

Chapter III

Critique: Information Systems Academics' Core Competency?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is about identifying a distinct core competency for information systems (IS) academics. The author is concerned that, while many would agree that their competency has more to do with thinking skills than technical expertise, thinking skills are poorly defined. This chapter will suggest a definition using pragmatism, which is growing in popularity both in IS and the theory of knowledge. More specifically, this chapter will explore the argument that the core competency of IS academics be recognised as pragmatic critical thinking where this is defined as developing unique and useful concepts to reflect on industry-related problems. While there is some recognition of this role for IS academics already, the lack of explicit definitions of “critique” and the provision of practical examples may be blocking its development as a feasible core competency. IS academics may want to develop new ways to critique management practice rather than more ideal methodologies. In this way, academics would have a useful service to offer industry. Examples of possible critique methods are presented with some discussion about how they might be applied.

INTRODUCTION

There is a near endless debate within the IS discipline about the relevance and integration of its research. This seems to stem from an acceptance by many IS academics that their primary role is simply as trainers for future system developers. This means there is sometimes no genuine appre-

ciation by IS academics of the need for research. A quick survey of the teaching materials used in most first-year undergraduate courses soon reveals a lack of mention of research or of its close cousin, critical thinking. The majority of IS textbooks use the dogma of “trust me” this is how you do it.” For example, these sorts of books rarely demonstrate how they know their advice is

really justified. They rarely encourage students to ask “how do you know that is true,” or what is the empirical evidence to support any claims of how to act.

Those academics that do research then get told to “get relevant” by practitioners. This cry may best be interpreted as “understand our current problems, offer us something more.” Yet IS academics may never be able to fully appreciate current business design problems as practitioners do, even though many academics do have a little relevant management experience. This is partly because academics now work and learn under a different organisational culture compared to practitioners. They are on a different path; their practise experience quickly becomes out of date. Moreover, the two different organisational cultures mean movement between industry and academia is difficult because of attitudes reflected in work processes. For example, each operates on different time scales. The 3-year time scale of academic research qualifications clashes with the 3-month timescale of many industry projects. Moreover, academia claims to be focused on the critical development of the individual, whereas, industry is focused on the development of a corporate financial bottom line.

A possible way forward out of these problems is to consider the core competency of each group and how they may “synergise” each other. Thought of using this approach arose from consideration of the clustering literature in economics, which deals with developing networking between the tacit core competencies of locally based industries. This raises the question, “What is the core competency of IS lecturers and how would that help clustering between the IS industry and academics?” What is IS academics' distinct core competency? For a historian or philosopher, clearly it is about knowing history or philosophy from research. However, knowledge about business problems lies with those struggling amid its day-to-day demands, that is, managers. Business knowledge is not born and nurtured in universities, as might

be true with knowledge of history, but rather in business. IS academics need to identify a different core competency from academics in general, as well as practitioners.

CO-EVOLVING A UNIQUE CORE COMPETENCY

It is suggested that “thinking” is the core competency of the academic, more specifically, constructive and creative “critique¹.” An ability to critique contemporary business problems systematically and constructively has the potential to be evolved, with industry, as our unique core competency. There is now an extensive, mainly economics literature that discusses core competencies, typically in relation to innovation (Belussi & Fabio, 1998; Lawson, 1999; Prahalad & Hemel, 1990). My interpretation of their work suggests that core competency in business education is some knowledge that can stand the test of time and that provides the skills to evaluate any particular technique, fad, or conventional wisdom. Examples of these fads and techniques include e-commerce, how to calculate a critical path, designing a spreadsheet, drawing supply curves, and citing the four Ps. These techniques are merely the “momentary expression” of a deeper knowledge graduates acquire to tackle any new problem as it arises. IS academics could develop a competency to critique these ever-changing problems constructively.

D. Wade (personal communication, 2001) reviewed the core competency management literature and argues that the characteristics of competencies lead to the creation of a competitive advantage. These include *value*, *rarity*, *appropriability*, and *sustainability*. Enthusiastic teaching of the latest techniques is neither rare, appropriate, nor sustainable; techniques change. A more long-term, stable, and deep-rooted competency is required to assist the graduate to deal with the ever-changing world. However, Wade's characteristics

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