Critical reflections on decisive moments

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Abstract

Managerial decision making is recognised as an important aspect of business school curricula, yet students often perceive a mismatch between pedagogy and preferred outcomes. If students view decision making as conflicted and confused, social and emotional, context-specific and time-urgent, how should the instructor respond? Can a business school decision course be designed so as to empower students? This report examines aspects of an innovative MBA managerial decision making course in which students critically reflect on a decisive moment that was important to their development. The research questions are: Did student feedback indicate that the course was successful? (RQ1) Did student’s critical reflections on decisive moments indicate that the course was empowering? (RQ2)

Introduction

It is perfectly true, as the philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards.

— Soren Kierkegaard, Journals IV A 164 (1843)

Managerial decision making is recognized as an important aspect of business school curricula, yet MBA students often perceive a mismatch between their own real-life experiences and the conventional technical, reasoned approach12345678. MBA students invariably describe their own decision making as conflicted and confused, social and emotional, context-specific and time-urgent. They tend to rely on emotion, including gut feelings910 and their own willpower11. Above all else, MBA students see themselves as social actors whose decisions affect others – moral issues are important to them12131415. Interestingly, while students’ descriptions of their own decision making are diametrically opposed to the conventional approach, they are well aligned with the Victoria Business School learning goals and objectives in Figure 1.

Fig. 1: Victoria Business School
Learning Goals and Objectives

This research describes an innovative course in problem solving and decision making that meets the goals and objectives in Fig. 1. The course provides accessible theory and practical case examples of decision making in decisive moments. An integrating multiple-perspective framework is introduced and three themes — emotion, reason and morality — are explored in some depth. Students apply concepts and frameworks to analyse decision processes, and to critically reflect on a decisive moment. The critical reflections, some of which are published in a series entitled *My Decisive Moment*, are examined for three indicators of empowerment: expressiveness, the degree to which the topic appears important to development, and authenticity. The purpose of the research is to answer two questions:

*Research Question 1. Did student feedback indicate that the course was successful?*

*Research Question 2. Did student’s critical reflections on decisive moments indicate that the course was empowering?*

The organization of this report is shown in Figure 2.

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**Fig. 2: Organization of this article**

Inquiry

Student expectations for a critical and creative decision making course suggests the need for a pluralistic, yet very practical, mode of inquiry that focuses on intertwined and emergent emotion, reason and morality. For the purposes of the current research a critical pluralist system of inquiry was adopted. The very brief description below is adapted from Habermas’s theory of communicative action as employed, for example, for the purpose of critical heuristics, the design of inquiring systems, ethical inquiry, problem structuring, systemic intervention, systems approaches to management, and systems thinking.

The course challenges students to evaluate, both prospectively and retrospectively, three perspectives on knowledge (Fig. 3):

**Technical perspective**
The world of external nature, i.e., *how it is*, the technical world of material fact that is the totality of all entities about which objectively true statements are possible, or could be bought about by purposeful intervention. The mode of existence is objectivity. The mode of access is observation. The mode of validation is a critique of claims to objective truth. In managerial decision making the technical perspective drives observational methodologies that deliver: an appreciation of physical circumstances; analysis of underlying causal structure; assessment of alternative physical and structural arrangements; and action to generate, select, and test options, and to implement the best alternative.

**Interpersonal perspective**

Our world of society, i.e., *what we say*, the social world that is the totality of interpersonal relations legitimately regulated by contextual expectations or norms. The mode of existence is inter-subjectivity. The mode of access is participation. The mode of validation is a critique of claims to rightness. In managerial decision making the interpersonal perspective drives participative methodologies that deliver: an appreciation of social practices and power relations; analysis of distortions, conflicts, interests; assessment of ways of changing the power structure; and action to generate empowerment and enlightenment.

**Personal perspective**

My world of internal nature, i.e., *why I feel*, the personal or subjective world that is the totality of the experiences to which the speaker or actor has privileged access. The mode of existence is subjectivity. The mode of access is experience. The mode of validation is a critique of claims to sincerity. In managerial decision making the personal perspective drives experiential methodologies that deliver: an appreciation of individual beliefs, meanings, emotions; analysis of differing perceptions and world views; assessment of alternative conceptualizations and constructions; and action to generate accommodation and consensus.

Treated separately each perspective is grounded in a foundational (or conventional) theory each with its own silo-ed:

- ontology-epistemology (objectivity, inter-subjectivity, and subjectivity),
- methodology (observation, participation, experience),
- quality measures-validity claims (objective truth, rightness, and sincerity).

However problem solving and decision making typically requires a multi-perspective approach in which intertwined claims to objective truth, rightness, and sincerity are surfaced, teased out, and tested against one another. An obvious problem here is that complexity, exacerbated by reductionist thinking masquerading as academic rigor, will jeopardize student’s ability to internalize the relevant ‘takeaway messages’ that, in practice, empower performance. A popular solution to this problem is to employ low-cognitive load visual models that are designed to shape practice via critical reflection in real time (‘meta-cognition’). The course therefore...
employs a small number of visual models and a consistent color scheme.

For example, the course captures prospective and retrospective perspectives in a three-level, two-column V-shape that is broadly applicable across problem solving domains, including research. The emergent structure of a problem is visualized as six elements captured in a format that surfaces and ‘validates’ (checks the coherence of) the links between plan and implementation at three levels of abstraction or inclusiveness (here labelled why, what and how). The first three elements (here labelled the ‘plan’) successively refine and narrow intentions. The last three elements (here labelled the ‘implementation’) successively aggregate and expand outcomes (Fig. 2).

The course also assists students to express the conflict and confusion commonly experienced in the earlier stages of practical decision making via three overlapping circles (Fig. 3)

Fig. 3: Pluralism

Emotion, Reason, and Morality

The course also assists students to perform stakeholder analyses via a table format with three rows (emotion, morality, reason). Each stakeholder (or stakeholder group, or aspect of the problematized situation) is represented in a separate column. For example, three groups of stakeholders important to the current research are researcher, instructor, and student. The role of a researcher is seen as primarily technical (reason), the role of an instructor is seen as primarily interpersonal (morality), and the role of the student is, in comparison, more personal (emotion). (Fig. 4)

Fig. 4: Pluralism

Stakeholder Perspectives
It should be emphasized that the course models are not intended as *representations* the details of which have a one-to-one correspondence with aspects of an external reality. Rather the models constitute multi-modal and recursive spaces for interactive and reflective conversations among writers and readers, creators and consumers (often all the same person!). The models are *re-presentations of*, and reflections on, the creative and critical possibilities that emerge from the intertwined technical, interpersonal and personal knowledge perspectives described above. These re-presentations are *real-ized* not in the external physical world but in the biological cognition or autopoiesis of the living\(^\text{32}\) (Fig. 4). The purpose of the models, therefore, is to ‘scaffold’\(^\text{33}\), or ‘enact’\(^\text{34}\), emergent phenomena that are simultaneously: (1) biological cognition; (2) social action; (3) self-reflection, mindfulness, or ‘thinking about thinking’ (‘meta-cognition’).

### Methodology

Research question 1 is to be answered by feedback from students on: (1) teaching and learning, and (2) the course. Research question 2 is to be answered by examining students’ critical reflections on decisive moments for three indicators of empowerment: *expressiveness* (subjectivity), *topic important to development* (based on life experience), and *authenticity* (sincerity). (Fig. 5)

**Fig. 5: Methodology**

Theoretical pluralism motivates the research questions and informs concepts about the nature of empirical evidence.

Fig. 6 identifies the nature of student engagement. The course aims to exploit blended on-line and face-to-face teaching and learning for the purposes of skill development in reflective practice. Elements of the pedagogy include: (1) comprehensive on-line quizzes and case and/or chapter summaries completed before class; (2) student presentations, YouTube videos, exercises and discussions in class; (3) exemplary case and chapter summaries made available to ‘scaffold’ (Vygotsky, 1978) subsequent classes and assessments; (4) selected student work published in My Decisive Moment that extends the ‘virtuous cycle’ of scaffolded improvement into subsequent years.

Fig. 7 identifies the course organisation. Weeks 2 and 3 contrast the appropriate and inappropriate reliance on emotion. Likewise weeks 4-5 and 6-7 contrast the appropriate and inappropriate reliance on reason and morality. The titles for each week are those of the course text\(^\text{35}\) which provides a highly accessible account of brain processes and related decision behaviours. This text introduces many decision behaviourists, most especially Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman\(^\text{36}\).

Fig. 8 is the cover of the current Vol. 2 of *My Decisive Moment*\(^\text{37}\). Books in this series aim to: (1) document academic excellence; (2) support collaborative learning processes; (3) empower individual experience. Vol. 2 is a 223pp edited book with full colour and many pictures and figures. To aid meta-cognition authors colour-coded their text to surface and express their preferred quality measure-validity claim (objective truth, rightness or sincerity). Authors summarised key colour-coded concepts by promoting them to colour-coded sections of...
course models. These course models consist of V-models (as in Fig. 2), overlapping circles (as in figures 3 and 7), and stakeholder analysis grids (as in figures 4 and 5) and their variants. Students’ critical reflections on decisive moments are thus supported by a very practical, low-cognitive load scheme for coding, analysis, and modelling. In effect, each student excavates meaning from ‘the argument in their head’ via a practitioner-driven method for discourse analysis that is based on systems approaches to ethical inquiry\textsuperscript{18, 22, 24, 27, 21}.

A key pedagogical innovation is the consistent application of three overlapping circles at three levels of abstraction: (1) theoretical perspectives (Fig. 3); (2) course organisation (Fig. 7); (3) a biological model that is the human brain (not shown here due to space limitations). The visual model of a brain adds a more tangible and empirical dimension to the broad concepts in Figures 3 and 7. This lowers the ‘fog index’. Diverse YouTube curriculum examples relating, for example, to deferred gratification https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yo4WF3cSd9Q&feature=related (2.45), fairness http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lKhAd0Tyny0 (2:38), and other aspects of social psychology or behavioural economics, can then be discussed in terms of a relatively small number of neurological mechanisms. Because many of these mechanisms ‘fly beneath the radar’ of conscious thought the effect is to allow emotions and intuitions to be treated as real empirical phenomena that are accessible to researchers via scanning devices (observation) and to practitioners via critical reflection (experience). Specifically, this biological model provides a direct understanding of how ‘decision framing’ affects the conversation in our head between what we know (reason) and what we feel (emotion) — something experienced in every trip to the supermarket!

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Fig. 6: Teaching and Learning

A Blended Strategy

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Fig. 7: Course organization

Emotion, Reason, and Morality

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Fig. 8: Indicators of Empowerment

Student assignments are published in a series entitled ‘My Decisive Moment’

Empirical data was sourced from two post-experience managerial decision making courses at Victoria Business...
School. The courses are very similar but are offered to students at different stages in a stair-cased MBA programme. The first course (CMSP801) has an enrolment of approximately 50 students each year and is offered at the first stage (certificate and post-graduate diploma). The second course (MMBA508) has an enrolment of approximately 25 students and is offered to students who directly entered the MBA programme. The student cohort in both courses had the same characteristics, viz five or more years managerial experience, a wide dispersion in academic preparation (high school to advanced degrees), age (25-55), work role, life stage, and expectations. For both courses the modal student had 15 year’s work experience, a bachelor degree, and was aged 35. This modal student had switched work roles, organisations, or locations at least once, and had children and a mortgage.

Results

It was clear that students had conflicting expectations for the course (and for their other courses, too). On one hand, students were pleased to engage with the subjectivist aspects of the course as these provided the opportunity to critically reflect on decisions important to their development. All students saw this as an opportunity to give voice to (‘validate’) life experiences. On the other hand, an instrumental/transactional/credentialing approach also appealed — students were time poor, the course had cost them money, they wanted the instructor to provide the answers, and a good grade, period. It was expected that the diversity of student expectations would result in mixed evaluations of the course, teaching and learning – and especially mixed evaluations of the critically reflective assignment and its ethical underpinnings. It was clear that a large minority of students in the second course saw engagement around critical reflection (‘meta-cognition’) as potentially surplus to their requirements.

Student feedback on the course, and on teaching and learning (RQ1)

To answer Research Question 1 student feedback on the course (including organisation and the neuroscience text), and teaching and learning (including engagement) was obtained via an anonymous survey. The survey was administered by the class representative who sealed the completed forms and delivered them directly to the School of Management office. Analysis was performed by Student Services. The survey consisted of quantitative and qualitative components. There were 14 quantitative items for feedback on the course and 8 items for feedback on teaching and learning. The results reported in this research are based on a total of 292 student enrolments in CMSP 801 and MMBA508 over the period 2011-2014. A total of 239 course feedback forms were received and analysed (82% response rate) along with 237 forms on teaching and learning feedback (81%).

All questions were answered on a 5 point scale where 1=excellent; 2=very good; 3=good; 4=poor; 5=very poor. The overall median for the course was 1.60 and the overall median for teaching and learning was 1.65. In Figures 9 and 10 below selected quantitative scores have been reported along with related responses to the open-ended qualitative questions. Notwithstanding the wide disparities in student’s academic preparation, age, work role, life stage, and expectations, there was a positive consensus on many aspects of the course, and teaching and learning.

In summary, student feedback on the course, and teaching and learning, is seen as supporting the notion that the course was successful (RQ1).
Student’s critical reflections on decisive moments: Indicators of empowerment (RQ2)

Research question 2 was answered by examining students’ critical reflections on decisive moments for three indicators of empowerment: expressiveness (subjectivity), topic important to development (based on life experience), and authenticity (sincerity). The topic investigated by each student was chosen for the purposes of reflection and insight. The conceptual frameworks provided as part of the managerial decision making courses are of a general nature that are intended to be supportive of a wide array of topics. While disclosures of a very personal kind are not discouraged, neither are they specifically encouraged. The assumption is that the students are self-directed, adult learners, who wish to examine decisive moments that are important to their development. With this in mind, the choice of a decisive moment is left up to the student. The guidelines provided by the instructor included the following:

‘Select a problem-solving and decision making situation that you have experienced that is important to your development. The aim is to reflect on that experience and gain deeper insight into it through the application of conceptual material. You should analyse the problematic situation, what triggered it, and how you felt about the decision process before, during and after it unfolded. You should consider how the decision process might have been managed better by you and others. You will be assessed on your ability to make sense and critically reflect upon your experience through the application of concepts, ideas and/or frameworks.’

Submissions are currently being received for volume 3 of *My Decisive Moment*. Victoria University Human Ethics Committee granted approval #21221 on November 20th 2014. The order of presentation in these volumes — emotion, reason, morality — broadly matches that in the course text. Confidentiality was maintained by listing the author’s name (or, if they desired, a pseudonym) in a list at the front of the book. It is therefore difficult (or impossible) for anybody (including the course coordinator) to make any connection between a particular case and a particular contributor. Interestingly, students see inclusion of their real name as an important aspect of the expression of authenticity and voice. (Fig. 8)

Indicators that students were empowered by the course (RQ2) were sought by reviewing a total of 159 assignments comprising some 400,000 words submitted over the five year period 2011-2015. These assignments comprised 40% of the total. Each assignment was analysed for the number of page references, the use of course models, and organisation around a time sequence (before, during, and after the decisive moment). The key
issues were summarised and the assignment was categorised (very approximately) as belonging to a single application domain in the external world. All of these assignments were well-prepared and each offered a rich picture of practical decision making. The most obvious finding was that, as indicated in the abstract, student described their decision making as conflicted and confused, social and emotional, context-specific and time-urgent. Each author presented a critical reflection that constituted a complex and pluralistic inquiry into intertwined emotion, reason and morality. In aggregate, the critical reflections cover decisive moments in a wide range of domains. Interestingly, problem-solving and decision making situations selected from non-business domains surfaced issues that were very similar to those selected from the domains of business. For example, the most common issues within the domain of work (35 assignments, 22% of the total) were relationships, a separate category accounting for 46 assignments, and 29% of the total. This is interpreted as evidence that an individual’s analysis of their own decisive moment had an intensely human character that was largely independent of context (Fig. 11).

Fig. 11: Indicators of empowerment

Domains and Frequencies

Analysis of the 159 assignments demonstrated that each addressed a problem-solving and decision making situation that was clearly important in the life of the author. As indicated by the thumb nail sketches on the back cover of My Decisive Moment Vol. 2 (Fig. 8), the situations include: the million-dollar sale of a personal business (work); personal experience of the Christchurch earthquake (work); medical misadventure (health); risk and reward in starting a new business (work); tramping across a flooded estuary (sport/leisure); issues with the condition of a residential investment property (purchase/debt/investment); and a high-altitude rescue on Mount Everest (sport/leisure).

The modal assignment was graded B+ (77%). This modal assignment did analyse the situation for key concepts. Reflection and analysis did generate insight. Implications for ‘managing’ the decision process did reflect insight. The assignment was structured coherently. There were 21 references to specific pages in the neuroscience text. Key concepts from the narrative were promoted to two course models. The most popular model was the V-Model (as in Fig. 2), followed by stakeholder analysis grids (as in figures 4 and 5), and overlapping circles (as in figures 3 and 7). On occasion students included good quality models from areas such as cognitive behavioral therapy and virtue ethics that were not covered in the course.

A key element of analysis is the sample assignment entitled The Soldier about a NZ Defence Force casualty in Afghanistan. Within the limit of 2,500 words the author has produced a confronting narrative supported by four stanzas of poetry, seven pictures, two course models, and more than 40 page-specific references. Grids have been employed to analyse the perspectives of three stakeholders (surgeons, author’s team, author) at three points in time (before, during, and after the decisive moment). Arrows and a gold star have been added to the ‘after’ grid to identify aspects of the decision making process that, in the author’s opinion, approach those identified in the ‘Gold Standard’ of excellence. A stand-alone academic article incorporating The Soldier is being readied for submission to E:CO.
Discussion

The only way to cultivate virtue is to control our passions

— Aristotle

Almost all students were enthusiastic about the neuroscience text and the assignment on critical reflection. They appeared to learn by analyzing an issue important to their development through the application of generic course models. Students were often surprised to discover that they could explain a lot of their decision behaviors by reference to neural activities unconnected to conscious thought. Because they could not consciously interrogate unconscious thought many had previously thought that values and morality, emotions and intuitions played an unimportant (even negative) role in rational decision making. They now subscribe to an extended version of rationality based on neural pluralism and pluralistic approaches to decision making – which, of course, had resonated with their own experiences all along. A strong theme in all critical reflections was a journey from negative emotion, through problem solving (usually involving supportive others), to positive emotion. It was clear that all students viewed problem solving and decision making as an integral part of their roles and relationships, identity and culture, both at work and elsewhere. Students saw themselves as social actors whose decisions affected —and were affected by — others. Moral issues were of prime importance to them. Students reported that revisiting the issues was often psychologically difficult but that the overall effect was both emotionally ‘lightening’ – and intellectually en-lightening.

On occasion students chose to write about situations important to their development that were of an intensely personal nature, yet often important to society as a whole. The intent was not to focus on past emotional trauma and social exclusion, but to move towards acceptance by self and others. This requires that — even in a business school – that ‘others should know’ about episodes of criminality, violence, and sexual abuse. Some critical reflections provided poignant, even shocking, examples of empowerment (Figs. 12 and 13).

Conclusions

This report analyzed selected aspects of a business school managerial decision making course that aims to meet
student and university requirements for critical and creative thinking (Fig. 1). A pluralistic mode of inquiry that focused on intertwined and emergent emotion, reason and morality was briefly introduced (Fig. 3). It was then employed to frame stakeholder perspectives (Fig. 4), the methodology by which empirical data was gathered (Fig. 5) as well as the pluralistic nature of competing neural processes. The course employed a blended teaching and learning strategy (Fig. 6) supported by a simple course organization. The latter was tightly coupled to a neuroscience text organized around the appropriate and inappropriate uses of emotion, reason and morality (Fig. 7). Course learning objectives focused on the development of practical skills in everyday problem solving and decision making, as well the development of skills in critical reflection that are required to understand decisive moments (Fig. 8).

Feedback from 200+ students indicated that the adoption of an innovative blended teaching and learning strategy and neuroscience course text was successful. (RQ1) Students were especially praising of the text. They not infrequently took it away to read on holidays and shared it with family members and friends. The course and text were made accessible (‘ready to hand’) via low cognitive load visual models. For the first time students appreciated the nature of ‘the argument in their heads’ when they engaged, critically and creatively, in disentangling claims to emotion, reason and morality. The power of these pedagogical innovations was particularly noticeable in the quality of the insights gained through critical reflection. The critically reflective assignments, including those accepted for publication in My Decisive Moment, focused on authentic expressions of insight on topics important to the author’s development — in other words, empowerment. (RQ2) Kierkegaard noted that ‘life must be understood backwards..but..it must be lived forwards.’ As the author of The Soldier puts it: ‘The course makes you think, and think about thinking.’

References


Reference Link