Teaching Business as Business: The Role of the Case Method in the Constitution of Management as a Science Based Profession

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<th>Journal of Management History</th>
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<td>Manuscript ID</td>
<td>JMH-06-2019-0042.R2</td>
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<td>Manuscript Type:</td>
<td>Research Paper</td>
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<tr>
<td>Keywords:</td>
<td>boundary object, ontological model, case method, Harvard Business School, critical management studies</td>
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Teaching Business as Business:

The Role of the Case Method in the Constitution of Management as a Science Based Profession

Abstract

Purpose: This paper explores the early days of business education with the aim of understanding how the Harvard Business School (HBS) contributed to the constitution of ‘management’ as a science-based profession. The research focuses on HBS signature pedagogy, the case method, and its role in the institutionalization of managerial knowledge.

Design/methodology/approach: The research is based on a qualitative content analysis of HBS Annals published between 1908 and 1930. Through a manual coding of the annals, the paper traces the diffusion of the case method in the curriculum and connects it with the institutional transformations that took place between 1908 and 1930.

Findings: The data show how HBS curriculum transitioned from lectures to case teaching in the aftermath of World War I. This pedagogy allowed HBS to demonstrate the possibility of systematically investigate management problems and to deliver business education at scale. The discussion argues that the case method, acting as a boundary object between business praxis and management theories, constituted management as a science-based profession.

Originality/value: Recent debates have emerged about case method’s ability to critically question socio-economic structures within which business is conducted. This paper contributes to the debate arguing that the historical and institutional factors leading to the affirmation of this pedagogical approach had a substantive role in the type of knowledge produced through its application. The findings challenge the idea that the affirmation of the case method is attributable to its epistemological primacy in investigating business problems.

Keywords: case method, boundary object, ontological model, business school, Harvard Business School.

Paper type: Research paper

Wordcount: 7596 words
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

Introduction

Sitting on the southern bank of the Charles river, the Baker Library at Harvard Soldiers Field campus stands an icon of American capitalism. Generations of managers, state officials and captains of industry have animated the halls and the buildings of Harvard Business School since its foundation in 1908. Thanks to a century-long track record of high-profile alumni and generous endowments, Harvard Business School (HBS) ranks consistently amongst the top business schools in the world (Dichev, 2008). Besides being one of the most influential academic institutions of modern capitalism, the School has also contributed to the very definition of ‘business management’ as both a profession and an academic discipline (Contardo & Wensley, 2004). In this paper we discuss how the case method, HBS signature pedagogy, had a substantive role in the constitution of management as a science-based profession (Brante, 2011).

The case method is as old as HBS itself, as was introduced in the curriculum during the School’s 1908-1913 ‘experimental phase’ (Cruikshank, 1987). The method assumes that learning is more effective when conveyed through participation rather than through passive listening and memorization. This pedagogical approach trains students to individually and creatively think, encourages collective debates of ideas, and stimulates inductive decision making (Garvin, 2007). Case-method based classes usually involve role-play exercises in which students are asked to engage with in-vitro reconstructions of business problems similar to those faced by business executives on a daily basis (Richardson, 1994). One century after its debut in the HBS curriculum, the case method is more than just a pedagogical tool for the production and constitution of managerial knowledge (Contardo & Wensley, 2004, p. 212). Adopted by over 4,000 schools worldwide (Levy, 2015), the case method is probably HBS’ most successful
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

product. As of today, the School publishes around 350 cases per year and controls approximately 80% of the case market (Harvard Business School, n.d.).

In the following pages we challenge the idea that the affirmation of the case method as the standard pedagogy in business education is attributable to its epistemological primacy in investigating business problems (Velushchak, 2014). Previous works in the field of business history and critical management studies (e.g. Bridgman, Cummings, & McLaughlin, 2015, 2016; Bridgman, McLaughlin, & Cummings, 2018; Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, & Rowlinson, 2017) have already addressed the limitation of the case method to critically question the socio-economic systems (and associated ideologies) within which business is conducted (Bridgman et al., 2018). In this paper we extend this critique arguing that the reasons behind the diffusion of the case method in business education should be sought in the institutional dynamics of HBS between 1908 and 1930. The introduction of the case method into the School’s curriculum allowed HBS to become the main interface between academia and industrial capitalism. Acting as a mediator between these two social contexts, HBS defined business management in a way to suit the institutional needs to: 1) demonstrate the possibility of systematically investigate business and management problems and 2) deliver business education at scale (Copeland, 1958, p. 176).

The research is based on a qualitative content analysis of Harvard Business School’s Annals published between 1908 and 1930. Through a manual coding of the Harvard course catalogues, we trace the diffusion of the case method in the curriculum to connect it with the institutional dynamics that took place during the first 22 years of operation of HBS. Theoretically, we borrow the analytical framework developed by Star and Griesemer (1989) for the interpretation of historical material. We combine this concept with Brante’s definition of
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

Ontological Model (2011) for the analysis of science-based occupations. The resulting theoretical assemblage is employed to illustrate how HBS was capable to establish management as an academic discipline and to constitute business managers as a new class of professional experts all through the case-method pedagogy.

The plan of the paper is as follows: the next section offers an overview of debate concerning the limits, and the potential, of the case method pedagogy for business education. In the subsequent section, we review the early days of HBS as a way to frame our analysis within the historical context that the School was founded upon. We then illustrate the qualitative, methodological approach we have taken in the study of HBS Course catalogues and present the results of our content analysis. Lastly, we contextualize our findings within the institutional history of HBS to show how the progressive diffusion of this pedagogy contributed to the consecration of business management as an academic discipline and led to the affirmation of the managerial class.

The controversial case of the case method

This research connects with a longstanding debate taking place in the field of Critical Management Studies about the potential and the limits of the case-method as the pedagogy in business education. Within this debate, Forman & Rymer (1999) have analyzed the role of the case method in the constitution of the managerial subject. They argue that this pedagogical approach is co-responsible for the affirmation of the masculine, blunt, and ruthless subject position that business executive are asked to personify (on the same issue see also P. Du Gay, 1994). In discussing the ideological consequences attributable to the use of the case method, Contardo and Wensley argue that the standardization of business education achieved by this pedagogical approach has led to a hegemonic and unquestioned conception of what management
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

is or should be about (2004). They contend that through the analysis of stylized yet very specific ‘real problems’, the case method fails to question the larger dynamics of capitalism within which businesses and managers operate (Contardo & Wensley, 2004). More recently, Bridgman and colleagues furthered the debate arguing that the case-method, with its narrow focus on the firm and its bias towards short-term decision making, would be unable to cope with the political, economic and social turbulences currently concerning the Global North (Bridgman et al., 2015, 2016, 2018). Their critique has become increasingly urgent and salient in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis, for which business schools have been held, to some extent, jointly responsible (Gempesaw II, 2009; Giacalone & Wargo, 2009). Furthermore, in their counter-history of the case method, Cummings, Bridgman, Hassard, and Rowlinson (2017) highlighted how the adoption of case method at HBS was far more contentious, and its success all but unavoidable, rather than what is usually presented in canonical accounts of the School’s history.

In a similar vein, Khurana analyzed the affirmation of the managerial profession in relation to the political, social, and cultural context of early XX Century (2007). His arguments stand in opposition to purely economic and teleological accounts of this phenomenon, such as those provided by the economic historian Alfred Chandler (1980; 1994). Khurana’s work encourages scholars to not consider the affirmation of managerial professions as the unavoidable consequences of the transition from small, family run, businesses to large, hierarchical, corporations. Instead, he suggests studying the professionalization of business management in relation to the multiple contingencies (historical, social and economic) of early XX Century, which also included the constitution of university-based executive education. Supporters of the case method argue, instead, that case-study research is an efficient, effective and rigorous means for theory building (Eisenhardt, 1989). In particular, the possibility to conduct cross-case
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

analyses would allow researchers to ‘emphasize complementary aspects of a phenomenon’ and to ‘draw a more complete theoretical picture’ (Eisenhardt, 1991, p. 120). In addition, the case method would be more effective than traditional academic methods in training students in the ‘analytic and communication skills needed to perform effectively’ (Argyris, 1980, p. 297).

In the attempt to contribute to this ongoing debate, in this inquiry we investigate the micro dynamics that within a specific academic institution and during a specific historic timeframe, contributed to the scientific and professional legitimization of business management. We focus on the Harvard’s case method because, as argued in the following pages, this pedagogy played a key role in the mediating the relation between professional praxis and scientific knowledge (Brante, 2011).

Teaching Business at Harvard: HBS 1908 - 1930

The Harvard Business School was founded in 1908 thanks to an endowment left to the Harvard Corporation by the sewing machine magnate Gordon McKay. When the first Dean, Edwin Gay, inaugurated the School, the curriculum was experimental in both its content and its methods (Gay, 1926). The program of study was initially composed of courses borrowed from the Harvard Law School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, which also hosted the school from 1908 to 1913. Alongside regular lectures, courses often featured seminars held by local industrialists and engineers (Cruikshank, 1987).

From the beginning, Edwin Gay opposed the idea of conceiving business education as a by-product born at the intersection of Economics, Law and Political Economy (Gay, 1926). Instead, Gay envisaged business as an independent discipline with its own ontological and epistemological commitments (Khurana, 2007, p. 97). He envisaged HBS as the school to initiate a new approach to business education and research to educate future generations of scientifically
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

trained business managers. His vision garnered the support of the Harvard President Abbot Lawrence Lowell who, in a private correspondence, concurred that HBS should have taught students ‘business, not political economy’, in the same way as Harvard Law School taught students ‘law, not jurisprudence’ (Lowell, 1907).

The creation of the Bureau of Business Research.

Shortly after inauguration, HBS attracted the attention of industrialists and local magnates. Some of these members were invited to host seminars at HBS and join the Faculty as part-time lecturers (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 59). This was the case for Arch W. Shaw, founder of the Shaw-Walker Furniture Co. and editor of the professional trade magazine ‘System’. Prior to join HBS, Shaw was attempting to replicate ideas of scientific management developed by Frederick W. Taylor and apply them to the distribution and commercialization of commodities (Jones & Monieson, 1990; Shaw, 2005). In his goal to develop a quantitative theory of distribution costs, in 1911 Shaw donated $2,200 to HBS (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 59).

In those years Edwin Gay was still experimenting with the School’s curriculum (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 59). He was trying to balance two seemingly opposite needs; to provide a pragmatic and actionable education for an emerging class of bourgeoisie intellectuals while avoiding a professional training approach. On one hand, this imposed the development of action-oriented and job-ready courses, but it also required HBS to frame business management as a proper academic discipline based on solid theoretical foundations. In Gay’s vision, the development of a research apparatus was the only way to way to pursue both these objectives (McDonald, 2017, p. 20).

Gay therefore invested Shaw’s donation into the creation of the Bureau of Business Research (BBR), a research institution for the systematic investigation of business problems.
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

(Harvard University, 1913). Paul Cherington, a founding member the School and Professor of Economic Resources, was nominated as the first director of the BBR. Cherington used the resources allotted to the BBR to conduct a pilot study on the distribution costs of the shoe industry. Between 1912 and 1913, Cherington and a group of HBS graduates visited over 130 shoes retail stores in Ohio and Wisconsin. The outcomes of the pilot study were published in the 1913 ‘First Bulletin of the Bureau’ (Harvard University, 1913), a highly significant report describing the shoe industry’s costs, revenues and profits structure.

Beyond its actual merits and usefulness, the report was particularly relevant for HBS as it was published in the final year School’s experimental phase. Edwin Gay was eager to use the BBR research results as a way to demonstrate to the Harvard Corporation the progress made by the School in the scientific investigation of business problems. Lawrence Lowell, the President of the Harvard Corporation at the time, acknowledged and praised HBS’ research efforts (Copeland, 1958, p. 33). The results achieved by the newborn research apparatus helped the School to secure additional funds and expand its operations beyond the 1908-1913 experimental phase. In addition, HBS was split from the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and became a separate and independent administrative unit within the Harvard Corporation.

*Standardizing and scaling business education.*

The First World War had a significant impact on the School. Enrollment dropped by 50% during the war period and several faculty members temporarily left the School to serve in government offices. HBS returned to its ordinary operations after the war, when many veterans enrolled in business education (Copeland, 1958, p. 42). In the first year after the conflict the School hit a record enrollment of 380 new students. This enrollment surge had serious
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

repercussions on the School’s post-WWI fragile infrastructure. The administration had to deal with problems related to teacher recruitment, budget restrictions, and a lack of classrooms.

The post-WWI era was also a period of great transformation for the School’s administration. In 1919, Dean Edwin Gay was replaced by Wallace B. Donham, a banker, a Harvard School of Law Alumni and the vice president of the Old Colony Trust Company. Donham believed that the 1919 enrollment spike was predictive of future growth and therefore worked to secure the administrative infrastructure of the School. Donham agreed with Gay that business education should gear students for academic and intellectual independence. Donham wanted to convey business education through the analysis and discussion of emblematic examples in the way that they, as Donham quotes, ‘come to the business executive, rather than in generalized form as it has been reacted upon by the business economist’ (1922). Inspired by the success of the Harvard Law School, Donham encouraged the faculty to rely on the case method as the way to impart business education.

Originally developed in 1870 by Christopher Columbus Langdell, the case method was introduced at Harvard Law School as a way to train students in the analysis of historical court cases (Merseth, 1991). In borrowing the case method, Donham was faced with the problem of creating an archive of pedagogically relevant business problems. While a good selection of cases for teaching the law could have been assembled ‘by a competent man in any good law library’ (Donham, 1922), such historical and pedagogical literature related to business was non-existent. Therefore, the transition to the case method pedagogy required the School to create its own archive of business cases (Donham, 1922).

To create a collection of case studies, Donham invested additional resources into the Bureau of Business Research that resulted in the development of a standard protocol for the
production of new cases. The protocol asked faculty members to submit a case-request to the
Bureau every time they identified missing case-based teaching material. Within this request, they
were also asked to define the pedagogical needs and the characteristics of the desired case. Based
on the requested specifications, the BBR identified a suitable company to analyze, conducted the
necessary on field researches, and eventually summarized the problems and outcomes in a format
appropriate for educational purposes. Through the systematization of research protocols, the
BBR was able to publish over 5,000 cases by 1925 (Harvard University, 1926).

In support of case production and circulation, the Donham administration also financed
the creation of the School’s journal, the Harvard Business Review (Copeland, 1958, p. 283).
Moreover, Donham incentivized the Faculty to write their own textbooks based on content from
cases produced by the BBR. The first case-based textbook was adopted in 1920 by the Marketing
course (Copeland, 1920). Five years later, in 1925, the entire School’s curriculum was based on
the analysis of real business problems (McDonald, 2017, p. 58). Also in this year, Wallace
Donham was invited to help develop the curriculum for the Stanford Business School, the second
graduate-only business school in the U.S and the first modeled after Harvard (Abend, 2014).

Methodology: Content Analysis of the Course Catalogues

After having outlined the evolution of the case method through a review of HBS’ early years, in
this section we introduce the methodology used to map and track the diffusion of this pedagogy
throughout the first 22 years of the School’s operation.

In this research we relied on a qualitative content analysis of the Official Registers of
Harvard University published between 1908 and 1930 (Babbie & Benaquisto, 2014). Also
known as ‘Course Catalogues’, these booklets were intended to help students plan their graduate
career and were published every year up until 2015. The official registers are part of the Baker
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

Library ‘HBS Archives’, a collection of administrative, operational, programmatic, and academic documents of historical value. In this research we retrieved and analyzed the digital versions of the Catalogues. In the field of business and management history, archival data are often used for explaining processes of change and evolution, for challenging existing theories and for building new theoretical models (Barnes, Dang, Leavitt, Guarana, & Uhlmann, 2018; Das, Jain, & Mishra, 2018). In our case, the decision to rely on a qualitative content analysis of archival records was based on the longitudinal nature of our inquiry and on the availability of digitalized and official HBS documents. Despite minor changes, the Catalogues’ format was consistent between 1908 and 1930. The first pages provided students with practical information about admission, registration, and requirements. Following this, a ‘Description of Courses’ was detailed, which included the syllabi of all courses offered by HBS in that academic year. The final part discussed additional administrative aspects, such as fees, scholarships, and accommodation options. We focused primarily on the ‘Description of Courses’ section. For each year, we coded all the courses offered at HBS and analyzed the syllabus of each course. We classified the courses as ‘Case method based’ if they explicitly referred to the ‘case method’ (or ‘problem method’ or ‘case system’, as it was also called) as their teaching approach. We also considered as ‘Case method based’ all the courses which, whilst lacking the term ‘case method’ within the description, featured the three main elements of this pedagogy as defined by Wallace Donham (1922):

(1) Assigned actual business problems to students;

1 Available on the HBS official Library website https://www.library.hbs.edu/Find/Collections-Archives/Special-Collections/Collections/HBS-History
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

(2) Asked students to prepare a written or oral analysis of the problems from the decision-maker’s perspective;

(3) Tested students’ arguments through a collective, Socratic, discussion.

An example of a course that fit these criteria is provided below in the description of the 1914-1915 Business Policy course:

The dominant purpose of this course is to give second-year men an opportunity to focus upon actual business problems […] and to give them a view of business from the position of the general manager. […] Following these problems each member of the class makes a brief oral report to the class upon the results of his research work in the subject assigned to him. After this oral report, and after the points raised in class from discussion of that report have been further investigated, a written report is submitted to accompany the business data gathered. (Harvard University, 1914, p. 29)

The content analysis of the Course Catalogues was conducted with Nvivo, a qualitative content analysis software. The results were subsequently tabulated and visualized using the data visualization software Tableau. The outcome is an interactive timeline showing HBS curriculum evolution over the years accompanied by a line-graph showing the enrollment trend. This visualization helped us to link the diffusion of the case method with the institutional transformations which involved Harvard Business School in the time frame of the analysis. The interactive timeline and the underlying dataset were released to the public and they are both available for consultation and reuse. In this paper we present a static representation of the timeline, enhanced with coordinates to facilitate its consultation.

2 The visualization is available at this URL: [URL MASKED AS IT MIGHT REVEAL THE AUTHORS IDENTITIES]. The dataset can be downloaded here: [URL MASKED AS IT MIGHT REVEAL THE AUTHORS IDENTITIES]
The diffusion of the Case Method at Harvard Business School

In this section we explore the findings of our investigation of the HBS course catalogues. The discussion of our findings is strictly connected with the institutional transformations, discussed in the previous section, which took place in the school between 1908 and 1930. In the following is a static representation of our interactive timeline. The upper section of the visualization shows the evolution of HBS curriculum. The academic years from 1908 to 1930 are plotted on the horizontal axis and coordinates which facilitate the individuation of courses are plotted on the vertical axis. In the following pages we will refer to courses through a combination of year and coordinate (e.g. 1928; 2). Green squares represent the courses that relied on the case method as their pedagogical approach. Red crosses represent the courses delivered through traditional frontal lectures. Finally, grey dots indicate courses which, although mentioned in the Course Catalogues, were not offered due to force majeure (e.g. during WWI). Gray lines show the progression of courses through the academic years. The absence of a line from one year to the next indicates that a course was discontinued. The lower part of the visualization shows the enrolment trend between 1908 and 1930. Callouts were added in both sections to highlight relevant institutional events.

[FIGURE 1 GOES ABOUT HERE]

The case-method during HBS experimental phase: 1908-1913.

The case method has been in the School’s curriculum since its foundation. As visible in Figure 1, two courses relied on the case method approach in the first year after inauguration. The first of the two was the Commercial Law course (1908; 2) taught by Frederick Schaub. Schaub, not surprisingly a professor from the Harvard Law School, applied the case method to the
analysis of trade-related problems. The second course relying on the case method was Economic Resources (1908; 3), taught by the future BBR director Paul Cherington. The 1908 ‘Economic Resources’ syllabus indicates that: ‘Reliance will be placed, as far as possible, upon the problem method of instruction, the students investigating and preparing reports upon characteristic institutions in various branches of trade’ (Harvard University, 1908a, p. 17).

Figure 1 shows how the diffusion of the case method began prior to the institution of the Bureau of Business Research. For instance, the 1909 course on Insurance (1909; 7), asked students to engage in ‘discussions of the practical problems that are daily presented to insurance offices’ (Harvard University, 1909, p. 28). In 1910 the course Industrial Organization (1910; 4) adopted the Socratic pedagogy based on the analysis of real cases, taught by the then Dean Edwin Gay, himself a supporter of a case-method. Another course to adopt the case method during the 1908-1913 ‘experimental phase’ was Transportation (1912; 6) which, in 1912, relied on the case method for the module on Railroads. Lastly, the Accounting course (1912; 1), switched to the case method in 1912. The syllabus from 1912 clearly indicates that the course asked students to analyze problems ‘chosen almost wholly from fields where no legal prescription or formal traditional programme of procedure can direct the student in his work’ (Harvard University, 1912, p. 15).

*HBS curriculum in the First World War period.*

1914 was the first academic year in which the School ran as an independent administrative unit. The consequences of School’s independency are reflected in the School’s program. The number of courses almost doubled, and most new courses relied on the case method. Accounting (1914; 1), Law (1914; 2), and Insurance (1914; 8) continued with the same syllabi prior to 1914. Amongst the new courses, General Business Problems (1914; 5, co-taught...
by the BBR co-founder Arch W. Shaw), Manufacturing (1914; 4), Printing and Publishing
(1914; 10), Lumbering (1914; 13), and the Course for Secretaries of the Chamber of Commerce
(1914; 11) all relied on the case method of instruction. Marketing (1914; 3), Foreign trade (1914;
6), Banking and Finance (1914; 7), Transportation (1914; 9), and Local Public Utilities (1914;
12) instead maintained the traditional frontal teaching style. From 1914 until the end of the
Edwin Gay mandate in 1919, this situation remained unaltered. The only exceptions were the
introduction in 1915 of the case-method based course on Chamber of Commerce Problems
(1915; 11), taught by the BBR director Paul Cherington, and the transition of the ‘Banking and
Finance’ (1917; 7) and the Local Public Utilities courses (1916; 12) to the case method. The
academic year of 1919 was marked by a reduction of courses which, although officially listed in
the Course Catalogue, where marked as ‘Omitted’ (represented in the timeline by a gray
dots). This was due to the large involvement of Harvard’s faculty members with US war
operations and a significant drop in enrollment that saw an intake of 232 students in 1817 fall to
just 32 students in 1918 (Copeland, 1958, p. 42).

Wallace Donham and the affirmation of the case-method.

The School curriculum underwent its second major renovation after WWI with the
election of the new Dean, Wallace B. Donham, in 1919. In his attempt to cope with record level
enrollment (380 students in 1919), Donham restructured the curriculum by encouraging faculties
to standardize their teaching methods and create new and ad-hoc teaching materials (Donham,
1922; Merseth, 1991). The outcomes of his efforts can be appreciated in the timeline, as almost
all courses transitioned to the case method after 1919. The only course that maintained a
traditional lecture style was the theoretical course on Economics (1920; 4), aimed at
familiarizing students with the ideas of economic thinkers ‘from Adam Smith to the present day’
(Harvard University, 1921). The course eventually switched to the case method in 1925 (1925; 5), when students were invited to analyze and discuss economic principles in connection with actual business problems. Thereafter, all courses relied on a Socratic pedagogy, with the sole exception of the Business Conditions course in 1930 (1930; 3) which, in its first year of existence, did not adopt the HBS case method.

The Constitution of Management as a Science Based Profession

Based on our content analysis of the HBS curriculum, we suggest analyzing the affirmation of the case method in relation to the HBS role as interface between academia and industry. Countering the idea that the success of the case method pedagogy should be attributed to its epistemological superiority in the investigation of business problems (Velushchak, 2014), we argue that the specific historical and institutional context played a key role in its diffusion and had a lasting impact on the kind of knowledge produced through its application.

Throughout the experimental phase (1908-1913), the School was pressured to demonstrate the possibility of investigating business problems with the same rigour of other professional schools such as law, medicine, and engineering. This was the conditio sine qua non for the existence of the School beyond 1913. Early attempts to investigate business problems borrowing economic theories proved to be unsuccessful (Donham, 1952, p. 13). Most economic theories framed the management of business within an ideal representation of the market (e.g. the model of perfect competition). However, macroeconomics models were of little use for aspiring managers who looked for principles of optimal business administration under ‘realistic’ conditions (Copeland, 1958, p. 176). The incommensurability between economic theories and business praxis was a problem that HBS, alongside other business schools around the country, had to face. At the Booth School of Business of the University of Chicago, the conundrum was solved by developing
abroad and theoretically-heavy curriculum which included both natural and social sciences (Khurana, 2007, p. 157). Also, at the Wharton School of Finance and Economy of the University of Pennsylvania, business education was framed in pragmatic terms and taught in the form of industry-specific courses (Sass, 1982). At HBS, Edwin Gay was convinced that business management should develop its own thought-style (Fleck, 1979) instead of being reduced to either a professional discipline lacking a theoretical apparatus or as an applied branch of economics (Gay, 1926).

The challenge for Edwin Gay was therefore to demonstrate the possibility of distilling theoretical knowledge out of the professional practices (Harvard University, 1908b). The investments into the Bureau of Business Research responded to this necessity. Instead of economic laws and principles, the knowledge was produced through the analysis of real problems that emphasized the practical human and organizational aspects of everyday business (Copeland, 1958, p. 176). The effectiveness of Gay’s vision is testified by the expansion of the School’s courses offered in 1914 (Fig.1). In the following two decades, Gay’s strategy led to the publication of 7,500 cases (Harvard University, 1930) and to the institution of the Harvard Business Review as a means to disseminate managerial knowledge beyond HBS and across the country.

A second historical contingency which fostered the diffusion of the case method was the sudden 1918 enrollment surge. The challenges posed by the new wave of students in the post-war period required a drastic reformation of the School’s curriculum. In response, the newly elected Dean Wallace Donham continued with the standardization strategy initiated by his predecessor Edwin Gay. Donham further expanded the strategy by inviting Faculty members to work in conjunction with the BBR to create case-based textbooks. As shown on Fig.1, the adoption of
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

textbooks between 1919 and 1920 drastically boosted the diffusion of the case method pedagogy within the School’s curriculum.

Moreover, the adoption of the case method helped HBS deal with the shortage of personnel as this method improved the efficiency of teaching increasingly larger classes of students. Business management was a relatively new discipline in the 1920s, and the Harvard Business School struggled to hire new Faculty member, even more so because of the high wages that the private sector offered to academically trained managers (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 148). In this respect, the standardization of courses, achieved through to the introduction of standard teaching methods and textbooks, increased the productivity of Faculty members, thus in 1926 allowing HBS to reduce by half the number of external lecturers hired to cover the courses (Copeland, 1958, p. 181).

*Case-method as a boundary object.*

Previous studies have questioned the limits and distortion introduced by the case method pedagogy (Bridgman et al., 2015, 2016, 2018; Contardo & Wensley, 2004; Cummings et al., 2017, p. 170; Forman & Rymer, 1999). We want to extend the critique arguing that the historical and institutional factors leading to the affirmation of this research and teaching method had a substantive role in the type of knowledge produced through its application.

Borrowing Star and Griesemer’s (1989) vocabulary, we can conceive the Harvard case-method as a boundary object. A boundary object is an analytic concept identifying ‘objects which both inhabit several intersecting social worlds and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them’. At HBS, the Case method was a boundary object capable of connecting the social context of academia (the locus of knowledge) with that of the industry (the locus of praxis). Through the inquiries of the Bureau of Business Research, the School demonstrated the
possibility of straddling these two social contexts and to prosper as a mediator between academia and the industry.

The case method allowed HBS to defeat the skepticism of industrialists, for whom the only valuable business knowledge was the one ‘acquired at a tender age with a broom on an office or factory floor’ (Gay, 1926, p. 399). It also allowed for the development of a theoretical body of knowledge relating to business management. Relying on the Sociology of Profession vocabulary, the case method can be described as a generative element of business management’s ontological model (Brante, 2011). An ontological model is a system for classification and categorization that governs our perceptions of reality. Ontological models provide the basic building-blocks upon which theories are constituted.

Ontological models are the obligatory passage point between praxis and knowledge; they guide knowledge extraction from praxis, and in turn constitute the theories that inform practice. A profession, defined as an occupation backed by a scientific knowledge, can only develop in presence of an ontological model (ibid.). In the case of business management, the case method allowed the School to sample business executives’ practical experiences and subsequently create new theoretical knowledge, thus illustrating a deeper aspect of business reality beyond the empirical surface of individual cases. By extracting knowledge from specific cases and making this transferrable and applicable to different contexts, over time the School established the business management ontological model. In doing so, HBS defined management as a profession, i.e. as a science-based occupation. However, the historical and institutional contingencies in which this ontological model was created (i.e. by means of the case method) had a profound impact on the type of knowledge produced from praxes. It is therefore key to critically assess the limits of the signature research and teaching methods of HBS.
The case method allowed the School to create ordered representations of otherwise chaotic socio-economic phenomena (Latour & Woolgar, 1986). As a research instrument, the case method translated messy and complex business problems into synthetic readings which were further embedded into scientific texts and pedagogical instruments (Latour, 1987, p. 68). The ways in which the rich, unorganized knowledge of the reality of business administration were translated into abstract cases responded to the need of the HBS to train students to solve ‘real’ business problems. The emphasis on ‘real’ is because ‘real cases’ should allow students to reach definite conclusions about the problems at hand during a classroom discussion. This necessity became even more pressing after the WWI where enrollment reached record levels (Fig.1). The emphasis on honing the decision-making skills of students and encouraging a focus on practical aspects of the case limited the possibility of contextualizing business problems within larger sociopolitical contexts. These limitations have recently spurred a critical and constructive reflection upon the need for the development of pedagogical techniques appropriate for the questioning and critique of the assumptions underpinning capitalism (Bridgman et al., 2018; Duarte, 2009. Against ‘theory-creep’ in business education and in support of case method's pragmatism see Simons, 2013).

It should also be emphasized how HBS’ unique and instrumental definition of ‘real business cases’ affected not only its pedagogy, but also its research practices. The emphasis on the real-life nature of business cases meant producing cases as they ‘come to the business executive’ (Donham, 1922). This definition of what constituted a real case was central to the work of the Bureau of Business Research, which analyzed and systematized business problems as they were experienced by business executives. In doing so, the Bureau systematically disregarded the viewpoints of other stakeholders, such as those of employees, trade unions,
TEACHING BUSINESS AS BUSINESS

governments, and all else involved in the direct and indirect effects of the economic activity being researched. The translation of business owners’ viewpoints into pedagogical material is, as we believe, co-responsible for the case-method’s narrow focus and inability to contextualize business administration within the larger dynamics of capitalism (Bridgman et al., 2018; Contardo & Wensley, 2004). Nevertheless, such a narrow-focused approach suited the HBS institutional need to develop, over the five years of the experimental period, an ontological model which would allow the School to train students in the pragmatic art of management.

Conclusions

In this paper we have analyzed the diffusion of the case method in the Harvard Business School curriculum between 1908 and 1930. Instead of attributing the success of this teaching and research method to the School’s alleged epistemological superiority, we argue that its affirmation depended in large part on the contingent institutional dynamics that transformed HBS during its first 22 years of existence. In particular, we argued that the success of the case method was dependant on the need for HBS to prove the possibility of investigating business scientifically and providing business education at scale. Edwin Gay and Wallace Donham were skillful in positioning the School at the interface between academia and the industry. The School’s strategic positioning, combined with the institution of the Bureau of Business Research and the standardization of the pedagogy and creation of case-based textbooks, marked the birth of business education, consecrated HBS as the behemoth of this new discipline, and legitimized the managers as a new class of experts. However, the adoption of the case-method naturalized the business owners’ perspective thus narrowing its analytical focus to intra-corporate or inter-corporate dynamics. The consequences of this pedagogical approach can be seen in the method’s
inability to critically question larger socio-economic structures within which business is conducted (Bridgman et al., 2018; Contardo & Wensley, 2004; McDonald, 2017).

Our paper also had theoretical aspirations. In combining Brante’s ontological model with Star and Grieseman’s boundary object, our goal was to demonstrate the relative, socially constructed, and contingent nature of the knowledge created through the application of the case method. We hope that this contribution can be useful to business historians and sociology of professions scholars interested in questioning disciplinary powers and professional authorities. This study faced a couple of limitations that are typical to manually coded, qualitative content analysis. The HBS course catalogues are an incredibly rich source of historical information. However, because of their format and of the amount of information they contain, their analysis was lengthy and labor intensive. Therefore, we could analyze only 22 years worth of data, from 1908 to 1930, with the resources we had available. Future research could experiment with computer-assisted content analysis techniques (e.g. topic modelling (Blei, Carin, & Dunson, 2010)) as a way to analyze large archives of administrative documents.
References


Fig. 1. The diffusion of the case method in HBS curriculum and enrollment trend between 1908-1930.
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