

BUSINESS EDUCATION IN THE 21st CENTURY
The critical dilemma:
What balance of professional specialization and Paideia?

*The keynote address delivered by Nikos V Skoulas,
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I feel very honoured to have been asked to address this Annual Conference of the European Council for Business Education and I hope that my remarks this morning will provide a useful frame of reference for the talks and sessions that are to follow over the next few days.

However, before I begin my presentation, I think it would be useful to tell you a little bit about myself – specifically about my life in business, politics and business education.

A native of Crete, I have spent most of my time living and working in Athens and Canada and wandering around the world, faithful to the paradigm of Odysseus, one of my better known ancestors. For the major part of my life I have been a practicing manager as a business executive in food distribution and tourism and hospitality enterprises, broadcasting and government service.

Through out this period, education, training and human resource development have been very high on my professional agenda, being of the firm belief that business development and education are twin sisters. In fact, true to this belief, for the past five years I am exclusively dedicated to running Minoan International College, an institution of higher learning delivering programs in general business and the business of tourism and hospitality, together with a team of outstanding academics, three of whom are here today, namely Dr. Stergios Mourgou, Dr. James Moran and Dimitris Perrakis.

The reason for this rather lengthy self-introduction is to pre-empt any notion of bias on my part, inasmuch as I will be presenting a dilemma which, I believe, business educators face, or should face, at this time. In my defense, let me say that if there were to be any bias at all, given my background, one might expect that it would lie on the side of a strictly technical and professional orientation towards business education.

In considering what I was going to say today, I was drawn, not surprisingly, back to the Bologna Declaration and specifically to those sections which relate to the broad role of university education in “establishing a more complete and far-reaching Europe, in particular, building upon and strengthening its intellectual, cultural, social, scientific and technological dimensions”.

It is within this context, I believe, that we, as business educators must design and deliver our programs and degree studies. In other words, while many of the presentations and sessions of this conference will deal with its stated and important theme – “Creativity and Innovation: Developments in Programmes, Content and Delivery”, I would like to be so bold as to suggest that this theme must be couched in the wider considerations indicated in the Bologna Declaration and that many of the negative political and economic developments of the past few years have underwritten an unquestionable need for a reconsideration of the role of what we have referred to as “general education” in all professional programmes of study and, perhaps, most importantly, within business programmes.

Undoubtedly, our role as business educators demands that we provide “creative and innovative programmes, content and delivery” within our business schools. But it has become crystal clear to many, myself included, that this is not our only responsibility as business educators.

In fact, it is arguable that, as business studies have become increasingly “professional and technical”, that we have, in many ways, abdicated another equally important responsibility – that of preparing our business graduates, not only for the rigors of the business world, but also for their lives as intelligent, moral, cultured and active citizens of their countries, of Europe and of the global community.

The philosophy of education in the West began, as do most good things, with the Greeks. These ancient Greek thinkers were preoccupied with the concept of the “citizen”, with the distinction between the “private sphere” and the “public sphere” and with the relationship of both of these to education.

They believed that a proper education was one that addressed all facets of a human being (intellectual, physical, cultural and moral) and all subject matters and was really a means of preparing the individual for his/her contribution to the “public sphere” – that is for citizenship and an ability to contribute to the public good! I use “his/her” contribution here since Plato, if not many other Ancient Greeks, believed that this education should be designed for females as well as males.

An educated citizen was one who, while attending to personal needs and requirements, was motivated, at least equally if not more, by the desire to give back to the community. And, it is this essential element of education that I fear we are in the process of losing within the specialized, professionalized and highly technical programs that we often find at the centre of university curricula today!

Recently, a colleague of mine was attending an on-campus recruiting session at one of my school’s partner institutions – D’Youville College in New York State, and I am reminded of the remarks of the President while addressing a room of potential students.

The President, Dr. Roche, acknowledged that a student often chooses a college or university that he/she believes will best contribute to his/her personal career and long-term success.

The President then pointed out that those able to complete a college education are, in fact, a privileged minority of American citizens and then suggested that a student choose D'Youville ONLY if part of his/her reason for obtaining a college education was to increase his/her ability to give something back to society. She further pointed out that this commitment was an integral part of the working ethos of the entire college.

Unfortunately, I think that many of us in education have either under-emphasized or forgotten altogether this extremely important and foundational element of education in the West.

However, many American universities have, to date, maintained a very nice balance between professional education and general education, with many committing the equivalent of a full year of study— out of a four year undergraduate programme – to general education courses in the humanities, social sciences etc. The requirement usually applies to all disciplines, including business. Such schools continue to see their mission as education in the fullest sense.

Another of my college's partner institutions is Southern New Hampshire University. SNHU has developed an innovative, 3 year undergraduate honors degree programme in business administration. While perusing the academic content of this degree programme, I was struck by the fact that although it is 3 years in duration – something new for SNHU I believe - it mandates 2 courses in English, a public speaking course, a course in critical thinking, a history course, micro and macroeconomics, psychology, a humanities course, a world literature course, a philosophy course and a course on the environment. Apparently, SNHU continues, as it has in the past, to grasp the importance of what the Ancient Greeks considered to be a well-rounded education.

As I mentioned earlier, the philosophy of education in the West began with the Ancient Greeks. In fact, the word “paidagogy”, that has worked its way into the English language lexicon of education, derives from the Greek word paideia. In his book, “The Passion of the Western Mind”, Richard Tarnas defines paideia as

“. . . the classical Greek system of education and training, which came to include gymnastics, grammar, rhetoric, poetry, music, mathematics, geography, natural history, astronomy and the physical sciences, history of society and ethics, and philosophy – the complete pedagogical course of study necessary to produce a well-rounded, fully educated citizen”.

Paideia, in the Greek sense, aimed at the creation of a “higher type” of man. The Romans reproduced this notion in their concept of “humanitas” from which our modern term “humanities” evolved.

The point I would like to make here is that educational theory in the West began by eschewing any attempts to separate “training” and instruction in “task-specific” skills from the more fundamental aims and goals of education – those of advancing the well-being of social existence in the Greek polis and of harmonizing training and skills development with the search for wisdom and virtue.

Is it possible that the current global economic and, I dare say, social crisis may be a consequence of the failure of the educational system to harmonize these two? I have a strong suspicion that the “golden boys”, the corporate leaders and the government officials whose actions or omissions precipitated the crisis, probably have an excellent command of the skills necessary to manipulate the “hedge funds” and the other functions of the financial markets, but lack the ethos and the sense of social responsibility “Paideia” endows us with.

According to Plato, a wide range of highly developed skills, in all facets of life, was necessary for the polis (city state) but only to the degree that the skills could be blended with the other elements of paideia – in his view, especially philosophy. Skill development and training alone could never be enough! In fact, Plato was highly critical of the so-called Sophists of his time who, for money, taught the youth of Athens the skills of rhetoric as a means of equipping them for individual success. One may conclude that many modern politicians are under the influence of the Sophists’ rhetoric rather than the teachings of Plato.

Plato and a long line of political thinkers to the present time, have argued convincingly that the “good society” can never be simply a collection of self-maximizing individuals. And, it has become clear to many modern students of political economy that “community”, “citizenship” and a “public sphere” will not and cannot arise spontaneously from the “free market” and, that these objectives, for that matter, will always be in at least some degree of antagonism with the logic of the market. Indeed, the establishment of “community”, “effective citizenship” and a “public sphere” operating in the interests of the “common good” has been seen by many to be the proper task of a variety of non-market institutions of society, including, perhaps most importantly, educational institutions, in general, and those of higher education, more specifically.

A modern Canadian philosopher, George Grant, has argued, rather convincingly I think, that a primary function of European universities, from their inception until very recently, has been to provide an “intellectual check” on, or “brake” for vested interests operating in the “private sphere” - in terms of the concepts introduced here – to ensure that education serves, first and foremost, the aims and objectives of “community”, “citizenship” and the “public good” through a curriculum based in “paideia”.

However, Grant goes on to say that, in the 20th Century, many of these same universities, their offspring in Europe and many others in North America, have succumbed to the lure of vested interests in the “private sphere”, as the distinction between the “private sphere” and the “public sphere” has been blurred.

And, in light of that, a “new” breed of educational theorists and gurus has insisted that colleges and universities recast themselves as mirror-images of the “private sphere” they must increasingly come to serve. In this “new” conception, universities become producers of “goods” ie. graduates for a re-conceptualized notion of the “public good” that is, in fact, as I have just said, the result of a modern blurring of the distinction between the “private” and “public” spheres of society.

Their exhortations are often encased in language that extols the virtues of a “client-based education” in which measurable outcomes that serve the interests of the buyers of the educational outputs ie. graduates are given priority. An example, that some here might be familiar with, is Marc Tucker’s Human Resources Development System by which the government trains individuals to serve the state and the economy. In a letter to Hillary Clinton he wrote:

“What is essential is that we create a seamless web of opportunities to develop one’s skills that literally extends from cradle to grave and is the same system for everyone – young and old, poor or rich, worker and full-time student. It needs to be a system driven by client needs, guided by clear standards that define the stages of the system for the people who progress through it, and regulated on the basis of outcomes that providers produce for their clients, not inputs into the system”.

The orientation here is, I believe, all too familiar and has found increasingly fertile ground in the past few years as colleges and universities in many parts of Europe and North America continue to face increasing competition for a diminishing student population and often crippling private and public funding cuts.

Understandably, the faculty of professional programmes, such as business, would rather have hours or courses trimmed from the “non-essential” components of the programmes – very often the general education requirements.

But what then of paideia?

Does the “client-based” approach to education ultimately serve the best interests of the wider society?

Do professional programmes such as those of business schools which reduce or eliminate general education adequately serve the “public sphere”?

And, in the absence of a substantial education in the humanities and social sciences, who, except for a small number of apparently inconsequential philosophers, religious thinkers, environmentalists etc., is even asking the question?

Are we, business educators, as surely as we must, including in our courses and programmes a reassessment of the relationship between the world of business and the wider society in light of the recent economic crisis and the revelations of widespread greed and corruption among our corporate leaders?

Do we support the idea that our business students would benefit from attending more (in some cases, any) classes in philosophy and ethics, economic history or political theory as part of their preparation for the business world and citizenship? Or have we accepted, as many have, that the interests of business are identical to those of the wider communities in which they operate?

Perhaps we assume that the often mandatory business ethics course will deal adequately with the relationship between the business community and the wider society?

I'm reminded that last year, while attempting to establish an articulation agreement between my college in Greece and a British university's School of Business, I was told by the relevant administrator from there that my school's commitment to general education would be a stumbling block to cooperation.

The theme for this Annual Conference of the ECBE is an important theme. We, as business educators, must continue to explore ways of being creative and innovative in the content and delivery of our business programmes - ensuring their relevance and guaranteeing that the graduates are adequately prepared to make substantial contributions to the "new" and rapidly changing world of business and able to forge successful careers.

But this, I have argued, is not enough! In addition, it is imperative for our business schools and programmes to graduate young people with the broader knowledge that general education provides and that will allow them to utilize their business acumen as citizens of their countries, of Europe and of the global community. They must, as the Bologna agreement declares, contribute to the strengthening of Europe's intellectual, cultural, social, scientific and technological dimensions in order to truly serve the public sphere.

The authors of a recent article in the New Statesman (March 9, 2009) propose, as part of their writing, ten ideas that constitute a "manifesto for change" given the present global economic crisis. These include electoral reform, tax reform, bank regulation, new minimum wage guidelines etc. What strikes me most about the article is the complete absence of any consideration of education, although there is an oblique reference to the need for people to begin listening to one another.

Why should readers of the article entertain or accept the proposed ideas for change? What would be the readers' frame of reference for assessing the proposals? I believe that, in the absence of a population prepared through paideia, a meaningful assessment is impossible.

Before closing, please allow me a short parenthesis. What do our students-clients think? A fitting response can, in my opinion, be found in an excerpt of a prospective student's application essay which I would like to share with you:

"A college educates people intellectually but also develops personalities, characters, values, attitudes, teamwork, mutual support, problem solving and creativity. Essentially, the personal development of students is as important as the acquisition of knowledge and skills. To this end, the education imparted to students should be wider than what they would need in order to simply work in one particular field".

Ladies and gentlemen, dear colleagues,

As we meet together over the next couple of days, I would ask, and hope that your discussions of "creativity and innovation in the development of programs, content and

delivery” are conducted within the broader context of education I have reminded us of today! We at this Conference are all striving to create the best business programmes we can. I simply think that the ultimate aims and objectives of such programmes must be forged within a concept of education that necessarily reaches beyond our own departments and programmes.

References

- 1 The Bologna Declaration, June 19, 1999.
- 2 Richard Tarnas, The Passion of the Western Mind : Understanding Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View.
3. Marc Tucker, Human Resources Development System, National Centre on Education and the Economy (NCEE)
4. Neal Lawson & John Harris, “No Turning Back” in The New Statesman (March 9, 2009).
5. George Grant, Technology and Empire: Perspectives in North America (1969) Chapter: “The University Curriculum”

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