LES AMIS DE l'École de Paris

http://www.ecole.org

GRESUP

*G*roup de *Ré*flexion sur l'*E*nseignement *SUP*érieur de la gestion

with the support of FNEGE

24 January 1995

Can Management Education Innovate ?

"WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION ? THE EAP'S EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATIONAL METHODS"

Bernard COVA
Professor, EAP

Report by Philippe Zarlowski

Students come across different education systems when they go to study at foreign universities. International experience comes as a shock to them. It reveals that all of our management models and theories are under-defined, conflicting and of limited use for forecasting.

I - PRESENTATION BY BERNARD COVA

I'm going to start by explaining where I stand in terms of international experience. I am a Frenchman of Italian origin and I grew up in an unusual international environment - the Anarchiste International, thanks to my grandfather. I spent two years working in Morocco before becoming an international sales engineer for Europe and South America in the aerospace industry. I was educated first of all at the Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Paris (ESCP) then University Paris-Dauphine. I now teach at the EAP, which has establishments in France, Spain, Germany and England. What makes it unique from other elite institutes of higher education is the fact that each of its students follow the course in several of these European countries.

When I arrived at the EAP, I realised that the school puts careful thought into the educational value of management teaching. I shall present our basic philosophy of international educational methods with regards management teaching. Before I start, I'd better warn you that I'll use stereotypes to make certain points!

Differences in educational methods hiding between the lines

If you take the brochures from twenty different French management schools, you'll see that they all talk about sending their students abroad, all use interactive teaching methods with case studies and all rely on work placements for in-company training. These three features are common to all of the schools and there doesn't seem to be any distinction between them. However, if you take a closer look at how the cursus happens in practise at each school, you'll be surprised by the differences you can find by reading between the lines.

Case studies are a good example. One current method is to present models to students and then use cases as practise in applying the models. At other schools, students aren't given any theory, but go to the sessions to discuss a document. Here, case studies allow the students to conceptualise the various problem-solving processes they may come across.

The situation is the same for work placements. What is there in common between a school where work placements are carefully followed up and another where the trainees are left to their own devices? The differences turn out to be equally extreme between the various ways of following up the end-of-training reports that the students write. If we stretch this example further, we might say that in some schools a professor has 30 reports to correct and will spend 30 seconds on each. By contrast, other schools consider work placements to be central to learning; here, the professors' role is to help students understand concepts and link them to what they see happening in companies.

Finally, the differences seem even more marked in international education. The majority of business schools have an international stream, i.e. a cursus of lectures that give an international slant, with foreign work placements in the best of cases. Some business schools offer exchange programmes, although nobody really worries about the courses that are taught by the host institutions. Other schools confuse international experience with expatriation. However, there is a difference between working in a mixed team as a Frenchman abroad, working with foreigners in France or working abroad in a French company. Is it really possible to attach the same educational importance to such diverse experiences as a work placement outside mainland France, a term spent at a foreign university, a course followed in France with foreign students

on an Erasmus programme, an international stream followed in France, or an entire course followed abroad (for example, an MBA)?

Which educational methods for management teaching ?

These three issues all have in common the problem of educational methods, with the new added dimension of being international. The educational sciences can help us pick out its main features. Therefore, we'll use what Jean-Pierre Astolfi[1] calls the central paradox of learning:
"All learning occurs on a tightrope between two poles:
- one of the poles, self-structuring, can be linked to the so-called 'new' educational methods; it stresses the indisputable fact that it is the student, by himself, who learns. No-one, however well-meaning, can do the learning for him;
- the other pole, outer-structuring, stresses another indisputable fact, that our basic knowledge is not the result of individual rediscovery."

In this way we can draw a two-way continuum between the student/self-structuring pole and the knowledge/outer-structuring pole upon which management schools have come to place themselves.

The problems arise when the tension slackens between the two poles, and it is only possible to be on either one of the two poles. This is not unlike what has happened in France since 1970. Using a little imagination, we can take Michel Crozier's[2] rather caricatured view of the 'FNEGE bandwagon', whereby 700 'scouts' played the experts upon their return from Northwestern, Chicago and Wharton. With the homecoming of these educational 'scouts' in the 1970's, French management education plunged headlong into the utopia of scientific management and in doing so positioned itself at the 'outer structuring' extreme of the education continuum. The FNEGE scouts had the following credo: there exists a sort of universal management learning that can be expressed in a systematic form, and with the development of quantitative research, we will be able to establish and develop scientific knowledge, split up into different disciplines (Finance, Marketing, etc.) that will simply need to be passed on to the students as though it's common sense. This strong technical and scientific culture naturally determines the way in which the knowledge is passed on, as something that can be mastered. As soon as we are confident of knowing everything and being able to predict it all, we ask no further questions about educational methods: we simply pass on what we know. Therefore the methods we use stem from our conception of knowledge.

Seen from this angle, work placements and case studies are educational tools that allow the student to apply the concepts and techniques taught in class. This means that business schools suddenly shifted from the art of business to management sciences, where learning has been essentially deductive.

In spite of all this, there has been one attempt to provide an alternative solution on the 'self-structuring' side. In 1973, close on the heels of the 1968 events, the EAP directors countered the management science movement by asserting that management sciences did not exist. Instead, management learning (if there is such a thing!) was considered above all to be local, i.e. specific to each company; there is no transferable

---

1 *L'école pour apprendre*, Paris: ESF; 1992.

2 Michel Crozier's account in *Gérer et Comprendre*, no. 35, June 1994.

management expertise and therefore no body of experts or teachers. With this in mind, the EAP's original teaching methods were based on two options:
- personal development, with a monitor who, using an introspective psycho-analytic approach, helped the student to develop his personal and career goals;
- management learning by action-reflection, with a mentor who helped the student to step back and develop his own wisdom in relation to his own in-company experiences (i.e. individual work placements and group projects).
This model of teaching, where learning was basically inductive, disappeared in 1979, when the EAP gave up these educational devices to embrace management science, albeit with some reservations.

However, these days the management science movement is being challenged. In my opinion this can be explained by three phenomena:

Firstly, companies reject people who are too analytical and cannot work effectively in a team. Company directors have therefore told the schools: *"You're not producing the sort of graduates that we require. We need managers who can act quickly and make decisions, not students who have been trained to become consultants"*.

Secondly, MBA courses in the United States are changing, with courses on operational research being replaced by leadership training and group work. This trend has now reached France, as illustrated in the book *L'Ecole des Managers de demain*, written by professors from HEC (Hautes Etudes Commerciales).

Finally, post-modernism is increasingly casting doubt onto the scientific and conceptual approach.

The impact of this theory on international education

What impact have these changes had on international learning in management schools?

If we take a look at what has been done by the majority of schools centred on outer-structuring techniques, we see that they have tried to invent a specific body of 'international' knowledge. There has been considerable debate on whether international learning spans many disciplines or is a separate discipline in itself. The outcome of this debate will determine how this knowledge should be taught.

Therefore at one extreme, international learning is seen as a management discipline with specific concepts and techniques that need to be learnt separately; sending students abroad to do work placements gives them the chance to apply the models that they have learnt in class. More commonly, international management is seen as an all-encompassing subject that allows students to integrate what they have learnt in the various disciplines from classes, work placements and other educational experiences. It is either presented as a capstone course, often in the final year, or it is seen as a bonus (along the same lines as technology) in which case a stay abroad is considered valuable for learning various ways of behaving, but no attempt is made to integrate it into the existing teaching.

By contrast, the EAP considered international learning to be a core part of the learning process: the school's aim was therefore to train individuals to develop a particular kind of understanding. This meant putting the students in an unsettling situation so that they themselves could challenge their own behaviour and go on to develop new approaches to life. The EAP's founder believed that international experience was a good way of doing this.

What's the situation today? International education is a reality, thanks to the opening of Europe and the fact that foreign students are attending courses at various schools. Students are travelling more widely both with the school and in their holidays. Today, this international dimension is part and parcel of our daily lives (both in general and in the business schools). So how can it be integrated into teaching methods? What does this mean for the future?

A virtuous circle of intellectual openness and social/geographical mobility.

This international aspect is a catalyst that allows us to see the pluralism of cultures and theories. I can illustrate this with my own experience: I was lucky enough to study at one of the Parisian business schools, during which time I lived comfortably and didn't ask myself questions on the meaning of life. Then I taught Economics at a high school in Morocco; this meant of course that I had to teach Moroccan students. After a few minutes' teaching, one of my students pointed out that the Koran contradicted what I was saying. I had the choice of taking one of three attitudes:
- the saviour-figure: "I've come to tell you the truth";
- turning a blind-eye: "I'll carry on as though I didn't hear that remark";
- open-minded: "What if they're right too?"

This sort of experience opens students up to pluralism, including theoretical pluralism. French students discover different education systems when they go to study at foreign universities. International experience comes as a shock. It shows that all of our management models and theories are under-defined, conflicting and of limited use for forecasting. Many students come to a turning point and completely change their view of management when they see that Kotler's 4 P's marketing mix model or Porter's 5-Forces model of competition are not unquestionable truths but simply the dominant models among a whole range that are presented by the professors and used in business. Indeed, the basic, real-life lessons are all too often lost in theory. It is all too easy to forget that these concepts are not indisputable facts, but theoretical tools that people create in order to structure their way of looking at the world. And these ways of seeing the world are becoming increasingly fragmented and local. The students often come to the conclusion that management is less about manipulating supposedly universal models than about choosing the right model, using several models at once, or even creating special models for specific situations.

The professor's role in this educational process is not to train students to become experts at manipulating and applying the most popular models, nor to reject all the models as useless and even dangerous; instead, their role is to help students recognise the existing theoretical trends and link them to the international experiences that they have had: e.g. foreign work placements, mixed classes, etc. International education can also involve working with students who have different reactions, or going to visit companies that work differently. International learning clearly shows the importance of theory, as well as its limitations. Hence the students don't come away from their various international experiences with fixed ideas on general, universally-applicable management concepts. Instead, they learn basic principles that are integrated into partial, fleeting theories, and this influences their behaviour. They acquire an intellectual versatility, which in turn encourages them to become socially and geographically mobile: when people have this versatility, they are prepared to travel, and vice-versa. This virtuous circle can provide the basis for a whole educational programme, as opposed to merely giving a brief insight into international management.

International education as the spur for an ethical debate on tomorrow's managers

Finally, these changes raise the question of the ethical choices made by business schools. If we train students to become more mobile, won't international learning lead to a new ideal: i.e. the international or Euromanager, who is mobile, flexible and prepared for any place or culture? But have we thought about whether it is viable or not to train an 'international manager' ? Our society is running at two speeds: on the one hand there are some highly mobile and highly knowledgeable people, and on the one hand we have a group of traditional, marginal, semi-settled people who are clinging to their local roots.

The result is a widening gap between those who are becoming mobile and those who cannot do so; the first group have the most choice and the most contacts, whilst the second group have a very limited choice and are finding themselves increasingly isolated. Mobility, which used to be seen as complementing a settled way of life, now seems to be making a progressive comeback as our very *raison d'être.* Management schools have decided to advocate social and geographical mobility (their choice is less clear in terms of intellectual openness!) without really being aware of the effect this could have on society. This is the real issue in international management education. Are business schools aware of the ethical choices they are making when they design their courses? I will leave this thought with you as my conclusion.

II - DEBATE

International learning : a risky 'deconstruction' experience

A participant : *I'd like to answer your question concerning the viability of international managers: people have to have a strong idea of their own culture before they can accept other cultures.*

Bernard Cova (B.C.) : I agree: in fact, the catch phrase of the eighties was *"Think Global, Act Local"* but nowadays we tend to say the opposite: *"Think Local, Act Global"*.

A participant : *I believe that the problems in the Slav and Arab countries come from the fact that they have tried to catch up with the West by imitating our ways. They are so adept at this that they are now going to two extremes: on the one hand, withdrawing into their traditional culture, and on the other, completely rejecting it in favour of the Western culture. This also happens to expatriates, regardless of their host countries. My son, for example, spent 18 months in the United States. He wrote to me saying that all the French people he had met out there were split personalities, torn between their origins and the local customs. Expatriates no longer understand people of their own culture when they do finally return home.*

B.C. : If they're already split personalities torn between two places, what will happen when they're torn between four or five?

Another participant : *I think we're confusing two different issues here: people who have to emigrate and fit into a new culture, and young students who learn about a new culture without having to forget their own. EAP graduates learn to behave in this*

way and they therefore have fewer problems with other cultures. I'm Slovene and have had trouble fitting into the French lifestyle. However, the EAP taught my son what he needed to be better equipped for an international environment.

B.C. : The idea behind all this is mobility, which is certainly today's big issue. We want to enable our students to be mobile in every sense by giving them an international education. We could wonder whether being mobile makes people end up losing their bearings.

A participant : *People can lose their attachment to a culture in more than one way. Developing a split-personality, being a strong individual or taking on another cultural identity are all different ways of stepping back.*

A participant (EAP member) : *It's crucial to underline that the culture shock is experienced as a group. All the students are in it together. They have English friends who show them around in England, which is a help.*

A participant : *How many foreigners study at the EAP ?*

EAP member : *Out of 190 students in one year's intake, there are on average 40% French, 30% German, a large number of Spanish students and a smaller proportion of other nationalities.*

A participant : *No doubt international experience has a negative effect on certain people: we can imagine some people developing radical doubts that will do nothing to help their future integration in a company. The simple fact of immersing people in an international environment is no guarantee that they will embrace it: some people may reject it. What's more, you've limited the international element to Europe, which must cushion the shock somewhat.*

B.C. : I admit that some of our students did crack at the beginning. Moreover, we notice every year that the various nationalities tend to stick together, particularly the Spanish. What you've said does seem to be true.

Another EAP member : *I'd like to put this into context. We should talk about the complexity of international experience, since we witness some extremely complex set-ups. Lets say for example, that the leader of the Spanish group is going out with a girl from a different culture. He'll show some resistance at a certain level but in other ways he'll make efforts to integrate.*

The same participant : *So if we want to avoid the negative effects, should we systematically select students who have an international family background and are married to foreigners?*

B.C. : We can certainly ask ourselves whether international managers develop multiple-personality disorders as a result of wearing different masks. Does this mean we should be talking about intellectual flexibility or personality disorders ?

Is international experience a genuine way to learn ?

A participant : *I agree that people come back disoriented and struck by their experiences. However, I'm wondering what we can let the students believe. They've gone abroad but are not natives of the host country, which means that even after a*

year or two they haven't spent enough time there to really fit in. Is this a way of training international managers ? Does this experience allow them to acquire skills?

An EAP member : *EAP students are better at dealing with the differences. They acknowledge and accept differences in others. We see the changes in them after three years. Local really means local to them; they develop an ability to understand how they may think differently to the person opposite them. This means that when the students go back into the real world they are already aware that different people have different ways of thinking.*

Another participant : *Are EAP students already international before they enter the school?*

An EAP member : *This is often the case. 50% of our intake already have an international profile. Notably, 10% of them have a dual nationality.*

B.C. : International experience is the type of personal challenge that we have chosen for them. We could also send students somewhere just to get their hands dirty. If, given their profile, this doesn't do the trick, we should perhaps find another means.

Another EAP participant : *All the students have experienced being an expatriate, but not all of them have worked in international teams.*

A participant : *What happens when the students come back from their international experiences?*

B.C. : In one sense they don't come back, having become specialists in practical international management. I think professors can make a huge mistake when they talk about international management from the outer-structuring angle, saying for example, "This is what international management is."

A participant : *What impact does geographical mobility have on your students ?*

B.C. : It allows them to challenge some of their fixed ways of thinking. To come back to my own experience, I really did ask myself why the Koran wouldn't be better than Kotler's book.

A participant : *Why should students have to go to other countries in order to realise that there are differences?*

B.C. : I think it's essential. Only geniuses can really understand the differences by staying at home.

A participant : *The developments in telecommunications mean that it's possible to have a virtual international experience.*

B.C. : I'm very worried that a weak, mixed culture will develop, a bit like the one shared by the readers of *Business Week.*

A participant : *Where do EAP students go onto once they've graduated ?*

An EAP member : *Our graduates find jobs in all the management functions, since the EAP is a generalist business school. The size of the companies they work for is also very varied. Some join very large companies, whereas others work for smaller*

companies that have a serious need for people abroad. In this way, 40% of our graduates find their first job outside their native country. This suggests that the melting pot does work. The EAP is still in the vanguard in this respect. Our English trustees recently told us that our strength lies in the profile of our graduates. Companies are developing an image of the EAP as a school that gives future managers a head start for working in international teams. Even if people work via groupware networks, it's still essential for them to understand the cultures of other countries. The students each specialise in a particular management function, but the school must continue to ensure that they integrate successfully into international teams.

B.C. : Having said this, it's true that general business school blurb on international learning doesn't show the difference between the real experience of the EAP graduates and other business graduates.

International education frameworks

Another participant : *What methods does the EAP use for international education ?*

B.C. : The EAP is currently taking its whole curriculum back to the drawing board. We know that it's a waste of time to throw people into an international environment without first giving them pointers. But it's no good either to put too much stress on the academic side of things. This means that our professors must be able to use theory to throw light on our students' experiences. For example, a professor should enhance the educational value of work placements by illustrating the students' experience with concepts. Students must be shown how to use theory to take an objective look at their experiences. It's easier to enlighten the students once one accepts pluralism. We can either teach classic strategy courses or we can try to understand each management situation through the twelve schools of strategy that are not all in harmony.

An EAP participant : *International experience at its best is a real school of mobility and at this stage the business school is still responsible for providing the right conditions. But can it go any further? What more can it do beyond creating a genuine international environment?*

Another EAP participant : *Only 40% of our students are French and we have boosted our numbers by bringing foreigners into the school. In effect, the school has created an international environment, but not as a cosmetic measure. The main problem is how the school should deal with the situations we've created. This is the key question. How do we integrate the two poles of learning that Bernard Cova talked about? We are a business school and the students must therefore have a minimum of facts at their fingertips so that companies acknowledge us. It's not necessarily enough to point out the difference. It's more a question of controlling the process of cultural integration at an educational level, and knowing how to give the students the right back up.*

A participant : *Are there any specific procedures for monitoring the students' progress?*

An EAP participant : *First of all, we have a system of personal tutoring. For example, we had one case of a German student who wasn't keen on our way of teaching Marketing and Human Resources. Our system allows us to solve this type of*

problem. It's only a small school, which means that we can give personal support to students who have trouble fitting in.

B.C. : Language lessons also take on this role. They've become courses in intercultural communication. Our language teachers play a very important role in ensuring that students integrate.

A participant : *We know that some French schools try to explain national differences. What are you doing to give your students pointers on these differences? Is it enough to tell them that they need to adapt? Of course, I'm not talking about stereotypes but about general guidelines.*

B.C. : This is a subject for debate. If someone leaves for Great Britain with prejudiced ideas then he or she will take much longer to fit in.

An EAP member : *We ask for example that our students on work placements do an ethnographic study of the company they're with. Likewise, it is compulsory for our foreign students to carry out work placements in France, even if most of them have already done work experience in their own country and are surprised that we ask them to do more. This is when we see the foreign students being surprised by French culture.*

Participant : *Do you help your students to find their work placements?*

B.C. : In theory they're supposed to manage by themselves, but we do help them if there's a problem.

The international issue reveals a debate on course content

A participant : *What importance do you place on the technical side of international management, such as COFACE financing methods?*

Another participant : *You quickly learn these techniques on the job when you go into exporting.*

B.C. : I learned this sort of thing at school, but I only really took an interest when I started to work in the sector, and this is generally the case for all management techniques.

A participant : *All the same, companies do say that the students should have some concrete knowledge. They should learn the basics of accounting, for example. However, companies also say that 'hard' subjects aren't important in schools that are not international. In this case, what is essential: 'hard' subjects or international experience?*

B.C. : I would like to see theory and international experience link up. It's personal development that I'm interested in, not international education per se. We have to realise that 80% of what is taught in business schools has only a short shelf-life. We should of course try to maximise the students' experiences, but without being tied to management programmes that are already too heavy.

A participant : *However students from standard schools aren't very hot on concepts, even if they're force-fed them.*

B.C. : What can we teach our students that is worthwhile? International experience allows us to approach issues that are more important than certain rather dry concepts.

A participant : *This is a bit of a pessimistic view, although the big question in management education is indeed whether people actually learn from lectures or whether it all boils down to practical experience that prepares the students directly for their future careers. Practices vary by definition. The same problems are cropping up in the engineering sciences which are developing in a similar way. The professors must be clear about their paradigms. The students can latch onto certain things.*

B.C. : The trouble arises when students are told that the theories are definitive. I think we ought to encourage them to do research, as this would give them a clearer picture of how theories are put together.

A participant : *How can we get past this kind of absolute relativism that you talk about, which could easily make us all cynical?*

B.C. : There are two types of postmodernists: the sceptical and the positive. The sceptics say that there is nothing left to believe in: every theory has already been pulled apart and disproved. However, positive postmodernists attempt to tread the middle ground between the two extremes of grand universal theories and no theory at all. I don't believe in the universal theories of marketing, nor do I believe that what goes on in companies is always different every time. I try to give my students this sort of positive perspective. My approach is flexible, but all the same it allows the students to understand different companies that operate in different sectors.

A special teaching team

A participant : *How do you consult with your teachers abroad?*

B.C. : We used to meet up when our governing body still had the means to finance our travelling expenses. Nowadays we make more use of technology like faxes and computer networks. What's more, each country used to manage its teaching in a rather disjointed manner, but we are now assigned a "product champion" to manage each discipline, for example Strategy, at all the EAP schools.

An EAP member : *We should point out that it's not easy to standardise the teaching, even if everyone can agree on which textbooks to use. There should therefore be general guidelines for each discipline.*

Another EAP member : *I have the impression that the difference in content is most marked with the Germans, who have a very clear idea of what they want.*

B.C. : In Marketing, we realised that each professor was doing as he pleased. In the end, it boiled down to the same course, even if each country spiced it up differently. To come back to the COFACE example, it's true that we could make the students study each country's rules and regulations. However we don't do this. I don't believe we should go too far with tools and techniques, but we should instead point out the convergences and differences between one country and another.

A participant : *Where does the EAP teaching staff stand in relation to your idea of education?*

B.C. : There's nobody at the EAP from the 'FNEGE bandwagon'. Some members of our full-time staff have been there from the start. They've spent 20 years at the school and have a sound knowledge of psychology. I'll give you an example of how EAP staff look at things differently to other professors: before coming to the EAP, I was actually at a more prestigious school and my colleagues told me that leaving the place would be a come-down for me. However, as soon as I went to my first meeting at the EAP, I realised that the people there had a completely different way of reasoning. For example, they talked about an educational plan, which is something that had never been discussed at my previous school. The EAP is special in that every new teacher is involved in its rich tradition of thinking seriously about education.

International education : can it go against what students want ?

A participant : *Were the students at your last school more or less hard-working in class than EAP students?*

B.C. : The students are more conscientious at the EAP. More of them have actively chosen to be there as opposed to following the conventional route: only 25% of the students are selected from French preparatory classes. The students keep up the pace, which makes it easier to teach at the EAP.

An EAP member : *This is an important point: the fact that there are many different cultures at the EAP means that the students don't consider it an easy ride to a diploma.*

Another EAP member : *Exactly: right from the first year, the students work in groups of five, and there are never more than two people from preparatory classes in the same group. The students quickly find their feet and see each other as groups.*

B.C. : How do students react to international education at other schools?

The same participant : *The problem is that at other schools 90% of the students don't do any work. But they love it when they have lessons on for example, "How to Negotiate in Russia", especially if the teacher is Russian, even if he or she has lived in France for the past 20 years. Business schools have lost the balance between these two extremes.*

Another participant : *Are the EAP students very demanding in terms of the courses they want to be taught?*

B.C. : It's true that some post-grad students get to be more like customers than students. If students know exactly what they want, why are they at school? What I mean is, if a student knows what he needs, then he already knows the subject. I believe that people wanting every offer to match their needs is the degeneration of the marketing philosophy. I believe we shouldn't give into this pressure from students, but that we should react by coming up with a sound educational plan. If we didn't have such a plan we would simply be satisfying their needs like slaves.

An EAP member : *Of all the schools I know, the EAP is the one where the students are the most keen to debate the course in an organised manner. There is a committee of members from the four countries who organise the debate with our professors. The students are not merely consumers. In any case, they see that their needs are not all the same. Part of the students' work is to help build the future EAP, which will be neither a French elite business school nor a German university.*

B.C. : Certainly, without an educational plan there would be nothing to stand up to the huge demands of the student-customer.