RESEARCH PAPER

Can business schools use practical reasoning to help them with social impact?

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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the challenges that face university-based business schools. These challenges are concerned with their ability to maintain expectations in educational and research terms, whilst at the same time making impact in social contexts. This paper outlines how impact might be informed by a heightened awareness of the difference between pure and practical reasoning. This was a key concern of Immanuel Kant, who laid the foundation of a philosophical genre which, in this paper, is termed 'practical reasoning'. The paper contrasts some of the most fundamental ideas of practical reasoning with other forms used to underpin the activities of contemporary business schools. The paper presents an argument about how the methodological, epistemological and philosophical insights drawn from this genre may have relevance to the contemporary requirement for social impact in university-based business schools.

Introduction

For 20 years and more, top business and management journals have been replete with papers about the irrelevance of contemporary business schools (e.g., Hambrick, 1994; Gopinath and Hoffman, 1995; Davenport and Markus, 1999; Watson *et al.,* 1999; Lyytinen, 1999; Benbasat and Zmud, 1999; Huff, 2000; Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2001; Hodgkinson, 2001; Hodgkinson *et al.,* 2001; Huff and Huff, 2001; McLean and MacIntosh, 2002; Bolton and Stolcis, 2003; Baldridge *et al*., 2004; Goshal, 2005; Spender, 2005; Keiser and Leiner, 2009). Some contemporary debates express concern that teaching in business schools is not used in practice (see, e.g., Ivory *et al*., 2006; Masrani *et al*., 2011; Thomas and Wilson, 2011). Mitroff *et al.* (2015) are particularly blunt and compare the engagement in practice of business school faculty with that of those in law, medicine and engineering. They argue that a key problem is the hiring policies of business schools, which prefer new faculty with PhDs in 'related' disciplines. This is damaging the credibility of business schools:

> Today's business school faculties . . . often hire economists, sociologists, and social psychologists who do not practice the very things that they teach in the classroom: managing a business. In fact, some of the business school faculty that we know joined academia because they had disdain for business and management. Hiring scientists from the so-called grounding disciplines moves business schools further away from reality . . . (Mitroff *et al*., 2015, p.87)

Such perceptions may relate to the observation that the history of business school curricula tends to be 'multidisciplinary' (i.e., informed from a range of feeder disciplines), but lacks cogency and integration (i.e., it is not sufficiently 'inter-disciplinary') (see Elmuti, 2004; Gosling and

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Mintzberg, 2006; Monks and Walsh, 2001). Commonly the concern about business school activities is expressed in the gulf between academic and practitioner communities – 'Practitioners are from Mars; academics are from Venus' (Tucker and Lowe, 2014; see also Baldridge *et al.,* 2004). This divide is not only expressed in terms of the differences of communities, but also in methodological and epistemological terms, with an implication that there is a need for new integrative forms of engagement and research (e.g., Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011; Starkey *et al.*, 2009). These divides typically characterize academic research as rigorous, but in need of reaching out to ensure relevance to practitioner groups. This rigour–relevance divide mirrors an intellectual position which has a much lengthier history. For example, Immanuel Kant's trilogy was concerned with the linkage between 'pure reasoning' ('rigour') and 'practical reasoning' ('relevance') (Kant, 1787, 1788, 1790). Might the work of Kant help with the concerns about contemporary business schools?

This paper draws out some fundamental themes which originate specifically in Kant's (1788) *Critique of Practical Reason* to help explain some of the concerns expressed about business schools. The significance of the paper is to demonstrate that there is a specific genre of literature which may provide a range of new possibilities in research, teaching and executive education. The originality of the paper lies in its analysis of this specific genre, drawing out key themes which come from Kant's work. The paper is structured as follows. First it discusses the roots of practical reasoning[1] and why it might be considered important for modern business schools in the contemporary context. This includes a discussion of the implications for policy and process in some core business school activities. Secondly, the paper discusses more recent contributions and their relevance for some of the contemporary challenges that business schools face. The third section explores some key disciplinary and research implications that might arise.

Practical reasoning

One of the most fundamental starting observations is that managers must learn to develop and apply their reasoning in order to achieve practical results. However, the challenge is not so much in this rather obvious statement, but in how a given practical reasoning is constructed, justified or judged to be appropriate in a specific context. Achieving this requires consideration of the nature of reasoning itself, the subject of Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788).

For Immanuel Kant, reasoning is pure or theoretical when it is applied to produce knowledge or understanding of phenomena (i.e., what is, or what happens). Thus 'pure reasoning' aims at providing causal laws, often premised on an inquiry which is informed by its application to natural systems. An alternative form of reasoning, which Kant terms 'practical reasoning', is one that helps to determine what ought to be, what ought to be done and/or how to do it (see Kant, 1788). It could be argued that practical reasoning should have a prominent role in business schools, given that at the heart of any managerial task is the issue of what ought to be done and how to do it. If practical reasoning were to be adopted more explicitly in business schools, it follows that the heart of the activity would be a concern with the design, application and validity of various forms of inquiry in attempting to achieve a future state or social system.

Kant's distinction between pure and practical reasoning raises some important questions about the way business schools currently undertake their activities. Decision makers in business schools might benefit from a clearer understanding of the difference between pure and practical reasoning along the lines set out by Kant. This is because certain teaching and research activities undertaken in business schools might tend towards 'pure reasoning', so they might assume that the subject or framing of a piece of research or teaching is something to be investigated as if it were a natural phenomenon (what is, or what happens). This would be very different from a study using

[1]The term 'Practical Reasoning' as a proper noun is used to denote a literary and philosophical genre. Here the term 'practical reasoning' (without capitalization) is used to mean the reasoning applied in an everyday sense. I acknowledge that both of these are contestable, as is the relationship between them.

practical reasoning to explore what ought to be, what ought to be done and/or how to do it in a given social context (e.g., in a specific organization). If a business school were to define itself around practical reasoning, its focus would shift from researching phenomena associated with the managerial task to the inquiry involved in undertaking the management task.

Kant suggests that only practical reasoning can determine how to use human freedoms to realize better human social systems. 'Practical' implies a capacity to determine man's will by the law of an intelligible world, the law of freedom itself (Kant, 1788, p.139). Thus, practical reasoning involves the critique and improvement of choice-making and perceived choice options. This has important implications. For example, an element of practical reasoning is subjection to criticism, and to consideration of other possibilities including the conditions and the ethics of the current state (e.g., of an organization), as well as an aspiration and vision of the conditions and the ethics of a future state. The notion of current and future state is a key difference between pure and practical reasoning, and it might be argued that this can help explain some of the dilemmas facing contemporary business schools. For example, there may have been a tendency to frame research and teaching around the study of phenomena (what is, or what happens) in contrast to the framing of research around the validity and rigour involved in practical reasoning in achieving a future state in a given context. Were business schools to research and teach from the perspective of practical reasoning, new forms of inquiry might emerge:

(i) to evaluate social freedoms in a given context, in making decisions, in a process of practical reasoning;
(ii) to challenge perceived choice options which themselves can constrain freedoms;
(iii) to question the conditions and ethics of the current state and of a future state;
(iv) to evaluate a given practical reasoning and the resultant or related actions purposely designed to achieve a future state.

In practical reasoning, these elements would be considered inter-linked inquiry.[2]

Given that inquiry based on practical reasoning aims to justify decisions and actions (e.g., to manage a given business to achieve a future state), it must stand up to scrutiny. That is, there must be a basis for judging one to be good, another to be bad. This level of inquiry is what makes practical reasoning rigorous because it concerns 'testing the validity', a feature shared with scientific inquiry. The basis of this judgement might be considered to be of primary concern to researchers, whereas the operationalization and outcome of the practical reasoning itself might be considered to be the primary concern of practitioners. The basis for judging the relative merits of a given practical reasoning is quite challenging. In part, this is because a future state cannot be proven by use of empirical evidence – at the time the practical reasoning is being developed and actions justified, it is in the future. A search for an empirical basis for the decisions made to achieve a future state is necessarily circumscribed. This is why Kant challenges perceptions of a given future state in the abstract construction of it as a concept; he attempts to unpick the truth value (and deceptions) of practical reasoning, and the construction of the concept of the future state. One of the ways he does this is by deconstructing the *a priori* (or noumenal) concepts, and the *a posteriori* components, each playing a role in a given construction. It may contain assumptions and preconceptions of its constitution, and this can be subjected to analysis by taking apart the reasoning – which will have both *a priori* and *a posteriori* content. In the application of practical reasoning, there are possibilities to increase precision by increasing awareness of the ability of concepts and constructs to provide insights into a given future state. It is also possible to unpick the predictions of a future state or a future context by deconstructing the experiential or empirical basis of the current or past, which may have implications for the future state. Invariably, since practical reasoning is concerned with a future state, Kant is also concerned with the 'conditions and the ethics of a future state', and this is

[2]Churchman (1971) uses the term 'inquiring system' to denote a similar idea.

a key element in the critique of a given practical reason (see O'Neil, 2013). As such, there are elements in practical reasoning which are required to provide a basis for that future state, and for exploring the validity of the practical reasoning itself. When this is applied in the business context, the design of the inquiry includes some key elements. For instance, the deconstruction of key abstractions (e.g., markets or innovation or business models or industry sector analysis) may be required to explore the possibilities of achieving a given concept of a future state. This may also involve the consideration of the specific freedoms to change one situation into another. These freedoms would necessarily be context-specific and would involve consideration of the ethics of the future state.

In short, if a business school were to embrace Kantian practical reasoning more fully, it might: (i) define its research and teaching around potential improvements to the design, critique and validity of practical reasoning and associated inquiring activities (i.e., to analyze its own limitations in a given context); and (ii) define its research around the fundamental challenges to reasoning and how these might be overcome. A similar position is outlined in Churchman (1968), which outlines some key challenges to practical reasoning. Consideration for how these are best explored, designed, researched and evaluated is arguably a significant step away from current and dominant practices within the modern business school. Further, taking practical reasoning into contemporary business schools would challenge certain assumptions about knowledge generation practices within the discipline; for instance, the assumptions that frame research around such functions of business as marketing, accounts and operations. This is because evaluating the possibilities of achieving a future state is not bounded by the functions of business, and will often require inquiry which crosses (or challenges) functional boundaries. Similarly, it may challenge assumptions in technical or technique-based research. This is because practical reasoning may use technical principles, or techniques, as an element of the inquiry, but one that is framed quite differently to achieve social impact (see Monks and Walsh, 2001; Elmuti, 2004; Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006; Mitroff *et al.,* 2015).

Kant sees practical reasoning as striving to inquire into the 'totality of conditions' in which a future state might be achievable. He uses this in an abstract and rhetorical sense, recognizing that understanding of a totality of conditions of a future state is impossible to know, but is nonetheless possible to consider and to strive for. This notion of a totality of conditions is akin to saying that the totality is ultimately determined by God, and the human condition is such that there remains a need to strive towards it by using and improving inquiry. Unfortunately for humans, the search for some sort of holistic inquiry (into the totality of conditions) is an impossibility. However, improving awareness of these limitations is certainly within the remit of humans. Inquiry does not mean that truth is in some way derived in an absolute sense, nor that a totality of conditions is ever possible. Rather, it may be better to take inquiry to mean that it is possible to examine the limits of one's own truth. Thus, Kantian practical reasoning aims to realize the weakness in the totality of understanding in a given context, which is subject and context specific. In this sense, 'holistic' might be taken to mean exploring the limits of one's own truth as it applies to the practical concerns of what ought to be, what ought to be done and/or how to do it. In this sense, a practical reasoning can be understood, as Kant puts it, as a rule which challenges the conditions upon which it is based. This is a form of regulative process which acts to improve reasoning, and the objective of the reasoning and inquiry is not to derive laws (or theories), but to uncover assumptions about the possibilities of achieving a future state, in a given context, within the limitations of the freedoms to act. The process is in essence one which business school researchers and teachers may be able to explore further. Whilst this 'critique' means something specific in practical reasoning, it has a different role, meaning and significance in other disciplines. This may explain why Mitroff *et al*. (2015) think that the recruitment of faculty from feeder disciplines may not be altogether desirable for the long-term well-being of either the discipline of management or for business schools. 'Critique' can mean very different things in disciplines untroubled by this specific Kantian perspective. While feeder disciplines can add significant value to inquiry, and help improve 'critique' of it, they may also frame research differently, which may result in losing sight of the need to integrate insights into practical reasoning.

In summary, most research and teaching in contemporary business schools is not based on Kantian practical reasoning. Research and teaching in the field are more dependent on a reasoning that is meant to uncover laws, generate knowledge and explore rules and theories. More alignment with Kantian practical reasoning might shift activities in contemporary business schools. That is to say, it could shift the focal point from research to functions, phenomena and related abstract theories, theories applied to hypothetical situations and/or functional techniques, towards a continuing refinement of practical reasoning and associated inquiring methods. Teaching would shift from teaching knowledge, theories and techniques, to examining reasoning and inquiring methods. The teaching focus would require the application of suitable inquiry to explore the relationship that practical reasoning has to action, and to the results and implications of that action. Teaching might be undertaken with greater integration with practice (as in forms of apprenticeship or other contextually rich learning activities).

Kant for business schools?

Kant was writing over 200 years ago, and much has been developed in the intervening period that relates to practical reasoning. For instance, Singer (1959) used Kant (1788) as a basis for his work on 'measurement systems'.[3] He used this term to mean an integrated set of elements: 'that which is being measured',[4] the units of measurement being used, the methods of undertaking the measurement and their application as they contribute to a given practical reasoning. He demonstrates that measurement simultaneously enables precision as well as providing deception. For instance, in a measurement system, the results may influence the practical reasoning, but just as important is what the results might hide. The abstraction that is involved in what is hidden provides the basis for improvement and also a basis for examining the validity of a given practical reason. Further, in the application of measurement in practice, there is a point at which it stops, when it is deemed to be practically adequate and fit for purpose. Thus, the purpose, the measurement system and the practical reasoning are inextricably linked. This lays the foundation of a teleological dimension in measurement, which includes the hidden as well as the explicit purpose in the application of a measurement system (i.e., the hidden or explicit purpose determines when it is fit for purpose). Thus, becoming aware of the teleological dimensions in measurement can be a basis for its critique and improvement. Measurement systems embedded into a given practical reasoning will involve the search for explicit and implicit motives. There are significant methodological implications. For example, if contemporary business schools were to adopt practical reasoning, the critique of measurement would be considered a source of improvement in reasoning. The teleological dimensions would be an essential integrated component of inquiry and also a potential source of improvement in reasoning.

West Churchman builds on Singer's ideas. His *Design of Inquiring Systems* (1971) explores the limits of a given inquiry based on practical reasoning. He positions practical reasoning in the discipline of management and organization. This work brings together some of the most important elements in the search for continual improvement in inquiry. This shares the Kantian view of searching for the limitations or deceptions of a given practical reason as a basis for its improvement. Understanding the position of Singer and Churchman requires sharing a rather difficult abstraction. Fundamentally, they are exploring the relationship between the measured, the measurer and the measuring methods, and applying it to inquiry itself in order to identify the flaws in it, as a basis for continual improvement. Thus, a practical reasoning is the measured in this instance, and is the subject of critical evaluation. The researcher is the measurer, applying the critical evaluation. The measuring methods are applied to a given practical reasoning as a basis for its design, application,

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[3]By 'measurement', Singer (1948, 1959) is thinking of 'a means to judge' rather than an amount of something.

[4]In Kantian terms, that which is being measured might be not obvious, particularly if it is an abstract or contentious concept such as a social system or organizational process. This might be particularly problematic if it is conceptualized as a future social system.

process and evaluation. The implication is that the framing of researcher input around practical reasoning can provide a basis for continual improvement in its design, application, process and evaluation. The interest of the practitioner is in the improvement and resulting precision of the practical reasoning. The role of the researcher is to use the principles of an inquiring system to achieve and verify the improvement. Once this initial abstraction is understood, the positioning and integration of researchers with practitioners based on practical reasoning can be developed. This offers the opportunity to develop new collaborative arrangements among key stakeholders (e.g., the triple helix collaborations; see Leydesdorff and Etzkowitz, 1996; Etzkowitz and Leydesdorff, 2000). Applying practical reasoning as a basis for such collaborations would be a very different framing from that most commonly applied by researchers in contemporary business schools.

In his search for the principles of practical reasoning, Churchman (1971) includes three hypothetical inquiring elements, described and conceptualized as roles. These elements are client, decision-maker and planner, depicted in abstract form, with conflicting interests in the design of a future social system. The integration of these into an inquiry has important implications for the continued development of practical reasoning. For example, (i) it provides an abstract form of 'inter-subjectivity' of these in a given context; (ii) it recognizes the need for a critical dialogue when exploring the affected over and above those more directly involved in a given future state; and (iii) it can be a search for consensus or accommodation, a basis for action to achieve a future social system. Churchman attempts to integrate the roles of client, decision-maker and planner as a basis for improving the practical reasoning, and as an element of a search for holism in inquiry, based on the idea that dialogue can help to improve the practical reasoning,

Habermas (1971) also uses the notion of practical reasoning to critique rational choice and communicative action. He famously warns of the dangers of a positivistic misinterpretation which may result in subverting a required dialogue about a given practical reason and the societal structures which place constraints on freedom. That is to say, there are certain social beliefs that masquerade as practical and rational. These have inherent epistemic assumptions that may be imposed on social situations which deny the freedoms of choice and thus deny behaviour based on consensual norms (Habermas, 1971, pp.91–2). Habermas's work and that of the Frankfurt School has gained notoriety for its contributions to a critical theory of society (CST), pioneering its ideas by building upon some of Kant's underpinning messages. While both Habermas and Churchman are both concerned with reinterpreting Kantian practical reasoning, their approach is fundamentally different. Habermas's CST helps explain the social-structural barriers to achieving a future state and warns of the dangers of its subversion. Churchman is concerned with the design of inquiring systems to create an interpreted inquiring and learning process which captures the lived-in experiences to identify the possibilities of action within the context of social freedom to act. The juxtaposition of these two positions may highlight significant implications for contemporary business schools. For instance, there are contributions that CST might be able to make in the critique of assumptions in social change. However, CST does not use the principles of practical reasoning to achieve or evaluate social change and social impact. As business schools embrace new performance criteria embodied in such terms as 'impact', 'social impact' and 'impact research', there may be a new impetus for *Design of Inquiring Systems* in order to improve practical reasoning and its role in future social systems.

The three inquiring elements are extended in Churchman (1979) to include the systems philosophers. This is an additional subjective account that can be integrated into the inter-subjective accounts of those directly involved in the change of social systems. This is done because there is a need to explore 'the significance of the whole effort' (Churchman,1979, p.80). In part, the implication of this is to include, as an element of the inquiry, the impact made. This is not narrowly focused on the impact of an intended change or future state (e.g., the immediate effect on a given business or organization of the action that results from a practical inquiry). Rather, it is also concerned with the impact that is unintentional. For example, by improving one business, another might go out of business; or, by developing a business, there might be unforeseen ecological, social or other impacts.

Thus, the inquiry considers impact on wider social systems, and evaluates the desirability of impacts. The implications of this are that:

(i) prior to managerial action, it is possible to inquire into likely consequences on wider systems (a key goal of holistic inquiry);
(ii) during and after action, it is possible to include inquiry into unintended impacts;
(iii) the continued iterations of inquiry and action and the inclusion of the unintended consequences widens the inquiry making it more holistic; and
(iv) the implications for present and future human systems are a central element of the inquiry, which thus involves the social values that underpin a given change.

In effect, the inclusion of the significance of the whole effort into an inquiry widens its scope in a way that is commensurate with the Kantian notion of a totality of conditions. While Churchman does not use the word 'impact', it is very much what he means (i.e., the improvement of practical reasoning to consider the impact on future social systems). If business schools were to frame impact in the way Churchman outlines, they might focus on unintended as well as on intended impacts on social systems, and on the social value and desirability of these impacts.

By his inclusion of the various inter-subjective accounts, Churchman enables the integration of a form of dialectic into his systems approach with which to analyse the weaknesses in a holistic understanding of a future state. In integrating this in appropriate ways, it is possible to avoid the difficulties associated with narrower forms of reasoning, such as technocratic rationalism. For example, Churchman talks of a challenge to planners' claims for rationality by those who live with the practical consequences of the planning. The basis of this challenge is not achieved by a privileging discourse or communication *per se* (e.g., about the planning, policy or impact in planners' terms and language), but by incorporating an interpretation of the lived-in experience of those who are connected in some way with the planned social change. Thus, the communications are not to contest the rationality of the plan in technical terms, because those affected by the planning may have no means (or skills) to undertake it. In practical terms, the inability of humans to do this effectively is a key challenge in a process of practical reasoning because it can easily assume a form of objectivity or superior knowledge which privileges a given social perspective. Churchman is conscious of the consequences in epistemological terms and in terms of social values if the required dialectic is somehow subverted by rationalist or technocratic approaches. They may have a tendency to avoid a search for consensus or accommodation, or to strip away the social values from the inquiry (see Ulrich, 2012a, 2012b). If business schools were to consider the use of practical reasoning in their activities, there might be opportunity to develop students' skills in integrating the lived-in experience into an inquiry and drawing out implications. Integration of the notion of social value into practical reasoning would provide new ways to improve current efforts to explore responsible management practices (see Raschel and Gilbert, 2015).

In his continual refinement of measurement, Singer (1948) acknowledges the contribution of feeder disciplines. Churchman (1979) follows suit. He talks of the enemies of the systems approach, the philosophies which have no concept of practical reasoning,[5] but which may have contributions to make to improve the reasoning. Or, in other words, in an inquiry based on practical reasoning, findings, constructs, ideas, frameworks and methods that have not been specifically constructed from the principles of practical reasoning can be elements of inquiry into continual improvement. There is a demand for researchers to explore concepts and constructs developed from other domains, and which might, over time, assist in the development of practical reasoning. They can be tested for relevance, validity and for the way they affect the inquiring process, assuming they are evaluated for the purpose of refining a given practical reasoning. The challenge lies in determining what (if anything) needs to be included, what is its

[5]He specifically talks of politics, morality, religion and aesthetics.

potential value (and limitation) in helping to determine what ought to be, what to do and how to do it. A researcher at a business school has a role in exploring this value and the opportunity of improving it in some way (a process of refutation and reinterpretation to enhance relevance). This is part of any research, but the criteria in practical reasoning are specifically linked to the experience of application as it contributes to the process and the outcomes (the social impact). In Churchman/Singerian practical reasoning, rigour need not be compromised by relevance because the measured, the measurer and the measuring methods are all being critiqued in a continuous quest to improve inquiry as a core element in the process.

Ulrich (1983) explores the practical consequences of Churchman's inquiring systems, and formulates from them a set of heuristics, termed 'critical systems heuristics' (CSH). These serve to discover problem-relevant questions in the formulation of problem-solving, social planning and change. Heuristics he sees as 'not a collection of prototypical problem solutions or problem-solving techniques', but rather 'the art of making "the problem" the problem' (Ulrich, 1983, p.22). In doing this, Ulrich positions CSH away from narrowly defined or functional research, as a problem of learning, which challenges stakeholders in their perceptions of 'as-given' problems and solutions. Following Churchman, Ulrich also differentiates CSH from a rationalist or empiricist inquiry, and proposes a critical process approach. His work is clearly informed by the Kantian exploration of the weaknesses (or deceptions) in a given holistic understanding when developing judgement. Ulrich's CSH develops Churchman (1979) in developing several key strands. For instance, CSH

(i) develops the work of Churchman in heuristics to provide greater levels of accessibility to this form of practical reasoning;
(ii) integrates a reinterpreted form of dialectical reasoning to integrate a self-reflective element, forming a key element of the heuristics;
(iii) adapts Churchman's four categories to demonstrate their use in challenging the (often self-imposed) boundaries which limit holism in a practical reason and are a basis for his 'critical turn' of the systems approach (see also Ulrich, 2007); and
(iv) provides a critique and explanation of some failing alternatives which result in weaknesses in practical reasoning.

One of the consequences of seeing this form of practical reasoning as heuristics is that it must be accessible in various forms for various human learners (e.g., business managers in a potential change situation). This may provide a natural opportunity for business schools to explore the opportunities to use heuristics based on practical reasoning at various levels in the design of learning programmes. For example, in executive education, learners may be using key aspects of practical reasoning in a designed process; students of business and management may be introduced to the methodological principles of practical reasoning while they prepare for practice; and researchers may explore improvements to the heuristics designs based on practical reasoning, its underlying methods, the design and application of resultant action, and/or the way these might combine as a research method for knowledge production. If the design of such activities were to be informed by this approach to inquiry, then there would be some important implications for contemporary business schools. For instance:

(i) Given that the purpose of practical reasoning is to guide attempts to achieve a social impact as a primary goal, there will also be knowledge generation opportunities (e.g., during an executive learning programme designed using the principles of practical reasoning). Thus, business school researchers can evaluate and improve the methods of practical reasoning during its application.
(ii) The experience of applying the principles of practical reasoning may confirm or refute existing concepts, constructs, frameworks, methods, techniques, tools, abstractions and theories.

This process may contribute to knowledge generation. That is to say, there may be implications for knowledge, despite the fact that knowledge generation is not a primary goal.[6]

(iii) A process of learning based on the ideas of practical reasoning (an executive programme, for instance) will be designed to be a critical process in a particular form (i.e., one that attempts to guard against error and to make transparent the deceptions or illusions within the practical judgements inherent in a given practical reason). This includes exploration of the perceived freedoms in a given social context to achieve a given future state or social system.

(iv) If a business school were to undertake some of its activities from the position of practical reasoning, there must be capacity to explore the relationship between a practical reasoning and the human action that is informed by it. This is because the relationship between action (or non-action) and the reasoning is potentially a rich area of exploration. It provides empirical insight into the social constraints on the freedom to act and the teleological dimensions of a given practical reasoning.

(v) There must be a relationship between a given practical reasoning and the process by which it is refined and improved. This can be built into the design of a practical reasoning process. For example, a business school executive programme based on practical reasoning will be designed to incorporate continuous improvement to the reasoning, and may include research to improve the design.

(vi) Although practical reasoning has a theoretical basis, its primary purpose in practice is not to construct theory. Nonetheless, there are opportunities for theory generation during a process of developing a practical reasoning in a given social context. For example, a design of a business school learning programme based on practical reasoning may change a social situation, and in doing so may confirm, refute or provide insight into theory.[7]

Some disciplinary and research implications

Kant talks of a doctrine of elements and a methodology of practical reasoning, implying that practical reasoning has generalizable characteristics (applicable in many contexts, having a knowledge base, an intellectual basis and methods). Thus, practical reasoning is of relevance to any practical discipline which aspires to social impact. It is perhaps for this reason that a broad range of academic communities within business schools have shown interest in related areas (see, e.g., Goldkuhl, 2012; Hannah *et al.,* 2014; Whitford and Zirpoli, 2014). Given that practical reasoning has a distinct philosophical underpinning, many more business school communities should find that they can integrate it within their activities. For instance, there have been calls for a mode 2 production of knowledge in business schools (see Gibbons *et al*., 1994; Gibbons, 2000; Vermeulen, 2005). This is the idea that knowledge generation can be developed from the direct experience of practice, which contrasts with purer research forms, termed a 'mode 1 production'.

Given the continued emphasis on social impact, future functional, technical or technique-based research might also consider the potential to integrate with a genre of research which is focused on demonstrating and justifying social impact. For instance, forms of research which have assumed validity in process and outcomes using technical or functional criteria may be required to demonstrate social impact. Ulrich (2012a, 2012b) provides a useful critique of such research, focusing specifically on operations research. He cites examples of research, commonly empirically orientated, which may provide insights into new methods to define future social systems. For example, an operations research piece may identify variables which are to be tested by model or experiment to

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[6]The primary goal of a specific practical reasoning is assessing, achieving and justifying a social impact. In doing this, there may be implications for knowledge generation, including the improvement of the theoretical principles of practical reasoning itself.

[7]Thus, theory generation may emerge from the practical reasoning process. In such a case, theory might be considered to be an emergent property of the process.

draw conclusions about a technical improvement or development. It is possible to embed such research into practical reasoning, and thereby assess the possibilities of achieving a future state within a given social context. Social impact from the research undertaken in business schools already takes place. However, it is typically seen as an emergent property of the research, without the explicit integration into research design. It might be integrated more formally with practical reasoning and thereby provide a theoretical and methodological underpinning for impact. This would provide a link to research activity and future social systems. Faculty in business schools may wish to draw from a highly developed genre as they seek to become explicit and transparent in achieving social impact.

The principles and traditions of practical reasoning are alien to many business school researchers. There are significant challenges in the integration of research types which have roots in very different traditions. In that research now has to make some sort of social impact, there are choices to be made. These choices affect the accountability of researchers to organizations, to funding bodies, to society, to practitioner communities. How business schools and their researchers conceptualize, design and undertake research specifically to promote and develop their impact, presents many challenges, not least because they are charged with preserving epistemological precision, validity and transparency of conclusions – all the while maintaining intellectual curiosity. There is little to guide the researcher in process, epistemological or methodological. For instance, (i) there is little guidance on the requirement for inquiry into unintended impact; (ii) there is only weak integration with the ethics of the future state (those human systems which are impacted); and (iii) there is no concept of present and future human systems to aid judgement about good and bad in impact. While there might be lots of impact from current research activity, there may be no way of knowing whether it is desirable. These are significant weaknesses in the common conceptualization of 'impact'. As a result, there is a danger that impact becomes more important in theory than in practice. There is much well-meaning aspiration for engaged, impact-based research, but its impact can be weak and ill-judged. There may be significant effort put into proving impact with very little real impact. Lots of impact may be detrimental, its effects on human systems remaining unappreciated while academics in business schools concentrate their efforts on collecting data to prove the positive contribution of their research, unable or unwilling to consider the significance of their efforts as a whole.

Conclusion

There are many dissenting voices in the corridors of business schools when current research practices are discussed. Many such voices are those of senior academics. Policymakers in business schools can react to the challenges they face in a number of ways. They might put more resources into existing practices to prove their value without significantly changing them. They might justify the *status quo* by encouraging faculty to do things related to their research work (e.g., consulting activities). Or they might explore a suitable academic underpinning for practical work so that practice becomes a respectable way of undertaking key business school activities (e.g., a theory of practice to lend intellectual rigour). This paper has argued that, if they choose the last option, there is a robust body of ideas, historically grounded in practical philosophy, which can provide an appropriate underpinning. It is a matter of conjecture whether business school policymakers will take a deep breath and put into place the changes necessary to embrace practical reasoning as an element of their research and teaching. It is also doubtful whether they see themselves as having the freedom to make the required changes.

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