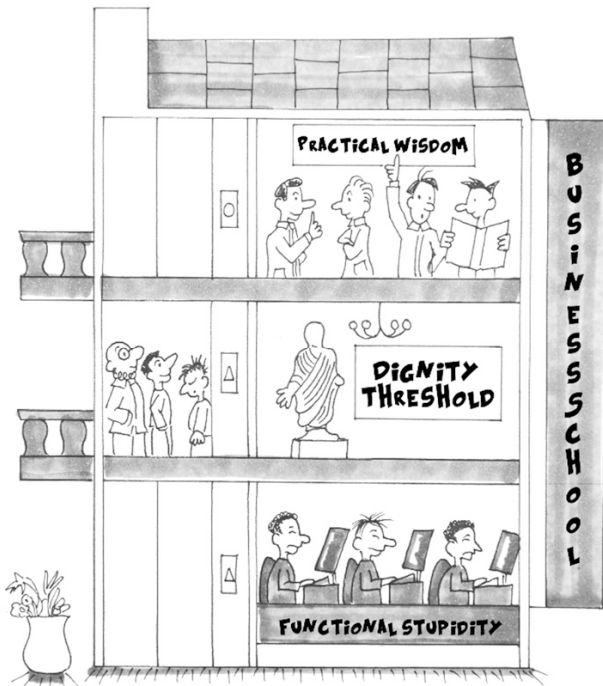




Practical Wisdom vs Functional Stupidity: Toward an Inspired Business School

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1 Introduction

A few years ago, I had a conversation with a retired German business school professor, who at that time was still involved with university accreditation. He mentioned that in one of his recent assignments, the committee had to deny accreditation to an institution because of insufficient business content in their degree programme. Afterward, I felt slightly depressed, because I thought that the entire point of the programme (which was being offered by an institution committed to anthroposophical values) was to study business in a horizon-broadening, interdisciplinary way that encourages the critical questioning of the conventional business strategies and management decisions that have led to one crisis after another. I realized that this incident is symptomatic of functional stupidity as described by Alvesson and Spicer (2012; 2016), which is briefly explained in section 2.

Universities face changes and challenges due to certain neoliberal reforms made to higher education (in the following referred to as HE). These reforms are somewhat paradoxical in that an increase in normative pressures is at the same time accompanied by the granting of certain (pseudo-) autonomies (Bronstein & Reihlen, 2014). It is hard to ignore the impression that in HE we are currently witnessing a vicious enactment of Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr's famous dictum, *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (Karr, 1849 cited in Ratcliffe, 2016). This is especially true of business schools, where we observe a continual rise in overall enrolment, but also mergers, structural diversifications, strategic vision announcements and an ongoing frenzy to publish academic journal articles against a backdrop of heightened public scrutiny of the contribution business schools are making to society. The business school is featured in Section 3, and section 4 links it to functional stupidity.

Critique of business schools is almost as old as business schools themselves (e.g. Rousseau, 2012). At present, there are two main streams of criticism. The first one questions the relevance of the knowledge taught at business schools, and the second is concerned about the negative influence business schools and their teachings has had on organizations and society at large (Roca, 2008). In this chapter, I draw on both of these criticisms to plead for the "inspired" business

school. The tool essential to that end is Practical Wisdom, which is outlined in section 5. In lieu of a traditional discussion, section 6 suggests three potential approaches to enable and foster Practical Wisdom in the lecture hall and beyond. Thereby, this chapter contributes to the contemporary rediscovery of philosophical concepts for the benefit of meaningful business in general and business education in particular.

2 Functional Stupidity

There is a paradoxical phenomenon that is observable in many guises, both from the perspective of participants in an organization's daily business operations and from the perspective of citizens impacted by large-scale business scandals; namely, despite employing smart and highly-educated people, organizations foster stupidity in the workplace and the consequences thereof are far-reaching. The culmination was the implosion of mortgage-backed securities which precipitated the meltdown of the US subprime lending market in 2008. The underlying assumption that bankers "wouldn't do anything stupid, en masse" (Brooks, 2011, n.p.), proved to be wrong. But until the collapse, their behaviour seemed rational, considering that they traded or invested in financial products that were top-rated up until the very moment of the crash.

After a thorough analysis of this phenomenon, Alvesson and Spicer (2012; 2016) identified the concept of functional stupidity, which is essentially the result of three deficiencies that organizations support and even catalyse. First, there is a lack of reflexivity owing to an inability or unwillingness to question knowledge claims, dominant beliefs, and norms. Secondly, there is insufficient justification, which means that actors neither demand or provide reasons and explanations for prescribed courses of action, and assume there is no need for accountability, let alone scrutiny. Thirdly, there is insufficient substantive reasoning so that the myopic application of instrumental rationality in achieving desired ends replaces calling those very ends into question, or at least questioning the meaning of the data produced on the way to achieving those ends.

Alvesson and Spicer (2012; 2016) offer five possible explanations of who or what provokes functionally stupid behaviour at organizations, of which two are

of great relevance for this chapter. Firstly, functional stupidity can be structure-induced by hierarchies, routines and inflated bureaucratic exercises governing the work within organizations. Despite claims that we may be beyond bureaucracy (e.g. McSweeney, 2006), inflationary governance and compliance regimes (Grindle 2010) have the opposite effect, by creating organizational players who do not question whether a course of action makes sense, but rather whether it complies with the rules. Secondly, functional stupidity can be imitation-induced, which means that organizations follow fashionable mainstream pathways. "All too often companies do things not because they produce the best results, but because everyone else is doing it" (Alvesson & Spicer 2016, p. 151). Such behaviour helps avoid risk, as deviating from mainstream practice can be harmful to the organization. Bureaucracy's iron cage of Max Weber's era has transformed into a glass-cage (Gabriel 2005), the alluring transparency of which encourages more imitational and governance-conform behaviour to pacify organizational constituencies.

3 Business School

Business schools began to emerge in the latter part of the 19th and the early 20th century. In Europe, the first institutions were established in Germany, France and Scandinavia and were outside the purview of traditional universities. In the United States, the first business school was founded at the University of Pennsylvania (Amdam 2007; Engwall & Danell 2011).

They all depended to some extent on financial support from businesses and wealthy entrepreneurs. From the outset, the role of these institutions was ambiguous. On the one hand, they were encouraged by the corporate world to produce better-educated professionals for management roles. On the other hand, their practical orientation came largely at the expense of academic credibility. "As a matter of fact, scepticism toward the introduction of business studies into universities was as strong in the USA as in Europe" (Engwall & Danell 2011, p. 433).

The conflict between the institutions' practical orientation (i.e. the usefulness of the degrees and knowledge obtained by students seeking entry into the busi-

ness world) and their quest for business to be recognized as a science is engrained in the business school model. This has evolved into an ongoing *rigour-versus-relevance* debate (e.g. Birnik & Billsberry, 2008). As a way out of this dilemma, business schools have largely emphasized economics to the detriment of the social sciences in order to portray business studies as based on “hard” science; a course of action widely attributed to a perceived inferiority known as *physics envy* (Bennis & O’Toole, 2005)

Drawing on findings represented as being as scientifically reliable as Newton’s Laws of Motion, business schools profess to supply the management world with formulae for quasi-guaranteed success beyond any doubts of legitimacy. Unfortunately, that move has made matters even worse, as underlying economic principles (such as the infamous *homo oeconomicus*) have been exposed as myths or thinly disguised ideology (e.g. Smyth, 2017).

Business schools represent one of the impressive success stories of the 20th century, and the boom seems to be continuing despite warnings already expressed early in the 21st century (e.g. Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). The growth of business schools has been fuelled by the inflated importance that neoliberal ideology has attributed to HE (Alvesson, 2015) and by the idealization of business schools as bubbling career cauldrons or as institutions where individuals assume responsibility for their own future. However, academics (e.g. Parker, 2014) as well as a greater public audience are already asking whether business schools may have *lost their way* (Bennis & O’Toole 2005). Business schools have to face the fact that management is neither a profession (Khurana, 2007) nor a science, and due to corporate excesses and scandals they are losing credibility and respect in the public sphere. Rich in symbolism or, as noted by Alvesson (2015), in *grandiosity*, but possibly devoid of meaning and societal legitimacy, the business school as an institution is in need of re-orientation (Birnik & Billsberry, 2008).

In such context, revived debates about (and the search for) the educational ideal (e.g. Biesta, 2002) resonate. Similar debates currently revolve around the re-discovery of the journalistic ideal (see Christine Boven’s contribution). Media and journalism – like HE traditionally considered providers of information and

enablers of knowledge – also have come under scrutiny and face a loss of public trust, unfolding a plea for practically wise solutions to problems in that field.

4 Functional Stupidity in Business School

The paradox of functional stupidity is quite pronounced in the case of business schools. We would expect institutions of higher learning and their intellectual constituencies to be at the forefront of employing reflexivity and substantive reasoning. However, such notion reflects the traditional position of universities as organizations independent of outside interests (Bleiklie, Enders & Lepori, 2013), which is no longer true. The neoliberal triumphant march (Altwater, 2009) is transforming HE into an “input-output system, that reduces it to a function of economic production” (Olssen & Peters, 2005, p. 324). In Europe, this trend is reflected in enactments of the so-called Bologna reform (e.g. Witte, van der Wende & Huisman, 2008) and aggravated by the *Lisbonization* of the EU (Capano & Piattoni 2011), assigning HE a key role in creating a globally competitive economic environment.

Section 3 mentions structure-induced functional stupidity as the first relevant sub-phenomenon. A case in point of inflated bureaucratic exercise is the concept of accreditation. Under the pretence of quality assurance – a complex construct (e.g. Westerheijden, 1999) – and of ensuring competitiveness, business schools, in Germany, for example, have to recertify every single degree programme on average every five years. To this end, they compile anywhere from hundreds to thousands of pages of mission statements, course outlines, learning outcomes, lecture contents, etc. This diverts the focus of the academic faculty away from research and teaching, and instead, has them engaged in documenting and justifying what they (are supposed to) do. A bizarre exercise considering that the documents are usually accepted at face value (Brenner, 2009). The bureaucratic efforts and resource diversions of such exercise multiply in the case of business schools with the highest international ambitions pursuing so-called triple-crown accreditation consisting of AACSB, EQUIS and AMBA. Unsurprisingly, the realm of *accreditocracy* is proclaimed (Julian & Ofori-Dankwa, 2006).

What little space for differentiation survives the accreditation process is further diminished through the ranking system, which closes the loop in the march toward imitation-induced functional stupidity. Rankings are paramount to the construction of an international business school market; encouraging the alignment of all activities for an optimum outcome in published “league” tables (Wedlin, 2006). It remains unclear whether increasing competition actually improves the quality of degree programmes or just the quality of showing the respective institution in the best light at the very expense of substance (Gioia & Corley, 2002). In some countries, the volume of government grants is dependent on ranking. This ensures a full focus on rankings and the path to success is always the same: imitate *best practice*. Westerheijden (1999) predicted that such exercises would produce more uniformity and managerialism. He was right.

5 Practical Wisdom and the Business School

According to Aristotle, Practical Wisdom is “the ability to identify the salient features of complex and particular situations” (Roca 2008, p. 610); for elaborate explanations and recent contextual considerations of the concept please refer to Claudius Bachmann in this volume. Considering the complexity of the contemporary business world, this ability appears to be as beneficial today as it was in Aristotle’s ancient Greece. We should note, however, that much that we understand to be salient is often more myth than reality. The *globalized economy*, for instance, is presented as a recent development, but in reality, can be traced back to the high level of international cooperation of pre-WWI, the global value chains of the Dutch East India Company founded in 1602, and beyond.

Nevertheless, contemporary complexities in today’s globalized economy are unusual in that they are characterized by a faster information flow, increasing interconnectedness among organizations, and much greater diversity among the people involved (e.g. Stacey, 1996). As such, it presents real challenges.

Unfortunately, the aforementioned quest for – or rather imitation of – best practice is at odds with Practical Wisdom. The very idea of imitating what another successful organization does in the specific context of its organizational

history, tradition, culture, vision and interaction with its stakeholders ignores particular differences. It assumes, instead, that in general, everyone should also do what has proven successful for another player or what is politically-ideologically prescribed, regardless of any salient or subtle contextual differences.

“Through the exercise of Practical Wisdom one must be able to discern the significant aspects of a particular situation and to apply one’s knowledge, experience and values to make a ‘good’ decision” (Roca, 2008, p. 610). Business schools have not fared well in this respect.

The shortcomings are twofold. Firstly, as highlighted in the previous section, business schools as institutions of higher learning are trapped in ranking, accreditation and other policy-induced schemes that mainly emphasize competition, and only willing enactors of what is viewed as best practice can be competitive and ultimately successful. As a direct consequence, business schools play the best-practice-game, which arguably is a worst-practice-game in many respects, because the dominant neoliberal public pedagogy negates basic conditions for the development and exercise of critical thinking and active participation in civil society (Giroux, 2008). It even results in “the structural and ideological undermining of academic capital” (Naidoo, 2010, p. 73). However, from an organizational perspective, it may still be as tempting as it is detrimental to the promotion of Practical Wisdom, because – despite heavy bureaucratic workloads and doubtful outcomes – it provides a convenient frame that does not require thoughtfully crafted adaptations (see functional stupidity). Secondly, business and management education at business schools have hardly contributed to fostering Practical Wisdom principles among student constituencies.

This notion in turn has least two root causes.

The first one is the *economistic worldview* (e.g. Pirson, 2017) which dominates not only the (big) business world and arguably society in general, but also business schools in particular. This worldview assumes that economic considerations are the only legitimate ones in the social / political organization of life.

Furthermore, it assumes that economics is an exact science at the core of which there is homo oeconomicus as mentioned in section 3, which portrays humans as benefit maximizers entirely driven by rational interests. In the business version that would be profit maximization for the benefit of large-scale shareholders. The resulting business narrative precipitates the elimination of judgment and duty from management decisions, thereby leading to dysfunctional behaviour on the part of organizational key players (Hurst, 2012). Unavoidably, this economic worldview “has led to multiple problems on multiple levels, because the misrepresentation of individuals has logical consequences for groups, organizations, and society” (Pirson, 2017, p.18).

The second cause is the very nature of management, i.e. the key subject business schools profess to teach and support. Due to the lack of a professional code of ethics and the absence of a professional body for establishing, overseeing and enforcing such code, (as is the case with the medical and legal professions, for example) (e.g. Kuhrana & Nohria, 2008), management cannot be a profession, per se and therefore it cannot be taught as such in classrooms.

The key proponent of this line of thought is Mintzberg (e.g. 2011) who believes that both management and management education are “deeply troubled” (Mintzberg, 2005, p. 1). He asserts that

“[t]he trouble with ‘management’ education is that it is business education, and leaves a distorted impression of management. Management is a practice that has to blend a good deal of craft (experience) with a certain amount of art (in-sight) and some science (analysis)” (Mintzberg, 2005, p. 1).

Therefore, he created a new management programme at McGill University admitting only qualified managers. The objective is not to establish best practices, but to gain deeper and more varied insights. While such an approach does not address what to do with inexperienced business school students, it shows how to encourage and build Practical Wisdom into business school curricula.

Marshall and Thorburn (2014) assume a rather idealistic stance, pointing out that Practical Wisdom contributes to *living better* and *thinking better* – hence fostering reflection on the aforementioned better decisions in ethical and epistemological dimensions. This stance inspires the following section, which in lieu

of a traditional discussion, delineates three approaches to be taken by the inspired business school for providing business/management education that opens new horizons.

6 Toward the Inspired Business School

The first approach entails a change of mindset, or rather a shift of worldview. I suggest it is a prerequisite, or at least a catalyst for the two approaches that follow. According to Giacalone and Thompson (2006), the fundamental problem we face is that management education is based on an *organization-centred worldview*. It assumes that businesses, in particular corporations, are central to society and that advancing their interests automatically advances society's interests, as well.

They also make the point that no other discipline places an organizational construct at the core of its study program as do business schools. That is, everything taught revolves around the corporation. The problem with this dominant worldview is that it

“not only conveys that business centrality is true, but that the concomitant materialism and self-interest that characterizes business decision making is appropriate. At the top of our values hierarchy is money and all of its constituents: power, status, and the accumulation of wealth. In teaching this, at best we propagate and validate the worldview with which students enter our institutions; at worst, by perpetuating a worldview prescriptively that may be damaging [...], we are responsible for the academic equivalent of iatrogenic (physician-induced) disease” (Giacalone & Thompson, 2006, p. 267).

Engaging in such activity, we can hardly find another valid response than no to the harsh question, “Does management education add value?” (Khurana & Nohria, 2008, p. 2). Beyond pure financial gains derived from various career options that at least some business school graduates still enjoy (whereas many do not), there is no other benefit; but rather, many values, especially moral ones are eroded. However, a shift in worldview makes it possible to answer that question with a confident yes, it does – and it does so for the benefit of the many and not the few, as well as for society at large and for the individual who cares. For considerations of values-orientation (and common welfare) in leader-

ship, Martina Stangel-Meseke’s contribution to this volume offers valuable insights and for wise thoughts on corporate ethics, please refer to Gershon Braun’s article and case study.

Consequently, Giacalone and Thompson (2006) suggest the shift towards a human-centred worldview. This is in line with a humanistic view and its differentiated understanding of human nature as opposed to an economistic view as depicted in table 1.

Table 1: Comparative views on human nature (adapted from Pirson 2017, p. 62)

Human nature	Economistic view	Humanistic view
Foundation	Wants	Drives
Goal	Maximization	Balance
Operating modes	Fixed utility curves / opportunity sets	Routines, learning, Practical Wisdom
Role of morality	Amoral	Moral / immoral
Aspiration	Wealth / Status / Power / Reputation	Well-being

Hence, a shift in worldview enables business school educators and students to acknowledge the complexity of human nature and to foster Practical Wisdom as an operating mode. This will require the courage of envisioning our students (i.e. future business protagonists) as agents of well-being – the ultimate objective from a humanistic perspective. Following the humanistic model depicted in figure 1, the promotion of Practical Wisdom is the operating logic for achieving well-being. The achievement of a minimum level of dignity, referred to as dignity threshold is a prerequisite for the pursuit of well-being aims. This threshold is reached through a balance in satisfying the four human drives of acquire, bond, comprehend and defend – as opposed to just maximize (currency value) according to the economistic model. In consequence, dignity means “our fellow humans are not to be treated as mere objects or instruments in a business organization’s production functions” (Donaldson & Walsh 2015, p. 192).

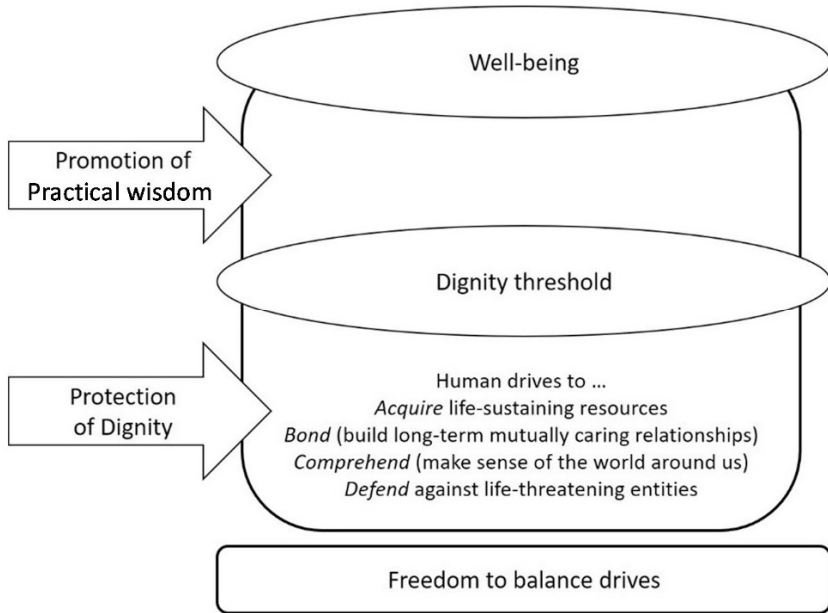


Figure 1: Operating logics of humanistic perspective (adapted from Pirson 2017, p. 75)

According to Pirson, “The development and refinement of capabilities and processes of Practical Wisdom are a constant learning task rather than an algorithmic process” (Pirson, 2017, p. 74f), and therefore a challenging but rewarding task well placed at the business school. In-depth reflection on the possible consequences of available decision options in context-specific situations are key, and students’ exposure to such an exercise will be beneficial as

“[i]t forces them to look at what is really happening as a result of the decisions our education advocates [...] and to spend a significant amount of time contemplating whether their intended decisions are good and what to do about them when they are not. [...] By providing them with an alternative worldview and tools to explore the systemic repercussions of their decisions, we free them to act morally, immorally, or amorally based on a clear understanding of decisions-making consequences” (Gialone & Thompson, 2006, p. 272).

This concept feeds into the second approach I would like to outline: the move beyond mainstream teaching material archetypically represented by standard

economic textbooks, such as Mankiw and Taylor (2014) and by the famous (or infamous) Harvard Business School cases. Beyond the anecdote that some students at Harvard University left Professor Mankiw's lecture as a sign of protest against a one-sided neo-classical perspective of economics (e.g. Delreal, 2011) it is noteworthy that students realize that something is fundamentally wrong with the mainstream business school worldview and the teaching material it produces or draws upon. Harvard Business School cases certainly have their place, but they seem to have become a major product in their own right, generating substantial revenues for Harvard.

Analysing 36 popular Harvard Business School cases Swiercz and Ross (2003) revealed a rational domain bias, i.e. an economic worldview in the material. Characteristics of the cases include execucentrism; the consideration of only or mainly the perspective of top level management, instrumentalism; a portrayed primary purpose of controlling people and situations to achieve a pre-defined outcome, and objectivism; the assumption that there is an objective business reality for which there is only one objectively optimal solution to the problem presented in the case. The case method has benefits when it comes to meeting the goal of educating effective managers, but it falls short of promoting Practical Wisdom skills, especially considering that model answers provided as teaching material suggest there is one exclusive, rational, correct and acceptable solution or management decision. Such a bias fails to pursue a key objective of business and management education that would be supportive of Practical Wisdom, i.e. "challenging students to think critically about the role, influence, and philosophical foundations of management" (Swiercz & Ross, 2003, p. 426). This provides a good foundation for exploring the social significance and consequences of organizations, and the decision-making processes within them.

Roca (2008) specifies how to enrich the work with traditional Harvard Business School cases. Maintaining the conventional structure of case analysis in a first session, she lets the students reconfigure the case in the first part of a second session to create awareness of the moral issues that underlie the strategic decisions at hand. In the second part, the lecturer exposes the students to fictional situations of employees in the case study and encourages them to adopt the

perspectives and experiences of different participants, such as employees, for instance. The remarkable result is that the students often change their initial perspective over the course of the exercise (Roca, 2008).

Beyond the enhanced and altered use of conventional teaching material there are vast, but so far too rarely appreciated opportunities for resorting to alternative cases and / or textbooks. I would like to particularly point out the recent Dark Side Case Competition initiative of the Critical Management Studies community which encourages case writing that acknowledges the dark side of contemporary capitalism. The resulting collections comprise worldwide examples of the devastating consequences of mainstream corporate behaviour (Diochon et al., 2013; Raufflet & Mills, 2009; Sauerbronn, Diochon, Raufflet & Mills, 2018). These cases offer an opportunity to reconsider decision-making scenarios in the context of Practical Wisdom. With respect to textbooks, there are also promising examples of enriching alternatives overcoming mainstream business education. In particular, the idea of pluralist economics is gaining traction, and an array of books is coming to the fore (e.g. Reardon, 2009; Thornton, 2016; van Staveren, 2015).

The third approach to promote Practical Wisdom in business schools that I would like to highlight is the re-discovery of a liberal arts education. A large-scale initiative to that end (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan & Dolle, 2011) was introduced by the Carnegie Foundation in the USA, which imported, the European humanities-based educational ideal. Now, hopefully it will return as an inspiration to the so-called old continent.

Once again, the prerequisite is a shift in worldview for business schools. The current and to some extent global economic and financial troubles, “may stem in no small part from blind trust in an exclusively economic view of business and the world” (Colby et al., 2011, p. 29) thereby undermining Practical Wisdom. Hence, to foster it, we need a change of outlook.

In order to broaden perspectives, Leuphana University, Lüneburg, Germany, has introduced a first semester requiring all undergraduate students to take two

interdisciplinary modules covering the overarching fields of responsibility and sustainability. Thus, the institution encourages students to question what is normally taken for granted and to adopt different points of view. Understanding more of the world and more about collective as well as individual responsibility makes a very good foundation for more meaningful HE in general, and better business education in particular.

There are also suggestions that arts, and especially contemporary art, can enhance the learning experience and support understanding of the world and the role human beings play in it. “By experiencing art in a business course, students can become more sensitive to the needs of others, and more imaginative in their responses to those needs” (Statler & Guillet de Monthoux 2015, p. 8). In this way they can develop Practical Wisdom. Such ideas inevitably attract criticism and may be dismissed by hard-boiled economists as esoteric. However, various initiatives at medical schools to train students’ medical eye, i.e. visual diagnostic skills through courses covering art history or narrative painting analysis (e.g. McKinnon-Crowley, 2017) yielded considerable improvements. This could be an indication that it is possible to improve business students’ skills in interpretation (e.g. of business situations or reports) and analysis (e.g. of strategies or market trends) with arts-based exercises, too, considering that businesses and especially business models can also be viewed under an organism lens (Baden-Fuller & Morgan, 2010).

There are numerous ways of fostering Practical Wisdom, both inside and outside the classroom. For a noteworthy example of how an HE institution can act practically wise to handle specific circumstances, please refer to Angelika Dorawa et al. in this volume. While the three approaches highlighted here certainly do not offer a quick fix for current problems in business education, they are the start of a worthwhile journey. Let us embark on this journey soon.

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