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Sub-theme 29: Values, Organizations and Institutions

Socially responsible business schools? Values, valuing and evaluation of a social responsibility project run at a UK business school

In this paper, we reflect on the values reflected by certain practices of evaluating a social responsibility project run at a business school in the UK. We concur with the idea that business schools have to act as responsible members of their localities and take the opportunity and their relatively privileged and financially powerful position in society, at least amongst educational institutions, to promote the social good, well-being, and social mobility. Consequently, we argue, when evaluating such educational social responsibility projects run in the local community, business schools have to be clear about the values embedded not only in the project itself but also in the evaluation framework developed to ascertain its effectiveness and impact. We suggest that evaluation methods developed in the 1980-90s, primarily responsive contextual evaluation, that have since been pushed into the background by neoliberal forms of governance should be adapted to complement methods prevalent nowadays, such as social return on investment (SROI) in the field of social responsibility and quantitative scientific frameworks in the field of education studies.

This paper connects to two rationales of the sub-theme. On the one hand, it is humanistic in that our argument aims to counter the reductionist tendency in the evaluation of social responsibility projects. On the other hand, it is also self-critical inasmuch as we argue that business schools have to take responsibility for their practices not only in terms of what they research and teach but also in how they deliberate the social value of their activities.

Business schools and their social value

Ever since the 2008 global financial and economic crisis, business scholars have been encouraged to assume responsibility for the education they provide and the values they preach. Ghoshal (2005) famously called for management academics to revisit the performativity of their theories, which allegedly contributed to the unfolding of the crisis and the indebtedness of society in general. Writing the history of US business schools, Khurana (2007) has decried the lost professional ethos that could have steered management students away from subscribing

to regimes of corporate greed. More recently, critical management scholars have expressed a renewed call to putting our values to work in actually shaping our education and institutions themselves (Contu, 2017). This could involve a different form of critique, which is less concerned with describing universal repressive structures or subjectively perceived individual values, and more attentive to the relational affects between people and material objects (Ashcraft, 2017). As these calls demonstrate, values have become quite critical to management education but are at the moment more reflected in individual scholars' teaching and research than they are in either the operation of business schools or academics' and institutions' engagement with their stakeholders.

The latter issue is addressed by the work of Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman (2016; 2009) whereby they offer a range of options for management scholars to engage with particular groups of the public. They list "an affirmative stance, an ethic of care, a pragmatic orientation, attending to potentialities, and a normative orientation" options (2009: 545). Specifically, pragmatically oriented fora set up along the lines of Habermasian ideal speech situations can create a platform for constructive and affirmative dialogue between stakeholder groups. But it is particularly in the area of creating micro emancipations (Alvesson & Willmott, 1992) that business schools could start not only expressing but also implementing values that serve wider social goals of social mobility and development.

Values in evaluation

If business schools are expected to fulfil such a social role (Kraatz & Flores, 2015) that would require them to also express their values in practices of academic administration and other aspects of their operations, which go beyond their research and teaching activities. Recently, such engagement across a wide range of business schools has been performed under theegis of the Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME). PRME is a UN-mandated umbrella organization that promotes and supports the education of future managers for sustainability, responsibility, and ethics. One important way its six principles are expected to be reflected in business schools is through activities, language used, examples and case studies given that complement the regular activities. These form part of the "hidden curriculum" (Blasco, 2012), which students and staff members pick up on—even if only unconsciously. However, as a general framework, signing up for PRME only provides an impetus and support to business schools with which to engage, and just precisely what values are reflected in the programmes, activities and projects they choose to do, and how critical these are of the prevailing ideas of management (studies), is still up for grabs (Louw, 2015).

The authors of this paper are now into the third year of a pioneering programme run by the Engagement, Sustainability, and Ethics Unit at Cass Business School which accredits second year BSc Management students who mentor and coach at-risk first year students at Cass and pupils in local secondary schools in underprivileged areas of London. As an elective module, we teach mentoring and coaching theory and skills over a semester through regular weekly practical workshops. Students then engage in mentoring during the following semester. The module is formally assessed through observation of a coaching session, reflective essay writing and feedback from participants and schools. This is a project that demonstrates a commitment to responsible management education through social responsibility towards the local community of the business school and a sensitization of undergraduate students to economic and class allowing different opportunities in life, which are very different to those of our own students studying in the City of London. As a responsibility to our students taking the module, we expect, and have some early proof pointing to this, that being versatile in such life skills greatly enhances their employability. All in all, we hope that such a project is an outstanding way to develop mentoring and coaching skills in our students while supporting school pupils from deprived backgrounds—and that after the first five years of piloting similar projects will be adopted by other business schools too.

A key question for us in terms of this project has been how to evaluate its effects. Towards the end of the project we will have to convince our funders and potential new ones, our Dean and hopefully representatives of other business schools, and ultimately also prove to ourselves that such a project is worth (not in the limited financial but the much broader normative virtuous sense of the word) doing and rolling out on a bigger scale. To do this, we first have to identify the values encoded in the project itself. In the evaluation literature this is most often done through the (re)construction of a theory of change (Anderson, 2005). While such a theory of change is indicative of what creators of the project think is socially valuable and how the apparently valued social mobility can be achieved, more engagement is needed to find out all stakeholders' values encoded in the project.

This is where project evaluation becomes important not only as a means of judgement but also as one of discovery and pedagogy (Patton, 2017). As Schwandt argues, “somewhere along the line in their professional preparation, evaluators need to gain adequate awareness of, concern for, and understanding of issues of human well-being” (2007, p. 124) given that any action we take incorporates social, political and moral values. In order to fulfil their role in advancing such a wider humanistic concern beyond simply establishing that a certain programme works,

evaluators have a threefold task. First, they have to understand the values and norms embedded in the particular programme they are evaluating. Second, they have to engage in moral criticism, which can use the tools of social science to explain power relations. Finally, the values and moral principles encoded in certain forms of evaluation need to be examined.

That is, beyond the recognition and critique of values embedded in the project itself, business school staff members as evaluators should also pay reflexive attention to the kind of evaluation used and the values encoded in the evaluation framework itself. Two basic models of evaluation of socially responsible projects are readily available to us as management educators: from the field of social enterprise, at least in the UK and the US, the framework of SROI has become the definitive model for evaluation (Scholten, Nicholls, Olsen, & Galimidi, 2006); approaching evaluation from the area of education studies, the introduction of New Public Management (Thomas & Davies, 2005) and the associated development of the audit society (Power, 1997; Ruth, Wilson, Alakavuklar, & Dickson, 2018) has resulted in an almost exclusive focus on proving that educational programmes can achieve certain preset, and predominantly quantitative, outcomes.

Mainstream approaches in social responsibility project and educational evaluation

Originally developed in 1986 by US venture capitalist George Roberts, SROI is a social accounting and reporting system that applies business values to non-profit activities to judge their value. Over the past 30 years, it has been promoted in the US and the UK as the primary tool for foundations, charitable organizations, and social enterprises to evaluate the worth of their projects and the organizations as a whole. The aim of SROI is to measure the value of the benefits that certain stakeholder groups accrue as a result of the organization's activity and, importantly, assign them a monetary value to enhance the commensurability of projects. Thus, the model makes it easy for (social) investors, charitable donors, or government bodies to compare the returns (or savings in the case of the latter) on a variety of projects.

The comprehensive and well-developed nature of SROI made it a suitable framework to use for the evaluation of our own school mentoring and coaching partnership project. Its guidance on identifying stakeholders and assessing the benefits they gain as well as the clear representations of this to our funders are aspects we adopted for our own evaluation framework. However, the method has been criticized for a variety of reasons that make it not suitable on its own for us to use. Its final step and goal of monetizing the benefits accrued fits into a broader critique of the financialization of daily life, which by selecting only financially viable projects

for investment or funding can promote the reproduction of social inequalities (Dowling & Harvie, 2014). It also promotes a neoliberal market-based logic of evaluation (Davies, 2014). But even if one believes in the need for commensurability, the agency-centeredness of makes cases almost impossible to compare (Fujiwara, 2015). Finally, evaluators have the power to empower or disempower particular groups of stakeholders by (not) asking them and/or (not) involving them in the process (see Hall, Millo, & Barman, 2015).

Approaching from the field of educational evaluation also poses certain problems. Educational evaluation since the 1970s has increasingly taken the form of measuring so-called “quality” against preset objectives, in line with broader changes towards the audit society. The introduction of New Public Management has resulted in education being governed by these evaluative activities rather than a discussion of its primary role in fostering a particular kind of society and individuals (Segerholm, 2010). Thus for an evaluator, the question should be who benefits (Segerholm, 2010) and how people’s well-being is served by any particular programme that we’re evaluating (Hostetler, 2005). Howe goes as far as to claim that “Educational research [that includes evaluation] can never be value-free. To the extent it approaches value-freedom in its self-perception, it is to that extent dangerous [and] in fact [...] useless” (2003, p. 133).

In summary, in the fields of both social responsibility and educational evaluation, the most common forms of evaluation are descendants of positivist ideals that sustain the idea of an objective truth and researcher/evaluator’s epistemological privilege in being able to fully access this. To complement for the shortcoming of these approaches and their lack of any attention to values briefly discussed above, we propose that the debate on constructivist responsive evaluation (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Stake, 1975) should be revisited.

Constructivist responsive evaluation as a complementary approach

Guba and Lincoln (1989) claim that researchers have no access by any means to an underlying reality, only to socially constructed truth claims. Evaluation thus becomes context-dependent, where stakeholders’ perspectives matter as much as the evaluator’s and consensus (or at least several rounds of discussion) over how the programme is eventually evaluated should be developed in deliberative democratic settings of a Habermasian kind. Apart from accounting for the value-laden and context-dependent nature of both facts and their interpretations in the evaluation process, this approach also educates for democratic dialogue. Evaluation outcomes then cease to be seen as descriptions of truth but rather as ways of making sense of an

intersubjectively constituted reality. Thus, the values of those who construct evaluations fundamentally shape these evaluations as well as those “particular physical, psychological, social, and cultural contexts within which they are formed” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 8). In consequence both values and their power implications should be reflected upon and revealed, as well as the views of evaluators included in the process itself. This is in sharp contrast to formal evaluation that Stake sees “as centralizing, as conservative and working more for the powers that exist than for the powers that should exist” (Abma & Stake, 2001, p. 10). The aim of responsive evaluation is to respond to those favourable claims, unfavourable concerns, and disagreed-upon issues that stakeholders may have regarding the particular programme to be evaluated and to keep these in mind and respond to during the subsequent phases of evaluation thus making values explicit.

Our own evaluation model is going through a major update at the time of writing this abstract and the first evaluations are to be conducted shortly. Elements of this, and the values incorporated, will be presented in the final full version of this paper at the EGOS conference.

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