

Roundtable Discussion:

Reviving Europe through Student-Centred Learning at the Business School

ABSTRACT

Europe faces severe challenges such as increasing inequality and the rise of nationalism. It is time for business schools in Europe to contribute to the strengthening of civil values and to build or revive awareness of Europe's business scenery and its cultural specificities. EU higher education policy emphasizes, among other notions, student-centred learning. This workshop aims at the generation of ideas and inspiration for learning experiences that foster students' awareness of Europe and what benefits are at stake. Passion for Europe and belief in the contribution meaningful business can make here for a multipolar world guide this session.

Keywords: EU crisis, Business School, Student-Centred Learning

Introduction

Europe, and more specifically the European Union (EU) face a plethora of challenges. The current era of crisis was ignited with the so-called Euro crisis 2009 following the more or less global financial crisis triggered by the US subprime mortgage market in 2008. However, there are deeper and historically grown roots encompassing different cultures, political leadership styles and political philosophies of European countries (Bohn & de Jong, 2011; Brunnermeier et al., 2016). Furthermore, democratic deficits or doubtful democratic legitimacy of decision-making bodies in Brussels (e.g. Rohrschneider, 2002) are often mentioned as fundamental problem of the EU and its acceptance among citizens. Recently, the Brexit vote, the rise of populist parties riding a wave of nationalism that takes them into parliaments in substantial force, the overarching and heated debate on how to handle the refugee influx from war-stricken countries and the perceptions (and realities) of rising inequality (Piketty, 2014) along with unfair distribution of global trade benefits underpin alarming trends and raise concerns about the future of Europe and the role businesses play in it.

The ‘European Dream’ (Rifkin, 2005), a concept that never reached the status of a widely used label in its own right, let alone the mythical appeal of the ‘American Dream’ seems to fade away before it could really take off. It promised (and arguably still promises) more potential substance, though, than its role model counterpart across the Atlantic Ocean which has not materialized for many people and was classified as an illusion (Clark, 2014). Nevertheless, the interest in Europe and the EU as a supranational construct enabling a strong, dynamic economic and a favourable lifestyle (despite crisis and doomsday prophecies) is still substantial – among outside constituencies. On a personal note, it seems to us that the (increasing number of) students from overseas we are privileged to teach in our classrooms display open-minded attitudes with underlying combinations of curiosity, admiration and sincere interest vis-à-vis the EU. Unfortunately, that applies much less to European students.

Maybe, Europe becomes the victim of its own success: European integration has created a huge single market with some 500 million people living in its area as citizens. These, whether in the role of consumers, employees or entrepreneurs take all the ensued benefits largely for granted. They enjoy benefits such as free movement of people, goods and services, international career opportunities as well as simplified, more efficient business conduct and opportunities of broader scope (e.g. Johnson & Turner, 2016). But they hardly acknowledge that these benefits did not fall from the sky and require engagement to maintain them.

Besides the economic/business realm, the EU (with additional countries on this continent) has created a significant higher education area. Based on the Bologna process a system of comparable degrees with transferable credit points was established (e.g. Witte et al., 2008), and among the major aims there is enhanced student and faculty member mobility across Europe for the benefit of a unified sector strengthening the overall competitiveness of the EU on the global economic and scientific stage (Capano & Piattoni, 2011). More specifically and as part of quality assurance initiatives the EU emphasizes the importance of student-centred learning: “Institutions should ensure the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach” (ESG, 2015:12).

Against this backdrop we propose a roundtable discussion with the purpose of exchanging ideas, sharing experiences, and encouraging initiatives to address the increasingly urgent question of how we as management educators can strengthen the European cause and raise awareness of its challenges. We would like to explore how we can revive the appeal of Europe as a place of meaningful life and of business conduct for a prosperous society. In particular, we suggest a discussion about how that could be achieved with the students’ perspective in mind to encourage their pursuit of a (re-) discovery of Europe, its values and meanings and its role in the world well beyond business matters.

Theoretical Foundation

Manifold issues of fundamental importance are at stake in the debate of the current European crises and the potential future pathways of this continent. In the political realm the epistemic dimension of democracy (Habermas, 2008) is subject to intellectual considerations. Beyond that the very survival of democracy (a European concept with its roots in ancient Greece) in Europe is at stake, considering that more or less autocratic governments in other parts of the world seem to produce more economic growth and faster results in contested markets. However, it is often underestimated that democracy not only provides benefits of idealistic value such as notions of participation of the population or of *realpolitik*-driven value such as long-term stability, but it also provides economic benefits such as containing corruption – an inhibitor of economic growth and prosperity in the long run (Drury et al., 2006).

In the philosophical realm the meaning of the ‘European project’ of Enlightenment (Geier, 2013) is vividly debated. Values associated with Enlightenment such as human rights, application of reason (without the absolutization of rationality) and knowledge generation through scientific inquiry (while fostering pluralism in the arts and sciences) are under severe pressure in Europe (and in many parts of the world the situation is much worse). Neither business educators nor business students should ignore that, as their future career prospects if not their livelihood altogether relies on them.

In search of the role Europe and democracy play in the future we draw on Habermas’ (2008) plea for bipolar communalities between the ‘old continent’ of Europe and the USA and extend that perspective with the acknowledgment of a complex and dispersed world order that is probably best described as *multipolar* (e.g. Mouffe, 2009). Further complexity is added by the power and aspirations of corporations as global players. New deliberations are required across borders as well as across the political/business/educational spheres to deal with intertwined political and corporate responsibility (Scherer & Palazzo, 2007).

In such context we agree with the diagnosis that national narratives (which are so strongly on the rise these days in Europe, as pointed out) are not sufficient to educate students (Schissler & Nuhoglu Soysal, 2005). We are inclined to argue that an educational approach at business schools relying on them actually betrays students and ultimately society at large. Especially through the Erasmus programme the EU has fostered international mobility and exchange, which should prevent an all too national focus in any member state. However, it is disputed in the literature whether or in how far this exchange programme contributes to strengthening a European identity among students (e.g. Kuhn, 2012; Mitchell, 2015).

There is a lack of (or at least doubt regarding) European identity not only among students (and citizens at large). It is also prevalent among business schools. Whereas they keep heavily internationalizing, partly following policy prescriptions (e.g. Capano & Piattoni, 2011) and partly in attempts of enhancing their profile and/or their income generation options it gets less and less apparent how European business schools differ from counterparts especially in the USA. They miss opportunities of establishing a European profile as proposition of value appealing to prospective students at home and overseas (Rundshagen, 2014).

In terms of business school pedagogy (although *andragogy* would be even more appropriate in settings of management education), we are concerned about the dire finding that particularly business school students suffer from compartmentalized knowledge generated at their institutions of higher learning (Somers et al., 2014). Moreover, we are fully aware that our student constituencies essentially consist of *millennials*. They tend to have a ‘want it all’ and ‘want it now’ mentality and look for enticing, rewarding study environments, but they also tend to look for meaningful work and are prepared to contribute to society – even if they are insecure in how to pursue that broader goal (Ng et al., 2010). Such constellation arguably is an ideal starting point for student-centred learning approaches with a cause.

We acknowledge that student-centred learning is not a new concept (e.g. Easterby-Smith & Olive, 1984). Nevertheless, there are various appealing aspects of the concept in our contemporary context, and we will just highlight a few as follows: student-centred learning environments can stimulate deep approaches to learning (Baeten et al., 2010), which we consider beneficial (if not urgently needed) in the era of ‘educational bulimia’ (Lea et al., 2003). Furthermore, student-centred course design can empower students to become self-directed learners (Hains & Smith, 2012), which in turn strengthens their competences in a business world that increasingly requires skills of self-organization and incessant drive to perform at least for more advanced career levels. It is also noteworthy that student-centredness includes elements of choice; i.e. students can decide to some degree what they study or in which format they cover certain contents (O’Neill & McMahon, 2005), which accommodates millennials’ preferences. However, we would like to point out that we consider it vital that student-centred approaches do not turn student-as-consumer-centred, as the consumption notion undermines student engagement and learner roles (e.g. Naidoo & Jamieson, 2005).

Session Description

This proposed roundtable discussion session emphasizes interaction and inspiration of participants. It is designed to encourage brainstorming, listening to the experience of colleagues or like-minded people and the generation of ideas we can take back home to the classes we are going to teach. The scope of potential specific aspects is flexible, ranging from broader and more pragmatic considerations such as how to illustrate complexities and manifold facets of EU policy-making (e.g. Wallace et al., 2014) to more idealistic considerations such as how to foster passion for Europe and/or the ideas, values and way of life it (potentially) represents, always with our millennial constituency in mind.

Suggestions could include the introduction of dedicated courses/modules into our business school curricula, encouraged by the fact that ‘Business School and Society’ courses can foster awareness of social issues (Stead & Miller, 1988). Approaching from the student-centred perspective, considerations of how to go beyond the textbook basis (e.g. Suder, 2014) to really engage the students and create remarkable learning experiences are of high relevance. In particular ideas such as the integration of business projects reflecting the typical SME scenery as a backbone of European economies or regional specificities as well as excursions (e.g. to Brussels as EU capital with its major institutions) can be considered (and the workshop proposal team will be glad to share their experience in this regard). Furthermore, ideas of how to build out-of-the-ordinary case studies or how to encourage activities of added value for the students along the lines of our cause are thinkable.

The proposed timeline is as follows:

Introduction	5 minutes
Workshop team presents topic and provides experience/quick examples	10 minutes
Discussion and brainstorming, structured according to group composition (Option: split into smaller groups to focus on specific aspects)	40 minutes
Wrap-up and conclusion	5 minutes

The range of possible specific discussion topics is left broad to allow for adaptation to the needs/interests/expertise according to the group composition. Rather than with ‘ready-made solutions’ participants will take home inspiration and a range of ideas. This workshop is intended to contribute to the revival and/or strengthening of European business aspects, civil society values, and philosophical notions of wider applicability for the international business school community caring about meaningful management education.

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