

A COLLABORATIVE AUTO ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF CONCERNS OF FACULTY MEMBERS OF POSTGRADUATE MANAGEMENT PROGRAMS

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Abstract

While discharging their duties B-school teachers interact with several entities inside and outside the academic world. These dealings confront them with certain problems from both within and beyond. This ethnographic inquiry strives to study examine such issues faced by teachers of postgraduate management programs. As a collaborative auto-ethnographic study, it involved multiple researchers (forty-one, to be precise); all of them B-school teachers. In phase 1, seven researchers first wrote their own expressions and then brainstormed and discussed these transcripts. In phase 2, thirty-four researchers helped in perusing the narratives crystallized in phase 1. In phase 3 a limited team of researchers, like in phase 1, took the data filtered in phase 2 ahead. It was then coded after several passes using open and axial coding. The iterative exercise of coding gave rise to eight categories viz. challenges in teaching, oversized syllabus, issues in examination, concern for continuous learning, students' attitude changing gradually, acceptance to teachers by the industry, commercialization of education and regulatory compliance. With repeated coding, fragmenting and re-assembling the chunks of data, two themes emerge: endogenous issues and exogenous issues. It is fervently hoped that the study could help B-school teachers toward betterment of their academic delivery.

Keywords: Management Education, B-School Teacher, Auto Ethnography, Collaborative Auto Ethnography

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Introduction

Management Education has been in discussions these days, both at a national level in India as well as at a global level. Several articulations are emerging in the form of research papers that deliberate on this topic and there have been a few seminal titles like the one by Datar, Garvin and Cullen (2010) in the book form as well. We first take a look at some such papers and then turn to an introspective stance of the B-school faculty members, which is the mainstay theme for this paper.

Balaji (2013) in his Research Paper “Trends, Issues and Challenges in Management Education” studied the present situation of management education in India after financial turbulence of USA and the case like Satyam in India, the trends prevailing and implication of management Education of India on Industry and individuals, emerging issues of management education and its approach towards the development of curriculum needs of Industry. He concluded that business and management education could play a pivotal role in social uplift and triggering the entrepreneurial spirit in a society. While discussing the challenges & opportunities in management education in India, Kumar (2011) examined the present status of management education in India. The key issues have been identified for bringing efficiency, sufficiency and equity in the overall system of higher education including management education. Abilities of head and heart, skills and knowledge (ASK) are the engines of economic growth and human development of any economy like India. According to the much discussed Economic Survey 2011-12, India is going to be the youngest nation with largest work force in the world which possesses the potential to become an economic superpower. In a working paper of IIM Ahmedabad, Pradeep N Khandwalla (1994) briefly sketches the history and special features of Indian management education and offered an analysis of its strengths, weaknesses, threats and opportunities. He concluded that while the prospects are uncommonly bright, there may be rough passage for weak schools. Shubhendu Shukla (2013) goes ahead with a focus on issues and concerns of management education in India” to investigate its major issues & concerns and concludes that today we need good and active managers for the development of country. A conceptual framework is presented by Khalil (2007) in the context of knowledge management (KM) in B-schools in India.

Apart from this outside view, it would be equally pertinent to gauge what faculty members of postgraduate (PG) management think about their own ecosystem. Coming to their own

standpoint, they are entrusted with the mission of moulding the managers of tomorrow. Alongside instructional delivery for students these faculty members undertake other academic duties like course material preparation, setting the term-end question papers, related evaluations/paper correction, satisfying the queries of students, continuous assessment of students by way of quiz, submissions, presentations, etc. In addition, they have to cater to certain non-academic, administrative functions. Apart from these in-house tasks the teachers are engaged in research activities and management development programs, as well, where they interact with outside world, e.g. research organizations in their respective disciplines with whom they might be collaborating, companies where they occasionally engage management development programs, funding agencies whose sponsorship is sought for research projects, conferences or other events and regulators like university grants commission (UGC), All India Council for Technical Education (AICTE).

B-school faculty members are thus frequently in touch with entities within academic world e.g. students, principal/ director, technical staff like lab instructors, system administrators and other non-teaching staff catering to accounts, secretarial and administrative functions as also with the entities beyond the four walls of academics like regulators, companies, etc. It is but natural to guess that during these interactions within and outside the educational ecosystem, these faculty members would be facing some problems in the routine chore, some hardships in putting the pieces of jigsaw puzzle in the proper place and some issues of subtle nature that might be hard to surmise. This study attempts to understand the interaction of these teachers with entities within and outside academic world, to gain an insight about the problems they face in discharging their duties. This exercise leads to explore the topmost concerns in the minds of such faculty members. The first research question of this ethnographic study is to understand the major concerns of B-school teachers about their academic sphere, while the second research question is to explore their key concerns related to the outside world.

Method

The researchers have been teaching management students and hence have been making certain observations that go well with the quote of Maréchal (2010), “autoethnography is a form or method of research that involves self-observation and reflexive investigation in the context of ethnographic field work and writing”. Such observations transcend the personal aspects and are extrapolated to a wider canvas, as put by Carolyn Ellis (2004), “research, writing, story, and

method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social, and political". It was decided to adopt collaborative auto ethnography (CAE) approach, so that all the advantages of having more than one researcher could be reaped. With every researcher's busy schedule of lectures, the team went ahead with a partial concurrent collaboration, as advocated by Coia and Taylor's (2009). However, such a team work offered a supportive environment and emotional support through all stages of articulation (Boud & Lee, 2005). Leaving the evocative auto ethnographic approach that is centered around narrative presentations opening up conversations and evoking emotional responses, the analytic auto ethnographic path was chosen to focus on developing theoretical explanations of broader social phenomena (Ellingson & Ellis, 2008). Lastly, as suggested by Hamdan (2012) autobiographical narrative approach was considered well suited to educational research.

The research project went ahead in three phases which address different purposes and involve different count of participants/ co-researchers and employ different research methods.

Phase 1: It started with selection of participants/ co-researchers who would fit the dual bill of experience as a teacher at postgraduate management programs and flair for ethnographic study. A series of introductory sessions were conducted by the lead author addressing 50+ teachers of postgraduate management programs across five B-Schools. These short sessions aimed at audience sensitization on CAE variety of auto ethnography and to stimulate their interest in it. This approach was found highly effective to engage the interest and to seek the contribution of fellow teachers, as rightly put forth by Sambrook, Jones and Doloriert (2014). The exercise helped build up a team of seven participants/ co-researchers; with constitution and its demographics as given in table 1.

Table 1 – Demographic Details of Co-Researchers Participating in Phase 1

Co-Researcher (Pseudonym)	Gender (M/ F)	Age (2015)	Teaching Experience	Industry Experience	Area of Interest
Datta	M	45	15	5	Information Technology
Bhaskar	M	51	2	30	Marketing Management
Beena	F	41	17	3	Finance; Investor Behaviour

Balavinder	M	36	4	10	Operations & Quality
Raksha	F	55	33	--	Business Communications
Fiorina	F	31	3	10	International Business
Thakur	M	56	7	30	Info-Tech & Telecom

The variety of expertise areas of researchers, as can be seen from table 1, was an advantage in the research project as rightly put forth by Galligan et al.(2003). More inputs were provided on CAE to this team. Next, a meeting was conducted for deciding upon research modalities and communication among fellow researchers. Finally, a few illustrative open ended questions about the subject matter were also discussed and a free development of expression was requested for.

With these inputs, co-researchers went ahead to draft their own narratives. These expressions – at an initial stage and also at a part completion stage – were deliberated on, in a one-to-one manner when the lead author played the role of a patient listener and occasionally a sounding board to ensure that expressions convey precisely what is meant by the respective person. Consider as an example what Balavinder quoted in a curt and cryptic style as

“re-exam is a pain in the neck”

On more probing for elaboration, it got expanded in his revised expression

“Setting supplementary exam papers for failed students and writing their model answers is a repetitive and tedious job especially because it calls for huge efforts in setting the paper that will be taken by a very few students”

The later version certainly adds more clarity. This process helped in crystallizing the individual narratives.

Subsequently, all the narratives were edited with the sole purpose of bringing anonymity by replacing the real names with pseudonyms and then circulated among all the seven members for their review and responses. A chronological set of memos kept on accumulating all throughout this process. This collection of narratives was then taken up for codification using open coding method. After a couple of rounds of coding, the narratives revolving around the points other than

concerns and apprehensions were weeded out as they were not the focus of the present research. It would be fitting to mention just one example out of those deleted narratives that goes as under:

“Profound satisfaction that I get with delivery of a lecture is incomparable. This is the prime reason why I switched to academics. So much so, that when students are not around during vacation, I make it a point to engage a few faculty development programs to quench my thirst for lectures.”

This transcription piece underlines the burning desire of the participant to deliver a session to students. The emergent category of ‘teaching passion’ is a positive phenomenon and hence deleted from the scope of further study.

An iterative process of coding was performed with an output of several codes which surfaced after churning of the related pieces of transcript. Table 2 shows a very small, illustrative but not representative list of codes. Slowly the “key elements” (Erickson, 1977) like syllabus, exam, pedagogy started surfacing and were tried to hold in some association with the broader education context, using these key elements as the specific occurrence of the abstract canons of higher education in management.

Table 2 – Data Codification – An illustration

An illustrative portion of Data collected from Co-researchers	Codes
1. Profound satisfaction that I get with delivery of a lecture is incomparable. This is the prime reason why I switched to academics. So much so, that when students are not around during vacation, I make it a point to engage a few faculty development programs to quench my thirst for lectures	Burning desire to teach
2. Attendance should be 90-100% compulsory and co-curricular activities of students committees should not run parallel to lecture schedules. Fridays to Sunday for that.	Academics being focused as the basic occupation of a student
3. The primary motive of teaching was getting respect from students and to influence their life with channelizing their energy in positive direction, which has lost its significance	Respect expected due to shaping the students’ lives

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|---|---|
| 4. Some students lag behind. I have been taking special revision session for them. But in spite of these efforts some students cannot make it in the term-end exam. Their poor or no answers pinch me. | Innate passion for students' education |
| 5. Setting supplementary exam papers for failed students and writing their model answers is a repetitive and tedious job especially because it calls for huge efforts in setting the paper that will be taken by a very few students. | Bothersome nature of Exam, especially the one for repeaters |
| 6. But over the years I realized that my acquisition of a doctorate was not the end of my research and studies but only the threshold of the vast research world. | Continuous learning/perpetual research |

The spotlight of research was thus beamed on expressions of co-researchers that were more of concerns in their mind about education in general and management education in particular. Such concerns, which would potentially assume the label of 'categories' included bulkiness of the syllabi, pains involved in examinations, continuous learning and upgrade essential for teachers, changing attitude of students, desire to gain industry acceptance to teachers' scholarship and pragmatism, excessive commercialization of education and regulatory compulsions. Further, these potential categories seem to fall under two heads of natural grouping of teachers' perceptions viz. what happens inside the academia and how the academicians look at the outside world. At this point, the process was kept on hold giving way to phase 2. The coding of data subsequently continued as an initial part of in phase 3 as described later in this paper.

Phase 2: Before firming up with categories that in turn would be churned to give rise to themes, researchers thought of seeking a seconding. It was therefore decided to expose these half-cooked categories along with relevant expressions from narratives to a larger set of teachers of postgraduate management programs. With a view to gain a wide-spread audience in a short while, an opportunity was explored where several such teachers would have assembled. A faculty development program (FDP) held under the auspices of All India Council for Technical

Education (AICTE) was spotted. This event had attracted fifty faculty members representing several academic outfits located across length and breadth of the nation. Having obtained the permission from organizers, an appeal was made to participants of this program to contribute to the current research project and thirty-four of them responded positively. This group of teachers joined the project for a very short duration. They were presented with a set of closed questions consisting of major issue voiced during the phase 1 and for each issue they were asked to tick one of the five responses, viz. ‘completely agree’, ‘somewhat agree’, ‘neutral’, ‘somewhat disagree’ and ‘completely disagree’. These responses were then utilized in selection of the issues.

A small number of points were marked as irrelevant for the present research project for reasons like institute-specific functioning that is not a representative process, some optional courses chosen for specialization which are very rare and thus do not come into a common fold, etc. Here is an illustrative expression that was rejected in phase 2 & hence deleted:

“My tenure at one of the universities enabled me to head and therefore participate in many CSR activities and also attempt to alleviate issues faced by women within my reach“

Response of participants to above expression:

Count of participants who completely agree	Count of participants who somewhat agree	Count of participants who stay neutral	Count of participants who somewhat disagree	Count of participants who completely disagree
2	10	15	2	5

The phase 2 thus involved higher count of participants and served as a sort of validation of the outcome of phase 1 that had a limited count of participant/ co-researchers. While a few points, as stated above, had to be dropped after phase 2, most of the outcome of phase 1 was upheld and passed on to phase 3. Here is an illustrative expression that was confirmed in phase 2 & hence retained for further course.

“We as professors need to keep an ear to the ground, so that we are abreast of developments in the fields parallel to academics, e.g. trainings and management development programs. There are some surges like massive online open courseware (MOOC) and professional certifications like PMP for project management, CISA for systems auditing, etc. In the past one such phenomenon of distance learning has already demonstrated its power and has eaten up a slice of traditional education. If we do not pay heed to these developments and adapt to such waves, our profession may see a strong decline in the changing social milieu”

Response of participants to above expression:

Count of participants who completely agree	Count of participants who somewhat agree	Count of participants who stay neutral	Count of participants who somewhat disagree	Count of participants who completely disagree
21	9	3	--	1

Phase 3: An elaborate coding then followed. The open coding done earlier in phase 1 was repeated here to firm up the categories. Occasionally, the fragmentation of data was inevitable because some co-researchers have expressed their voices embracing more than one factor at a time. Consider for example these two narratives of two different co-researchers:

“With the changing socioeconomic environment, concept of family is changing rapidly, the present students are more competitive and self centered. The degree of competition among them is so high that they don't even make true friends as a result they feel identity crisis”

.... Co-researcher ‘Beena’

“Slowly but surely, the attitude of students seem to be moving toward preferring quick-fix over detailed studies. This is experienced on several occasions, e.g. a student approached for help in his placement interview when he had hardly 45 minutes left for the

interview.”

.... Co-researcher ‘Balavinder’

A portion from Beena’s expression (present students are more ... self centered ... they don't even make true friends ...) and a portion from Balavinder’s expression (attitude of students seem to be moving toward preferring quick-fix over detailed studies) were fragmented and put together to highlight the concern ‘students’ attitude changing gradually’ which is an example of category. Next section discusses all the categories as well as the themes arising from those categories.

Discussion

The categories emerging from the coding of narratives are summarized as under:

Category	An illustrative transcript giving rise to the category in column 1
1. Challenges in Teaching	• ... It has now become imperative for faculty members to prove themselves in every class (competition against Goggle)
2. Oversized Syllabus	• Packing too much teaching into a very short period [that is hard] to ‘catch up’ ...
3. Issues in Examination	• Sometime some students totally miss the tenor of the question in the exam paper. Such a gross misunderstanding ... makes me restless.
4. Concern for continuous learning	• While continuing in the present job, the faculty members who have done their PhD should be encouraged to undertake post-DOC
5. Students’ attitude changing gradually	• Slowly but surely, students’ attitude seem to be moving toward preferring quick-fix over detailed studies.
6. Acceptance to teachers by Industry	• ... More concerning point is that there are very few professors whom industry would listen to with a deep respect.
7. Commercialization of education	• ... turning this into a profit making business and treating students as customers and parents as stakeholders ... which is highly unfair.
8. Regulatory compliance	• Educational institutes are neither the part of corporate nor MSMEs so except UGC there should be no regulator

These categories were then taken up for further study. As pointed out by Trahar (2009), practitioner research is, invariably, a cyclic process with research and practice inextricably linked and continuously evolving. This was well understood when repetitive passes were taken through the categories. This exercise started throwing light on the themes as under: The first category

'challenges in teaching' explains what hardships teachers face and how these issues are advancing with technological developments and passage of time. The second category 'oversized syllabus' points to a bulky curriculum that is getting further augmented with increasingly more learning objectives and related updates. This category in turn aggravates the first category of 'challenges in teaching'. The third category of 'issues in examination' solicits the attention to problems in setting up the question papers, correction of answer sheets and related administrative tasks. This category again in turn embraces the first two. In comparing and contrasting these three categories, a common thread running through all of them was also traced, i.e. the difficulties underlined by all these categories are essentially related to the factors that are largely within four walls of the academic world. The inherent nature of these categories thus gives rise to a theme of 'concerns of B-school teachers about their own academic sphere' which can be seen as a set of endogenous issues. The fourth category 'concern for continuous learning' indicates the importance felt by teachers about incessant updates about latest development in their own field, polishing the saw regularly so as to keep themselves abreast with the current day. While the subject matter of such study updates is certainly outside world, the intention, impetus and implication all fall within four precinct of the academia, hence this fourth category is also reckoned under the same theme.

As we move on to remaining categories, they seem to be turning to outside world beyond academia. 'students' attitude changing gradually' is the fifth category and is impacted by friends, family & society thus falling outside the academia, though apparently the students per se are within the education system. The sixth category 'acceptance to teachers by Industry' is in strict logical sense a mix of internal and external factors, however, having already addressed the other major concerns that are within academia, this category is also marked as exogenous. The seventh category 'commercialization of education' emphasizes a forceful shift of academic endeavour from its erstwhile noble nature to a money-minded business pursuit of the owners of the academic institutions. Hence, that too is not within the realm of academicians. Finally, the eighth category 'regulatory compliance' talks of various dictates and directions from regulators, so, obviously falls outside the sphere under discussion.

Looking at the factors within and beyond, the management institutes should work out their agenda from first principles. As advocated by Prince (1999), B-schools should be more radical in applying the techniques of business strategy, which they teach to students, to reconsider the way

they teach. The above said categories would provide a means for such re-thinking. Considering above discussion and in the light of research questions cited at the start of this paper, the two emergent themes, viz. 'endogenous issues and 'exogenous issues' and the eight categories which were discerned to dovetail into their evolving themes as summarised in table 3:

Table 3 – Eight categories giving rise to two themes

Category	Theme
1. Challenges in Teaching	• Endogenous Issues
2. Oversized Syllabi	
3. Issues in Exam	
4. Concern for Continuous Learning	
5. Students' attitude changing gradually	• Exogenous Issues
6. Acceptance to teachers by Industry	
7. Commercialization of Education	
8. Regulatory Compliance	

Conclusion & Future Enhancements

The research project highlights a bunch of concerns in the minds of teachers of postgraduate management programs. Those focusing inward – viz. challenges in teaching, oversized syllabus, issues in examination and concern for continuous learning – point toward areas on which B-school teachers should introspect more and should try to come up with the solutions that gel well with their ethnographic aspects of ecosystem and culture. In doing so, they would draw more benefit if they join together in small local groups so that their collective wisdom would be more sharply focused on the common sub-ethnic traits they share with that group.

The current project underscores another set of concerns of B-school teachers that are more out-bound, viz. – students' attitude changing gradually, acceptance to teachers by the industry, commercialization of education and regulatory compliance. These concerns may not be addressed by the B-school teachers alone, but such efforts would entail collaboration from other stakeholders outside the academic precincts like industry/ practitioners, owners of the trusts/ foundations/ societies running and reining the B-schools and regulators like UGC, AICTE. Such a widening circle alone could take up the said concerns and explore the best fit solutions.

It would be pertinent to mention two limitations of this study: Firstly, the present study has a sharp focus on management discipline with other faculties like arts, science, commerce, law, medicine, engineering and social sciences totally out of its purview. Even within the management stream, the pointed focus on postgraduate programs has kept off the undergraduate and diploma programs in management. Besides, some regional specificities can cause some variance from what is stated in this paper, e.g. As Locke (1985) observes, the German business schools have distinct historical roots and differ considerably from the higher education in business management sciences that developed in other European countries. Secondly, this exploratory project would gain more ground if it is followed by a more elaborate and widespread quantitative study as a sequel. Another discreet benefit to be gained with the follow up research would be a sense of belonging and confidence in the minds of a larger segment of society that probably still has apprehensions about qualitative research.

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