

# The phenomenon of *being-in-management* in executive education programmes

## An integrative view

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Managing in Complexity

### **Abstract**

Currently, we experience a situation in society in general as well as business school education where leaders and executives prefer to remain ambivalent and inauthentic about humanity's worsening socio-economic challenges. As a result of this, we continue with regimes of common sense that have lost their legitimacy and perpetuate an unsustainable future. Occasionally we notice this when there is a financial, environmental, social, or ecological crisis. Is it possible to resurrect a willingness to be more proactive? This paper uses the business school education challenges to explore this dilemma and offer insight on how the situation could be changed. The paper argues that the key phenomenon of *being-in-management* has not received sufficient attention and is an important aspect of teaching and learning in business schools that constrains impact. We experience this as a lack of will, lack of commitment, and subsequent lack of action to improve many of the socio-ecological threats we encounter. This paper makes a concerted effort to offer a coherent argument that this is the case, and integrates recent views of the phenomenon of *being-in-management* to illustrate the potential for more societal impact. While the business school setting

is in focus, the insight is of equal value to academics interested in development education and global learning.

**Keywords:** executive education, being-in-the-world, being-in-management

## Introduction

The scholarship of global learning, development education, and business education share many similar challenges and pursuits, and can cross-fertilize each other with observations and findings. For example, they both share the aim of inspiring action to make the world a better place. Since its emergence, the discipline of development education and global learning has been raising awareness and understanding of how the global affects the local, and how individuals, communities, and societies can and do affect the global (Bourn, 2015). Business education has recently had to emphasize a similar process of consciousness development as issues of global inequality and ecological sustainability risks have increased. In his evaluation of the theory and practice of global learning, Douglas Bourn makes the observation that development education is much more than learning about development (*ibid.*). This paper will illustrate how Bourn's observation in development education and global learning can also be noticed in business education (*ibid.*). In addition, this paper proposes that a focus on the phenomenon of *being-in-management* is relevant for both disciplines.

The business school curriculum in recent years has had to be revised to create capacities for graduates to address both the reality of growth not being inclusive or sustainable (Hesselbarth and Schaltegger, 2014; Marcus *et al.*, 2010; Setó-Pamies and Papaoikonomou, 2015), and to address serious criticisms of business schools, management education, and MBA programmes (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Birnik and Billsberry, 2008; Chia and Holt, 2008; Datar *et al.*, 2011; Ghoshal, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004; Mitroff *et al.*, 2015; Moldoveanu and Martin, 2008; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Schlegelmilch and Thomas, 2011; Thomas and Cornuel, 2012).

These issues point to a too narrow conceptualization of a manager as being a rational, reflective agent controlling and optimizing people and resources. They also point to a lack of appreciation of the 'messiness' of management, and the inadequacy of the business school curriculum in preparing managers to deal with this messiness (Mitroff *et al.*, 2015).

A common scholarly response has been to highlight the problem and pose solutions, despite Russell Ackoff's statement that we should focus 'on the management of messes rather than the solution of problems' (Ackoff, 1981: 22). We see this in particular in the discussion around the future of the MBA and of the business school (as referenced above). The revisions that have taken place in business schools

in response to criticism can be seen in the incorporation of a number of theories and frameworks, such as sustainability, shared value, customer capitalism, design thinking, authentic leadership, impact investing, inclusive innovation, social entrepreneurship, and in the mapping of new required competencies.<sup>1</sup> It has also led to a revival of scholarly interest in wisdom as a relevant concern in the management and organizational sciences.<sup>2</sup> The result is great uncertainty about what management students should be taught and what they should learn (Birnik and Billsbury, 2008). Furthermore, despite these efforts, we have not seen a noticeable reduction in the fundamental problems of inclusivity and sustainability. The complex problems we face globally are increasing, rather than decreasing (Whiteman *et al.*, 2013). At the same time there has, between 1960 and 2010, been a significant *decline* in the proportion of published research that can be considered 'actionable' and useful in practice, both for managers and their teachers (Pearce and Huang, 2012).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we look critically at contemporary arguments in research landscapes of project management, management education, and entrepreneurship; and highlight efforts in these disciplines to bring about a new capability to address developmental challenges. An interesting observation from this synthesis is that what is being experienced as inadequate theory in practice, and a lack of action to reduce the problems, emerges from concerns that point to a need to better understand the phenomenal world of management. There have been two significant efforts to describe such a phenomenon: Aristotle and Heidegger. Aristotle offered the idea of *phronesis* (*practical wisdom*). As this concept has been extensively covered in the field of teacher education, and is now increasingly being considered a relevant concept in the management literature as well (Nonaka *et al.*, 2014; Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014; Grint, 2007; Nonaka and Toyama, 2007), we will not discuss *phronesis* here. Nor will we provide a discussion of Heidegger's concepts as explanations also exist elsewhere (Florian and Graham, 2014; Popp and Holt, 2013; Guignon, 2012; Sewchurran, 2008a, 2008b; Spinoza *et al.*, 1997). Instead, the second step in this paper will be to offer some of our key heuristics for understanding the phenomenon of being. These heuristics are informed by Heidegger's work. Thereafter we discuss contributions from scholars who have used Heidegger's ideas to promote a phenomenal view of *being-in-management or entrepreneurship* that we have found useful in our teaching practice. Finally, interwoven in this discussion, we put forward our views on how these perspectives have helped us communicate and teach the phenomenon of *being-in-management* to students on an Executive MBA programme at a South African business school. This teaching is founded on our proposition that a shift in the being-in-management of executives, from detached deliberation to involved experimentation, might lead to more intense engagement with, and articulation of, the complex social, economic, and environmental challenges we face.

## **Evidence from the research: the need for ‘modes of being’ in management and entrepreneurship**

The research disciplines of project management, general management, and entrepreneurship are all concerned with driving tacit skills (i.e. those that are hard to represent explicitly), such as the ability to organize, manage, and ‘entrepreneur’. These disciplines all question the adequacy of theory to explain practice, and have highlighted the need for a focus on ‘being’.

Researchers studying the phenomenon of projects and related management practices (Bredillet, 2015; Maylor and Söderlund, 2015; Sewchurran, 2008b) have been grappling with understanding what sustains the gap between theory and practice. There has been a concern that despite an accumulation of new theories of project management, there has not been a corresponding improvement in the success rates of projects. The research contributions in the space of projects that offer explanations of this illustrate a growing realization among researchers that project management, as a collection of instrumental techniques, is an insufficient paradigm to guide the creation of new, innovative practices of organizing. Furthermore, it is becoming apparent that project management is dependent on responding to unique, dynamic situations: it requires reflexive learning, moral thought, practical wisdom, and prudence (Cicmil, 2006; Cicmil *et al.*, 2006; Pollack, 2007; Sewchurran, 2008a, 2008b). These suggestions highlight that behavioural, cognitive, and communicative aspects are of far greater value to managerial or leadership performance in projects than sets of prescriptive techniques. Bredillet (2015) suggests that the search for theories needs to be focused on the different intelligences that are needed in practice rather than an overemphasis on the knowledge as predictive or descriptive models. Sewchurran (2008a) similarly offers a perspective of how to educate for a new way of being in projects that allows for the prudent interplay of different ways of being. Furthermore, Sewchurran and Brown (2011) draw attention to the dangers of continuing to theorize with an incorrect model of being-in-projects and warn that new knowledge about projects as descriptive or prescriptive can imprison and confound rather than enable intervention or understanding. They argue that research and practice in business education about projects has not embraced a wider ontology of human lived experience and this has helped preserve a pretence about what project management education and research ought to focus on.

Similarly, researchers in management implicate the kinds of knowledge produced and taught in business schools for failing to explain the dichotomy between theory and practice, and they raise the lack of impact of business school education on the real challenges in management as a concern. Moldoveanu and Martin (2008) notice that business schools take advantage of the large market for business education, but do little to make business education more relevant to the contextual challenges

faced by managers in practice. They present a perspective on the 'future of the MBA' as needing to be a concept-making role, and argue that management education has to prepare managers to thrive in the role of being *articulators* of new concepts and common sense regimes. Like Spinosa *et al.* (1997), they see this articulator role as needing to bring the disparate raw experiences of the many into coherence, to stimulate understanding about and action on the situation of concern. In offering these suggestions they recognize that there is a weakness of will to engage in this kind of management and diagnose that there are new managerial virtues and personal being dimensions, such as ontological openness or 'open-beingness', that need development (Moldoveanu and Martin, 2008: 57). They make the insightful observation that academic practice can help bridge the theory-practice gap if it works in the *tacit* domain by attempting to instil and develop 'productive *stances* and *modes of being*' rather than separating taught knowledge from lived experience and action (Moldoveanu and Martin, 2008: 47).

Chia and Holt (2008) explain that the production and dissemination of abstract causal explanation over practical knowledge have led to a privileging of detached contemplation over involved action. They assert that we ought to take the *being-in-the-world* of managers more seriously in research and teaching. Chia and Holt (2008) further observe that an overemphasis on representational knowledge holds scholars and practitioners back from realizing that management is mostly an immersed perceiving, coping, and sense-making process: it is a set of skilled integrative social practices, which may draw from the representational forms of knowledge. These practices are more of an art than a science. Management, they argue, is essentially about 'becoming aware, attending to, sorting out, and prioritizing an inherently messy, fluxing, chaotic world of competing demands that are placed on a manager's attention. Active perceptual organization and the astute allocation of attention is a central feature of the managerial task' (Chia, 2005: 1092). Managerial action thus takes place from within messy situations that managers find themselves in. As such, the practice of managing is more of a phenomenon of method, as Chia and Holt (2008) and others have argued.

The scholarship of entrepreneurship has undergone a similar anxiety with regard to their search for relevant theory. There is evidence that these scholars are also settling for a more phenomenological understanding of the 'entrepreneurial' experience and are particularly concerned with sustaining, arousing, and nurturing emotional commitment and new insight (Popp and Holt, 2013). In making a case for entrepreneurship as a research-creating process, Steyaert (2011) and Johannisson (2011) make the argument that the experience of (entrepreneurial) human venturing is one of sense-making, emotional commitment, concrete action, and a vision from

the orchestrator. Thus a research-laden approach should seek to nourish the venture, keeping it meandering but focused, as well as energized and flowing.

While the research disciplines of project management, general management, and entrepreneurship all differ in context, they all seem to suggest that to improve practice, the dichotomies between theory and practice, and research and practice, need to be eliminated. At the core of this debate lies a concern that what we value as valid research is not adding to our ability to pursue the challenges in the world of *being-in-management*. Hence it won't be enough simply to get closer to practice: there must be a moderation from an ontology of *being-in-management*.

The sections above illustrate that there is recognition of the limitations of overemphasizing knowledge by representation, and not focusing sufficiently on understanding the experiential knowledge in practice, and a need to suggest ways in which these could be *integrated* to enhance the performance of *being-in-management* as it unfolds in day-to-day practice. We argue that not striving for integration of knowledge and experience (or theory and practice) confounds the management experience and prevents impact being made in the real world. It also limits practical mastery of the art of management, and it further limits the development of the art of management as a phenomenon. Following lines of thought expressed by both Tim Ingold (2011) and Hilary Austen (2010), we suggest that when we are managing (or engaged in any other artistic performance) we are infused in the medium in which we find our being and through which we move. As is arguably the case in our perception of the weather, we do not perceive our managing 'out in the open,' we perceive *in* our managing (Ingold, 2011: 138).

### **Key heuristics from Heidegger: understanding management as a phenomenon**

As was clear from the previous section, the phenomenological concept of *being* (derived from Heidegger in particular) has been cross-appropriated from philosophy and has entered the research areas of project organizing, managing, and 'entrepreneuring' through the work of theorists such as Nonaka *et al.* (2014), Popp and Holt (2013), Cunliffe (2009), Sewchurran (2008b), and others.

The questions levelled at the adequacy of our grasp of being-in-management are questions concerning ontology. Every science presupposes some conception of the essence of the entities that are the objects of its enquiry in research and educational efforts. This conception is often referred to as ontology. Generally there is no need for researchers to question these ontological frameworks. That said, during periods of crisis, such as that faced by business schools in relation to their MBA programmes, researchers and educators have to call into question the ontological frameworks within which they work (Guignon, 1983: 64).

Like the theorists from project organizing, managing, and 'entrepreneurship' cited earlier, Heidegger was similarly concerned by a lack of understanding of ontology regarding 'as-lived' experiences. This motivated him to give a general account of existence, which is presented in his best known and most influential work, *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962; Guignon, 1983: 3).

Unlike Aristotle, Descartes, and others, who all started with perception and detached contemplation in presenting a fundamental ontology for being, Heidegger starts instead from the phenomenal experience of being-involved-in-the-world. He is the first philosopher to attempt to do this (Sewchurran, 2008a). We will discuss Heidegger here in heuristic form since more detailed explanations of some of the key concepts exist in other papers (Guignon, 2012; Popp and Holt, 2013; Sewchurran, 2008b).

The ultimate aim for Heidegger's *Being and Time* was to provide ontology to serve as a basis for the development of other regional ontologies (Guignon, 1983: 65), of which management is an example. Heidegger intended that his ontology should influence regional ways of looking at social practices such as project management, management, and entrepreneurship (Sewchurran, 2008a).

Some of the key heuristics ('rules of thumb') relevant for a phenomenal understanding of being as proposed by Heidegger, include the following:

1. Human beings embody understanding of their environments and this allows them to undertake daily mundane activities without being reflective.
2. Because of this tendency, human beings develop a pre-reflective sense or grasp of their environments, and apply habituated expectations in their perceptions of their environments.
3. The daily activities that human beings engage in do not follow strict thinking and then doing iterations.
4. Human beings are occasionally reflective and able to theorize.
5. Human beings only find themselves in theorizing modes when things don't work the way they expect them to, such as when the world does not respond in ways their habituated expectations anticipate.
6. The basic assumption that human beings are engaged in rational cognition (i.e. that the environment is passed through the retina and these images are processed by the mind using a cognitive process to compute understanding of the phenomena, together with adequate behaviour for the given situation) is untrue.

7. Human beings are for the most part already involved-in-the-world and not always aware of themselves.
8. Human beings do not encounter the world as objects with specific properties and uses.
9. Human beings are always confronted with meaningful situations seeking their involvement: seldom do they encounter objects through their properties.
10. In moments when the world does not respond as expected, human beings become conscious of themselves being in the world with other human beings.
11. Human beings constantly refine their involvement in the world and this shows up as new practices and solicitations (i.e. as relations between things, which afford the opportunity to perform an action).
12. Hence, once theorizing or understanding happens, the resultant insight moderates involvement in the world and changes the solicitations (requests, calls, demands) a human being encounters.

These heuristics offer insight into the different modes we might be in when we are in the messy flux of being-in-the-world, and illustrate a range of states that education and research do not consider when they assume that being-in-management is about the rational selection of appropriate theories to use in particular situations.

The following section offers insight into how other researchers are trying to educate for the being-in states of management.

### **The phenomenon of *being-in-management***

A number of scholars (Chia and Holt, 2008; Moloveanu and Martin, 2008; Sewchurran, 2008a, 2008b; Spinoza *et al.*, 1997) have presented a phenomenal view of *being-in-management* or *being-in-artistic-performance*. Almost all of them reference Aristotle or Heidegger, except for Austen (2010), who draws on Dewey. We discuss them here, and highlight in particular the ideas that we have found to be useful in teaching *being-in-management* to Executive MBA (EMBA) students.

Chia and Holt (2008) suggest that *being-in-management* is like being in a never-ending dance of 'building' and 'dwelling'. In the 'building' mode, they suggest, the manager is able to build mental models and theories of intervention prior to any practical engagement with the world. And in the 'dwelling' mode managers are inextricably immersed in their surroundings and have no means of retreating for a birds-eye view and must reach out from wherever they are. Chia and Holt (2008) also elaborate on the downside of overemphasizing the 'building' of a 'rational, reflective manager in the world' in research and teaching. Their ideas are useful to articulate the breadth of the phenomenon of being-in-management since they highlight



the many modes that are important to develop, and they draw attention to the importance of developing *all* of these. Theirs is a useful way of putting the 'dwelling' dimension on the radar for management development rather than the phenomenon being undefined, ambiguous, and a source of frustration.

Spinosa *et al.* (1997) also draw attention to the 'dwelling' mode and highlight a specific state in this mode, which they identify as the state of experiencing *anomaly* or *disharmony*. They argue that this state can be used as a source of insight and focus to usher in what they term 'whole new worlds,' which, they say, used to be quite a normal capacity prior to the industrial revolution, but has since been lost. They suggest that:

*Before the advent of machine-powered tools one had to bend to one's will as much as possible the tendencies in the thing one is working with, whether the grain of the wood, the shifts and power of the wind, the will of the horse, or one's own desires.*

(Spinosa *et al.*, 1997: 26)

In other words, human beings used to have the capacity to improvise in a steering, authentic way, but this mode of being has been enfeebled by the new cultural style we have acquired, which is obsessed with certainty, with knowing completely before acting, and with being in control. Their ideas communicate the value of the 'dwelling' mode of being and how the capacity to make productive use of this mode of being has become concealed, with the result that we do not notice our in-dwelling in the world in which we are being managers.

Austen's ideas on performance mastery and artistry are helpful in highlighting the latent value in the 'dwelling' mode and how its value can be accessed (Austen, 2010). In her study of artistry and performance, she suggests that artists and performers build qualitative knowledge of what it feels like to be in a performance or to engage in an artistic work (*ibid.*). This amounts to a felt-experience that they try to sustain. She defines these qualitative kinds of knowledge as distinctly different from knowledge by representation, and defines the notion that there are 'qualitative markers' of being in performance.

Moldoveanu and Martin (2008) build on the claims of Spinosa *et al.* (1997) that human beings have lost their ability to disclose new worlds, when they diagnose that there is a weakness of will and emotional commitment to venture into defining new regimes of common sense. In arguing their case, they refer to the culture of reasoning that society is ensconced in, and the subsequent effects this has on the roles of management and leadership. They explain that the master narratives, such as shareholder-capitalism and an overemphasis on analytical thinking, no longer hold self-evident truths. They regard the lack of progress with changing the societal conditions we are experiencing as a lack of will and commitment to act among our

leaders and managers. In giving advice on how to design the thinkers of the future suitable for management and leadership, they propose that contemporary leaders (and business schools) need to champion the role of articulating new regimes of common sense and new concepts, in order to bring the disparate raw experiences of the many into discussions about new business models, new policies, and new worlds of possibility. They describe the phenomenal experience of dwelling, and offer a suggestion that future leaders need to build a capacity not only to leverage the tension that is experienced when they have choices to make among undesirable, opposing options, but also to enjoy doing so. They suggest that whenever choice situations emerge, the thinker of the future must resist the role of being a choice maker and allow for new options to emerge. This requires an 'integrated thinking' intelligence capable of holding two or more opposing ideas in mind concurrently while resisting choice and still retaining the ability to function. They argue that the manager, as high-value decision maker, is fundamentally an integrator and an articulator.

This section has highlighted some existing contributions that are being incorporated into our EMBA teaching practice to help managers learn to notice, hold on to, and articulate a phenomenal description of *being-in-management*. While our research is still in its early stages, and our interventions on the EMBA in South Africa are still being tested, with only three cohorts of EMBA's having gone through the programme so far, we are hopeful that the remarks above might inspire more pedagogical experiments to bring about a different way of being-in-management practice.

The purpose of this paper has been to argue that the emerging scholarly efforts to explore the phenomenon of being-in-management, which has been lacking in management education, might present an access point with which to leverage the tensions created by an evident lack of will, commitment, and progress in dealing with many of the socio-ecological threats we encounter, to allow for new worlds of possibility to be articulated, disclosed, and enacted.

We argue that a framework that is founded on a phenomenal understanding of being-in-management, and that uses texts such as those cited as theoretical lenses, might be useful in business education because:

1. It systematizes and organizes the totality of the messy experience of being-in-management, and provides an entry point to competence development and mastery across the entire breadth of the managing experience.
2. It assists in making the opportunities for learning, sense-making, sense-giving, competence development, mastery, and intervention noticeable to the manager.

3. It broadens the definition of knowledge so that the focus goes beyond knowledge-by-representation to include felt experience of being-in-management as well.
4. It serves to make the management experience more fulfilling and more purposeful, inspiring more commitment to sustain a lifelong pursuit of learning and more authentic engagement with the world.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has clarified the validity of the concern by Bourn (2015) that development education must go beyond its information roles and focus on pedagogy: it did this using the context of business education. The purpose of the paper has been to go beyond this and exemplify how a phenomenon of being-in-management might be central to making the management experience more fulfilling and purposeful, as well as illustrate how the phenomenon of being-in-management is a key constraint affecting a lack of will, commitment, and subsequent progress in dealing with many of the socio-ecological threats we encounter.

The contribution of the paper is that it highlights that the phenomenon of *being-in-management* should be central to management education pedagogy and research, as it provides the potential to calibrate finer, more detailed awareness of new ways of being-in-management. It also cultivates more intensified involvement in executive leaders and managers to help society and business regenerate themselves. In arguing this case, we have provided a set of heuristics for understanding the phenomenon of being-in-management, and drawn on theorists who are leading discussions on how to design the business and societal thinkers of the future. We have connected these suggestions to prominent emerging threads in project management, general management, and entrepreneurship research, and highlighted that researchers in these interventionist fields are calling for a light to be shone on the being-in-practice of managers. We have consolidated what this might mean for more socially impactful leadership and management pedagogy, and argued that a lack of action seems to emerge from not having the 'being intelligence' or the will and commitment to notice, articulate, and implement new regimes of common sense that might be more open to generating more inclusive and sustainable growth and development agendas.

While the roles being considered in this paper are more prominent in business, they are significant influencers in pursuing the aims of global learning and development education. The pedagogical insights from this paper may also be relevant to the broader aims of development education and global learning.

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## Notes

1 For a discussion of the first sustainability MBA, see Hesselbarth and Schaltegger, 2014.

2 See Nonaka *et al.*, 2014, for a review.

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