negotiation and compromise. We acknowledge the need for students to develop technical skills in business education. However, we advocate a return to a clearer focus on the intellectual development of students that enables the development of self-hood over and above equipping them to earn a good living. One that encourages a shift from an uncritical acceptance of external authority and guidance in order to establish their own identity, values and beliefs, and to make positive contributions to wider society.



## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our findings suggest that first year students come with an *expectation* that business education at university will be intellectually challenging, even if they view the nature of the challenge in distinctly different ways. Later on in their final year they experience such challenges as more risky and undesirable. Here, we tentatively propose a few suggestions that may encourage students to accept the legitimacy of intellectual challenge throughout their degree.

Educational quality is inextricably linked to student satisfaction but they are not the same (Gibbs 2010). This is not to decry the burgeoning influence of the student voice on their university experience, but to suggest that we should be careful in our response to it lest through abjuring any signs of discomfort or dissatisfaction we also undermine the very intellectual development we seek to support (O'Donovan, 2017). Hutchings (2005) suggests that one way to get students to accept learning challenges is to facilitate their understanding of the learning journey and the rationales for programme pedagogies and structure, to become in her words 'pedagogically intelligent'. Such pedagogic literacy may also increase the perspicacity of student evaluation of their learning processes and environment to the benefit of all. This would also press us to determine and articulate the objectives of our educational programmes beyond a list of often fragmented and technicist learning outcomes.

Staff describe a common practice - to scaffold learning, students initially learn the basics - demonstrable theories, facts, vocabulary and techniques and only subsequently are challenged by contestable knowledge areas and complexity. However, such a focus can valorise learning approaches of memorization and authority dependence. Some participants described how they orchestrated activities that led students to question their assumptions and beliefs and accept alternative points of view as both possible and legitimate early on in their university studies.

By presenting students with what Perry terms 'calculated incongruities' (1970: 210), it may encourage students to engage with intellectual challenges whilst they are in a transitional state on entry to university, and relatively 'unfrozen' (Lewin 1951) in their expectations and ways of thinking and practising. At this early stage, students are expecting change, indeed a few may even be looking forward to intellectual challenge, and bored and disengaged by reproductive learning. Final year students described intellectual challenge as risky. Gaining further insights on the nature, form and location of intellectual challenges in individual programmes may be valuable, not only in terms of enhancing learning development, but also in smoothing critical moments of discomfort and thereby increasing student satisfaction.

Such initiatives require a strategic approach at the course/programme level. The fragmented approach to HE embodied in the now ubiquitous modular system can militate against coherent teaching, assessment and support structures that scaffold intellectual development. An increased emphasis on programme coherence across structures and pedagogies may more effectively support intellectual challenge and development beyond that which occurs in individual modules. Indeed, without cross-programme agreement it may also be reasonable to suppose that some tutors, fearing poor student evaluation, may steer well clear of intentionally challenging student beliefs and expectations in too discomfoting ways.

We welcome comments from any colleagues engaged in similar research or relevant practices.

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