

Chapter Four

Dancing with Ambiguity – the Wonder of Randomness

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I was tasked to talk about “what change is?” at the LIS75 Commemorative Conference – more specifically, to consider what change is through the lens of its significance to education. Why is it, I’ve been asked, that we need to change to make higher education more relevant? How do we ensure that the higher education system matches the needs of new students, and students who are returning for new or advanced programmes? Who needs to change, and how?

Certainly, by no means a small salvo of questions. So, let us take an analytical view of the topic first, before we attempt a systemic one.

In the weaving of my topic, the authors I consulted considered the following concepts and aspects: Change, lens of significance, education, why the need to change. They highlighted the following assumptions: – there is a need for relevance, to match needs for new students and returning students. And the assumption is also that there is a difference between new and returning students, and undergraduate and advanced programmes. These aspects and assumptions prompt the question, “who needs to change and how?”

Certainly, I was offered a dictionary of aspects, concepts and questions curtailed into one quilt of a topic.

Now – let us attempt a systemic view of this topic by summarising its essence. The essence, as I’ve extracted it, boils down to the following: *“Ensuring Higher Education sustainability through innovative change and flexibility”*.

Embedded in this systemic version of the topic under discussion, are some of the answers

to the original question: Why do we need to change? Well, I would argue, for the simple sake of sustainability, which has always been the primary driver of change – at least in the business world. And today, as a matter of fact for many decades, Business Schools and so-called Higher Education Institutions, are not just schools, they are also businesses with a market, with needs, with financial viability, feasibility and sustainability requiring certain Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) that drive these as imperative business practices. However, businesses as entities are finding themselves at the intersection of change and reaction to change where the speed, randomness and unpredictability of change are superseding our ability to prepare for this nature of change. Hence, innovative change becomes the new KPI which organisations have to embrace for the sake of sustainability and in this sense Higher Education Institutions are no different. As a matter of fact, they experience it much more urgently as they are the entities to which businesses look for answers in terms of preparing for this sweeping randomness in change the world is experiencing.

The title of my narrative: ‘Dancing with ambiguity – the wonder of randomness’ has specific significance and has by no means been chosen randomly. In fact, had I not myself been willing to change at one stage as senior lecturer at the Dutch Sudanese Management Centre (Business School of the Netherlands’ initiative providing European accredited management training in the heart of Khartoum – capital of Northern Sudan) I too would have found myself

at the peril of becoming irrelevant – the irrelevance that threatens many a lecturer, teacher, trainer and most training and education institutions (higher and otherwise) today.

You see, where I found myself in the heart of a country engulfed in a civil war, a military regime and imposed international sanctions, it's a bit difficult not to think differently about Porter's Five Forces (Manktelow & Carlson, 2014) and conventional PESTLE methodologies (Heckroodt, 2013) with which we scan the environment (Choo, 2003), if the same environment is so disrupted that the very conditions that gave rise to these frameworks, methodologies and paradigms of management simply do not exist. It is in these circumstances when the very constructs that gave rise to the paradigms through which we view the world, evolve from enablers to limitations, to stumbling blocks.

So – in asking me what needs to change and how we need to change as providers of Higher Education, I would venture to say that the answer lies in a fundamental questioning of the building blocks of Higher Education and the assumptions on which they rest, underpinning the paradigms that we have used for decades to shape our environment conceptually.

Today, as Senior Lecturer at Stellenbosch Business School and guest lecturer to four international business schools and private education institutions globally, I have to agree with Dr. Johan Roos, Dean and Managing Director of Jönköping International Business School (JIBS), where he also holds a professorship in strategy (including a period from 2009 to March 2011 when he served as President of Copenhagen Business School) that the educational institutions where our future business leaders are being trained, must be dramatically recalibrated and transformed.

Roos carries on to say that business education today is anachronistic in both how it is conducted and on what it focuses its content. Our brick institutions have in no way caught up with what today's technologies make possible in terms of

virtual learning and individualised, customised instruction. More importantly, business education needs to evolve once again, revising its goals to educate leaders of the future who have a new set of skills: sustainable global thinking, entrepreneurial and innovative talents, and decision-making based on, what he calls, *practical wisdom*.

For me, an example of such practical wisdom would be my challenge in Sudan where I could not use conventional frameworks taught in MBAs internationally as the fit between the frameworks or paradigms of the environment, with which I had to make sense of a disrupted environment, simply did not exist. This would be an example of practice forcing us to question the constructs of a theory that we used in order to make sense of the world in which we needed to manage our organisations.

So, in change there is content and approach as well as methodology. I'm going to focus on content and approach, more specifically the content and approach of strategy as a subject matter at Higher Education Institutions. Strategy is still regarded, in my view and experience, as the primary building block of competitiveness (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2010) and thus ranks as the most essential skill to be taught at Business Schools to our business leaders of today. This belief leads me to question the assumptions I have indicated above. The question is whether we still should regard strategy as the primary building block of competitiveness, as it has been over the past three decades, or whether we should shift our thinking in the direction that in the future the quest for sustainable competitiveness may well be embedded in business model flexibility (Casadesus-Masanell & Ricart, 2011).

What do I mean by this? Let me try and explain through an example.

Outside the lecture room, I spend my time building business expansion models for companies that wish to internationalise their

businesses. More specifically, I help companies expand onto the African continent.

In following Woolworths' exit from Nigeria in October 2013, the reasons for their exit have been cited as challenges with the supply chain infrastructure, high duties and levies, as well as a troubled relationship with the landlord.

It is interesting to note that none of these reasons were specific to Woolworths, but form part of the larger contextual environment which contains those factors of influence over which we as a business have little or no control (Heckroodt, 2013). A conventional thought paradigm on strategy would default to the notion of changing strategy, hence selecting an exit strategy, citing non-feasibility and viability from a shareholder perspective.

However, the challenge I pose to organisations is to progress from a choice of an alternative strategy, to rather considering a different business model while maintaining the strategic course selected. Failing to shift the building block of sustainable competitiveness to business model flexibility, away from contingent strategy as a solution to a changing environment, is to remain stuck in a thought paradigm of expired constructs. If a carpenter needs to use a screw to fix something, the strategy stays in place, irrespective of whether the screw requires a star point or flat point screwdriver. The tool would be different, but the strategy remains.

This is but one example of trying to answer the 'how' and the 'what' to change. The 'how' is to think differently by questioning the assumptions (McGrath, 2013) that gave rise to the paradigms we use in our efforts as educators to make sense of the world of management that we teach our students – new and returning ones. Not only do we need to change our way and

methodology of teaching through the introduction of new technologies, but we need a serious and fundamental rethink of the constructs we have used for decades on which to build our curricula.

Whereas most of the questions and concerns regarding education – of any sort and level including basic upbringing, come from those tasked with the responsibility thereof, those on the receiving end seem less concerned. If you are an educator, one would wonder about this disconnect between those who educate, and those who receive the education – at any stage of their life. My own definition of change, as the way in which I refer to it in this paper, is the challenge experienced when what used to work, appears to not be working any longer. Hence, educators are asking the question:

“Why do we need to change to make higher education more relevant? How do we ensure that the higher education system matches the needs of new students, and students who are returning for new or advanced programmes? Who needs to change, and how?”

Change in itself is not a bad thing and without it we, as a species, would not progress and develop or evolve (Nathan Bennett & Lemoine, 2014). So what then is the big issue about change? Should it not rather be something we as educators need to embrace and encourage, as opposed to worry so much about?

This paper attempts to ask this and a myriad of questions in the space of change in education and the uncertainty it embeds. The main focus is on the newness change can bring to higher education and in doing so, provide those on the receiving end of education with cutting edge relevance, competence and skills as they venture into the future.

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