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Getting on with the job

A response to Jones and Lockwood

Now that positivist research and the Large Hadron Collider have not caused a black hole to appear somewhere between France and Switzerland and we have not all been sucked to our doom, **Kevin O’Gorman** takes time to reflect upon some the issues raised.

PETER JONES AND Andrew Lockwood identified some of the reasons that hospitality management research and education is in a potential spiral of decline. Undeniably one of the main reasons is that the existence of the independent hotel school model, within a university business school, is being questioned. Marketing, human resource management, finance, operations can all be taught by subject specialists, ideally underpinned by leading research. Hotel schools *per se* are not a thing of the past—far from it, world-class centres exist—they are just not the subject of this reflection.

Research in a business school

Evolution in academia is not a new phenomenon. When universities were established advanced degrees were offered initially only in the vocations of medicine, law, and theology. Over time, the universities

have adapted to changing economic and social structures and demand for skills. Indeed, Whitehead in an essay welcoming the opening of the Harvard Business School observed

The universities are schools of education and schools of research. But the primary reason for their existence is not to be found either in the mere knowledge conveyed to the students or in the mere opportunities for research afforded to the members of the faculty... The justification for a university is that it preserves the connection between knowledge and the zest for life, by uniting the young and the old in the imaginative consideration of learning...¹

When the Harvard Business School began the university was the learning environment and some compromise had been reached between the idealist liberal vision and what Newman called ‘the disciples of a low utilitarianism.’² John Paul II elaborated the

mission of a university and stated that is it the duty of academics and researchers to make ‘universities “cultural laboratories” in which theology, philosophy, human sciences and natural sciences may engage in constructive dialogue’ and observes that in universities ‘there is an increased tendency to reduce the horizon of knowledge to what can be measured and to ignore any question touching on the ultimate meaning of reality.’³ All research must be robust and should avoid what Benedict XVI describes as a ‘dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires.’⁴ There is considerable scope within a university business school for a genuine plurality of views, and disagreement leading to constructive dialogue and contributing to enhancement of scholarship.

Science, engineering and technology, medicine, the law, and divinity were firmly established and a balance between the vocational and the liberal was pursued. Today, vocational courses may need to recapture some of the values and characteristics of the traditional higher vocations. However, unfortunately this is not always possible, so often contract trumps covenant in a wide range of contemporary occupations. But this can be further exacerbated by a failure to recognise the dichotomy and deal with it, rather than engaging in the introspective debate that has been a characteristic of hospitality academics. Far from the demise of the middle-class career predicted by some, professionalism and flexibility are highly desirable general features of gradueness; learning to learn and the formation of capacities in general should take precedence over the acquisition of specific content.⁵ Imagination and creativeness must complement flexibility as preparation for a world of rapid and continuous change; it’s a question of balance.

Theories in practice

In many sections of society, science is seen as being little short of infallible; anything else must be dismissed as fancy. Even in hospitality journals there is the tendency to trust the so-called hard facts of statistically analysed quantitative data rather than the interpretive results that qualitative analysis tends to produce.

However, the physicist Richard Feynman warned his students when they did research that, before publishing their results, they should think of every possible way in which they might be wrong; while another physicist, Alan Lightman, explains the vital importance of this self-questioning approach: ‘In science, as in other activities, there is a tendency to find what we’re looking for.’⁶

The ability to take an imaginative leap, beyond accepted scientific dogma and the entrenched views of academic colleagues, disciplinary boundaries or even apparent common sense, has been at the heart of a significant number of scientific or technological

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advances in the last few hundred years. For example, throughout most of the 20th century, the conventional wisdom was gastric juice caused ulcers, until a pioneering doctor infected himself with a bacterium thus proving that conventional wisdom was incorrect and winning the Nobel Prize for medicine.⁷ Even areas that appear to be based on objective fact or cold hard logic can be questioned, as the physicist Max Planck said, ‘New ideas are not generated by deduction, but by an artistically creative imagination... Science, like the humanities, like literature, is an affair of the imagination.’⁸

Hospitality research

To subsist within a contemporary research-focused business school, hospitality research must be robust and falsifiable. This unfortunately has not always been the case. One example is an early conceptualisation of the phenomenon of hospitality by Muhlmann who argued that

in essence, the organic and spiritual qualities of hospitality have disappeared, replaced in the public sphere by a formally rational system of (usually monetary) exchange whereby hospitality is provided in particular institutional forms (hotels, restaurants) that are essentially impersonal... for the most part, hospitality is no longer about the personal giving of

*the host's own food and accommodation but a matter of impersonal financial exchange.*⁹

This reflection on the hospitality industry within a narrow and poorly defined commercial context has permeated though hospitality scholarship and illustrates some of the errors inherent in aspects of hospitality research that need to be avoided if hospitality scholarship is to grow and develop. These are sweeping statements, not backed up with any apparent empirical research evidence. They are also given some credibility by the fact they sound plausible and echo characteristics of other hospitality research, that humanity's organic and spiritual qualities have disappeared and everything is being replaced with commerce. Fortunately, this is at worst simply not true, or at best a myopic and one-sided view of society.

This example illustrates the potential danger of considering a hospitality transaction out of its proper time or context and comparing it to another hospitality transaction from another time or context, a process referred to as the teleological fallacy.¹⁰ The organic and spiritual qualities that subsist within the domestic context, and indeed can be shown by individuals offering hospitably in the commercial context, have not been replaced; the contexts are simply different. Analysing texts from a different time or culture, then looking for examples of similar practices in traditional cultures in the world today, whilst being illuminating, can have its difficulties. What was lacking from the analysis provided was a clear understanding of contexts of hospitality. Hospitality offered in the home has been, and still is, used for various ulterior or nefarious purposes. The commercial hospitality industry has at least 4,000 years of history underpinning it. Although, as yet, no archaeological evidence of commercial hostels and taverns in ancient Mesopotamia has been found, however there is a large diorite *stela* in the Louvre Museum containing inscriptions commonly known as the code of Hammurabi (illustrated above). The original purpose of the *stela*



is somewhat enigmatic; however, from the inscription these are laws governing commercial hospitality from at least 1800BC: decreeing that the punishment for charging more than the beer was worth was death by drowning and there was a requirement that tavern

keepers, on pain of death, to report all customers who were felons.

Commercial hospitality (provision of food, beverage and often accommodation within business) has not suddenly replaced anything. Hospitality research should focus on deepening understanding of the industry, not how people behave in their own home; that is best left to anthropologists and sociologists who have the necessary training and research skills. As hospitality academics, researchers, students and practitioners we should be immensely proud of the rich and incredibly diverse heritage that our industry has. There is nothing wrong with providing a commercial hospitality service within particular institutional forms (now called the hospitality industry, but known by an assortment of different names in the past).

In Strathclyde we are entering both an exciting and demanding new phase as hospitality and tourism are becoming a central focus for the Business School's research agenda. A faculty-wide research centre is being established, with expertise being drawn from the entire university and beyond. If hospitality research is to grow and develop in a business school it should stay focused on the particular goal of increasing knowledge and understanding of hospitality management and the hospitality industry; albeit enriching that research through different methodological perspectives. This, as Jones and Lockwood said, 'is about doing it better'; but most importantly is getting on and doing it. Not only should we use the 'm' word we must use it and we should be proud to use it; after all hospitality has a very long history and has always been managed.

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