

IS Education for Executives: Joys and Pains

Panel

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Abstract

Executive education in IS is under the scrutiny of many institution for the potential to bring in financial revenues. However teaching executives can be a very challenging task because of their previous experiences, variation in their previous education, and multiplicity of motivations for pursuing a continuous education. The panel aims at sharing successful experiences and highlighting challenges of dealing with executive audiences. The panel will present the results of a large survey among executive students and identify the three most significant elements emerged from the survey: the importance of theory that is actionable, the importance of varied pedagogical tools and practices, and the importance of relevance beyond practical tools. Based on a survey that will be distributed to the audience at the beginning of the panel, the audience will be actively engaged in sharing their experiences on the three topics aiming at capitalize and sum up on the collective knowledge of the room.

Keywords: Executive education, actionable theory, pedagogical practices, relevance in teaching

Introduction

This panel will focus on the challenges and rewards in teaching IS to professionals and executives. Teaching to executives is a particularly challenging task because of the variety of situations in which they operate and because of the high demands that they pose to programs in virtue of their position and, not in small measure, as consequence of the cost of this type of education. On the other side teaching to executives can also be extremely rewarding because of the intriguing situation that one faces as instructor, because of the often novel situations proposed by executives of companies moving at the frontline of knowledge, and last but not least because executives can provide a fertile ground for research and data that are key in and applied research field like IS.

In this panel we will therefore present four views on teaching IS to executives that will touch upon four challenges that the panelists, totaling more than 5 decades of executive education on their shoulders, have dealt with and reflected upon for this panel discussion.

The panel will start with a discussion of the results for a survey among 1000+ executive students of a master program about the outcomes of their executive education (Panelist: Andrea Carugati, Aarhus University, Denmark). This survey will show the complexity of outcomes of IS executive education beyond the obvious increased salary and increased span of control. Survey replies regarding the advantages of the master program such as: “*use theories as well as practices in my work, to solve different problems. It has also taught me to be more analytical in my work*” point at the fact that practitioners need and enjoy both practice and theories in their executive education. The initial part of the panel will present the results of the survey and highlight the three most significant elements emerged from the survey: the importance of theory that is actionable, the importance of varied pedagogical tools and practices, the importance of relevance beyond practical tools. These three topics will then be taken up by the other panelist and discussed with the audience.

From this observation we move on to another challenge then which is that of transforming theory into practical tools. In particular we will discuss the divide between the joy of teaching one’s own research and complex theories and the pain of transforming it into actionable tools for teaching (Panelist: Joao Vieira da Cunha, Universidade Europeia, Portugal). This part of the panel will present a method perfected over time to use ethnographic research of IT adoption to teach structuration theory of IS to students at executive levels. The idea is that by learning about structuration in a practical way the students can in fact solve concrete challenges in their organization and improve their skill in using IS research to inform their everyday work with and around the information systems challenges that they face in their organizations.

The third part of the panel will deal specifically with the complexity of managing an executive class (Panelist: Martin Mocker, MIT CISR, USA). The idea is to share common pitfalls when interacting with executive audiences, but also practices that help to engage executives given that much of the learning is from student to student rather than from instructor to student. This part of the panel confronts the joy of planning a class to the last detail with the pain of letting the teaching emerge, seemingly chaotically from students interactions. This topic should appeal to faculty members starting to move from undergraduate and MBA level teaching to executive education. However, designed as an exchange among faculty with experience in executive education, the topic should also be of interest to seasoned executive educators.

The fourth part of the panel will tackle specifically the issue of relevance of executive education. The panelist (Water Fernandez, University of New South Wales, Australia) will discuss issues related to providing relevant information systems (IS) education for MBA programs and other executive students. The main challenge addressed in this section is how to overcome the joy (and comfort) of teaching theory (abstract and usually quite narrow) and deal with the pain of constantly thinking about relevance (practical and usually multifaceted). The panelist will develop an understanding of relevance as a multifaceted phenomenon, in which academic interests combine with personal, and organizational interests.

Panel Structure: This panel is constructed as a forum to exchange experiences of relevance for the community and to create debate around the different forms and requirements of IS executive education. The panel will be started by distributing a survey among the audience/participants where they will be prompted to think about issues of theory vs. practice, pedagogical tools, and relevance following the structure of the four presentations of the panelists as presented above. The survey discussion presented by panelist 1 will open up the topics and these will be tackled by the other panelists in a sequence. Subsequent to each panelist presentation, the audience will be engaged in sharing their experiences and debating controversial points from the survey. Panelist 1 (Andrea Carugati) will act as moderator of the discussion insuring the engagement of the audience in the debate. The discussions will be concluded with a wrap up by the panelist at the end.

Panelist 1 – Andrea Carugati

Joys and Pains of Providing Impact for Executive Audiences

This part of the panel will focus on the different types of impact that executive education in IT has on IT professionals. The main case is the Master in IT that runs in Denmark in a cooperation of 3 universities (Aarhus University, Aalborg University, and University of South Denmark) and with 3 specializations (software construction, interaction design and organization). The presentation is based on a survey of the students that have been through the program since its inception (population size=1011; 202 valid responses) focused on 3 sections: 1) professional status before the master program to establish a baseline; 2) professional changes during the master program; 3) professional changes after the program. In any of the sections the respondents were required to answer about competences and skills, salary level, span of authority, and job typology. Furthermore the respondents were also required to provide the qualitative evaluation regarding the change in skills and competences as consequence of following the Master in IT.

Beside showing a general high level of satisfaction with the program and high correlation between the master program and job situation improvement, the survey shows that job situation improvement is a broader concept than higher salaries and bigger span of control (more employees below one self). While these parameters indeed increased, job situation improvement also embraces broader responsibilities, lateral moves, and career path changes. In particular many respondents show that they used the Master in IT as a leverage to move from a technical career (typically software developers) to a managerial career (project managers, enterprise architects, or chief information officers).

Another interesting result comes from the coding of the qualitative responses regarding skills. While the majority of the respondents reported, as expected, more effectiveness at work (15,3%) and an increased ability to align with the business (15%), and deeper and broader knowledge about their professional field (8%), a large group reported being able to approach problems from an academic perspective and being able to apply theory to practice with successful results (33%). These responses are relevant in relation both to the construction of the courses programs but also in relation to the choice of literature to assign to the student. These comments also pose interesting challenges in making the literature and theory actionable in practice so that the student/professional is facilitated in the process of translation of theory into practice.

This section of the panel will open up the discussion points of the other panelists as well as provide general elements of debate for the audience.

· **Participation Statement:** I hereby confirm my commitment to attend the conference and serve on the panel if the panel is accepted.

· **Biography:** Andrea Carugati has more than 10 years of experience as faculty in France and Denmark. His research has been published in the European Journal of Information Systems, Databases, Electronic Markets, ECIS, ICIS etc. For the last two years Andrea has been Director of the executive program Master in IT at Aarhus University, School of Business and Social Sciences. This program has been identified by the European Commission as a leading program in the field. Andrea is currently working in the research project LEAD to extend executive education in IT to SMEs.

Panelist 2 – João Vieira da Cunha

Joys and Pain of Teaching your own research to executives

This part of the panel will discuss the challenges of teaching your own research to students. Researchers can have many valuable insights locked into research papers that executive students find difficult to parse. What kind of teaching practices can help students learn from publications intended for an academic audience? Different types of research papers require different challenges. Theoretical papers are perhaps the most challenging. There is no data that students to which students can relate. Moreover, the increased theoretical sophistication which has been a hallmark of IS research is a very fertile soil for scholars who want to grow novel concepts and models but it is a very sterile soil for teachers who want sow a practical but rigorous framework that students can use to improve their understanding of IT processes and IT consequences. The structuration theory of IS is perhaps the best example of this dilemma (Jones & Carsten, 2008). The structuration theory of IS has allowed the production of models of many of the IT processes at work in organizations that integrate structure and agency while taking into account the material properties of information systems. These insights are not only valuable for developing theory but also for implementing IS in organizations in a way that not only allows managers to reduce unintended negative consequences but also allows them to take advantage of unforeseen opportunities that arise as employees appropriate information systems to deal with their situated conditions for action (e.g. Orlikowski & Hofman, 1999). However, how can frameworks based on such arcane theories as Giddens's structuration, as useful as they may be, be taught to executive students who value practice tools more than abstract knowledge?

Empirical papers eliminate some difficulties, but introduce others. Empirical papers provide data that can make the insights presented therein more palatable to students. However, these data are presented to satisfy the chief audience of research papers, which are other academics who use the data reported therein to assess the quality of the study. Quantitative papers report only summary statistics that are meant to support the contribution that the paper claims rather than providing laypeople such as university students with descriptive data on the research setting. The analytical sophistication of some studies competes with, and often wins over the theoretical sophistication of the models presented therein. Qualitative papers present data that is more understandable to executives, but only provides piecemeal glimpses of the dynamics of IS use which are needed to build the theoretical contribution of the paper. The popularity of qualitative studies to develop the structuration theory of IS suggests that this type of research can be as difficult to parse for executive students as any theoretical paper.

Case studies have been the tool of choice to overcome the challenges of translating research for students. However, case studies do so at a heavy cost. They impose a specific teaching method where there is little opportunity to present models with enough detail to make them useful for students and furthermore they do not allow students to develop the skills necessary to use academic research as a source of insights.

This part of the panel will present a method that I have been using for the past 10 years to use my own ethnographic research of IT adoption to teach the structuration theory of IS to executives in a way that not only helps them to learn how to use this approach to solve concrete challenges in their organization but also improves their skill in using IS research to inform their everyday work with and around the information systems challenges that they face in their organizations.

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· **Biography:** João Vieira da Cunha began teaching in 1997, as a teaching assistant. He is now an associate professor in Universidade Europeia in Portugal, which is part of Laureate Universities — the largest international network of higher education institutions. He has taught courses in information systems in France, China, Denmark and Portugal. He heads the research institute and the doctoral school at Unversidade Europeia where he is responsible for several European projects for undergraduate and executive education.

Panelist 3 – Martin Mocker

Joys and Pains of Interacting with Executive Audiences

This part of the panel will zoom in on how to interact with executive audiences. It is no secret that executives behave differently in class than MBA or undergraduate students. Common questions when facing executive audiences include:

- What do executives expect from an educator?
- How can I educate people who have more experience in IT than I do?
- Can I get executives to read case studies?
- How do I make use of the collective experience in the room?

The idea is to share common pitfalls when interacting with executive audiences, but also practices that help to engage executives. This topic should appeal to faculty members starting to move from undergraduate and MBA level teaching to executive education. However, designed as an exchange among faculty with experience in executive education, the topic should also be of interest to seasoned executive educators.

Among other topics, this part of the panel will focus on different pedagogical tools to activate executive audiences. These tools go beyond classic business cases and can involve flip classroom, debates, surveys, and other activities apt at engaging the students/executives at a reflective level.

· **Participation Statement:** I hereby confirm my commitment to attend the conference and serve on the panel if the panel is accepted.

· **Biography:** Martin Mocker is a Research Scientist at MIT, Sloan School of Management, Center for Information Systems Research. He is also professor of business administration and information systems at ESB Business School, Reutlingen University, Germany.

He has ten years of teaching experience – at the undergraduate, MBA and executive level – at institutions including Rotterdam School of Management at Erasmus University, Hult International Business School, MIT Sloan School of Management, University of Muenster, ESB Business School and Boston University. Most recently he has been faculty director for the executive education course “Revitalizing Your Digital Business Model” at MIT Sloan.

Martin’s research has been published e.g., in MIS Quarterly, European Journal of Information Systems and also at ICIS.

Panelist 4 –Walter Fernandez

Joys and Pains of providing relevant IS education to executives.

This part of the panel discusses issues related to providing relevant information systems (IS) education for MBA programs and executive programs. The key term here is relevant education. The main challenge addressed in this section is how to manage the joy and drive of teaching theories with the pain of constantly reflecting on the question “how can this be made relevant”. Through the discussion we plan to develop an understanding of relevance as a multifaceted phenomenon in which academic interests combine with personal and organizational interests.

In the Australian experience, the challenge has several elements. Australia has a growing demand for universities to produce a greater number of graduates with information systems skills, a demand that at the moment is unfulfilled by the local labor market. This demand on IS skills is posed to continue as the impact of government policies include areas such as open data access, cloud computing, online content, digital economy strategy, media reform and skilled migration, to name a few. Furthermore, by 2020 the government's Digital Economy Strategy aims to deliver significant IS and IT outcomes affecting government service delivery, households, business and non-for profit organizations, health and aged care, education, teleworking, environment and infrastructure and e-services to regional Australia.

Industry often sees relevant education through the optic of their pressing needs, as practical solution to their growing pains or as something that aligns with their strategy. Pressing needs from industry can be challenging for elite academic institutions, research focused universities often struggle to provide timely responses to industry's demands. Yet, industry demand for executive education is not just about developing expertise on specific technologies, it also goes to the core of what a successful executive will need to know in the future. Current discussions with CEOs on this topic indicate that the CEO of tomorrow will need to be product and service oriented, rather than the sales of finance experts of the past; these CEOs will understand their enabling technologies and also the impact of emerging technologies on their business. Therefore, our universities need to prepare executives attending MBAs and other master level programs to manage new ecosystems, in which technology is a key element of their operational and business success.

While it is clear from government and industry that academic institutions are required to produce IS-skilled executives in sufficient number and quality, defining how to achieve this aim is problematic.

This section of the panel will discuss and illustrate:

- The growing gap between the market need for IT/IS professionals and the number of graduates produced by our universities.
- The challenge of teaching a specific domain to an interdisciplinary cohort of experts and the challenge of other sectors of academic life, from medicine to management, accepting the need to teach IT and IS to their students.
- The challenge of engaging effectively with external stakeholders (e.g., Government agencies, CIOs and CEOs) and assessing both demands and the required capabilities to respond to these demands.

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· **Biography:** Walter Fernandez is a full Professor at the School of Information Systems, Technology and Management, Australian School of Business, the University of New South Wales and a past Director of the National Centre for Information Systems Research at the Australian National University. Walter moved into academe in 2003 after a career in the corporate sector, which provides a real-world perspective to his teaching and research. Over the last decade Prof. Fernandez has been a successful teacher of postgraduate education who is passionate about providing relevant learning opportunities to a wide variety of experienced students. He serves at several editorial boards of ranked journals and as a Director of Studies at the Australian Graduate School of Management. Walter's research focuses on managing major IT projects and programs and on implementing information and communication technologies for development.

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