ACADEMY OF
Management

Learning & Education

Civilize the Business School: For a Civic Management Education

Teaching Material based on:

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The author consents and encourages other scholars to use this material for their teaching.

Pedagogical Note

These slides employ the sociological concept of the "**self-fulfilling prophecy**" which is applied to the context of higher education (business school) and management education (ME) specifically.

➢ Exploring self-fulfilling prophecies can help business student and educators identifying, questioning and redefining assumptions leading to dysfunctional consequences in ME.

As such, these slides are well-suited for **interdisciplinary courses** at the undergraduate and postgraduate level; and can also be used in the context of **grassroots participatory workshops** (e.g. visioning exercises, word-cafés, open space meetings, etc.).

Please feel free to use, modify, or expand upon these slides; and don't hesitate to get in touch for any feedback, questions, or collaboration:

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What is wrong with contemporary management education?

According to ME literature, four **(unintended) dysfunctional consequences**:

Nourishes **greedy behavior**. Wang et al. (2011) demonstrate that economics education in business schools is associated with students' positive attitude towards greed.

Encourages an **obsession with outputs and performance**; which leads to severe consequences on students and staff mental health (Fleming, 2021).

Exacerbates **inequality**, through teaching capitalism uncritically (Fotaki and Prasad, 2015).

Aggravates the **ecological catastrophe** (which it has contributed to create in the first place), through upholding eco-illiteracy (Gladwin, 1993).

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What can we learn from Merton about dysfunctional consequences?

Dysfunctional consequences are **precursors to change**:

They originate from specific behavior, which **originates from specific assumptions**. Merton calls this cycle **"self-fulfilling prophecy"**:

"[W]hen the net balance of the aggregate of consequences of an existing social structure is clearly dysfunctional, there develops a strong and insistent pressure for change. It is possible... that beyond a given point, this pressure will inevitably result in more or less predetermined directions of social change" (Merton, 1968, p. 94).

"…[Once humans] have assigned some meaning to the situation, their consequent behavior and some of the consequences of that behavior are determined by the ascribed meaning" (Merton, 1948, p. 194).

What are the roots of the problem?

Contemporary management education is based on at least four **assumptions**:

> Humans are self-interested by nature (i.e. *homo homini lupus*)

> The Business School is governed by instrumental rationality (i.e. by output-oriented action)

> There is no credible alternative to capitalist organizing (e.g. profit-maximization and capital accumulation are the ABC of business)

> Management is a mechanistic discipline (i.e. environment, society and business are as cogs of a machine that can be pulled apart and studied, understood and managed separately).

➢ These assumptions generate **self-fulfilling prophecies**, leading to **dysfunctional consequences**.

What can we do about it?

"The initial definition of the situation which has set the circle in motion must be abandoned. Only when the original assumption is questioned and a new definition of the situation introduced, does the consequent flow of events give the lie to the assumption. Only then does the belief no longer father the reality." Merton (1948, p. 197)

Our beliefs

Our actions

Other's beliefs

Other's actions
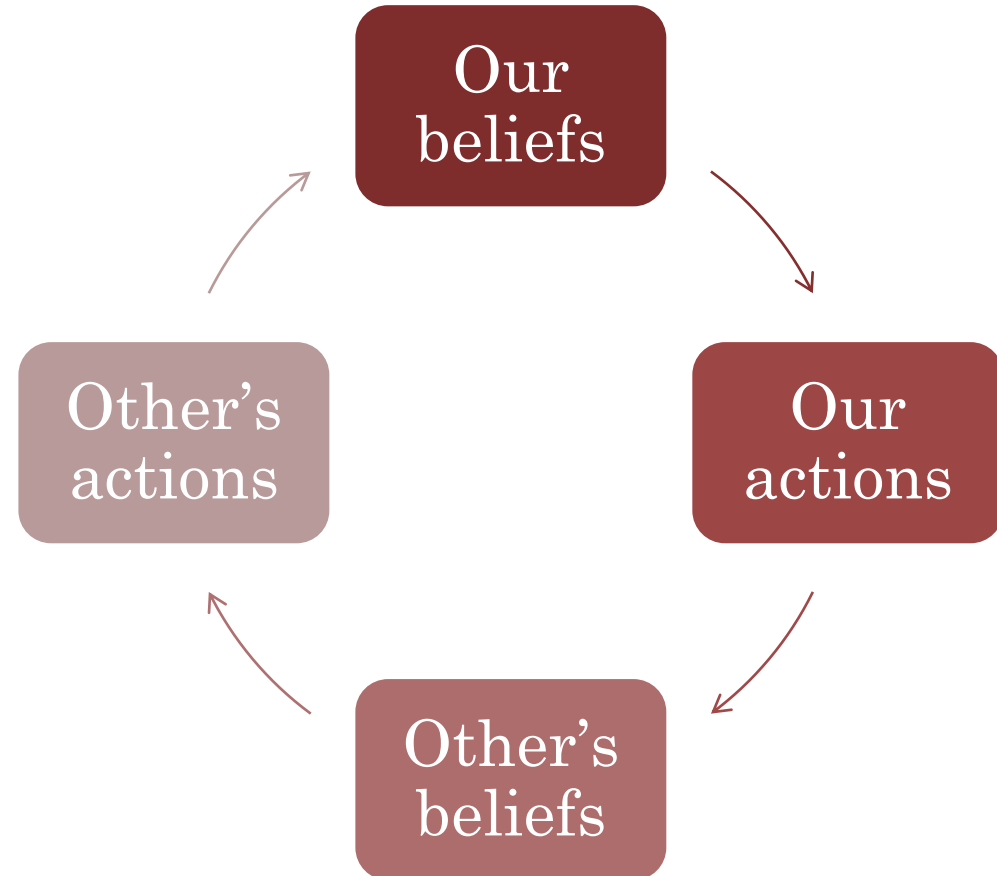
What if we assumed that…

Humans are a highly cooperative species (i.e. *homo homini natura amicus est*)

The Business School is governed by substantive rationality (i.e. by value-oriented action)

There are plenty of credible alternatives to business-as-usual (e.g. not-for-profit, cooperative and other social enterprises)

Management is a systemic discipline (i.e. environment, society and business are interdependent elements of a complex living system)
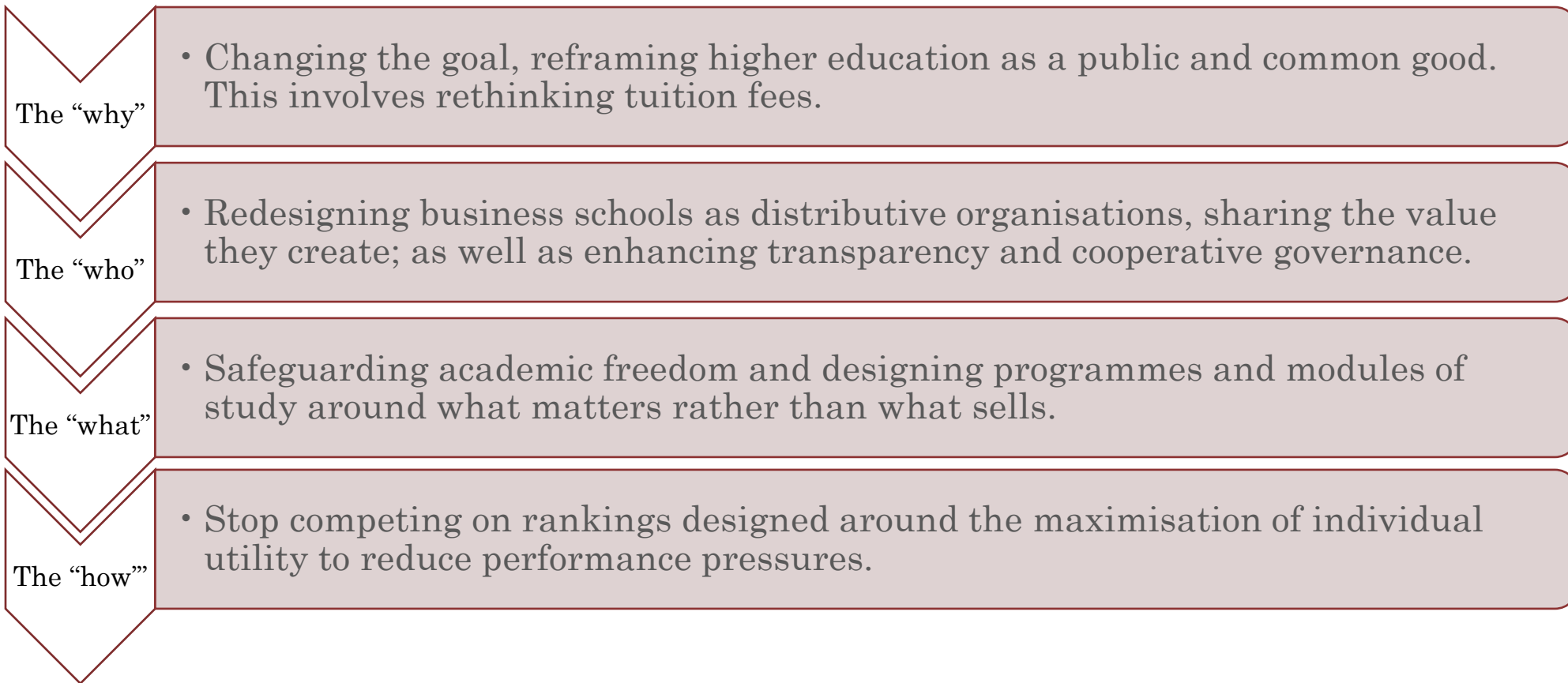
➢ Questioning and redefining assumptions enables **virtuous cycles**.

➢ An approach based on these assumptions is referred to in terms of **Civic Management Education**.

Why "Civic" Management Education?

- Civility, from the Latin *civilis*, means "**relating to public life**" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.).

- The expression "to civilize" is often a synonym for oppression (e.g. the civilizing mission of imperialism and colonialism). On the contrary, here it is used as a synonym for liberation (e.g. from the hegemony of neoliberalism). Reclaiming the term "civility" is a means towards "scaling deep" (Colombo et al., 2023).

- CME is rooted in **civil economy**: (Genovesi, 1757-58; Bruni and Zamagni, 2007). CME advances civil economy by redefining civility as the pursuit of ecological flourishing, inclusive of human flourishing.

- CME relates to the **civic university** agenda in the UK, encouraging this initiative to question taken-for-granted assumptions and move in a more transformative direction.

How can the potential of CME be fulfilled?

Merton (1948, p. 209) suggests that "deliberate institutional change" is needed to enable virtuous cycles. In the context of CME, this may include redefining:

The "why"
- Changing the goal, reframing higher education as a public and common good. This involves rethinking tuition fees.

The "who"
- Redesigning business schools as distributive organisations, sharing the value they create; as well as enhancing transparency and cooperative governance.

The "what"
- Safeguarding academic freedom and designing programmes and modules of study around what matters rather than what sells.

The "how"'
- Stop competing on rankings designed around the maximisation of individual utility to reduce performance pressures.

What else can be done?

Following Gibson-Graham's (2006) insights on diverse economies, we can argue that CME can be enhanced through cultivating:

A "politics of the subject"	• I.e. starting from ourselves as free agents of change. • E.g. through practicing intellectual activism and developing critical consciousness.
A "politics of language"	• I.e. "developing new, richer local languages of economy and economic possibility" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xi). • E.g. through dialoguing with different disciplines.
A "politics of collective action"	• I.e. "working collaboratively to produce alternative economic organizations and spaces in place" (Gibson-Graham, 2006, p. xvii) • E.g. through nurturing networks and partnership.

Conclusion

1. Through applying the concept of the self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948) to the context of management education, the essay unpacks the process through which **assumptions of self-interest, instrumental rationality, capitalist organizing and a mechanistic approach to management yield dysfunctional outcomes**.

2. Consequently, the essay proposes to reconfigure management education around **generalized reciprocity, substantive rationality, diverse organizing and a system approach to management**, suggesting this has the potential to produce functional outcomes.

3. The essay **calls for a new paradigmatic orientation to civility**: one that acknowledges the interdependence of natural and social systems; and redesigns management education in ways that enable ecological and human flourishing.

Some references to go further

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