Developing a Practice-Based Approach to MELT for Higher Education in Business Management

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Abstract

Perhaps no other discipline has experienced more persistent criticism during the last decade for irrelevance of teaching practices than business and management education. Among the many challenges faced by business educators, this paper highlights the inadequacy of the curriculum and assessment design approaches adopted by educators in developing the expertise and soft skills required by today's managers and entrepreneurs. By synthesising practice-based theories in management science with MELT frameworks, it presents a new curriculum and assessment design framework so as to better facilitate adult learning in business education. It also shows how some limitations of current MELT frameworks for business education can be successfully overcome by adopting practice-based theories in management science. Finally, it demonstrates the applicability of the proposed framework to four major sub-disciplines in business, and opens up the opportunity for future research to further expand and evaluate its effectiveness in developing expert practitioners in the business discipline.

Keywords: Practice-Based Learning, Dynamic Capabilities, Graduate Skills, Competencies, Expertise

Introduction

In the early 21st century, MBA education in mainstream universities has been heavily criticised (Bennis and O'Toole, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Rubin and Dierdorff, 2009) for its inability to produce competent business managers and entrepreneurs. Responses from business schools have ranged from the implementation of practice-based curricula (e.g. problem-based learning [PBL], work-based learning [WBL], work-integrated learning [WIL]) to the revision of graduate capability frameworks with more soft skills, such as integrative skills, reflective skills and innovation skills (Green, Hall and Agrawal, 2013). However, none of these reforms seem to have successfully contributed towards closing skills gaps in the industry, including Australia (Green, et al, 2009; Datar, Garvin and Cullen, 2010; Green, Hall and Agrawal, 2013; Minocha, Reynolds and Hristov, 2017). Even the most rigorous and practically implementable solutions, such as the work of Mintzberg (2004), appear not to have been readily adopted by mainstream universities. As shown by Minocha, Reynolds and Hristov (2017), most of the root causes of the irrelevance of MBA education identified by Mintzberg (poor integration of the curriculum, poor contextualization of the theories in practice, less attention to soft skills, lack of authenticity and second-handedness of learning experiences) are still prevalent across all business schools around the world.

The current challenges to establishing the relevance of business education are multifaceted. Firstly, with ever-increasing change and turbulence in modern business environments, it is essential that business theories and research keep up to date with practice (Gibbons et al, 1994; Starkey and Madan, 2001). Secondly, there are severe limitations to conventional pedagogical approaches in the development of the expertise and soft skills required by real-world managers (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005; Goshal, 2005; Schon, 1983). Soft skills possessed by expert managers and entrepreneurs (such as practical coping, opportunism, and creativity) are extremely difficult to implement when using pedagogies that are rooted in cognitive, behavioural, constructivist or social learning paradigms (Stewart, 2012). Finally, today's digital, economic and social environments have forced business schools to implement more online, flexible and customised MBAs.

This short paper focuses mainly on the second challenge, i.e., the need for further innovation of pedagogic practices to make business education more authentic and relevant (Minocha, Reynolds and Hristov, 2017) to suit the real-world practices of today's business practitioners. It presents a solution to the problem at the level of curriculum and assessment design by blending a fast-growing and innovative pedagogical framework called MELT (Bandaranaike and Willison, 2010) with established practice-based knowledge and learning concepts (Schatzki, Knorr Certina and von Savigny, 2001; Whittington, 2006; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005, Schon, 1983) in

management science. Furthermore, it also lays a fruitful groundwork to address the first and second challenges stated above through further enhancement of the proposed framework in future.

The central question of this conceptual paper is: *how can the MELT be used in designing practice-based curricula and assessment techniques in higher education?*

Literature Review

This section discerns three key issues at the level of curriculum design for higher education in business, which can serve as a basis for developing the proposed framework.

Firstly, management educators seem to rely heavily on learning theories that emerged from education research rooted in cognitive, behavioural, constructivist or social learning paradigms, rather than the practice-based theories relating to learning in the business and management discipline itself. Theories of management knowledge and learning in practice have advanced considerably, becoming well established during the last decade (Schatzki, Knorr Certina and von Savigny, 2001; Whittington 2006; Jarzabkowski 2004; Johnson, Melin and Whittington, 2003; Gherardi, 2009; Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2011). A discipline-based approach to understanding knowledge and learning and the subsequent application of the same to curriculum design is particularly important, as the subjects differ considerably in terms of their declarative knowledge (i.e. "know-what" or academic knowledge) and functioning knowledge (i.e. "know-how" or actionable knowledge; Barnett et al., 2001; Biggs, 1999). Moreover, as Goshal (2005) points out, irrelevant business education can have a negative reinforcing effect, resulting in bad practice and destroying good management practices in the industry. Paradoxically, this means that the content students learn from internships (e.g., WIL programs) may also become irrelevant. As such, it is crucial to adopt a pedagogical framework for business education that is well grounded in cutting-edge theories of knowledge and learning in the business discipline itself.

Secondly, the top-down or deliberative approach to curriculum reform and design seems to have continually obstructed the progress of the movement to implement practice-based education in management education (Minocha, Reynolds and Hristov, 2017). Most business schools seem to have taken a top-down approach to curriculum reforms by first upgrading 'graduate qualities' with a fragmented set of skills such as lifelong learning, critical thinking, innovation and leadership (Jackson and Chapman, 2012). These skills are typically selected through industry surveys. This approach puts less attention to how these skills are embedded in the

real-world processes and practices of modern business managers. Some current curriculum reform efforts, such as the Australian Business Deans Council's (2017) report, correctly identify the importance of soft skills and critical thinking skills for preparing business graduates for an uncertain future. However, they fail to recognize the importance of theories and frameworks in management science itself, which articulate the requirements for dealing with such situations as a fruitful basis for developing the curriculum. Therefore, it is unlikely that disconnected themes of graduate skills at the program level alone can successfully assist business schools in equipping students with the required expertise unless a fusion between graduate skills, learning outcomes and learning activities is achieved through a process and practice based framework in the management discipline itself. Almost none of the recent literature on business school curriculum reform (particularly articles focused on bridging the theory and practice gap) addresses the above issue in a structured manner (Jackson, Sibson and Riebe, 2013; Sulej, 2005; Jaiswal, 2015) with the exception of Mintzberg (2004).

Thirdly, although there is an overwhelming variety of practice-based learning and assessment methods (Higgs 2012) available for educators to bridge theory and practice (e.g., work-integrated-learning (WIL) such as work-based learning (WBS), action learning (AL) and problem-based learning (PBL)), there is limited guidance on how these pedagogical practices can be linked with the nature of knowledge, learning and the practices (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2011) of business managers. Current literature on work-integrated learning discusses the broader stages of the curriculum design process or the logistics of the assessment process (see, for example, Jackson et al., 2013), but says little about what managers actually do in practice (Schatzki, Knorr Certina and von Savigny, 2001; Schon, 1983; Cook and Brown, 1999) or the nature of knowledge involved in management practice (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2011; Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005). Without an adequate linkage with micro and macro level processes and practices of managers, the validity of mapping of the variety of subject content with assessment methods is questionable. Currently, the alignment of the above assessment methods with subject content and learning activities seems to be limited to an experienced guess by the educator himself/herself, rather than being based on an established theory of practice in the discipline of management. As such, there is a crucial need for developing new frameworks that can guide educators on how to design and align the curriculum in such a manner that it can have the greatest impact and relevance to practice with a minimal workload for both students and educators.

This research aims to address the above issues through the synthesis of practice-based and reflective learning theories in management science (Schatzki, Knorr Certina and von Savigny, 2001; Whittington 2006; Dreyfus and Dreyfus 2005, Schon, 1983) with a cutting-edge theory in economics and entrepreneurship called dynamic

capabilities framework (Teece, 2014) and one of the fast-growing innovative pedagogical frameworks, MELT (Bandaranaike and Willison, 2010).
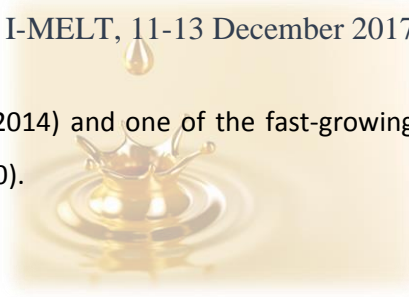
Conceptual Framework

The primary task of a business manager today is to cope with increasing complexity, change and diversity in business environments, not only in the long and medium term, but also on a daily basis. Today's managers are confronted with fast-changing business environments which are global, multidimensional and continuously disruptive, as a result of modern technological and business model innovations (Christensen, 1997; Deloitte, 2012). Clearly, this new business context requires more complex interactive skills, integrative thinking skills and enhanced judgmental skills (Thomas, 2007). The emerging theory of dynamic capabilities (Teece, Pisano and Shuen, 1997; Teece, 2007; 2014) in the business discipline has the potential to assist academics, students, practitioners, and entrepreneurs in making sense of these skills, competencies and capabilities required to manage modern organisations. Additionally, it has the potential to bring a higher degree of order and integration to the management curriculum, enabling students to see how courses and subject matter interrelate (Teece, 2011).

To compare the definition of the term *graduate capabilities* in the pedagogic literature with the concept of *dynamic capabilities* in the business literature is eye-opening. Typical terms used to describe graduate capabilities in business schools, such as "transferable skills", "generic competencies", "lifelong learning skills", and "graduate attributes" (Sumsion and Goodfellow, 2004) imply that there can be a set of disconnected generic skills that graduates should possess regardless of their discipline or field of study. As argued in the previous section, such an attempt to generalise skills from a trans-disciplinary perspective and in such a disconnected manner does not help to correctly reflect the expertise that a business graduate really needs to possess to create a competitive advantage and innovation in today's turbulent business environment.

More close observation of the term "capability" in the pedagogical literature shows that the concept of capability goes beyond the basic definition of a competency (i.e., to be able to do something [Stephenson, 1998]) towards a higher-order competency (i.e., to be able to respond to new/challenging circumstances [Stephenson, 1998]). In other words, basic competency concerns the ability to perform well, similar to the ordinary capability in DC literature (Teece, 2014), whereas capability is about the ability to realise the potential in changing contexts similar to the dynamic capability in DC literature (Teece, 2014). The current approach to

curriculum and assessment design seems to have neglected the large and extensive amount of literature and number of frameworks available in management science about the nature of the processes, practices, and capabilities that managers and organisations need to possess in today's business environment. As such, there is a need to integrate generic graduate capabilities using an overarching framework in the business discipline, which can articulate how the combination of different skills can contribute towards successfully managing and leading organisations in today's changing and disruptive business environments.

Figure 1 below contrasts the practice-based approach to curriculum design proposed in this research vs. the conventional approach to curriculum design. The proposed approach takes a bottom-up process of design as opposed to the conventional top-down process. Moreover, it takes the primacy of student's lifeworld and teaching & learning practices over institutional level frameworks. As shown in the inner two circles in Figure 1B, the proposed approach considers the curriculum as a shared practice of researchers, practitioners, educators, and students which equips graduates with both ordinary and dynamic capabilities in different business disciplines. Furthermore, as shown by the circular arrows in Figure 1B, the teaching and learning practices (inner two circles), and institutional arrangements (outer circles) mutually influence and contest with each other (Schatzki, 2012) to co-create the curriculum over time.
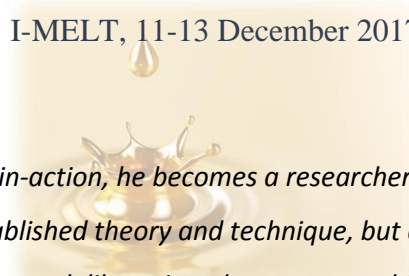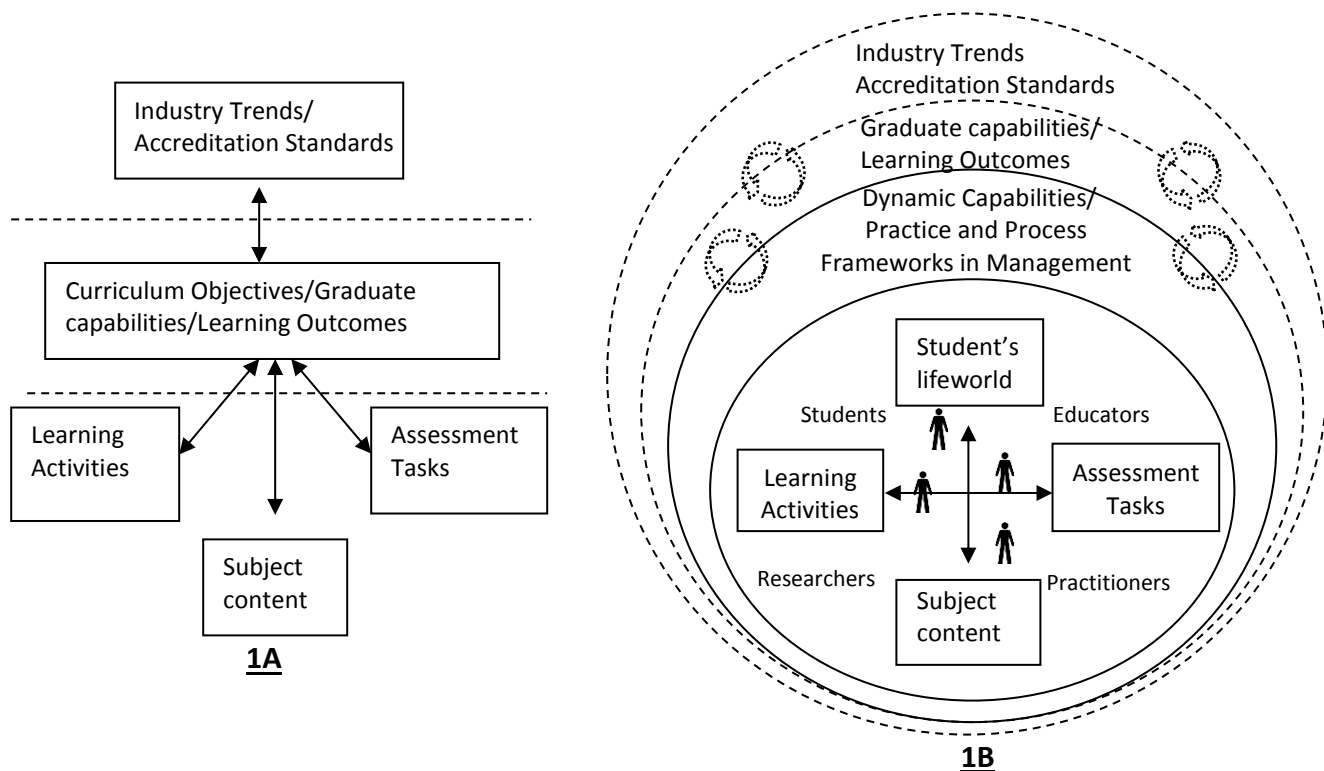

Figure 1. Conventional Approach vs Proposed approach to Curriculum Design

Discussion and Demonstration Case Study

This section expands the two inner circles in Figure 1B into more granular components and also briefly demonstrates how it can be implemented in a higher education setting. To keep the paper short, the discussion here is limited to the demonstration of the process nature of the proposed approach in different sub-disciplines, while more details such as the pedagogical methods, assessment methods, and personalization mechanisms are left for future work. This part of the framework adopts some components of MELT, with the remaining drawn from author's past work on process-based views of management practice (Chandrasekara and Harrison 2015) and Teece's (2010) work on dynamic capabilities theory.

The proposed framework follows a process-based approach to teaching and learning as opposed to an outcome-based approach, and it consists of three main phases: sensing, seizing and transformation (see Figure 2A below). So as to more accurately represent the three key management process bundles in the dynamic capability literature, it divides the six-stage MELT into seven stages. Influenced by the process approach to strategizing and innovation proposed in the work of Chandrasekara and Harrison (2015), educators and learners may consider each phase as an *episodic*, *pluralistic* and *emergent* praxis, where they may shift their activities and attention between phases and different tools based on the emergent context of each assessment situation. The *episodic* nature of a particular phase suggests that each process bundle (Hendry and Seidl, 2003) can be treated as a social learning process, which has a start and end point bringing about a change to the learner or a group as a whole. One of the important aspects of the concept of an episode is its emergent nature, i.e., the ending does not have to be pre-defined but can emerge through the action, reflection and interactive communication among the participants (Hendry and Seidl, 2003). The *pluralistic* nature implies that in real-world managerial practices, the theories or tools are in fact not mechanically applied by precisely matching with some given external conditions, but these tools act as a bricolage which can be adapted to suit different temporal and local situations (Chandrasekara and Harrison, 2015). As such, both educational designers and students have the freedom to customise the sequence in order to achieve the purpose of the assessment as well as to suit their own learning context and different problem situations, a guideline which is well in line with the MELT (Bandaranaike and Willison, 2010).

Perhaps no other author in history puts forward the true nature of the action and learning process of a skilful practitioner articulated above so succinctly as Donald Schon (1983). Schon argues that rather than separate activities, the learning, practice (praxis) and, indeed, even research, are built into the same inquiry. In Schon's own words:

When someone reflects-in-action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case. His inquiry is not limited to a deliberation about means which depends on a prior agreement about ends. He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry. Thus reflection-in-action can proceed, even in situations of uncertainty or uniqueness, because it is not bound by the dichotomies of Technical Rationality (Schon, 1983, p. 68).

As such, the proposed framework is inseparable from the life-world of the student participants as well as the real-world business environments, which meet an essential requirement of a practice–based curriculum design in business. Wherever the facilitator aims to create a simulated learning environment, it needs to be seriously thought through to not to lose the learning mechanisms and engaged learning experiences articulated in the proposed framework.

The following section of the paper briefly demonstrates how the proposed framework can be implemented in the context of designing an assessment and learning activity for an AQF Level 9 entrepreneurship subject (see Figure 2D below). The activity aims to take the students through a personalised journey of creating a new venture. Also included in Figure 2 are some analogous artefacts for additional subject areas such as project management (Figure 2B), strategic management (Figure 2C) and supply chain management (Figure 2E).

Problem Recognition:

At this stage, the learner recognises the need for creating a new venture and identifies the opportunity resources and limitations for the new business. This initial purpose and the boundary of the problem may change as the learning journey progresses (see the emergent process of learning described above). At each phase of action and reflection, the learner may further refine, enhance or even abandon the initial purpose statement. These features of the framework replicate the true nature of the learning process of a real-world entrepreneur (Shane, 2000; Sarasvathy, 2006).
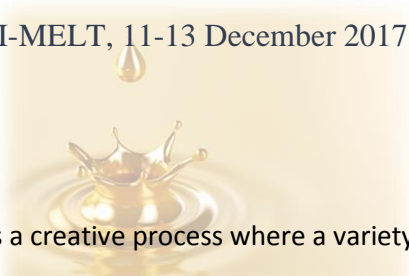
Sensing and Reflection Phase:

Teece (2007) considers sensing as a creative process where a variety of tools and cognitive skills can be used to sense, filter, shape and calibrate the fleeting business opportunities in complex business ecosystems. For example, the frameworks taught in the subject of entrepreneurship such as opportunity screening, self-audits and environmental scanning fall in line with this category. In this phase, the learner not only applies these frameworks to determine the greatest potential opportunity for the intended business, but also carries out a retrospective and prospective reflection to produce a reflective report, which can be used in the other phases of learning. Furthermore, the purpose statement crafted in the previous stage can act as a guiding frame of reference in order to focus on the purpose of the assessment and learning activity.

Seizing and Reflection Phase:

The seizing phase involves the generation of business models and the preparation of a correspondent business plan. This can be considered to be the most critical task for the design of an enterprise. As with the sensing phase, this involves iterative activities, which the learner may carry out individually or as part of a group. To capture the business opportunities recognised in the sensing phase, several new business models (Johnson, Christensen and Kagermann, 2008) will be created and evaluated using an appropriate criterion derived from the insights gained in other phases. As such, the process is highly interwoven with the actions and reflections of early phases, as well as upcoming phases. These links and mechanisms can be articulated by the learner through a portfolio of artifacts such as reflective journals, concept maps, rich pictures and the like.

Sensing

Transforming

Seizing

Action

Find & Generate

Evaluate & Define

Reflection

Recommend & Improve

Problem Situation

Action

Reflection

Apply & Communicate

Organise & Analyse

Reflection

Synthesise & Select

Action

2A

Find

Recommend

Project Management
e.g. Situation: To implement on time, to the budget and scope

Evaluate

Apply

Analyse

Synthesise

2B

Find

Recommend

Strategic Management
e.g. Situation: To position and lead the business against competition

Evaluate

Apply

Analyse

Synthesise

2C

Find

Recommend

Entrepreneurship
e.g. Situation: To create and capture better value through new ventures

Evaluate

Apply

Analyse

Synthesise

2D

Find

Recommend

Supply Chain Management:
e.g. Situation: To shape and leverage ecosystems

Evaluate

Apply
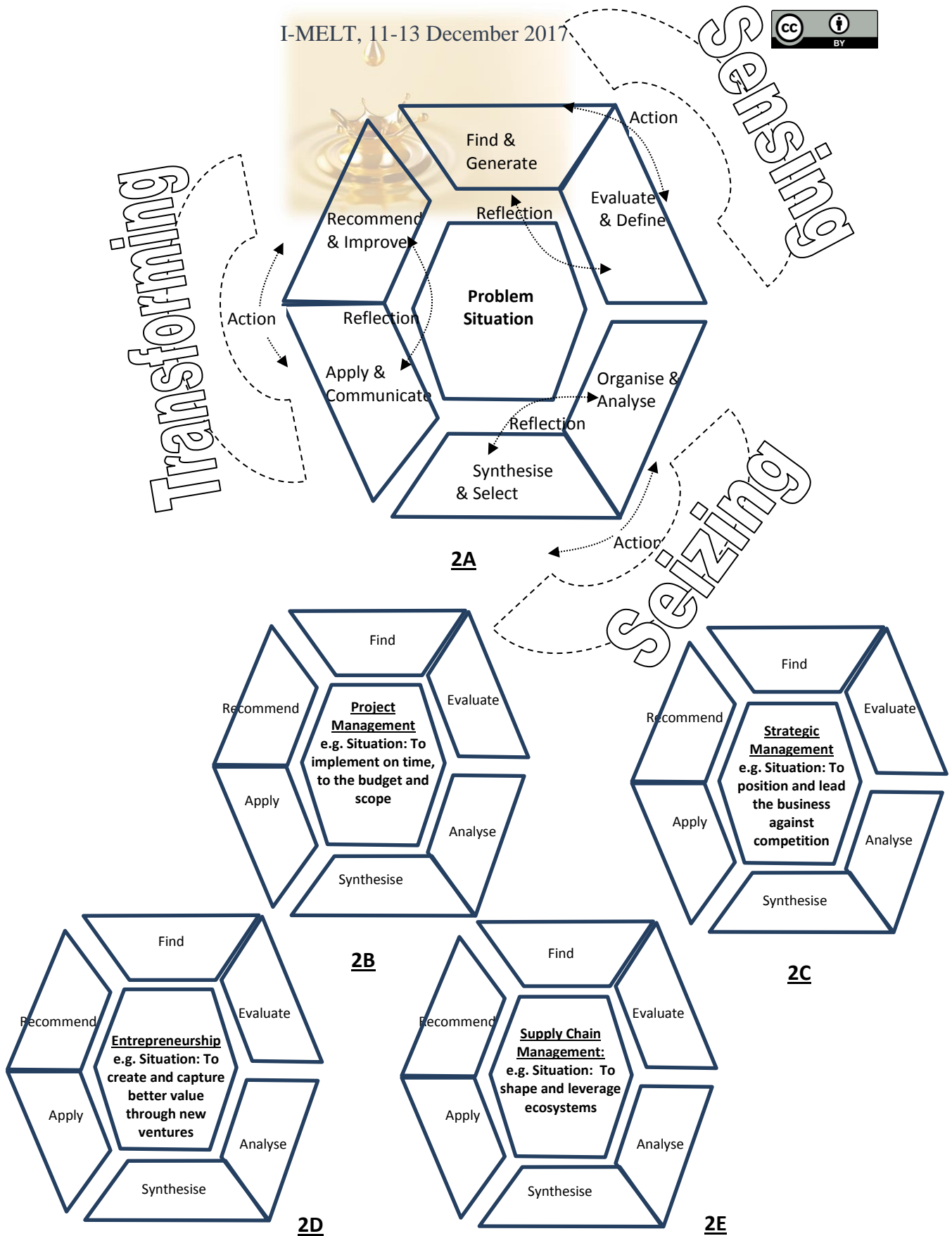
Analyse

Synthesise

2E

Figure 2. Adaptation of MELT to Developing Expert Business Practitioners

Transforming/Reflection Phase:

Finally, the transforming phase involves the reconfiguration of resources and the entrepreneurial team to implement the business model choices and the business plan developed in earlier phases. At this point, the learner may prepare and execute a negotiation plan for the potential investors, which might also involve experimentation (McGrath and McMillan, 2009). In the case of internal ventures, the work may also involve plans and recommendations in regard to the leveraging of processes, structures, resources (Teece, 2010) and leadership activities, such as bringing about cultural and structural changes. At a wider level, the learners may also discuss ecosystem-level leadership activities such as the formation of new networks, collaboration, and the diffusion of new business models with stakeholders.

Conclusion

This paper briefly articulates the beginning of a potential platform upon which a new curriculum can be developed for modern business schools, based on the epistemology of practice in management science, the entrepreneurship and economic theory of dynamic capabilities, and the fast-growing and innovative pedagogical frameworks of MELT. Particularly, owing to the active international community of experts in MELT, it opens up the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed framework through Delphi surveys and action research. Such future studies will help assess the framework from multiple perspectives. They will further enhance its robustness and effectiveness, with a view towards successful implementation across different business disciplines.
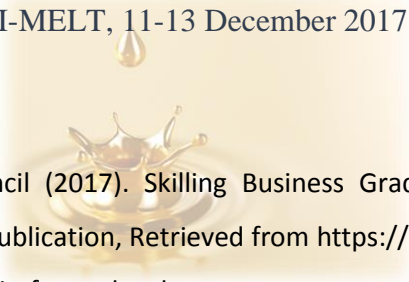
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