

## **Pedagogic challenges to the hegemony of neo-liberal business and management teaching**

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## **Pedagogic challenges to the hegemony of neo-liberal business and management teaching**

### **Introduction**

All business and management teaching must be set in its pedagogic context. The received wisdom of the day is derived from the dominant political-economic model of that society. Currently it can be argued that it is an extreme neo-liberal version of free market capitalism. The question is, 'how can we challenge this apparent hegemony?' This chapter advocates that by undertaking a 'dialogue' (Freire, 1974) with our students it is possible to demonstrate that a credible critique of neo-liberal business and management is possible; specifically through the vehicle of HRM teaching, when radical analytical tools from a key subject area, industrial relations, is applied through a pedagogic lens informed by the thoughts and praxis of Freire and Gramsci.

To this end, it is argued that teachers of business and management need to develop a pedagogic checklist for their subject in order to enable them as 'educators' (Freire, 1972) to enlighten students about the hidden alternatives to conventional and mainstream teaching, both in subject and practice. An audit for enlightenment, it is further posited, that can be informed by a model derived from the work of Freire, and another key radical thinker, Antonio Gramsci, who has informed our understanding of the management of power in modern societies and organisations. Business and management is about the exercise of power. Its teaching should, therefore, also embrace the objective of a critical understanding of how that power is exercised and on whose behalf. Only through a pedagogic perspective that challenges the hegemony of neo-liberal conventions can our students begin to understand the many alternatives available to them as future business leaders and global citizens.

The chapter opens with a review of the key conceptual thinking of the two writers. Set in this context, the discussion moves to a focus on industrial relations as critical school of thinking and how it can provide counter arguments to the received wisdom of the market. The paper closes with the development of a pedagogic checklist template, drawn from the foregoing discussion to offer tutors an alternative teaching strategy to raise the ‘consciousness’ of their students to other models of organisations

### **Pedagogic theory and practice through the lens of Freire and Gramsci**

The focus of Freire’s (1972) critical analysis of contemporary education practice was the emancipation of the people, the oppressed, through educational enlightenment. Reflecting later on his work, Freire identifies the anomie of the many in society, in that:

‘Hope is an ontological need. Hopelessness is but hope that has lost its bearings, and becomes a distortion of that ontological need’ (1992: 8).

Thus Freire captures the centrality of hope for a fairer future and a better society within the human condition, and reminds us of the pedagogic imperatives that can help us realise that hope for ourselves and, crucially as educators, for others. For Freire (1972), the key flaw in conventional education, and for him also its logic in the sense that it helps perpetuate the dominance of oppressor over the oppressed, is both its inequitable and stultifying nature.

Where:

‘The teacher talks about reality as if it were motionless, static, compartmentalised and predictable. Or else he expounds on topics completely alien to the existential existence of the students’ (ibid.: 44).

In this way the teacher ‘narrates’ and the student remains a mere ‘depository’ for the ‘knowledge’ the powerful in society deem valid, necessary and of no risk to their privileged

position. Unchallenged, this pedagogic process witnesses the ‘banking’ of such information, such as it is, by the learner as the norm for both students and teacher. In contrast, the radical educator for Freire is tasked with developing an emancipatory pedagogy that is premised on ‘problem posing’ methods of education which see teacher and student as equals. As students are posed problems that relate to their real world experiences, and crucially require a critical understanding of the political context of those problems, so for Freire education becomes ‘the practice of freedom – as opposed to education as the practice of domination’ (ibid.: 54). For Freire (1974) the radical must recognise the pedagogic difference in terms of being ‘an extension’ to the ‘subjects’, the workers or students, you engage with in terms of passing on skills and knowledge, and their radical role of communicator who in true dialogue with their students seeks also to raise their consciousness in the process of that education.

Gramsci (1971), whilst sharing many of the conceptual and practical views of Freire, focussed on the political ‘hegemony’ over which elites and potential elites contest the supreme power over the majority: through the ideology of common sense. Reflecting on the historical significance of hegemony and its ideological role in oppressing the many, he further identifies that this hegemonic control is exercised by ‘intellectuals’ in support of the dominant group. (ibid.: 12). The task of the counter intellectual is to develop an ‘organic’ role (ibid.: 12-18) within the social group they seek to support and emancipate them through offering an alternative ideology. As Leonard notes for HE intellectuals this is no small challenge (1993: 166), and the degree to which it is possible forms a key backdrop to our discussion here.

Acknowledging the influence of Gramsci on modern thinking, Hobsbawn (2011) rightly highlights that like all Marxists, or indeed all great thinkers, his ideas are grounded in the context of his time. For Freire, context is also key to the empowerment of people. As he observes:

**Integration** within one's context, as distinguished from **adaptation**, is a distinctly human activity. Integration results from the capacity to adapt oneself to reality **plus** the critical capacity to make choices and to transform that reality' (2013: 4, emphasis in the original text).

Whereas as passive players, people otherwise merely 'adapt' to the continuing existing state of their oppression. As Freire further opines invariably, therefore, their capacity to develop is never realised by the majority of people because of their manipulation by an elite through 'organized advertising, ideological or otherwise' (ibid.: 5). For Freire, this leads to men (sic) being 'unable to perceive critically the themes of their time, and thus to intervene actively in reality'. (ibid.) Through this the majority as 'oppressed' are prevented from reaching their potential as more enlightened and self-determining individuals (Freire, 1972, 1992)

Both Freire and Gramsci in their different ways recognised the significance of culture in the 'oppression' of the many. For Freire this centred in particular on 'a concern for the democratization of culture' (1972: 39). Freire offers a pedagogic praxis to aid learners through dialogue with their tutors to at one recognise their own interests and better understand how a culture is created and maintained by others that can and will be a constraint on those interests.

A small body of literature (Mayo, 1999, Leonard, 1993) exists, that is drawn on in this chapter, on how we can seek to synergise the concepts and analyses of Gramsci and Freire to good effect. For instance that Gramsci offers a view that is not hindered by the Marxist orthodoxy of economic determinism (Leonard, 1993), but conversely still allows us to critique and challenge the hegemonic nature of the prevailing current economic philosophy of neo-liberalism as an alternative form of economic determinism.

For Leonard, the two writers' belief that through offering another insight, not solely based on a traditional Marxist view of overthrowing Capitalism, that focuses also on the agency of the individual could counter both the fatalism of futility in seeking change suffered erstwhile by both the worker or peasant when confronted with the seemingly irreconcilable social effects of untrammelled neo-liberal economic orthodoxy. In the context of this chapter, Mayo (1999) notes the continuing negative influence of neo-liberalism on adult education, again in relation to the givens of market efficacy that underpins that education. Specifically with regard to pedagogic practice, he usefully recognises the degree of synergy that is possible in adapting Freirean and Gramscian concepts in adult teaching. He further provides us with insight that is applied in the discussion that follows, noting crucially that both men's approaches were informed by their common experiences as politicised adult educators driven by the goal of emancipating the dispossessed through 'transformative action' (ibid.).

### **Industrial relations as a model for critical study**

Some of the arguments in relation to Freire and Gramsci fit into a key area of HRM identified as having a more radical focus to offer in the critique of mainstream business teaching. The contribution of industrial relations<sup>i</sup> (or employee relations) study to potentially enlighten students of other business and management disciplines is in the recognition that the employment relationship as the central building block for all businesses, and as a theoretical concept, is at one both inherently antagonistic and also contradictory (Sisson, 2009; Elgar, 2009). This is in the sense that the worker has only her or his labour to sell. Therefore, the employer has potentially the opportunity to exploit this relationship given the unfair balance in power that exists. Conversely, it is contradictory because the employer buys only the potential to labour and they must still seek the commitment of the worker to their 'shared' objectives. The 'oppressive' nature of the workplace and the role of 'hegemony', within organisations and in society as a whole, and conversely the conceptual and practical potential

of industrial relations to offer pedagogic tools to provide a fuller understanding of this hegemony, become clear here.

However, there is ambivalence, at best, over how this potentially most critical of HRM and business sub-disciplines is taught. For instance, in many HRM programmes it is offered merely as an option for students, similarly mirroring its absence altogether in many MBA programmes. Evidence, it can be argued, that a more critical study of people management inconveniently challenges 'the givens' on which such programmes are largely based.

Nevertheless, in terms of Freire, when students are offered the opportunity to study industrial relations, we as educators can construct a meaningful dialogue with them where we first demonstrate the practical aspects of the subject and then raise their consciousness to the issues of power and hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) that underpin its study and practice. To illustrate, many students today are fazed by the notion of politics and power. This is a central premise for building a framework based on Freire and Gramsci. Therefore our first task is to demonstrate the relevance to them of context (See figure 1). This is done by demonstrating the dynamic and changing nature of industrial relations with respect to the different philosophical drivers for governments to formulate practical employment strategy and legislation.

One of the most obvious areas of HRM to consider is employment legislation and the hegemonic battle for 'fair rights' in order to explain the ideological nature of such struggles. A perfect example in the UK is the attack on the right to claim unfair dismissal. Later in the paper we consider the ideological reasons why the last coalition government systematically reduced the rights of workers to protection against unfair employment practices under the law. The assault on the value to society of the trade unions is also well documented. It becomes almost a sub text and a mantra of one section of society served by the dominant

media in the UK today (Milne, 2013; Bennett, 2014). The apparent received wisdom that we live in an individualised society where the notion of the collective is an anathema is another good example of challenging the hegemony of convention through teaching – ie to help our students test these notions. The means open to us include:

- Critically discussing the objective of the union and their heritage.
- Deconstructing their opponents' criticisms
- Analysing the question of workers' rights – and discussing the logic of their removal
- Questioning the market need to function untrammelled by restriction – Asking 'where is the evidence?'

As Judt's (2010) further observes the market has even permeated into the employment relationship of the HE teachers themselves, and undoubtedly impacting on the discourse of their pedagogic practice:

'In English HE circles today, the **market-as-metaphor** dominates conversation. Deans and heads of departments are constrained to assess 'output' and economic 'impact' when judging someone's work' (ibid.: 117 – my emphasis).

The aim of this chapter is to begin to develop the pedagogic tools for educators to critically analyse this discourse – why neoliberalism dominates both the subject matter of business schools and also constrains the liberty of the academic and reveal its real meanings and hegemonic nature to students of business and management.

### **Conflict management in the workplace**

Conflict management is a key focus of industrial relations but largely ignored in most mainstream teaching of business and management in any real critical sense. In terms of the focus of our discussion, Fox (1985) crucially defines three ideological perspectives on

conflict central to the study of industrial relations. Firstly, the acquisition of management power encourages a unitarist view of the employment relationship, typically supported by rhetorical strategies encouraging staff members to work in harmony towards common goals. Implicit in this view is managers' 'right to manage' which, if internalised, regards conflict itself as irrational. Fox also identifies a pluralist perspective in which organisations are seen as comprising of social groups that have competing values, interests and objectives. From a pluralist perspective, conflict is both rational and inevitable, requiring employers and employee representatives to devise and utilise agreed conflict resolution processes.

Finally, Fox outlines a radical perspective in which conflict is not simply viewed as inevitable, but as both a product and driver of change. The intellectual roots of the radical view can be traced to Marxist theory and Gramsci's (1971) conceptualisation of hegemony. Lukes (1974) draws on Gramsci to develop a coherent theory of power, identifying three levels of conflict: open conflict; agenda setting and hegemonic control. Hegemonic control (the most pervasive and difficult to challenge) is associated with a unitary outlook where consent is manufactured through a ruling elite's capacity to control information and communication, and embed its values and beliefs in governance and educational systems. A pluralist perspective is associated with the second domain of power. Control here is incomplete, and limited to setting the agenda for discussion. It is, however, possible to challenge the agenda set by a ruling elite, and force negotiations on the issues identified. Fox's radical perspective is associated with open conflict. At this level, alternative agendas may be put forward, even if pursuing them has a limited chance of success (Ridley-Duff and Bennett, 2011).

Workplace conflict arises in countering the power of neo-liberalism to seek to regulate the workers through overt discipline but more covertly hegemonic power (See Lukes, 1974) However, most mainstream business teaching ignores the fact that workers fight back; or

simply blame it either on poor management communication in justifying its actions or dysfunctional actions by ‘trouble makers.’ In reality the ‘frontier of control,’ (Thompson, 1989: 133-144) and the inherent conflict in the employment relationship, are best understood from a radical perspective (Fox, 1985) as rather the logical manifestation of workers’ resistance to a system that oppresses them *both* in terms of control and the return on their labours. The challenge for the educators is to contextualise and enter in dialogue with students in considering this alternative perspective on the world of work that for most students fundamentally challenges their erstwhile conceptions of working life.

Crucially, this approach to understanding the causes and consequences of workplace conflict, and its possible resolution, can be framed in a Freire/Gramsci viewpoint that pedagogically challenges the received wisdom of conventional academic discussion on conflict management. The latter we can argue is based firmly on a unitarist view of the workplace that neither reflects reality nor its political nature.

### **A Template for radical pedagogic practice in business schools**

The aim of this chapter is not to dismiss the relevance of key business and management skills and knowledge, for instance, in areas such as leadership and organisation, accountancy, ICT or sales and marketing. Rather, it is to offer an alternative pedagogic template through which business school educators can both help their student develop these necessary skills, whilst also offering them alternative perspectives of the world of work largely absent from most mainstream teaching. Figure 1 offers such a template.

**Figure one about here**

### **An example of applying the practical and the theoretical insights of Freire and Gramsci**

Arguably one of the most contentious areas of industrial relations that best exposes the current hegemonic tendencies of British governments is the constant changes in law with respect to workers claiming unfair dismissal, discrimination and challenging other unfair employment practices. Centred on the role of the employment tribunal, originally conceived as a cheap and easy means of access to justice for workers and first established over 40 years, successive governments, driven by neoliberal market ideology, have routinely drastically curtailed the rights of those workers.

As a pedagogic tool for student enlightenment this area of industrial relations offers two key and complementary elements of learning. Through dialogue, particularly with employed HRM students or managers, the tutor first establishes the common pedagogic aim of understanding the rights and responsibilities under employment law of employers and employees, and the skills and knowledge they wish to develop. In order to do this the tutor explains that through open discussion they must first put that legislation in its current and historical context. It is here that the tutor is able to enlighten the student to the nature of what for them was an erstwhile neutral and purely practical aspect of managing the employment relationship.

Through the posing of problems, for instance, ‘what rights have workers to claim unfair dismissal?’ and ‘what is your role in that process?’ the educator is able to initiate the conscientization of the students. In practical terms, but reinforcing the ideological nature of the last Coalition Government’s strategy on industrial relations, the key changes in workers’ rights to seek redress at an employment tribunal were:

- To increase the time you have to have been in employment with the organisation from one to two years before an unfair dismissal claim can be lodged
- From being a free service, employees now need to pay a fee of £1200 to make a claim
- Unfair dismissal cases will be heard by a single judge when previously there were lay members drawn from an employer and an employee background
- New forms of contracts introduced that remove the right to claim unfair dismissal

(SEE Renton and Macey (2013) for a detailed analysis)

Crucially here the educator can stress to students that this is an example of the hegemony of the market that plays to the common wisdom espoused, for instance, by the right wing press, and that no evidence exists for the need for these changes. Employers surveyed by the government did not see the threat of unfair dismissal cases as a barrier either to recruitment or good people management. As Busby et al 2013 conclude, the Coalition Government's diagnosis for the need for employment reforms, rather than evidence-based, was 'politically motivated and ideologically grounded making it unreliable with the potential to damage employment relations and restrict fundamental workers' rights. (2013 2) Recent reports back up this conclusion and when shared with students adds to their consciencization. In the year following the introduction of fees in July 2013 the number of cases being taken to employment tribunals by employees fell by 79% (CIPD, 2014)

## - **Conclusion**

The employment relationship and its management, just like the organisation's relationship with its customers or service users, is central to all aspects of business and management. In consequence, a critical industrial relations approach whose conceptual centre is that relationship, it is felt is more than legitimate to challenge the assumptions on which

mainstream teaching of accounting, marketing, operational management etc. is based. Rather, by applying pedagogic practice informed by Freire and Gramsci, it offers greater insight through a critical lens on all business teaching provided by a more radical industrial relations perspective

For this author, it has been heartening in the past, when teaching HRM, for postgraduate students to say at the end of the programme, and report back to the course leader, that 'studying this module made us see things in a different way'. Similarly, teaching undergraduates in industrial relations who declare at the end of the model that they now understand the role and purpose of the trade unions, offers some small evidence that changes in views are possible.

Crucially, it is also the hope of this writer that this discussion in some small way contributes to the radical argument against the apparent immutability of market hegemony, by way of marshalling the inspiring and equally practical and conceptual pedagogic insight offered to us by Freire and Gramsci; whereby we can offer our students another more equitable but no less effective vision of managing the workplace and society as a whole.

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<sup>i</sup> The preferred term for this paper is industrial relations. However, even this title has now been replaced on most courses and modules by the more 'manicured' term employee relations