



## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## THE INCLUSION OF LITERATURE IN BUSINESS EDUCATION: AN OUTLOOK FOR BETTER BUSINESS.

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### ABSTRACT



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Literature can make a multifaceted contribution to higher education especially in a highly vocational field of study like accounting. Such fields suffer particular pressure to impart 'marketable skills' in response to student demand, governments, and the professional bodies. Literature militates against the threat of 'de-disciplining'. Literature hones and enriches expression. It reinforces original, creative, imaginative and multicultural thought. By adding a disciplinary dimension, literature encourages reflective consideration of ideas in terms of the difference which they make to other ideas. Studied holistically literature sets important issues into the context of human endeavor and choices. Not least literature is prophetic. The labor market will, in the long run, penalize those who lack the qualities which can be uniquely imparted by literature.

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## INTRODUCTION

Literature is a deep well of experience for the social sciences. But it is more than this. By harnessing imagination, literature extends experience. It raises the heavens and deepens the hells of life. Literature achieves connections among the seemingly disparate, be it within literature itself, across the arts or across a wider range of disciplines. Many have challenged the assumption that literature operates differently from scientific thinking (e.g. Hayes 1984). It will be recalled that Albert Einstein said that 'imagination is more important than knowledge.' A relevant contrast is between the 'useful' and 'valuable' disciplines (Graham 2005, p 181). The former helps us 'to live longer healthier and more prosperous lives' while the latter 'make those longer, healthier lives worth living'. Graham assigns art, literature, music, philosophy and history to the latter category.

In academia, literature and the humanities find themselves under threat. They need to fight constantly to stay alive by demonstrating their value and impact. When it comes to establishing a link between literature and business, the relevance of the humanities seems even more tenuous.

Arguably, literature and the humanities have a lot to say about the world of business and the world in general. Ask most business leaders what keeps them up at night, and the answer will rarely be issues of process, technology or numbers – although all of that is certainly complicated and challenging. Rather, what leaders struggle with usually comes down to the people stuff. And by that they mean the complex and often contradictory nature of human beings. No matter what processes, policies and structures businesses put in place, people remain complicated and unpredictable: we don't always get along; we have very diverse motivations; we find change painful and difficult; we don't always behave "rationally"; and we don't always do the right thing, even when we have every reason to do so. Much great literature captures this acutely and provides us with texts that challenge and lay bare the simplistic ways we can so easily go wrong when we think about it. Insights from literature and the humanities are

particularly valuable when trying to understand behavior that doesn't seem to make sense in a classic economic analysis. Examples of people being confusing in the world of business abound, whether dealing with colleagues, partners or customers. The present argument is that literature serves both purposes and has particularly much to offer in Business education.

## NEED OF LITERATURE IN BUSINESS

Literature is an art-form among others. Inspiration comes from all the arts. There is a history-long tradition of the fine arts enriching and carrying forward utilitarian fields. Wedgwood and Royal Doulton porcelain broke the chains of *biedermeier* with the help of contemporary fine artists. Music humanizes therapy. Poetry, rhetoric and the classics enrich politics. It would furthermore be elitist and indeed patronizing to assert that all our 'relevant' undergraduates and graduates start from a position of cultural penury. So why the present focus on literature?

Literature is a transcription of life into language but much more. Literature is memorable, provocative, sometimes iconoclastic, inspiring and widely accessible. As one of the most imaginative forms of expression it encourages our minds to range questioningly, creatively and originally. Literature harnesses and stretches to its painful and disconcerting ultimate the power of human imagination. Its artifice generates greater reality. Literature stretches our intellect, extends our reach and firms our orientation. If utilitarian justification is insisted upon, George Eliot (1819-1880), quoted by Wood (2008 p.129), describes literature as 'a mode of amplifying experience and extending our contact with our fellowman beyond the bounds of our personal life'. In sum a definition of literature appropriate to the present context could be 'imaginative drama, narrative and poetic fiction'. At the same time literature itself crosses disciplines. Works such as the *Divine comedy* (1400) by Dante (1265-1321) are interdisciplinary Everest. Sensitive portrayal of character sits among mathematical complexity and ruthless political condemnation.



Whilst advocating literature as the most suitable vehicle for our purpose it is necessary to guard against any intellectual elitism – in plain words snobbery. Literature must feel free able to embrace film, television - even popular song. For example, the dangers of reification of people can fruitfully be debated using any of Plato's *Republic* (c 360 BC), Orwell's *Animal farm* (1945), and *Nineteen eighty-four* (1949), But at the same time Fritz Lang's film *Metropolis* (1927) provides food for thought in an increasingly technologically dependent age – e.g. what should be the role of The Mediator charged with reconciling interests and classes? This last could be used with the disturbingly prophetic *Brave new world* (1932) by Huxley (1894- 1963). Literature is replete with issues around drivers and exercise of power. The educator is spoilt for choice not least among the *Prince* (1513) of Machiavelli (1469-1498), the *Leviathan* (1660) of Hobbes (1588-1679), the *Admirable Crichton* (1902) of Barrie (1860-1937) and the *Lord of the flies* (1954) by Golding (1911-1993).

At the same time advocacy of morality in literature can be as ethically disturbing as literature's immorality or amorality. Charles Dickens (1812-1870) set out to shake up the complacent urban middle classes in a work like *Great expectations* (1860-1861) with its implicit critique of law and the city. His portrayal of a classless amoral world order, permeated by unscrupulous quest for wealth which corrupts individuals in the process, will be familiar to those who have lived through the last decades of the twentieth century. The short story *Bartleby* (1853) by Melville (1819-1891) anticipates the reification of the individual in the modern work-place and sits well with Pynchon's *Against the day* (2006) with its story of unrestrained corporate greed, false religiosity, moronic fecklessness, and evil intent in high places. Le Carré (1931- ) leaves the reader thoroughly morally bewildered in *The spy who came in from the cold* (1999).

### CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS

Traditional business tools and approaches aren't always helpful when trying to understand and talk about human behavior and motivation because these things are somewhat muddled. Yet human behavior

sits at the core of many of the biggest issues faced by businesses today – the challenges of sustainability, the economic crisis, or the shifting balance of global power, to name a few. We won't find answers to these questions in sonnets or novels or essays on literary criticism. That is where the impact lobby go wrong. But you may well find fresh approaches to the questions. Most businesses today find themselves in what feels like a perpetual state of change. If they seek out any expertise to manage through this, it is usually from disciplines like 'change management' or 'process re-engineering'. While these fields certainly have their merits and are necessary fixtures of the corporate world, they often fall short of providing satisfactory solutions, reducing people to 'stakeholders' or cogs in a machine.

Literature and the humanities can open up another perspective for us. For example, reading Hamlet can enlighten on the complexity of decisiveness in business. And when it comes to understanding what change is like, what do we learn by reading Ovid's *Metamorphoses*? Reading Ovid – will instantly take us into the world of business and 'change agent'. But no poem gets closer to the savage truth of transformation than Ovid's masterpiece. Reading it reminds us that inside the shiny exterior of every new thing is the pathos of the thing transformed, history locked inside modernity, whether we like it or not. Time and again, businesses forget this at their peril.

The masterful poetry of the *Metamorphoses* – edited by scholars, translated by poets, debated and decoded by critics – resonates in every line with the power of language, that tool we use with such careless brutality as we drive change. In every episode of the *Metamorphoses*, there is more insight than in dozens of manuals and business bibles. Business leaders would do well to pay it some attention. If we are going to make businesses more sustainable – economically, socially, ethically – transformation is necessary. The so-called scientific textbooks and the how-to guides have their place in this regard. But in the end, the real problems – the problems of the people that are affected by change, their feelings, their motivations, their conflicts, the



way business language brutalises as much as it inspires them – cannot be reduced to simple formulae. Where people are concerned, formulae seldom work.

As a way of approaching complex reflection, nothing beats the fragility, the openness, and the contradictory nature of the literary text. A more sustainable business is surely a more human business. If we continue to ignore human complexity, and human motivations beyond profit, eventually people will turn their backs on commerce. It is already starting to happen.

### CULTURES

We encourage our students to think globally about their future profession. In order to do this their thoughts will need to transcend international accounting standards, international asset pricing models, tax harmonisation and international economics. They will need to empathise with different cultures, corporate and national. Failure to do this has been a significant cause of merger failure (Gertsen, Sørderberg, and Torp, 1998; Tienari, Sørderberg, Holgersson and Vaara 2005). A country or region's literature gives insight into character, thought-patterns, decision processes, *zeitgeist* and the very fabric of expression. This can only help us to anticipate and resolve destructive conflict. We might have been less inclined, as consultants, to propose totally unsuitable models for Russia and her neighbours if we had studied *War and peace* by Tolstoy (1817-1875) - as fresh and relevant today as in 1869. This work points up the country's ruthless unmanageable history. Facile imposition of western style free choice was doomed to bring much of today's corruption and anarchy. Truly 'we understand the scope of our own day by delving into the sensibilities of other times and cultures' (Weinstein 1995). He characterizes literature as 'a cultural script which is unique'.

Literature is important as an end in itself as well as being a way out of increasing cultural and resulting economic disadvantage. The ancient universities of Europe had it as a large part of their purpose to promote reflective engagement with the culture, religions and professions of the society in

which they were engaged (Graham 2005, Essay VII). Rhetoric, in the Renaissance sense of poetry and other literature, was at that time considered an essential part of a university education. While not formally universities, the abbaco schools of Northern Italy, which sought to lay the intellectual foundations of mathematics and business for the merchant classes, taught Dante and Aesop along with mathematics and business. Our role as university educators today is likewise to both elevate and prepare, whatever our discipline. This ambition need not be the exclusive patrimony of the magic circle of universities, if newer universities – especially in their vocational departments – become duly sensitive to the danger of becoming skills factories.

### REFLECTIVE LEARNING

What is reflective learning and how does literature help us to exploit its offerings? Reflective learning aims to integrate knowledge with other knowledges and to imagine future and alternative consequences. Links and connections lead to awareness of a bigger picture. The ability to engage in reflective thinking is important for managers, especially during periods of change. An important aim of management education is to develop this ability. Today's graduates must be able to consider ideas in terms of the difference these ideas make to other ideas, and not only in terms of the difference which these ideas make to the world. Accountants must be able to imaginatively address values and evolution. Peltier, Hay and Drago (2005 p. 46) argue that this runs counter to what universities have become. Universities have experienced a 'shift from a collective world in which independent and critical thought was valued, to a collective world in which the universities are expected to fulfil not these values but those of the marketplace and the economy'.

Reflective learning invites us engage in dialogue with ourselves; to explore alternative interpretations of and answers to questions. More formally the proponents of reflective learning advocate a metacognitive stance in which we are critically aware of our own processes of mental functioning. It is a challenge to us as tutors to reward reflection and not be slaves to a 'model answer'



which we might have been obliged to send to colleagues, external examiners or professional bodies. Therefore, through literature it encourages reflective thinking by engaging oneself with questions, doubts, internal and external conflicts, dialogues and universal links. Through literature our minds are free to range across and beyond thought, time and space. Literature encourages the mind to juxtapose origins, consequences and ends.

### CONCLUSION

Badaracco (2006) believes that the multidimensional nature of great literature can help middle market leaders enhance self-understanding and emotional intelligence and be more open to alternative perspectives. "Business schools don't do enough to develop reflection." Literature can make a multifaceted contribution to educating our accountants whether in professional practice, the public service or industry. Literature reinforces original, creative, imaginative and multicultural thought. By adding a disciplinary dimension, it encourages reflective consideration of ideas in terms of the difference which they make to other ideas. It militates against the threat of de-disciplining in one of the most vocational areas in the whole university curriculum. Studied holistically, it sets important issues of management into the context of human endeavor and choices. Not least literature is prophetic. These benefits are strengthened by literature's ability to expose its readers and listeners to some of the most concise, articulate, powerful and sensitive expression ever uttered. The labor market will in the long run penalize those who lack the qualities which can be uniquely imparted by literature. If we deny literature to our students, they will be the poorer: no flowers will mean no gold.

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