



## **An endeavor to render an impressionistic image of Enlightening Management Education in Multi- perspective, Systems-based Research**

JOSEPH KIM-KEUNG HO  
Independent Trainer  
Hong Kong, China

### **Abstract:**

*The concept of Enlightening Management Education (EME) in Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Research, first proposed in the mid-90s, has been underdeveloped. This paper makes an exploratory discussion on EME and offers an impressionistic image of EME. It elaborates on the 3 main modes of EME and draws out the implications of EME on management education. By doing so, the paper contributes to the theoretical development of MPSB and informs Management Education practices by Management Educators as well as management students who aspire to be scholar-practitioners via MPSB Research or similar research activities with Systems Thinking.*

**Key words:** Enlightening Management Education, Management Education, Multi-perspective Systems-based Research, Critical Systems Thinking.

### **Introduction**

As a freelance trainer in management education, this writer is aware that there are major concerns facing management students in the management field. [In this paper, management students mainly refer to adults who study management subjects via formal education programmes or in an informal way, such as self-study.] These concerns are mainly

related to the evaluation of which management education routes to take. From the management students' standpoint, these routes can range from an enrollment with a formal MBA programme to management education based on self study. Actual evaluation process of each student is different due to personal as well as contextual factors. At the same time, the management education sector is in a state of turmoil.

This writer identifies 5 main concerns in management education for further discussion:

**Concern 1 is related to commercialization of management education:** by treating management students as consumers, university business schools are having more students behaving as picky consumers; more and more students try to beat the education systems so as to gain better academic results with unethical means. The writer had worked for an education centre which was popular among part-time students because of very loose examination invigilation.

**Concern 2 is related to the impacts of Information Technology on the business models of business schools:** contemporary Internet environment presents a more globalized and virtual environment that requires traditional university business schools to review and re-engineer their brick-and-mortar business models, see for example “Teaching and Technology: E-ducation” (*The Economist*, June 29, 2-13, p. 11).

**Concern 3 is related to management students' financial burden for taking formal management education programmes:** the traditional business model of university business schools are too costly to run, which, in turn, makes university school fees perceived to be increasingly too expensive to most students. For example, Damast (2011) reports that “about 50 percent of mba.com registrants in 2010 said they feared the degree would be too expensive, while another 48 percent worried about incurring financial debt and student loans.”

**Concern 4 is related to the need for education programme innovation:** fast evolving and sophisticated business environment generates corporate demands for management talents with diverse management competences. At the same time, managers at different stages of their career demand different formal education programmes. This puts pressure on business schools to innovate and update their education programme design more frequently, see, for example, TopMBA.com (2011).

**Concern 5 is on the fulfillment of social role and social responsibility of business schools:** business schools have been complained to be “currently pre-occupied with promoting and teaching optimization, efficiency and effectiveness, maximization and profitability” while paying too little attention on “promoting the skills of analysis and critical thinking or the mastery of theories, abstract conception or a wider appreciation of moral principles” (Ortenblad et al. 2013). Other than that, ethical values taught in business schools in one part of the world could conflict with ethical values in another part of the world, see Exhibit 1 for an example.

**Exhibit 1: An example on conflicts of value in education systems and its impacts on graduates’ employability**

*(Source: “Returning students: Plight of the sea turtles” The Economist, July 6, 2013, pp. 32-33)*

“Mr Li seems the perfect example of a sea turtle...[*writer’s note on sea turtle: those overseas prominent university graduates who subsequently return to Mainland China*], long applauded in China for bringing back advanced skills. In the past such folk reliably reaped handsome premiums in the local job market, but no longer.... Several studies show that sea turtles on average must now wait longer to find a less senior post at a smaller salary premium over local hires. ...

..A senior executive at Tencent, a Chinese social-media giant, says, he still poaches sea turtles from foreign firms, but finds that they have difficulty managing local engineers. A European investment banker says that turtles often cling to quaint Western notions like transparency, meritocracy and ethics, which puts them at a disadvantage in China’s hyper-Darwinian economy, where locals are more willing to do whatever the boss or client wants...”

It is, thus, useful for both university business schools and management students to reflect on contemporary management education practices so as to decide what should be offered (by business schools) and what should be taken up (by management students). This paper discusses the notion of Enlightening Management Education (EME), which is an under-developed one in MPSB Research. It then examines the implications of EME in respect to the 5 management education concerns identified above.

### **The notion of Enlightening Management Education in Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Research**

The notion of Enlightening Management Education (EME) is one of the ingredient concepts in Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Research. In order to further explore the topic of EME with the readers together, it is useful to briefly introduce the subject of MPSB Research of Ho (1995; 1996a; 1996b) to the readers. Briefly, there are academics and practitioners who are interested in Systems Thinking. These people make up the Systems Community. Over the years, the Systems community works on various intellectual initiatives as well debates on different intellectual themes in Systems Thinking. This makes up the systems movement. This movement entails a number of development cycles. Flood and

Carson (1988) identifies 4 such development cycles (DC), as follows:

**DC 1:** “Systems thinking, when formalized, leads to systems theory, which promotes systems thinking”

**DC 2:** “Systems thinking, when formalized, leads to system theory, which helps to explain structure and behavior in other disciplines, which promotes systems thinking”

**DC 3:** “Systems thinking, when used in real-world application, helps to promote management effectiveness in other disciplines, which promotes systems thinking”

**DC 4:** “Systems thinking, when used in real-world application, improves the effectiveness of problem management, which promotes systems thinking”

In the mid-90s, Ho launched a systems-based research initiative, called Multi-perspective, Systems-based (MPSB) Research, which reviewed various management disciplines, e.g. management accounting and logistics management, based on Critical Systems Thinking (CST); such research effort provides a path to make theoretical advancement in Systems Thinking and falls into DC 2 as described in Flood and Carson (1988). Two main academic papers captured the main ideas of MPSB Research, namely, Ho (1995) and Ho (1996a). There are 12 key notions underlying MPSB Research. Based on Ho (1996a), they are introduced in Table 1.

**Table 1: Key MPSB concepts in MPSB Research**

Key MPSB concepts	Descriptions (re: Ho, 1996a)
1. MPSB Research	A research programme that makes use of Critical Systems Thinking to review management disciplines with a view to developing knowledge structures of management disciplines as a path to make theoretical advancements in Systems Thinking.
2. MPSB frameworks	Knowledge structures of management disciplines that are generated as a result of the review of management disciplines based on Critical Systems Thinking; these

	structures are primarily expressed in the form of diagrams.
3. Perspective	The theoretical orientation of either a problem-solver or a methodology. It could be considered as a theoretical paradigm. In MPSB Research, 3 main perspectives are identified, i.e. the unitary (hard systems) perspective, the pluralist (soft systems) perspective, and critical (emancipatory systems) perspective.
4. A perspective switch	The switching of perspective by the problem-solver from one moment of reflection based on one perspective (e.g. unitary) to another moment based on another perspective (e.g. pluralist).
5. A migration of perspective	The modification or a shift in perspective of a methodology (e.g. migration of Systems Dynamics based on Hard Systems Thinking to Soft Systems Thinking), as reflected in the loosening of some of the original components of the methodology concerned.
6. Perspective anchoring	The intellectual effort to explicitly relate a methodology to a particular perspective so that it explicitly respects the rationality of such a perspective.
7. An MPSB rich picture building exercise	An exploratory exercise conducted on a problem-context based on multiple images of organization that are affiliated with different perspectives. It is similar to the Stream of Cultural Analysis in the Soft Systems Methodology of Checkland and Scholes (1990). Rich picture building is a problem-situation expression technique explained in the Soft Systems Methodology of Checkland.
8. An MPSB knowledge compiler	A set of techniques based on Critical Systems Thinking used to examine a management discipline at either an individual concept level or the whole discipline level, resulting in the construction or enhancement of MPSB frameworks that make the management disciplines coherent and understandable from the Critical Systems perspective.
9. The in-built tension of pluralism	The feeling of tension arising from the difficulties in considering and respecting

	fundamentally different perspectives in an intellectual exercise (e.g. a problem-solving endeavor or a theory-developing exercise) that utilizes the MPSB cognitive filters.
10. MPSB cognitive filter for management	A set of inter-related MPSB concepts that are used by managers to make sense of the various management approaches and management viewpoints that they encounter from time to time in the world of management practices.
11. Enlightening management education	Management education that endorses Critical Systems and makes use of MPSB Research as a main method of management learning.
12. Key MPSB concepts	The concepts that have been identified as highly relevant for the conduct of MPSB Research.

For further details of MPSB research, readers are referred to Ho (1995) and (1996a); as to Systems Thinking in Management, including Critical Systems Thinking (CST), Jackson (1991), Jackson (2000), Jackson (2003) and Flood and Jackson (1991) are useful readings. Briefly, CST has 5 commitments based on Jackson (1991), namely:

- (1) critical awareness,
- (2) social awareness,
- (3) pluralism at the methodological level,
- (4) pluralism at the theoretical level, and
- (5) emancipation.

Based on CST, Flood and Jackson developed a creative problem-solving methodology called Total Systems Intervention (TSI) (Flood and Jackson 1991); subsequently, Flood (1995) offered another version of TSI. The development process of CST and TSI is full of heated intellectual debates, which might as well be considered intellectually stimulating. For example there has been much debate on the topic of pluralism. In this regard, Ho (1996a) distinguishes 3 types of pluralism, namely,

normative pluralism, comprehensive pluralism and pragmatic pluralism. As an originator of CST, Jackson (2003) also offers an account of how CST has evolved in response to various debating issues in the systems community. Readers who are interested in CST and TSI are referred to the works of these writers to gain a deeper knowledge on CST.

When the 5 CST commitments are upheld in MPSB Research, this implies research efforts to investigate:

- (i) the practical as well theoretical strengths and weaknesses of management and systems theories in management,
- (ii) the social impacts of management theories practices,
- (iii) the knowhow on multiple perspectives adoption in management research works, and
- (iv) the value of management theories as knowledge for weak stakeholders in coercive contexts to create an environment that supports human development; for Gregory (1993), such knowledge enables cognitive emancipation.

As to EME, it is a way of learning management disciplines by management students, with MPSB Research as a main subject of study. Being enlightening, EME intends to offer intellectual insights and promotes personal development. For Ackoff (1981), development is about pursuit of omnicompetence, which means “an unlimited ability to satisfy one’s desires and those of others”. And omnicompetence also “implies self-control” (Ackoff 1981, 37). EME shares with Critical Management Education (CME) thinking that “the idea of individual agency [this writer’s note: this includes favoured management theories]... as being restricted and compromised by social structures and processes that will be present in the students’ day-to-day experiences of their organization. Their aim [this writer’s note: that is Critical Management Educators’ aim] is to bring the student-managers into a state whereby they can

identify oppressive structures and processes” (Perriton and Reynolds 2004).

EME endorses the 5 CST commitment, teaches MPSB Research, and encourages management students to take up MPSB Research as a means for their own management development. EME is not directly about using CST in educational systems design, which is a topic discussed in Gregory (1993). EME is for management students who aspire to become humanistic and critical scholar-practitioners.

EME can be guided, e.g. in a formal management education programme, or with personal coaching; the coach can be a human being or an intelligent education software application]; in this paper, these two EME modes are called *guided EME*. EME can also be in self-study mode, thus called *self-study EME*. To express these ideas more precisely:

- a. EME = Management education + MPSB Research as a main subject of study
- b. EME modes = self-study EME + guided EME
- c. Guided EME modes = formal EME programmes + guided EME with personal coaching
- d. Personal coaching = coaching (including tutoring) provided by human beings and/or intelligent education software applications

### **An exploration on formal EME programmes**

For formal EME programmes, at present, there is no university which offers a Business Administration (BA) degree programme nor a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree programme that teaches MPSB Research. This is as expected given that MPSB Research is a little known research theme in the academic community. As this writer is aware of, the MBA degree programme offered by the University of Hull in UK teaches Critical Systems Thinking (CST). And CST is a prominent school of Systems Thinking in the Systems

community. Nevertheless, the literature arising from DC 2 (as identified by Flood and Carson 1988) is quite a lot and this DC 2 literature has been included as readings in MBA degree programmes.

An attempt is now made on how to develop a formal EME programme. For this purpose, this writer proposes a simple framework based on a stool analogy to examine MBA programmes. It should be stated that MBA programmes are used as a handy example for discussion purpose here. Other formal Management Education programmes such as M.A. or M.Sc. in Management can also be considered. It should also be pointed out that MBA programmes from different universities use their own conceptual frameworks to organize their programme structures. They do not use the stool framework as this writer does here. This simple analysis framework, as a stool in form, has 4 parts, namely, a seat (1 part) with 3 supportive legs (3 parts). Specifically,

**Seat:** This represents management practices and the performance outcomes of management practices; examples are (a) contribution to total systems improvement, and (b) contribution to personal management performance improvement; the emphasis here is the application of management knowledge learned in the formal Degree programmes in the world of management practices, which leads to certain performance outcomes. Another outcome is the production of new academic ideas arising from management practices when it is guided by management research methods.

**First leg:** This represents personal development and personal strengths; examples are (a) contribution to personal ability to learn how to learn, (b) contribution to personal employability, and (c) contribution to whole-person development. Subjects such as career development and employment counseling are relevant here.

**Second leg:** This represents mastery of management theories; the main example is contribution to personal intellectual capability to employ management theories in real-world management practices.

**Third leg:** This represents mastery of Research skills and problem-solving skills; the main example is contribution to personal capability to conduct theory-driven analysis on real-world problems with management research skills so as to cope with these problems effectively. Subjects such as Research Methods and Management Consulting are relevant here. If we take some MBA programme structures and map them into this stool framework, we come up with Table 2.

**Table 2: Examples of MBA programmes as mapped into the Stool education framework**

<b><i>MBA programme</i></b>	<b><i>Seat (Management practices and their performance outcomes)</i></b>	<b><i>First leg (Personal development)</i></b>	<b><i>Second leg (Mastery of management theories)</i></b>	<b><i>Third leg (Mastery of Research skills and problem-solving skills)</i></b>
MBA from the University of Sunderland, UK.	Dissertation	Organisational visits and speakers programmes to cultivate students' interest in self-development	Financial Management and Control; Managing and Leading People; Operations Management; International Business Environment; Marketing Management; Global Corporate Strategy; Information Management; Enterprise and Entrepreneurship (optional subject)	Research methods for Dissertation

Joseph Kim-Keung Ho– *An endeavor to render an impressionistic image of Enlightening Management Education in Multi-perspective, Systems-based Research*

MBA from the University of Hull, UK	Dissertation	Personal and Professional development	Managing in organizations; Human resource management; Marketing; Operations management; Accounting and finance for managers; Strategic management	Research methods; Managing holistically
Executive MBA of Henley Management College	Dissertation	Personal development is integrated throughout the programme	Managing people and Performance; Managing Projects, Systems and Processes; Managing Financial Resources; Strategy and International Business; Corporate Finance and Governance; Strategic Marketing	Business research methods
A theoretical MBA programme based on EME (i.e. standard MBA modules, plus additional modules identified in this row)	Dissertation based on MPSB Research			MPSB Research concepts (an additional module); CST

Table 2 portrays a formal MBA programme based on EME that mainly introduces MPSB Research as an additional subject in the mainstream MBA programme structure. Since the modification of programme structure in this case is quite

mild, it should be feasible from the University regulation compliance perspective. It is also not a bad idea for an MBA programme to take up a more critical stance of management education, as a formal MBA based on EME does; such an MBA programme can be a good educational product to offer in the highly commercialized business education marketplace because it has unique value proposition. As to a Master Degree programme majoring in CST/EME, instead of an MBA with EME, (e.g. an MA in Management degree (major in CST).) such a Degree programme can be targeted at a more focused market segment that is much smaller in size than that of the mainstream MBA programmes.

Using the examples of evaluation criteria from the 4 main parts of the stool framework of management education, the writer produces Table 3 which portrays the differences of priorities of 3 types of management programmes as a caricature exercise.

**Table 3: A comparison between corporate management development programmes, mainstream MBA programmes and a formal EME programme**

Priority of objectives	<i>Corporate management development programmes</i>	<i>Mainstream MBA programmes</i>	<i>A formal EME programme</i>
1	Contribute to total systems improvement	Contribute to personal employability	Contribute to personal intellectual capability, especially in CST
2	Contribute to personal management performance improvement	Contribute to personal management performance improvement	Contribute to theoretical development of Systems Thinking in Management
3	Contribute to personal employability	Contribute to total systems improvement	Contribute to whole-person development
4	Contribute to whole-person development	Contribute to personal intellectual	Contribute to personal

		capability	employability
5	Contribute to personal intellectual capability	Contribute to whole-person development	Contribute to total systems improvement

Table 3, as a stereotyping exercise, stresses the viewpoint that the participants of the various management education and development programmes have fundamental different objectives and worldviews. Companies sponsor corporate management development programmes for their employees because they have specific corporate goals in mind; management students who spend a substantial amount of school fee for their own formal management education must be more concerned about their own employability. A strong instrumental focus of formal management programmes is also reinforced by a pervasive ‘educational gospel’ adopted by governments in many countries, which is: ‘the view that the essential role of adult learning (and education more generally) is to generate the high levels of skills deemed necessary for economic competitiveness and growth in the globalised economy’ (Rees 2013). This view must be quite appealing to a government and its people especially when its economy is suffering from a high unemployment rate.

The real-world market situation on formal management education programmes is a bit more complicated than the simplified view described here: for example, while a cursory glance at some of the promotional brochures of the business schools in Hong Kong gives readers the impression that the main value propositions of the degree programmes from business schools are (a) improved employability, (b) enjoyable learning environment with pretty and handsome classmates, (c) improved social status, and (d) high success rate of graduation within a short period of time, etc., see the writer’s Facebook photo album for samples of these promotion brochures (re: [https://www.facebook.com/#!/josephho33/media\\_set?set=a.10151750892847090.1073741834.713727089&type=3](https://www.facebook.com/#!/josephho33/media_set?set=a.10151750892847090.1073741834.713727089&type=3)), some brochures

stress more on *developing students' potential* while others emphasize *obtaining recognized academic qualifications fast*.

The implications of EME can now be examined further by relating to the 5 management education concerns identified in the introductory section of this paper:

**Concern 1 is related to commercialization of management education:** EME is not compatible with the management education commercialization orientation. Nevertheless, limited incorporation MPSB Research content in formal management education programmes remains attractive in a highly commercialized setting because such a programme can be perceived as offering a unique value proposition.

**Concern 2 is related to the impacts of Information Technology on the business models of business schools:** EME will be increasingly delivered via the e-learning platform, and within the digital social media ecosystem. Ho (2013a and 2013b) further elaborates on this topic. Any e-business process re-engineering initiatives taken up by business schools have to respond to this trend.

**Concern 3 is related to management students' financial burden for taking formal management education programmes:** This could prompt students to rely less on formal management education programmes for EME, unless the school fees are further reduced as a result of e-business process re-engineering initiatives taken up by business schools.

**Concern 4 is related to the need for education programme innovation:** The need for education programme innovation tends to promote education programmes diversity; as a result, some formal management education programmes will teach EME, or academic readings with very similar research themes, e.g. on CST, to make their programmes more differentiated.

**Concern 5 is on the fulfillment of social role and social responsibility of business schools:** When business schools pay more attention to their social roles and social responsibility, they will be more ready to run formal management education programmes that are more intellectual and critical; in this case, they will become more willing to teach EME and its closely related subject of CST in their programmes.

### **A review on the 3 modes of Enlightening Management Education**

Having examined the formal EME programme route at some length, this writer moves on to discuss more on the other forms of EME, namely guided EME with personal coaching and self-study EME. Drawing on the findings in self-regulated learning research (e.g. Banyard, Underwood and Twiner 2006), it is likely that *self-study EME* is more suitable for academically talented and skilled learners while *guided EME*, either with personal coaching or with a formal education programme, is more appropriate for management students and learners who are intellectually much less competent and who are relatively weak in self-control. As some of the writer's students maintain, they need external pressures to force them to study.

Management educators can be involved in *guided EME* with management students on an ad hoc or informal basis; these educators can provide e-learning support to management students via the Internet, see Ho (2013a; 2013b) for further discussion on guided EME based on personal e-learning support. Management educators can also be involved in teaching for a formal management education programme with subjects that cover MPSB Research. After all, management

educators do have some academic freedom in their teaching activities.

Table 4 makes an attempt to summarize the main characteristics of the 3 modes of EME so as to reveal more on the nature of these 3 modes of EME, especially as the guided EME with personal coaching and self-study EME have not been much discussed up to now in this paper.

**Table 4: A summary of the main characteristics of the 3 modes of EME**

	<i>Formal EME programmes</i>	<i>Guide EME with personal coaching</i>	<i>Self-study EME</i>
A root definition example	An MBA-based education programme system run by a university business school that introduces MPSB Research to business students as part of a competitive programme offer to a highly commercialized business education market.	A management learning system, initiated by a management learner, which makes use of ad hoc personal coaching, to carry out MPSB Research to improve competence in management practices as well as to contribute to the theoretical advancement in Systems Thinking at the same time.	A life-long management learning system, carried out by an individual manager based on self study effort, to conduct MPSB Research as a means toward developing himself/herself so as to become a competent scholar-practitioner in management practices.
Time frame	1 to 2 years	Ad hoc	Life-long
Expenditure incurred by management students	High	Medium	Very low
Top priority in the EME initiative	Employability for students; high enrolment of students to the Degree programmes for the business school	Improved performance in management practices and accelerated gain in knowledge in MPSB Research.	A life-long journey to become a scholar-practitioner via MPSB Research

Formality of the learning process	Formal	Much less formal	Informal
Passiveness of the learning process <sup>1</sup>	Mainly passive	Often not passive	Not passive
Reliance on the teaching process <sup>2</sup>	Heavy reliance (Teacher-directed learning)	Mild reliance (Learner-directed learning)	No reliance (Learner-directed learning)
Student learning performance evaluation	Evaluation made by subject teachers	Evaluation provided by personal coaches	Self evaluation made by management students

Table 4 compares the 3 modes of EME in terms of a number of major characteristics of them. An example of root definition (i.e. a relevant idea) is provided for each EME mode to illustrate what a human activity system (i.e. a purposeful human activity) of each mode can look like. The terms of root definition and human activity system come from the Soft Systems Methodology of Checkland (see Checkland and Scholes 1990).

As summarized in Tables 3 and 4, it is argued by the writer that EME cannot be seriously done in corporate management development initiatives nor in the mainstream MBA programmes as their priority of objectives are different from the fundamental aspiration of EME: to develop critical scholar-practitioners via MPSB Research and to promote emancipatory management practices - effective EME has to be a life-long and engaging learning process in the world of management practices. Ultimately, more reliance has to be placed on *guided EME* with personal coaching and *self-study EME*. Other than that, as a formal programme, EME can also

<sup>1</sup> A learning process is passive when an idea learned in one context need to be translated into other contexts (Chisholm et al. 2009).

<sup>2</sup> The teaching process equals: “establishing teaching/ learning goals, tailoring materials for students, delivering the materials in a manner appropriate to content, and understanding how students interpreted the content and process” (Chisholm et al. 2009).

be covered in Degree programmes in the Educational field as well as in Degree programmes with major in Critical Systems Thinking in Management.

## Conclusions

Contemporary management education has been much reviewed by management educators in response to the changing business and social environments. At the same time, contemporary systems thinking, e.g. in CST, has also been applied in the field of management education. This paper is the first one to specifically examine the notion of EME in MPSB Research since it was launched in the mid-90s. This paper amounts to an endeavor to render an impressionistic image of EME. It serves as an invitation to other researchers in the Systems Thinking field and Management Education field to participate in discussion on this topic. At the same time, the topic of EME should also be expanded by sweeping in other related topics such as enlightening management learning, enlightening coaching, enlightening work-based learning and enlightening management development. There is no reason why the dated concept of EME should not be replaced with a broader concept in Management Development in MPSB Research.

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