

Experience of a practitioner as a B-School faculty in India

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The reason I wrote this article was that, if accepted for publication by a journal of repute, I would be able to at least partially meet one of the key norms for a full-time faculty position in a Business School, namely, “Publish or Perish”.

At the beginning of the last academic year, at a somewhat solemn meeting conducted by the Director & Dean with each faculty, I was advised that career prospects at the institution would be dependent on my research output in addition to the assigned teaching workload. This came as somewhat of a shock, since, having come from an industry background, I had no idea what “research” entailed.

Since then, my understanding of “research” has improved somewhat and it appears to encompass the following:

1. Publication of Research Papers in peer-reviewed journals
2. Publication of Case Studies
3. Presentation of papers at various conferences
4. Authorship of Books or Chapters in books
5. Articles in Business Magazines and Newspapers

Hopefully, my current article will fall in one of the above categories and thereby qualify as legitimate research!

The first question which struck me as a naïve academic outsider was: what is the purpose of research in a B-School? Specifically:

1. Is it intended to contribute to management thinking and to the repository of management knowledge?
2. Is “research” synonymous with “publication”?
3. Is it meant to enhance the reputation (read: Rankings) of the institution?
4. Is it merely a CV-building exercise for faculty members?
5. Most importantly, does it benefit the students in any form?

As a marketing professional, brought up on the mantra that the Customer is King, it seemed to me logical that any activity conducted in a B-school should be designed to benefit its target audience – which was clearly the student body. After all, at least in India, it is the tuition fees paid by students which account for the bulk of the revenue of any B-school. Also, unlike undergraduate technical courses, a B-school’s primary (default) offering is a short, intensive

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course of study, comprising disparate subjects, and designed to maximize the employability of students in a period of 2 years.

In such a scenario, how does “research” undertaken by a faculty in a B-school benefit the students? One could argue that research-oriented faculty capable of making landmark contributions to management thinking and knowledge should be great teachers of their subject and would thereby naturally impart education of a higher quality to their students. Sadly, this is rarely true in India because the type of “research” typically undertaken is hardly “landmark” in nature and only rarely is accepted for publication in the top international peer-reviewed journals. Also the definition of “research” seems to be synonymous with “publication” which leads to all sorts of inimical behaviour aimed at ensuring acceptance by journals with a high “impact” factor, and then managing the “citation” process thereafter, rather than the subject and quality of the research itself.

Also, great researchers do not necessarily make great teachers, and often there is an inverse correlation between the two! From a student’s perspective, it is the delivery of the teaching which is critical and it is hard to see how a “research-oriented” faculty contributes to this in the short span of 2 years the students spend in the institution.

Of course, any good teacher does constant “research” to update one’s course material so that it remains contemporary and in touch with prevailing industry realities. But this type of effort does not fall within the traditional definition of research, although it contributes the most to the teaching effort and to the delivery of a contemporary education. Perhaps such course-related research should be documented by faculty members in terms of literature surveys undertaken, seminars attended and course outlines modified, so that it qualifies as part of the legitimate research required to be undertaken each year.

Also, if a B-school feels that research is an important ingredient in its “mix”, it can and should create 2 cadres of faculty – a Teaching cadre and a Research cadre. The former would have the primary task of delivering the courses on offer to the students and undertaking the associated “research” to keep their courses contemporary and updated – in fact, in some sense, they would be customers of the “basic” research conducted by others. The latter would focus primarily on high quality, path-breaking research in their chosen areas; teaching would be optional, not mandatory. With such a clear demarcation, faculty would be recruited based on their strengths in Teaching or Research and their workload would be defined, and performance appraised, accordingly.

This type of demarcation would also help attract industry practitioners to the teaching profession. At a B-school, more so than in any other academic institution, practitioner-faculty are vital for imparting education grounded in the reality of business. Student feedback on courses run by practitioners is almost always positive, since the emphasis is less on theory and more on practice, less on concepts and more on skills.

I am not implying that practitioners naturally make good teachers. Merely having industry experience does not mean that one has the capability to impart that knowledge to the students. Frequently, practitioners need to go through faculty development courses, case study workshops, etc. so that they can master the pedagogy required to run courses in a B-school. Also, verbal communication skills, personality traits and an innate ability to engage students, are critical faculty requirements to ensure an effective learning outcome; and these skills are distributed evenly among practitioners and academicians alike.

What creates hurdles for the entry of practitioners into B-schools is the expectation of performance in areas where they have had no prior experience or training (research, publications, etc.), and the mandatory requirement for a Ph.D. before they can be appointed as a Professor. Recruiting criteria for faculty as prescribed by the University Grants Commission (UGC) & the All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE), which are the regulating authorities for B-schools in India, appear to be actively designed to discourage the entry of practitioners into B-schools.

I am not going to argue about the merits or demerits of a Ph.D. degree and how it contributes to enhancing the teaching ability of faculty in a B-school. Suffice it is to say that it is a qualification more suitable for a career in research, as opposed to teaching. I absolutely do not denigrate or belittle genuine scholars, who have undertaken seminal theses in many fields, and I have immense respect for their achievements, but it is also true that, in many cases, the quality of doctoral dissertations in India and the dubious reputation of universities which have granted them, cast doubt on the credibility of this qualification itself.

UGC / AICTE need to recognize the difference between the requirements of teaching & research and prescribe norms for each of the cadres separately. Current Student-Teacher ratios should apply to teaching faculty only, and it should be left to academic institutions to employ as many research faculty as they deem fit. UGC / AICTE also need to revert to earlier recruiting norms which accepted industry work experience at various levels in lieu of a Ph.D. For example, to qualify for an Associate Professor without a Ph.D., at least 10 years of relevant industry work experience at senior levels could be prescribed; similarly, for Professors and Senior Professors, the norms could be higher requiring perhaps 15 and 20 years of experience respectively.

I do not want to give the impression that research has no value or should not be undertaken by an academic institution. In many countries, B-schools are generously funded through endowments and tuition fees are not the only source of revenue. This is true for some of the leading B-schools in India too. In such a scenario, the institution could legitimately accord equal importance to both teaching and research, and acquire and employ resources accordingly. In fact the reputation of many a leading B-school has been built through its research output, both in terms of volume and quality. By making path-breaking contributions to management knowledge and thinking, such B-schools have attracted top students to their hallowed portals.

I do want to argue however that teaching as a function should not be relegated to second place. The prime expectation of a student joining a B-school is to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills which would enhance one's employment/career prospects, and a high standard of teaching is vital in this pursuit.

I am also advancing an opinion that it is rare to find a good teacher who is also a good researcher. It appears to me that the attitude and orientation required for these two pursuits are quite different and attempts to force faculty members to undertake both these activities will result in a disservice to at least one of them.

And finally, I am in favour of a larger number of practitioners as teaching faculty in B-schools and recommend removing the various hindrances placed in their path, so that the prime objective of a B-school – imparting a business-oriented education to its students – is achieved.

I am conscious that some of the comments I have made in this article may be dismissed as naïve opinions of an academic “outsider”. My motive, however, is merely to attempt to define (or promote a debate on) faculty roles in the context of a special type of academic institution, namely a B-school. I also wish to advance a point of view on the utility of practitioners as teaching faculty in B-schools and suggest ways in which their involvement can be encouraged. Finally, I wish to state that is my deep and abiding respect for the academic profession which motivated me to take up a full time teaching assignment, which I view less as an occupation and more as a vocation, less as a career and more as a calling.