The Literary MBA in SA - Too Good to be True?

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Consider the prestige associated with the Masters in Business Administration degree (MBA) – the hoops that prospective candidates leap through in the stringent selection process, the sheer volume of work that those selected must complete along the way, the fees spent on acquiring the treasured qualification, the gloss that a CV is imbued with at graduation, the prospects of leadership.

For those who treasure education, and particularly those who view literature as a vital means of expanding worldviews and building moral character, the question arises: what do MBA students read?

According to a January article in the Harvard Business Review, MBA students at Harvard are reading literary classics as part of their Leadership Development curriculum. In the “Moral Challenge” component, titles like Antigone by Sophocles and Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe will be found; “Moral Reasoning” requires A Man For All Seasons by Robert Bolt and The Sweet Hereafter by Russell Banks; and the “Moral Leadership” section calls for The Prince by Niccolo Machiavelli and The Secret Sharer by Joseph Conrad, amongst other impressive titles.

Author and senior lecturer of business administration Sandra J. Sucher (The Moral Leader) has had a long career as a practicing manager. She argues that bringing executives together to read and discuss literary works can be a potent leadership development tool.

“Through the novels, plays, short stories, and historical accounts students are brought much closer to life as it is really lived, certainly closer than in lecture learning and even closer than in a case discussion. That’s because the authors lay out for us the full context of a situation: the fast friendships, bitter enmities, strong ambitions, and confused goals that the characters must navigate.”

It’s happening at Harvard; but are South Africa’s MBAs bred to be similarly well-read?

Cynthia Schoeman, an external lecturer at Wits Business School, offers a different model to the one outlined by Sucher’s and Harvard’s reading lists. She is the designer of many leadership programmes where discussions about ethics form a central part of the course content.

In her view, the study of moral philosophers - Plato, Socrates and others - should ideally underpin practical workplace ethics. “I’d give my eye teeth to attend a course like the Harvard one,” she says. “The content they cover is hugely relevant and interesting.” But in her experience students faced with the realities of running South African businesses question the practical value of studying moral philosophy directly. “They need a course
offering functional solutions in a realm where there are often ‘right vs. right’ situations and shades of grey.

“Business people no longer have the luxury of exploring moral philosophy and interpreting it into their world. This is the luxury of education, as opposed to training. In the old days students went the route of the classic education before training in the specifics of what they wanted to,” she says.

“Let’s consider the time available to complete the Ethics in Governance course, which is offered for the first time this year as an elective, but is not yet a core course. Nine three-hour lectures, typically run over a period of four consecutive days, is quite insufficient” for an armful of great books.

Schoeman utilises other teaching techniques in the available lecture time to impart knowledge and empower people to make a difference to the ethical running of their companies.

“Students don’t read. Executives don’t read,” she says, even though she gives them a reading list that includes Defining Moments by Joseph Badaracco and How Good People Make Tough Choices by Rushmore Kidder. “You strive to engage them with the issues in the course and hope they’ll pursue the goals afterwards in terms of actions.”

The University of the Free State’s School of Management has a reading list online, which includes Mark Gevisser’s The Dream Deferred, Richard Branson’s Losing My Virginity and Rudy Giuliani’s Leadership. An interesting list, but more in the vein of Schoeman’s than Sucher’s.

Daniel Malan, a senior lecturer teaching business ethics and corporate governance at the University of Stellenbosch Business School agrees with his South African colleague’s main point: “There is just no time,” he says. He prescribes Manuel Velasquez’s Business Ethics: Concepts and Cases, which contains a chapter providing a basic introduction to some ethical and philosophical theories, but literature isn’t on the curriculum.

What about the world’s largest correspondence school? Anton Ferreira, who teaches corporate and business strategy at Unisa’s Graduate School of Business Leadership, is currently the academic head of the department.

“We don’t have anything remotely similar [to Harvard’s reading list] in the MBL or MBA programmes,” he said. “Our course in business ethics is a year-long core module for second year MBL students. The prescribed textbooks and articles look at similar things and refer to the classics, especially philosophical classics. Machiavelli, for example, is referred to in their strategy studies. Students don’t actually read the classics, though.”

“Unisa’s business ethics course looks at the moral side of things, and focuses on the organisation itself as well as emphasizing the need for a personal morality. We see our
organization as located in Africa, hence we look at models on how to apply business ethics in relation to transacting with other African countries.”

Professor Oliver Williams, author of *Responsible Corporate Citizenship and the Ideals of the U.N. Global Compact*, is a visiting professor from the *University of Notre Dame*, and has been jointly appointed at the UCT and Stellenbosch schools of business.

He has business ethics students look at the all-time classic of business literature, Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*. Written in 1776, it is an enquiry into the nature and causes states’ prosperity.

“Smith, it can be argued,” says Williams, “was the first economist-as-moral-philosopher. A lot of people understand that Adam Smith says that ‘greed is good’, that he promotes the value of self-interest in business. However, he also aims to help one understand how wealth is created. His point is that wealth lies not just in diamonds, or oil, but in human ingenuity, in creative minds.

“We study the theory of moral sentiments – what does it mean to be human? It means to be compassionate. Self-interest is not the same as selfishness, but requires moral maturity. Compassion is what differentiates us from the animal kingdom. As far as classics of literature goes, that book always gets into my courses,” said Williams.

“The real problem is that reading novels takes up a lot of time,” he continued, echoing a common theme. “I use selections from Dostoyevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov* to show human behaviour being restrained by an overarching philosophy or world view. We all need some overarching world view, some reason to get out of bed each morning, some answer to ‘What’s it all about?’”

Williams feels strongly that any MBA programme must offer students an understanding of ethical frameworks. “Just as they have to have a conceptual framework to adequately comprehend accountancy, finance and marketing, so they need something that creates and reinforces an overarching world view.”

In an ideal world, professors from near and far agree, MBA students would be garnering wisdom from literature to apply to real-world business situations. They’d be debating whether the silence of *A Man for All Season*’s Thomas More really denoted consent - and how that might apply to the craft of creating watertight contracts, for instance. But in South Africa, the priorities of learning constrain the scope of the curricula, and the dimension of business leadership that extends beyond the concrete terms of commerce is only haphazardly explored. On that note, those enrolled for the degree might wish to bear the words of American tycoon *Henry Kravis* in mind:

“If you don’t have integrity, you have nothing. You can’t buy it. You can have all the money in the world, but if you are not a moral and ethical person, you really have nothing.”
The Brothers Karamazov in a nutshell!