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Multicultural Critical Theory. At B-School?

By LANE WALLACE

A DECADE ago, Roger Martin, the new dean of the Rotman School of Management at the University of Toronto, had an epiphany. The leadership at his son's elementary school had asked him to meet with its retiring principal to figure out how it could replicate her success.



Roger Martin of the Rotman School of Management is transforming the business curriculum.

PHOTO: Steve Payne

He discovered that the principal thrived by thinking through clashing priorities and potential options, rather than hewing to any pre-planned strategy — the same approach taken by the managing partner of a successful international law firm in town.

“The ‘Eureka’ moment was when I could draw a data point between a hotshot, investment bank-oriented star lawyer and an elementary school principal,” Mr. Martin recalls. “I thought: ‘Holy smokes. In completely different situations, these people are thinking in very similar ways, and there may be something special about this pattern of thinking.’ ”

That insight led Mr. Martin to begin advocating what was then a radical idea in business education: that students needed to learn how to think critically and creatively every bit as much as they needed to learn finance or accounting. More specifically, they needed to learn how to approach problems from many perspectives and to combine various approaches to find innovative solutions.

In 1999, few others in the business-school world shared Mr. Martin's view. But a decade and a seismic economic downturn later, things have changed. “I think there's a feeling that people need to sharpen their thinking skills, whether it's questioning assumptions, or looking at problems from multiple points of view,” says David A. Garvin, a Harvard Business School professor who is co-author with Srikant M. Datar and Patrick G. Cullen of an upcoming book, “Rethinking the M.B.A.: Business Education at a Crossroads.”

Learning how to think critically — how to imaginatively frame questions and consider multiple perspectives — has historically been associated with a liberal arts education, not a business school curriculum, so this change represents something of a tectonic shift for business school leaders. Mr. Martin even describes his goal as a kind of “liberal arts M.B.A.”

“The liberal arts desire,” he says, is to produce “holistic thinkers who think broadly and make these important moral decisions. I have the same goal.”

Ever since 1959, when two influential studies by the Ford and Carnegie Foundations chastised business schools as being too vocational, most M.B.A. programs have taken anything but a broad approach to their subject matter.

With few exceptions, traditional instruction has involved separate disciplines like finance, marketing and strategy, with an emphasis on quantifiable analyses and methods. While some valued what a liberal arts background could provide, the dominant view was that those elements had no place in professional business schools.

BUT even before the financial upheaval last year, business executives operating in a fast-changing, global market were beginning to realize the value of managers who could think more nimbly across multiple frameworks, cultures and disciplines. The financial crisis underscored those concerns — at business schools and in the business world itself.

As a result, a number of prominent business schools have re-evaluated and, in some cases, redesigned their M.B.A. programs in the last few years. And while few talk explicitly about taking a liberal arts approach to business, many of the changes are moving business schools into territory more traditionally associated with the liberal arts: multidisciplinary approaches, an understanding of global and historical context and perspectives, a greater focus on leadership and social responsibility and, yes, learning how to think critically.

Two years ago, for example, the Graduate School of Business at Stanford made a sweeping curriculum change that included more emphasis on multidisciplinary perspectives and understanding of cultural contexts. The first-quarter mandatory curriculum, for example, now includes a class called “The Global Context of Management and Strategic Leadership.” First-year students also must take a course called “Critical and Analytical Thinking.”

“If I’m going to really launch you on a career or path where you can make a big impact in the world,” explains the school’s dean, Garth Saloner, “you have to be able to think critically and analytically about the big problems in the world.”

Mr. Saloner says Stanford wants its business students to develop “a lens that brings some kind of principled set of scales to the problem.” In other words, he says, students need to learn to ask themselves, “In whose interest am I making the decision?”

Students in the critical-thinking course explore difficult, broad problems that require value-laden trade-offs. For example, should Google locate its servers for Chinese

customers outside China, which might provide inferior service, or inside China, where material could be censored?

But changes like Stanford's are far from universal. The University of Chicago's Booth School of Business has decided to keep its discipline-based approach. "We are happy with what we do, it is good for us and it matches Chicago, our faculty and our values," said its dean, Edward A. Snyder.

Nancy McGaw, deputy director of the Business and Society Program at the Aspen Institute, a nonprofit that studies leadership issues, said: "We don't see wholesale changes yet. We've been through this enormous crisis and there are some people who are saying maybe we can do things differently and avoid it next time. But many students still go through M.B.A. programs without being touched by this kind of thinking."

John J. Fernandes, president and C.E.O. of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, estimates that only about 25 percent of association-accredited schools are making significant curriculum changes focused on what he calls "the creation of more sustainable leaders." But he expects that to reach 75 percent in 10 years.

Professor Garvin of Harvard agrees, saying that there is "an imperative for change." "At this point," he said, "the forces for change are real, and the need for change is real, and the blueprints are already in process."

ONE of the most distinctive blueprints being developed is at the Rotman School. In addition to discipline-based courses in areas like finance and accounting, first-year students now take "Fundamentals of Integrative Thinking," which focuses on understanding and analyzing how people use models in their everyday lives.

For example, Mr. Martin says, students analyze how a book becomes a best seller, and then learn how to break the model down to its core assumptions and logic.

In a followup practicum, students practice what Mr. Martin calls "the art and science of building new models," using real-world problems, like developing a growth model for an alternative airline or a model for reviving Yahoo Canada.

In the second year, students can take electives ranging from design-thinking classes in the school's "Design Works" facility to a capstone course taught by Mr. Martin. Called "The Opposable Mind," this course focuses on developing and practicing the personal skills necessary to be a good integrative thinker and manager.

In one exercise, taken from Mr. Martin's own experience as a consultant, he videotapes students as they replay a contentious meeting in which two corporate executives disagree on their conglomerate's strategy. Two other students play consultants, and practice what Mr. Martin calls "assertive inquiry" to explore the assumptions and validity of each executive's argument. The students then generate new options to try to produce a better outcome.

"We analyze the tape with them and have them repeat it several times to see how they can do better," says Mr. Martin.

Brant Carson, a 2009 Rotman graduate who now works for McKinsey & Company, says: "I constantly hear Roger's voice in my head reminding me that everything doesn't have to be an either/or solution."

Mr. Martin started working integrative thinking into the curriculum with a couple of elective classes. At the same time, he began marketing the school as a place where students could learn "a new way to think." Since 1999, Rotman has doubled its enrollment and faculty — changes he attributes to what he calls the school's growing reputation as a place of innovative thought.

But does Rotman's curriculum really create a fundamentally different M.B.A. graduate? At least some people think so.

Steve McConnell, a managing partner of NBBJ, an architecture firm based in Seattle, noticed a distinctly different approach in the Rotman students he hired.

"They seemed to be naturally free of the bias or predisposition that so many of us seem to carry into any situation," he says. "And they brought a set of skills in how you query and look into an issue without moving toward biased or predetermined conclusions that has led to unexpected discoveries of opportunity and potential innovation."

For example, he says, the approach allowed one Rotman graduate to see that a major NBBJ health care client needed fewer facilities than conventional studies indicated — an insight that saved the client a significant sum.

Innovation, of course, is a business buzzword. So some business schools are embracing an innovation-oriented approach known as “design thinking.” Rotman has its “DesignWorks” department; Stanford has the Hasso Plattner Institute of Design, known as the d.school, where business students can take elective classes in design thinking.

“Critical thinking is an ability to understand a system or a statement and respond to it,” explains Tim Brown, president of IDEO, the design firm whose founder, David Kelley, was the main force behind the d.school's creation. “What's different about design thinking is, it's focused on taking that understanding you have about the world and using that as a set of insights from which to be creative.”

Instead of presenting existing problems to analyze or solve, design-thinking classes send students to do something akin to anthropological field work to find the problems. Then they field-test solutions, refining as they go.

“What I learned at the d.school was markedly different from what I learned in the business school,” says Laura Jones, who got her degree last year and is now a manager in global innovation strategy for Visa. “At business school, there was a lot of focus on, ‘You've got a great idea; here's how you build a business out of it.’ The d.school said, ‘Here's how you get to that great idea.’ ”

OTHER prominent business schools are also making curriculum changes, though the specifics and degree vary. The Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia recently introduced design thinking into its curriculum and has built an innovation lab, called I-Lab, to accommodate the classes' informal, collaborative style.

The Yale School of Management recently restructured its core curriculum around different “organizational perspectives” like customers, investors and society, instead of traditional disciplines like finance and marketing. “The faculty realized that in contemporary management practice, there's no such thing as just a ‘marketing problem,’ ” says its dean, Sharon M. Oster.

Yale has also added a “problem framing” course that tries to have students think more broadly, question assumptions, view problems through multiple lenses and learn from history.

“There's a great deal to learn from Bismarck, Kissinger, F.D.R. and J.F.K. about problem framing,” says Paul Bracken, a professor who designed the course. “I never understood why business schools didn't mine this literature.”

Harvard hasn't redone its curriculum, but the school has expanded its classes in global perspectives, corporate and social responsibility, and what it calls “authentic leadership development.” “We've been teaching the theory of leadership forever,” Mr. Garvin says. “But leadership is increasingly being treated at a skills level, with students working in small teams and in an experiential way, with reflective and field exercises. That's a pronounced shift.”

The changes are also not limited to graduate programs. Because business is now such a popular undergraduate degree, the Carnegie Foundation is arguing for greater integration of the liberal arts with undergraduate business programs.

Will any of these changes have a big role in preventing future economic crises? Opinions here are more mixed. If businesses' pay systems keep rewarding short-term, high-risk or narrowly focused behavior, many say, what business programs teach is unlikely to have much impact.

“As Upton Sinclair said, it's amazing how difficult it is for a man to understand something if he's paid a small fortune to not understand it,” cautions John Bogle, the founder and former chief of the Vanguard Group.

Mr. Martin agrees that the problems that led to the crisis are bigger than business schools alone can address. But he's still optimistic. “The vast majority of our students want to be a positive influence on the world,” he says. “And if you give them ways of thinking that help them with these complicated dilemmas, they'll make choices that are in some sense more worthy and have a higher moral quality.”

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