Inside the Corporate Classroom

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ABSTRACT   *Client-based management education consists of award-bearing, higher education provision for managers drawn from single organisations. The growth of this type of provision has taken place in the context of pressure on UK business schools to generate additional income for parent institutions and growing competition from large organisations developing their own corporate 'universities'. This paper reports a small-scale interview study of management lecturers at two UK business schools. In addition to mini case studies, four recurrent themes of concern to lecturers are discussed, which include the impact of organisational politics on classroom learning and the effect of powerful client organisations on the traditional student-lecturer relationship. The findings of this study indicates that the corporate classroom produces a range of pedagogic dilemmas for management lecturers and endangers core higher education values, such as a neutral and open forum for debate, and the development of student's critical abilities.*

Introduction

During the 1990s, an increasing proportion of higher education has begun to take place *outside* higher education institutions. Informally, part of this equation is distance learning facilitated by advances in information technology. Formally, part of this provision consists of higher education funded courses within the further education sector. However, funding statistics mask the true extent to which higher education is now being provided beyond the physical confines of the 'university'. Client-based management education is one such example of this phenomenon. It is increasingly common for university business schools to offer, so called, 'custom' programmes (Crainer & Dearlove, 1998). Terms such as 'client-based', 'closed' or 'in-house' are among various synonyms for these schemes. Unlike consultancy or company training schemes, these programmes are award-bearing offering generic qualifications, such as a Diploma in Management Studies (DMS) or a Masters in Business Administration (MBA) validated by a higher education institution. The teaching of students, drawn from a single organisation, will normally take place on company or specially hired premises away from the physical confines of the university.

The evolution of client-based programmes needs to be understood in the context of the income generating role assigned to UK business schools by parent institutions [Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), 1994; Grey, 1998].

These programmes help business schools to live up to entrepreneurial expectations and forge closer relationships with, often large and influential, corporate clients. Prestige examples include the British Airways MBA at Lancaster University. The trend among a number of large organisations to establish their own corporate 'universities', such as the British Aerospace Virtual University or Unipart 'U', is also putting pressure on business schools to respond more flexibly to the needs of client organisations. These and other organisations are showing signs of impatience with the traditional 'product-push' MBA and demanding that business schools adopt a more market-led approach to curriculum design.

> Companies no longer want to be told that program providers know what's good for them and they should quietly accept what they're given. Increasingly, they want to be involved in the process of program design and implementation, perhaps even using their own facilitators to put the program content into the company's own context. (Pant, quoted in Crainer & Dearlove, 1998, p. 252.)

This climate has produced a competitive buyers market for award-bearing management qualifications tailored to the needs of client organisations. While prestigious UK business schools, such as the London Business School, can afford to eschew such programmes on the grounds that they are too insular and do not enable managers to learn with and from their peers in other organisations (Dearlove, 1995), the majority of business schools are in no position to refuse to bid for potentially lucrative contracts. At one end of the scale, some business schools see themselves as 'bespoke tailors' of management programmes designed to meet the exact requirements of client organisations (Harris *et al.*, 1992) while, at the other end of the scale, others are only prepared to offer 'off the shelf' products with no curricular adaptation (Hall, 1992).

In many respects, client-based programmes can offer significant benefits to all parties. Client organisations are able to develop managers to meet their specific business needs, student managers obtain a prestigious, generic management qualification, while the business school gets to generate income together with the kudos and associated opportunities of working closely with a corporate client. In management jargon, this is a 'win-win' situation. However, client-based management education also raises important issues for higher education. How is the higher education experience of students affected by such programmes? What is the impact on student learning, the pedagogic role of the lecturer and the student–lecturer relationship? This paper, drawing on interviews with management lecturers, seeks to address these and other questions connected with the specialness of the 'corporate classroom'.

Previous Research

Much of the literature on client-based management education, published principally in management journals, characterise such programmes in positive terms as 'partnerships' between employers and business schools (e.g. Boot & Evans, 1990;

Simpson & Lyddon, 1995). There is some recognition of 'political issues' concerning the negotiability of the curriculum and 'teething' problems, such as conflicting expectations among stakeholders (Boot & Evans, 1990; Salaman & Butler, 1990; Harris *et al.*, 1992). Another familiar concern expressed in the literature is that student managers on client-based programmes will receive an educationally inferior experience by not coming into contact with students from other organisations as they would on a conventional, university-based, 'open' programme (Dearlove, 1995). The client organisation, as represented by the senior management, and/or the training and development officer, is widely recognised as the 'principal stakeholder' (Simpson & Lyddon, 1995, p. 29). Most of the literature, though, stems from largely descriptive accounts written by business school staff with an organising stake in such programmes and can skim over the surface of substantive pedagogic issues. Mortimer (1992), for example, describes the involvement of managers from the client organisation in the assessment of their colleagues participating on a programme as 'a rather different challenge' (p. 41) without elaborating any further! Although these accounts are valuable as guides to the delivery of client-based schemes, focusing on managerial and organisational practicalities, the literature tends to only hint at the pedagogic context of the corporate classroom.

Methodology

For understandable reasons, the activities of business schools in providing client-based management education are far from transparent. Corporate clients are highly prized and relationships, often nurtured over a long period, are frequently kept, if not secret, essentially private. There is no central database of client-based management education held by management education organisations, such as the Association of Business Schools or funding councils. As I discovered during the course of my research, client-based provision can remain a secret garden even to some members of a business school carrying out this work. It is a shadowy world within a 'shadowy world' (Crainer & Dearlove, 1998). Researchers, who work at (potentially) rival business schools, are treated with a degree of suspicion!

Gaining access to two UK business schools in order to conduct interviews with relevant staff proved a difficult venture. Access was obtained largely on the basis of re-contacting members of a previous research base (Macfarlane, 1997) and discovering the identity of key 'gatekeepers'. Developing renewed trust with interviewees was a central challenge. Advantages stemmed from my 'insider' position as a fellow management lecturer conducting interviews with my peers. I was able to reciprocate, in a way commonly expected when interviewing one's peers (Platt, 1981), by sharing my own experiences teaching on client-based programmes. However, the position of client-based provision on the semi-secretive periphery of business school activity led to a particular challenge in gaining the trust and co-operation of interviewees. This tended to centre around re-assurances that the identity of client organisations, business schools and lecturers would be guaranteed. This included maintaining the anonymity of one lecturer from another within the same business school.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with management lecturers with

experience of leading, organising and/or making a teaching contribution to an award-bearing client programme. Fifteen lecturers from two 'new' university business schools were interviewed over a 4-month period from September to December, 1998. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes with key staff at each institution enabling mini case studies to be constructed. 'Patterning' (Miles & Huberman, 1994) of the interview data also produced a number of recurring themes.

Mini-case studies

Coastal Business School

This is a well-established university business school with a number of corporate clients from both the public and private sector mainly following a single company DMS or MBA. However, although these awards are offered on a single company basis, the curriculum is not subject to negotiation. Students on client-based schemes are required to sit the same examinations as students on the 'open' programmes and assessment is carried out entirely by business school staff. There is some, marginal, involvement of senior managers/company trainers in programme delivery, but this tends to be limited to occasional 'guesting' spots on programmes. Tailoring takes place on the basis of programme delivery, at a time and venue suited to the client organisation. These are sometimes week-ends or teaching blocks of up to 5 days during the week. Client-based programmes are seen as important in the strategic context of increasing part-time postgraduate student numbers. Obtaining HEFCE funding was an ambiguous issue. Some client-based schemes had obtained government funding whereas other had not.

Organisational issues for the business school centre around staffing. Teaching on client-based schemes is not regarded as part of a lecturers' normal teaching duties. Staff contributing are thus paid on the basis of double overtime rate which, for some, represents an equivalence to consultancy rates. Those teaching on client-based schemes tend to be more senior members of staff described by one interviewee as a 'magic circle'. The use of highly experienced, 'core' staff raises concerns, however, regarding the staffing of the 'open' programmes. Meeting the particular delivery requirements of clients, means that staff need to have their other regular teaching duties 'covered' by colleagues. There was a perception among some interviewees that this had an adverse effect on the quality of the 'open' programmes. Some staff also expressed concern about this 'extra work' in the face of meeting research objectives. They felt under pressure to publish research and felt that there was a danger that client-based work was being conducted at the expense of research output. The ethics of using knowledge about a client gleaned from teaching on such a programme as a lecturing 'example' on other 'open' programmes was a particular concern of two interviewees.

Suburban Business School

This is a recently established university business school with corporate clients principally from the public sector. Unlike the Coastal Business School, Suburban

has developed programmes tailored more specifically to the needs of client organisations and these schemes are both at Diploma and Masters level. Delivery at Suburban also takes place at the client organisation's education and training facilities normally at weekends and during week-day evenings. In common with Coastal, assessment is carried out by business school staff and the involvement of senior managers/company trainers in programme delivery tends to be at the margins.

While Coastal was prepared to tailor delivery patterns to meet client needs, Suburban was prepared to go a stage further to meet corporate demands with respect to the content of the curriculum. Key players at Coastal Business School were insistent that the generic, 'open' programme curriculum would not be amended for client organisations. By contrast, a more flexible practice exists at Suburban. Here special validations at diploma and masters level had taken place, in order to meet the curriculum requirements of the various client organisations. This, in practice, often meant working closely with an organisation's personnel or training manager although key lecturers in this process indicated that they always tried to amend the 'generic' curriculum as little as possible. Programme directors of corporate provision made it clear though that the client organisation 'called the shots'.

Staffing provides another contrast in the approach to client-based programmes adopted by Coastal and Suburban. At Suburban staffing is treated as part of the normal teaching hours of lecturers with no premium paid, apart from travelling expenses associated with working off-site. At Coastal, staff are paid overtime to teach on these programmes. Although different in many respects to Coastal, there were similarities in the staffing priority given to client-based programmes. A small cadre of experienced lecturers, considered to be 'safe hands', were used to deliver the programme on company premises. It was made clear that the client organisations exercised a high degree of influence over staffing and that, on occasion, this had led to the removal of a lecturer from the programme at the express instruction of the client.

Recurrent Themes

All interviewees expressed concerns about client-based management education programmes. Although, the positive, practical and cost benefits of such schemes were acknowledged, in terms of convenience of location for student-managers, for example, interviewees from both institutions focused on a number of recurrent themes or issues largely critical of client-based provision. These 'patterns' (Miles & Huberman, 1994) may be represented in terms of the following themes.

Participation

In higher education, we tend to work on the assumption that students are willing participants. Higher education is, by definition, post-compulsory. However, several interviewees were concerned about the extent to which participation by managers on such programmes was genuinely voluntary. While it was recognised that many managers participated in such programmes in order to advance their careers, there

was also concern that some managers were motivated more by job insecurity than promotion prospects. A recognised first degree or substantial previous middle management experience are commonly employed by institutions as criteria for entry at diploma or masters level on an 'open' programme in management. Though participants at both institutions were still required to meet these normal entry requirements, the programme director at Suburban commented that a slightly higher proportion of students on client-based programmes were accepted on the basis of the accreditation of prior (management) learning.

In a contemporary business climate where re-organisation, compulsory redundancies, and expectations of employee 'flexibility' are commonplace, several lecturers argued that some managers viewed doing a management qualification, blessed by the organisation, mainly as a hedge against organisational change and uncertainty. As one interviewee described it, amongst students on a client-based scheme 'there is a feeling that it is good to be seen to be doing it'. There was no evidence that student managers were directly coerced into undertaking a programme of study, but lecturers felt that indirect pressure played a role. Although it was recognised that 'conscripts' might also be found on 'open' management programmes and, indeed, within modern mass higher education more generally, the problem was considered to be greater within client-based schemes where peer pressure would build-in expectations that all members of a relevant middle management strata would participate.

Nature of Learning

All interviewees expressed high levels of concern about what they regarded as the insularity of the learning process within client-based schemes. They argued that the cross-fertilisation of managers within 'open' programmes played a crucial role in helping students to understand the generic nature of many management issues and problems. While benefits in cross-functional understanding might be derived from bringing together managers from different parts of a large organisation, all interviewees saw the inevitable insularity of debate as a major drawback. 'Whinging' or 'navel-gazing' about organisational issues was also identified by several lecturers as a barrier to learning resulting from this context. Lecturers spoke about the challenge involved in dragging groups away from sometimes cathartic, but essentially introspective, patterns of class discussion.

One lecturer spoke about the need to 'provoke students beyond their conditioned mind-set', but that this type of teaching was more difficult to achieve on client-based programmes because 'a more pragmatic approach' was expected rather than 'a critical evaluation of their own organisation'. A different interviewee spoke of how 'discussions tend to be narrow and focused on the problems of the organisation' and several other interviewees commented about the limitations of these debates. One interviewee told a story about a client organisation which has subsequently become bankrupt. While he wanted to get students to examine their organisation in a critical way he argued that 'closed attitudes' meant these managers

were not prepared to contemplate alternative strategies and 'at the risk of being lynched I could have raised that as an issue, but I didn't, being a coward'.

Assessment of programmes at both institutions was not dissimilar to that employed within 'open' schemes. At Coastal, participants on client-based schemes were required to take the same examinations as those set for their 'open' programme students. Lecturers, both at Coastal and Suburban, commented, though, that coursework assignments invariably call on students to apply theoretical principles in their own organisational contexts. While this can result in assignments benefiting from unrivalled access to key company information and data, it can also produce work which fails to appreciate that a particular management 'challenge' or 'problem' is not unique to the organisation. There is also an expectation among client employers that coursework assignments will address current organisational issues. While assignments which focus on the work context are seen as 'relevant', lecturers are concerned that this is compounding the insularity of the learning experience. Lecturers considered that having managers from other organisations within the programme, grappling with similar issues, but in different businesses and sectors of the economy, would have improved the quality of learning. They found that drawing on the experience of students on 'open' programmes from businesses who had already undergone a major change process, for example, improved the understanding of others as to how theory converts into practice. Client-based programmes, by definition, do not facilitate learning from the experiences of other organisations who have faced, perhaps, broadly similar challenges.

Lecturers were unanimous in regarding the single company classroom as an inferior context for learning. While some indicated the importance of teaching techniques which promote critical discourse about management principles in order to overcome these circumstances, all were also keenly aware that their teaching style is constrained by the pragmatic need not to offend the sponsor who, in determining future contracts, acts as a *de facto* arbiter of the quality of teaching.

Politics of the Classroom

Lecturers can find the corporate classroom an intimidating environment and spoke about 'entering someone else's culture' and being an 'interloper'. Unlike 'open' programme students, participants often shared a knowledge-base about one another and a common language including 'in-jokes'. Tribalism can also be a factor with prejudices about colleagues from different parts of the organisation, an added active ingredient within the classroom.

Interviewees made particular comment about the impact of organisational hierarchy and perceptions of loyalty and whistle-blowing on class discussion. A problem was seen to occur where corporate classes consisted of a mix of managers of different levels of seniority. The presence in a group of a senior manager could have the effect of constraining the oral contributions of middle or junior managers. One interviewee related a story about the participation of an organisation's managing director on a client-based programme.

He came to the first session because he wanted a frank and open discussion

> about the company's problems. And the first session was absolutely dire because nobody would say a word. There was no open discussion about anything. So afterwards I went to him and said 'Look, if you want to get anything out of this for your management you'll have to stop attending because they won't say anything'. He was reluctant but he agreed to stop attending and then it was like opening the floodgates.

Although this is perhaps an extreme example of the effect of hierarchy on class discussion, other interviewees also made mention of the way rank could alter behaviour and openness. Another interviewee related a story of how the training manager, with responsibility for ensuring that the programme met the objectives of the organisation, would stifle debate and discussion through frequent interventions when present in class. At a session designed to debate ideas for management research projects the training managers' insistence on a few, 'relevant' research themes with a quantitative approach 'killed the discussion stone dead'. Moreover, even where student-managers are all peers of equal standing, freedom to debate can be adversely affected by the fear of being perceived to display 'disloyalty' to the organisation.

> Maybe a bigger problem is that people don't say what they think. They hold back. Their job could be on the line. They are surrounded by their peers and someone could blow the whistle on them.

A small number of lecturers also expressed worries about the effect of politics on the assessment of student-managers. Failing an influential manager might be a difficult matter to contemplate especially if this individual is key to the contractual relationship. As one interviewee commented, 'it would not look good if someone senior on an in-house programme failed an assignment'.

Student–Lecturer Relationship

All student–lecturer relationships contain tensions and ambiguities. However, client-based programmes introduce a high degree of ambiguity into the student–lecturer relationship which goes beyond the standard complexity of lecturers acting as both friend, and academic judge and jury. Interviewees acknowledged that, in practical terms, the client organisation, not the student-manager, was the principal stakeholder. This reality, though, raised various concerns regarding the lecturers role in relation to students because, as one interviewee commented, 'my first interest and focus is the individual learner and group as a whole', rather than the client organisation.

Lecturers related a number of stories to illustrate the importance of this issue to them. One interviewee spoke of the anger of an employer when student-managers were given details of other programmes at the business school. The employer felt that he was being 'by-passed'. Another story related to the demand of a corporate client that examination results should be passed to the organisation before student-managers were informed. A further 'dilemma' centred around the pastoral role of the tutor. A student-manager, applying for a new job, sought the advice of the

lecturer and asked for him to act as referee. In normal circumstances, the lecturer argued that this request would not have been a problem. However, as he felt he was primarily working for the client organisation the request for a reference put the lecturer, in what he perceived to be, an uncomfortable position. The 'omnipotence' of the employer as the 'paying client' was a worry to many other interviewees.

Implications and Conclusions

The findings of this small-scale study indicate that the corporate classroom represents a particular challenge for management lecturers and can produce a range of professional dilemmas. Research has indicated that lecturers across disciplines in higher education want students to adopt a critical and independent attitude to knowledge (Nixon, 1996; Rowland, 1996). Many management lecturers, to borrow a phrase from Goodlad (1997), also tend to see the university as '*a place of constrained disagreement*' and they are concerned about the barriers which make this difficult to achieve in the corporate classroom. Management lecturers identify with the core values of a higher education, such as 'critical evaluation' (Macfarlane, 1997), and they see these values imperilled in a client-based setting. Their concerns relate closely to three of the characteristics of a higher education identified by Barnett (1990): 'development of the student's critical abilities', 'a neutral and open forum for debate' and 'academic freedom' (pp. 8–9). The insularity and micropolitics of the corporate classroom make it problematic to achieve the first two of these characteristics while lecturers feel that their own pedagogic freedom is constrained by a need to comply with the expectations of the client organisation.

Talk about students in higher education has traditionally been confined to the notion of 'student as adolescent' (Silver & Silver, 1997, p. 25). During the 1990s, as the profile of students in higher education has altered radically, there has been increasing recognition of the special circumstances affecting mature and part-time students.

However, there is still a dominant presumption that students experience higher education in a university environment. Although previous research has reported on the frustrations felt by student-managers (Simpson & Lyddon, 1995), further research is needed examining the issues raised by this paper from the perspective of learners experiencing higher education *outside* the university. Corporate programmes do offer clear benefits to learners, particularly in making university management education more accessible. However, these benefits need to be weighed against some of the more negative consequences highlighted in this paper.

If freedom to learn is not to become an empty slogan (Barnett, 1990, p. 140), more account needs to be taken of the varied circumstances and environment in which higher education is now being delivered. Client-based programmes offer, perhaps, an extreme example of the problems which can arise when a university education is only partially transported to a different context. Lecturers are clear that freedom of expression in the classroom and the opportunity to learn from others outside one's own organisation should be valued constituents of a university management education.

In the headlong rush to offer higher education relevant to the needs of employers and employees, on a more flexible basis, it is important not to lose sight of the implications of such schemes for the core values and principles which characterise a 'higher' education. While client-based programmes offer tempting rewards for cash-strapped institutions, it is clear that the academic management of such schemes demands a delicate balancing act. In order to cope with the expectations of parent institutions, management lecturers appear to have adopted a schizophrenic attitude to their pedagogic role on client-based programmes. While exercised by the teaching and learning implications of such schemes, management lecturers are acutely aware that the power of client organisations means they must adopt a pragmatic attitude despite their professional misgivings.

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