

# Coupling Knowledge and Action in the Management Context What Does It Mean for Business Educators?

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# Working Paper

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**Coupling Knowledge and Action in the  
Management Context:  
What does it mean for business educators?**

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**COUPLING KNOWLEDGE AND ACTION IN THE MANAGEMENT CONTEXT:  
WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR BUSINESS EDUCATORS?**

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## **Abstract**

In the last decade, scholarly interest has been mainly attracted on the nature of knowledge, mechanisms of knowledge production and the transformation of the institutions diffusing knowledge. Most of these studies share the underlying hypotheses that management knowledge “travels”, as a package, from producers to passive receivers. A few exploratory attempts have envisioned an alternative perspective based on the idea of “knowledge consumption”. Managers are active receivers of institutionalized knowledge in the course of enacting their organizational roles.

Building on this last perspective, first we try to outline the process of knowledge consumption. We describe how sources of knowledge are selected, knowledge is acquired and consumed by assuming that managers are active consumer of management knowledge. Then, we construct the process linking the flows of management knowledge in organizations and the flows of action performed by managers. We sustain that knowledge has to be first dis-embed from the context and artifacts it is in to be translated into a portable form—a standardized artifact, a logic of action, etc. Then, specific courses of action are required to re-embed knowledge in new artifacts, practices or routines (e.g. a budgetary procedure, an organizational process, etc.). So, to re-embed knowledge in new contexts, managers have to mobilize resources and build consensus on the specific courses of action.

By assuming this process, two consequences are derived: first, the dis-embedding/re-embedding process is not the outcome of conscious planning; it goes back and forth, allows for controversial or “hypocritical” moves, at least in the short run. In any case, once management knowledge is translated into logics of action, managers have to use their imaginative power to share these logics to mobilize constituencies on priorities and undertake specific courses of actions This supports the idea that the managerial role is intrinsically political.

Second, management education cannot simply deals with managerial recipes and rules of thumb. It is increasingly asked for providing non-technical knowledge to help managers exert their political role. To mobilize constituencies and create consensus on controversial decisions, technicalities could be less relevant than business-unrelated knowledge. We hold that has a relevant impact on both the institutional settings and the content of management education.

The paper is structured in three parts. First, a framework is proposed to describe management knowledge consumption. Second, we outline the process linking consumed knowledge with actual managerial action. Third, the impact of this perspective on the structure of the institutions diffusing knowledge and on the idea of what is needed to make managerial decisions are explored.

Knowledge is at the very center of a large academic debate. Knowledge production has been investigated by assuming a deep transformation of the institutions that produce knowledge (Gibbons et al. 1994). Knowledge diffusion has been investigated by critically arguing on the university model (Parker and Jary, 1995; Mazza and Quattrone, 2000; Czarniawska and Genell, 2002). A wide scholarly interest has also raised on the epistemological basis of knowledge following the postmodern perspective. Within the management field, many scholars have engaged in distinguishing management knowledge content-wise (Mazza, 1998), on modes of articulation and transmission (Abrahamson, 1996), on carriers of diffusion (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000; Engwall and Sahlin-Andersson, 2002; Amdam, 2003)<sup>1</sup>. Others have held that the peculiarity of management knowledge stands in the need of a tight coupling with field application focusing on the prevailing direction of the knowledge flows between academics and practitioners (Barley, Meyer and Gash, 1988) and on the applicability of knowledge to concrete action (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000).

This last group of research works appears to share a skeptical view of the role of management education and of the relevance for action of the several management concepts at hand. This skepticism is not new; a few scholars had already envisioned a comprehensive critique of management education (Porter and McKibbin, 1988; Locke, 1996). After many years of growing success of management publications and rising expenses for management education and consulting, the current economic downturn puts again on the agenda of educational institutions the need to reassess the content of educational offer (Huff, 2000a) or, even, rethink management education at all (Reed, 2002; Trank and Rynes, 2003). In other words, the last months seems to confirm what the skeptics suggest: dark clouds are on management education. As Ackoff (2002) remarks

*“Most of what you’re taught you never use and is irrelevant, and what you do use you’ve learned on the job, usually on an apprenticeship relationship...Some adults learn in universities not because of the school or university but in spite of it.”*

Following the exploratory attempts by Watson (1994) and Gopinath and Hoffman (1995), in this paper we envision an alternative perspective on management knowledge, based on the idea of knowledge *consumption*. We hold that research attention should be displaced from the output (knowledge) to the process (knowing). By outlining the process of knowing, we assume that managers are active receivers of institutionalized knowledge when enacting their organizational roles (Staw and Epstein, 2000). By holding that managers are active knowledge *consumer*, we are able to study the coupling of knowledge and action in the management context. We suggest that this

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different perspective may lead towards a reconsideration of the current paradigms for management education. The way how the corporate leaders corporation are nurtured should change accordingly, taking into account their ability to select knowledge and put it in action.

This paper is structured in three sections. First, we describe the process of knowing in the management field by assuming a consumption perspective. Second, we outline view of how managers couple the acquired knowledge with the actual course of action. Finally, we discuss how the proposed perspective may have an impact on the assumptions characterizing contemporary management education form and content and present our reflections on the future of management education.

### **Knowing Management**

Most of the existing literature on management knowledge, either implicitly or explicitly, share the assumption that knowledge is a “package” that can be diffused with minor alteration during the process. So, it is possible to study how a given institutional actor works in the management knowledge field and how a given knowledge form travels from producers towards diffusers and, finally, the audience.

In this functional view, the focus is on producers and diffusers; the audience is made of passive consumers, their choices and preferences having a minor impact upon production and diffusion. The rule of division of labor and functional specialization apply to the institutions involved. Academia is prevailingly seen as the starting point for production of management knowledge. Consulting firms are as intermediaries, concretizing and commodifying management knowledge to turn it into “fast-travelling” techniques. Finally, press and media are given a role of popularizing and making management knowledge fashionable.

We argue that this view of management knowledge largely underestimate the role of managers in selecting and filtering knowledge as well as the gatekeeping role of the management community itself. Management knowledge is so highly unstable and strongly situated in local contexts (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000) that the very existence of an abstract management knowledge could be argued against. By assuming this perspective, management knowledge should be accompanied by a careful analysis of the process of knowing about management, that is the acquisition of a body of knowledge, and its translation into a mindset and, then, in a given practice or course of action.

From the knowing viewpoint, institutional actors are considered involved in the production and diffusion of management knowledge with no strict functional division of labor – or at least more complex network-like rather than hierarchical, overlapping and changing relation. In this way, the rule of functional specialization is replaced by multi-task competence. In the process of knowing, the key issues becomes what knowledge is actively sought by managers and what it is used for. In this sense, within the knowing process, managers can be represented as active knowledge consumers dialectically interacting with knowledge producers and diffusers. This dialectic may lead managers to be more or less active consumers according to specific contingencies and knowledge contents. We would, in fact, imagine a different degree of activity if managers are selecting a management book to read in an airport lounge during a stopover or if they are listening to a lecture given by a Noble prize in economics.

These assumptions stands at the core of the consumption perspective on management knowledge. The consumption perspective assumes that managers are able to actively select the assumptions they need rather than passively receive what is diffused by other institutions. The consumption perspective emphasizes the twofold focus of media effects on knowledge dispersal and consumer effects on content. It is not simply repeated consumption of commodities, but is more akin to involved instrumental interaction by active clients.

To follow the consumption perspective is also in line with the recent literature on the sociology of communication (Dayan, 1992). Scholars in this field suggest that, in a communication process, the audience is neither passive nor neutral or active. Audience is an active body who is constructing its own meaning of what is communicated and could be active or passive according to the actual communication process on stage. The juxtaposition between an active and a passive view of the audience needs to be overtaken (Bruhn Jensen and Rosengren, 1992). By building on this stream of social research, we propose to put the audience, that is the manager-consumer, at the center of the process of knowing. We assume that managers-consumers are active in making sense of available knowledge. So, managers consuming management knowledge are the key objects of analysis to understand how certain management concepts are put in actual managerial action.

Consistently with the consumer perspective on management knowledge, we propose to view the process of knowing as made of by three, logically distinct, stages: 1) management knowledge sources selection, 2) management knowledge acquisition, and 3) management knowledge consumption. However, it is important to point out that these three stages *are not* to be perceived of as sequential phases even though they are presented in a certain order – or more precisely their sequence maybe different from the order presented below.

## *The Selection of Management Knowledge Sources*

The self-directed effort of managers to actively select contents of knowledge has been surprisingly underestimated in the existing literature. Managers are seen as fed with management knowledge that institution such like universities, business schools and consulting firms suppose is relevant and helpful. The level of interaction, in terms of both institutional networking and tailor-made course design, between those institutions and the “practitioners” world, reinforces the assumption that the delivered knowledge is actually significant. As a consequence, those institutions are fully in charge to select the most useful knowledge for managers.

By adopting the consumption viewpoint, we assume that managers are active decision-makers in the process of knowing. In man cases, managers do not need to “outsource” the selection of knowledge contents. Their habits, lifestyles, personal tastes and networks are all involved in the knowing process on a daily basis. Their personal choices are part of the complex process of building competence and leadership for managerial action rather than the effort to solve specific issues at hand. In so doing, managers-consumers rely upon many sources of knowledge at their reach, as Nohria and Eccles (1998: 279) remark:

*“...Indeed management knowledge comes from everywhere: it comes from a manager’s own experience, from the experience of others, from books and articles on a variety of topics, from videotapes and live speeches by managers and management scholars, from formal education in business school MBA and executive programs, from training programs conducted by companies and outside training firms, and, increasingly, from consulting firms...”*

Hence, managers may easily shop across a wide and varied offer—including education, specialized media, digital media, popular books—so to acquire the needed knowledge for upgrading their managerial skills and problem solving capabilities, or gaining legitimacy for their actions. We propose that knowledge sources are selected on the basis of three orthogonal criteria: (1) scientific status, (2) practical relevance, and (3) social legitimacy.

*Scientific status* is often perceived to be a basic requirement for knowledge sources. Despite the craft nature of the managerial task and the fictional link between management and imagination, science is still a strong legitimating catchword for any source of management knowledge. In our age, when the trust in science is under a hard attack, management ironically appear to stand on the positivist side.

*Practical relevance* also affects the selection of knowledge sources. By looking at the advertisement



of leading MBA and Executive education programs, it clearly comes out that the dominant idea is that managers are in search for practical solutions to business problems. This belief is reflected first and foremost in MBA programs, but is also reinforced by management books business press reports. The widely diffused image of managers aiming at practical, ready-to-use knowledge for problem solving is now part of the managerial iconography.

*Social legitimacy* reflects the need for a wide social acceptance of managers. Legitimacy is in itself an indicator of institutions' ranking over almost non-testable features, such as trust, reputation, institutional linkages, and so on. Managers look for knowledge coming from socially legitimated experts like maitres a penser or top managers of successful companies. This would confirm the importance of the acquiescence to established social norms in managerial decision making (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Building on March's view of managerial decision making (March, 1988), we would expect that managers scan knowledge sources to select a stock of potential feasible solutions with unclear and ill-defined problems in mind. In empirical terms this means that *management knowledge selection is a solution-driven process where managers are mostly inclined to scan a plurality of sources, searching for reasons legitimating their (future) choices.*

#### *The Acquisition of Management Knowledge*

We propose that when managers acquire management knowledge, they behave as actual consumers. The consumer behavior of managers has been left largely unattended by the literature on management knowledge diffusion. It is our suggestion, however, that it may be revealing of managers' knowledge needs for action. We propose to focus on three modes of management knowledge acquisition: (1) company policy, (2) imitation, and (3) personal discovery. They are positioned on a continuum from less to more active role of managers-consumers.

*Company policies* to provide and update the management knowledge of their managers are developed since internal knowledge and competencies are increasingly considered as the primary source of sustainable competitive advantage. Companies set institutional linkages with universities, business schools and consulting firms in order to get a customized management knowledge offer. In this case, line managers often get the role and behave accordingly as non-selective consumers, as selection of sources and decisions regarding contents are either already made at the top management level or included in the career track. The assumption behind the development of company policies is that when managers are back again in the actual job context, they will be able to find by themselves

a way to translate the acquired formal knowledge into action. The usefulness of the acquired formal knowledge is therefore derived from the local translation capability of managers.

*Imitation* implies a more active role of managers in selecting what they consume. As for the development of company policies, the link between consumers and management knowledge is mediated by other actors – in this case peers, consultants, head-hunters, management gurus, etc. – playing the role of advisors and/or role models. Managers imitate—being encouraged in this activity even by their own organizations—those consumption behaviors that look highly legitimated and functional to personal achievements and careers following the implicit normative pressure the group exerts on each of its members. In this sense, media provide extensive information on influential CEOs education track, fashionable career paths, trendy golf clubs and resorts, etc. So, imitation reproduces the traditional issues of elite formation, where attending the “right” university, belonging to the “right” social environment, and being in the “right” meeting places were the most effective proxies of personal success. It is not surprising, therefore, if mass media increasingly turns successful managers into idealized role models and management heroes doomed to victory.

*“Western society applauds its winners. It is a competitive civilization in which the successful nation-states, firms and individuals are praised”.* (Sevon, 1996: 49)

A suitable reference in this direction is Rene Girard’s (1988) notion of the “triangular” desire. In it, the disciple pursues objects which are determined for him, or at least seem to be determined for him, by the model...the mediator of desire. The edges of the triangle thus represent *the actor, his or her role model, and the actor desiring something* not because of personal preferences but because of what he infers would be the choices and behavior of his model in similar situations. The original example goes to Don Quixote, acting in consonance with the inferred desires of his ideal. However, it could also be translated into a managerial context; in this case the manager, influenced by what (s)he perceives her/his model (a management hero, a guru, a consultant, etc.) would choose in a given case, selects one or another course of action.

*Personal discovery* is the tacit, experience-based way to acquire management knowledge mainly in order to build identity and image. As Townley (1995: 273) remarks

*“...knowledge of the self is central in the practice of management and features heavily in training and development of that practice as funded by organizations and delivered by consultants.”*

Similar to other consumers living in the age of the knowledge society, managers are also exposed to a large spectrum of information concerning management knowledge. Special business press reports

explain management issues. Sections of news reports are increasingly dedicated to management knowledge sources and contents. Besides this, bookstores and Internet offer a large space to management outlets. Furthermore, a growing amount of novels, movies and an increasing number of docu-soaps series, telling the story of various work places and/or professions, have managers as main characters and describe in-company life. Factors unrelated to profession, like personal interests, tastes, preferences and habits, largely drive this mode of acquisition. Personal discovery may thrive on any kind of source; in fact it is up to the consumers' sensibility to reframe what is acquired in order to translate it into action.

Management knowledge acquisition is, therefore, the result of the dialectics among producers of knowledge and managers. The dialectic may lead towards a more to less active role of managers, according to the specific context of knowledge acquisition. We suggest that the dialectic reflects the legitimacy interplay between management knowledge producers and consumers. *In the management knowledge acquisition, the dialectic strength of management knowledge producers decrease as the social legitimacy of the managerial community grow.* The recent rise of large financial scandals is reframing this relation by putting at stake the legitimization of the managerial community as well as rising criticism on management education.

### *The Consumption of Management Knowledge*

As suggested by reputed scholars (Pfeffer, 1981), managers use knowledge to make sense of organizational phenomena and other relevant environmental events. Outstanding skills in understanding environmental changes by detecting weak signs from a broad range of events, become, in fact, more critical for managers.

At the same time, managerial roles tend to expand and social expectations on managers are growing. Managers are increasingly asked to give meaningful opinions on economic, social and political events, since their decisions affect a large audience of potential—and actual—investors. To meet the expectations of a wide audience, managers need to be increasingly proficient in non-technical discourse. They are not requested to become poets or novelists; however, they are considered more and more role models and need to display tastes and habits consistent with this role.

From these two arguments, we derive that the main drivers of management knowledge consumption could be (1) gaining social prestige and (2) increasing performance.

Managers may acquire knowledge in order to gain *social prestige*. Traditionally knowledge has

been perceived as a mark of social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984) and a criterion for scrutinizing symbolic boundaries (Lamont, 1992). Social visibility and expectations force managers to share the rules for prestige accumulation with the other leading élites. Even though economic and management knowledge are increasingly gaining social prestige, more traditional forms of knowledge from academic disciplines, like humanities and natural sciences, are still highly valued as part of the social skills needed for a leading elite. Therefore managers are increasingly invited by mass media to appear sensible and knowledgeable about arts, literature, and so forth. Prestige regards opinions and behaviors more than actions; nevertheless, we argue that prestige is an important factor determining why managers consume knowledge.

Knowledge is also pragmatically consumed because it is perceived to *increase performance* in practice. The self image or identity of managers is to a large extent linked to performance, practical relevance and problem-solving skills (Townley, 1995). So, knowledge needs to be ready-to-use in organizational contexts and to make sense for local application. This perspective envisions the well-known rational/instrumental view of management action. Management knowledge is here valuable as it may result in efficient/effective implementations and increasing organizational performance.

We suggest that the two drivers are inversely correlated. The consumption for social prestige is accomplished by acquiring knowledge from socially legitimated sources. The consumption for increasing performance is accomplished by acquiring knowledge from sources legitimated in terms of usefulness/usability. As a consequence, *managers-consumers rely upon different distribution channels according to the (social or technical) value they look for*, in a similar way as gourmet or fast food restaurant are chosen.

*Insert Table 1 about here*

In the next section, we will outline how the management knowledge consumed is translated into action.

### **Managers Putting Management Knowledge in Practice**

Putting management knowledge in practice means transferring management knowledge over time and space. Since management knowledge is local, putting it into practice implies the managerial capability of bridging knowledge and courses of action. The concrete organizational artifacts (procedures, rules, systems, objects) are our point of departure to analyze this bridging.

Managers, in their quest for acting and breaking extant rigidities of stable organizational junctions, create new connections and structures of control. These become objectified in organizational rules, praxis and artifacts embodying actions preferences and management knowledge. In order to be transferable to other contexts, management knowledge has to be dis-embedded (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996) from the fabric of relations and action it is trapped in. Dis-embedding knowledge from its context means its de-contextualization and its translation into a portable form. This form could be another artifact which can travel from one place to another—e.g. a routine, a budgetary procedure, a production layout, etc.—or a more tacit element carried out by people mindsets.

In the latter form, management knowledge shapes the cognitive framework which guides behaviors and decisions; that is, what Bacharach, Bamberger and Sonnenstuhl (1996) name *logic of action*. Logics of action are cognitive frames embodying “the implicit relationship between means and ends underlying the specific actions, policies, and activities of organizational members” (Bacharach, Bamberger and Sonnenstuhl, 1996: 478). Logics of action also provide managers with the arguments when justifications for action are required (Bacharach, Bamberger and McKinney, 2000).

What is interesting to notice is that once management knowledge is translated into logics of action, managers have to use their imaginative power to apply these logics to mobilize people and undertake fresh actions. We agree with White (1992) that successful managers are able to open rooms for fresh action by breaking strong ties and reconfiguring existing networks of actors. In order to succeed, managers have to be able to re-embed knowledge into actions in new contexts. Re-embedding implies not only the design of an action plan, but also the development of ties with actors, the mobilization of external constituencies, the configuration of new networks of actors providing consensus and the like. In other words, it implies helps putting an action plan on stage, that is, the heart of the political dimension of managing. The dis-embedding/re-embedding process is not the outcome of conscious planning; it goes back and forth and allows for controversial or hypocritical moves, at least in the short run.

As described above, management knowledge trapped into concrete actions and artifacts, has to be dis-embedded in order to be translated into a different context. Following these arguments, we could argue that a consistent part of the management knowledge consumed by managers originate from what is already embedded into current praxis. So, in line with Barley, Meyer and Gash (1988), we expect that most management knowledge should emerge from extant practices and experience and then rationalized by academic institutions consulting firms and mass media. This dynamic provides an interpretation of rising skepticism of managers towards management academic

knowledge; in fact, it may appear as a mere rationalization of what is already available in the form of experience-based heuristics.

By applying the garbage can view of decision making (Cohen, March and Olsen, 1972), to get physical objects done and goal attained in their organization, managers are called for matching the flow of management knowledge with the flow of actions with no *a priori* synchronicity upon logical/rational or chronological premises. As a consequence, we hold that managers cannot develop rational rules to couple knowledge and action or to select and store management knowledge. Managers need to open rooms for as many links between knowledge and action as possible.

The actual completion of the link—i.e. the use of logics of action to make artifacts done—depends upon locally situated conditions. In this sense, to increase the availability of knowledge-action links, managers are eager to acquire as much management knowledge (in broad terms) as possible. This line of argument provides the topic of the diffusion of management fashions with a fresh interpretation based on the managers' need to have knowledge flows constantly available.

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

### **Implications: Eagerness, Scepticism and the Challenges for Management Educators in the Consumption Time**

In the previous sections, we have outlined the application of the consumption perspective on management knowledge and its translation into real managerial action. The arguments presented there can be summarized in the following issues: 1) management knowledge selection is a solution-driven process where managers are mostly inclined to scan a plurality of sources, searching for reasons legitimating their (future) choices, 2) in the management knowledge acquisition, the dialectic strength of management knowledge producers decrease as the social legitimacy of the managerial community grow, 3) managers cannot develop rational rules to couple knowledge and action; they need to open rooms for as many links between knowledge and action as possible. The implications of such issues for management educators are discussed below.

#### *Plurality of Knowledge Sources*

As Pfeffer and Fong (2002) remark “management and managerial skill has been identified as a core competence required for economic prosperity and possibly even economic development. In an

increasingly knowledge-based economy, the ability to mobilize and use knowledge is a critical skill". Data from many research indicate that business books and other publications are issued at an increasing rate. A good deal of this literature is not technical, but have important motivational elements, that is, it can be read as texts that both require and elicit the active imagination of the reader. The input that the specific and idiosyncratic act of reading provides to decision-making processes, the reading habits of managers, and the role of written media in the diffusion of management knowledge are therefore interlinked issues.

So, managers can read a lot about management. This potential (and, to a certain extent, actual) eagerness for knowledge transmitted through texts is parallel, perhaps even related, to an increasing skepticism on the relevance of management literature even assessed as fuzzy, irrelevant, pretentious and utterly divorced from the challenges of everyday management (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). The active role of managers in consuming knowledge is implied, the gatekeeping role of education may be put at stake.

In this sense, we suggest that management educators need a reflection on the knowledge they produce. Most management knowledge from academic institutions is produced in a self-referential form, aimed at talking with academic journals rather than the management community. As many scholars seem to look forward on a new focus on the economic core of management, we are sympathetic with those who emphasizes the risk to nurture "critters with lopsided brains, icy hearts, and shrunken souls" (Leavitt, 1989: 39). As Clegg and Ross-Smith (2003) argue, management should be developed as a science of subject rather than of objects. This means to consider those topics and arguments useful to the development of the personality and the self of managers.

As the knowledge base needed by managers to accomplish their tasks is getting increasingly varied, not only to accomplish the technical side of their task, but also to sustain their institutional and social role. We hold that managers do not only claim for practical relevance of contents. They may also acquire knowledge to signal personal reputation or to meet social expectations as members of a leading elite, since in the contemporary knowledge society, knowledge stands for reputation. Management education can build its own competitive advantage by gatekeeping this non-technical knowledge. In so doing, management educators should look at those disciplines like Sociology and Political Science and reframe the courses curricula accordingly. As suggested by Reed (2002), this should be a strategic priority for management educators rather than a fashion-like move.

*Dialectic Strength of the Managerial Community*

The managerial community has become more legitimated over time despite the supposed wave-like or cyclical nature of the evolution of business knowledge, as if no true building up were taking place, has facilitated that, in some academic circles, business knowledge, and the very managerial job, been seen with suspicion, as an irrational activity in need of legitimated cum legitimating knowledge. We hold that management knowledge production and managers' consumption are in a dialectic relation whose primacy is not prevailing on management education institutions.

This opens room for a restructuring of the education field. Competitive positioning of universities and business schools are at stake by the emergence of new actors such like corporate universities (Antonacopoulou, 2002). To respond to competition, management educators tend to conform, in a client-provider way, with the requirements of the potential audience. Since management cannot be reproduced in class, educators have focused on easy-to-transmit contents. The ambiguity and irrationality that characterize our time does not seem to enter into management classes; learning is coupled with repetition rather than changing way of thinking. As Pfeffer and Fong (2002) critically suggest

*“much of what business schools impart—theory and analytical techniques of various sorts—is readily learned and imitated, at least by intelligent people. Communication ability, leadership, interpersonal skills, and wisdom—the ability to weave together and make use of different kinds of knowledge’ (Mintzberg & Gosling, 2002: 28)—are at once less easily taught or transferred to others but, at the same time, because they are less easily imitated, have more value in the competition for leadership positions that occur in organizations.”*

Restructuring should take place at both the institutional and practical level. On the institutional side, the organizational model of business schools could be reconsidered. Business schools should be able not only to provide teaching sessions but also fruitful research programs by redirecting funds to research and doctoral programs from high-revenues MBAs (Trank, and Rynes, 2003). In doing this, business schools could benefit from a deeper relation with universities and with non-economic faculties in order to integrate with other disciplines. The search for a rational account of management behavior should not hide the intrinsic social science nature of the managerial discipline.

On the practical level, business school are under the strong isomorphic pressure of the ranking system. This is, to a certain extent, reducing over time the innovation rate in the educational courses by standardizing the format of, for instance, MBA and Executive education (Gioia and Corley, 2002). We suggest that business school should loosely couple with the assessing environment,



focusing more on the effectiveness of teaching. Recently, Wankel and DeFillippi (2002) have proposed a full reorientation of the teaching methods, in order to strengthen the educational role of business schools. This has been at the core of the widely diffused criticisms of the impact on students of MBA education. From this perspective, teaching should include techniques to involve students in assessing and developing their relational and political skills rather than looking for the appreciation of the audience. In other words, business education should provide less business functions and more education. Students should be again involved in learning about management rather than applications of commodified management toolkits.

### *Coupling Knowledge with Action*

Has the domain of managers-consumers been unobtrusive action—the management by indirection outlined by White (1992)—what is required to management education is actionable knowledge. The link between management knowledge and action is, therefore, a significant issue within management knowledge. Our view of this link primarily points out how coupling flows of knowledge with flows of action to make things done, is part of the politics of management. Managerial action is, in fact, a highly political task. Implications of this assumption are manifold.

The view of managerial action as highly political leads to a notion of managers as experts in long-term strategic action through playing short-term local games. This political model of managers corresponds to what March (1988) poses: executives should be seen as political brokers that relentlessly, from the power base of coalitions they need to build and continuously maintain, negotiate the composition of the firm and bargain its goals. However, while political theories of organizations have existed for a long time in organizational theory (among others, Cyert and March, 1963; Hickson et al., 1971; Pettigrew, 1973), managers' tasks have not been widely recognized as essentially political.

Also amplifying the political content of managerial work is the commodification of organizations. The coordination of units, only loosely subject to hierarchical umbrellas, is impossible to achieve with a stringent command-and-control style. All these features are pushing managers to become more like mobilizers of collective action, like leaders of social movements created around specific and transitory issues, or like coordinators of a number of small or middle size cells, or of transitory teams enacted around projects.

In this context, management education is asked to nurture political skills of managers by taking into account, as Roethlisberger (1954) had already suggested, of the knowledge that state what the

appropriate behavior of persons in groups should be (the so-called norms of behavior), the knowledges of behavior (regardless of time, place, and circumstance), the knowledge which persons have about themselves, the knowledge that state the logical conditions that must be obtained if the purposes of an organization are to be sufficiently secured, and, finally, the knowledge that state what the behavior of a person should be.

Management educational institutions should consider to teach this knowledge to help managers balancing the different dimensions and the growing awareness of the complexity of relationships in concrete phenomena. In search of this balance, managers look for a wide spectrum of knowledge for managerial purpose, far wider than that offered by traditional management education. This explains the rising skepticism on traditional management knowledge—seen as a sign of *cultism*, that is, the emphasis on one dimension of knowledge at the expense of the others.

So, immediate practical relevance could be useful for applied management knowledge but it may prove insufficient for other dimensions of the managerial task. In this sense, it might be worth investigating the importance of cognitive maps that include variables from humanities, politics and philosophy for managerial sensemaking in very uncertain contexts. Politics may prove central in visioning opportunities in ever-changing scenarios. Hot social themes, like environmentalism, business ethics, technology innovation and its impact on the labor market, may be purposefully addressed if managers show acquaintance with philosophy and sociology.

As a conclusion, management educators should avoid cultism and prevent the students to pursue shortcuts for cultism. The political skills underpinning those dimensions of knowledge should be, therefore, at the core of management education accounting for the real organizational milieu and the repertoire of tactics available for making things done. Management courses are still underestimating these issues and neglecting to include them besides a few sessions on organizational behavior or power and influence courses (Ferry et al., 2002).

## **Conclusions**

By exploring the consumption side of management knowledge, in this paper we make an attempt to understand the gap between two worlds that have existed in tension—that of practical relevance and problem-solving orientation, and that of social prestige. As reported in a recent article in *The Academy of Management Executive* (Huff, 2000b), James March judges, “the recent headlong

pursuit of immediate relevance in business schools and in management research” as wrong. As March explains it, the role of management academic knowledge,

*“...is not in trying to identify factors affecting organizational performance, or in trying to develop managerial technology. It is in raising fundamental issues and advancing knowledge about fundamental processes affecting management.”*

If we reflect upon the rise of financial scandals and the vulnerability of large corporations—if not of the whole financial capitalism—to unethical behavior, we cannot avoid posing a question on the outcome of management education in the last two decades. The effort of educating effective and proficient managers paradoxically seems to have lowered the level of integrity within corporations, in spite of the impressive array of literature on values, corporate responsiveness and business ethics.

The intrinsic irony of this paradox sheds a negative light on management education. As management educators we are asked to address the relevant questions coming from the observation of reality around us. Social constructionist and post modern assumptions cannot relieve us from the responsibility to “improve” management and make it ethical and responsible towards society at large. As educators, we are still in charge of uttering the relevance of social themes and proposing “good readings” on topics like history, politics, philosophy for managers to be.

In his recent “What to read and Why”, the noted literary critic Harold Bloom (2000), referring to narrative, affirms that people read in order to enlarge the sense of otherness, in order to heal the pains of solitude, and to practice the sense of irony. Although we can not make conclusive statements, we tend to agree that managers read for reasons not essentially different from those of Bloom’s fiction readers. They need, as Bloom would say, to heal their solitude among so much uncertainty and complexity, hear stories that could help to understand the predicament of others, and of themselves towards those others, to come to terms with the fragility of success. If a social actor needs the consolation of fiction this is decision-makers and actors in organizations.

Managers mainly play political games in their daily work. As for most readers, reading is for managers a primary source of ideas, techniques, inspiration and imagination for action, for the moves in their political games. Managers have no alternative sources for their consumable knowledge and hence the following paradox emerges: managers’ skepticism about the content of management publication is at the very heart of their continuous spread. Managers cannot replace reading with other means of knowledge acquisition. The institutional legitimacy of media disseminated knowledge offers justification even as the contingencies of managing push managers

to seek new knowledge, new inspiration. In other words, they are compelled to live with their skeptical eagerness in our media-saturated world.

We believe that many of those fundamental issues should be addressed by management educators. Educators have to both produce and advice readings. As management is growing as a social skill largely applied out of the business field, managers are more and more requested to own a broad knowledge basis as other elites. Consistently with March's argument, we hold that like nobles and politicians in the past, managers do not need to be technically trained; they will learn techniques by themselves. Like nobles and politicians in the past, they need to be taught "good manners", whatever this could mean in the 21st century.

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**TABLE 1**

**Management Knowing: A Consumption Perspective**

*Active role of managers*

-                      -/+                      +

<i>Criteria for selecting management knowledge sources</i>	Scientific status	Social legitimacy	Practical relevance
<i>Modes of management knowledge acquisition</i>	Company policy	Imitation	Personal discovery
<i>Drivers of management knowledge consumption</i>	Increasing performance		Gaining social prestige



FIGURE 1

Coupling Management Knowledge with Action

