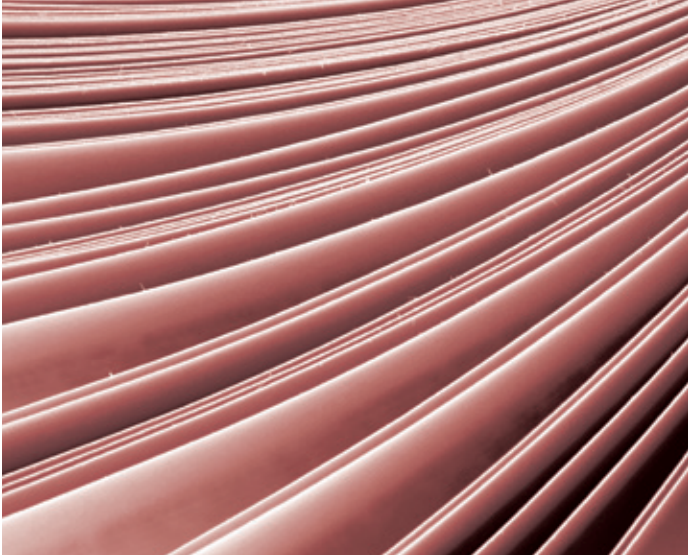




THE BUSINESS EDUCATION JAM



With over 51 years' experience in academia, **Howard Thomas** has continually researched, written and taught on the subject of management. Here, he discusses his involvement in the innovative Business Education Jam, presented by Boston University Questrom School of Business, which encourages a free-flowing stream of ideas between contributors from a range of backgrounds and cultures

Last year you were involved in the Business Education Jam, which was launched by Boston University Questrom School of Business in collaboration with IBM and premier corporate sponsors. Could you detail the core aims of this unique venture?

The Jam had two main objectives: to bridge the gap between classroom and career by uniting voices from both industry and academia, and to attract an audience that was unlike the usual fare. The Jam was inspired by the impromptu, collaborative nature of the New Orleans music scene, where different musicians come together and work out what they are going to do as they are doing it. The idea for the event came from the IBM business analytics division who use this notion of a 'jam' as a kind of crowdsourcing activity. In other words, it uses technology to broaden its audience and to discuss what is going on in a particular area. The Jam used this philosophy and sought to reimagine and investigate the future of management education.

What role did you play in the proceedings?

Ken Freeman, Allen Questrom Professor and Dean at Boston University Questrom School of Business (formerly the School of Management), first approached me about the Jam. Last year the Questrom School of Business turned 100, celebrating its history rooted in innovation and risk-taking. The Jam would continue this tradition by amplifying the need to reinvent business education, ensuring that Questrom, and all business schools, thrive for the next 100 years. Ken, who was aware of my work, asked me if I would be interested in helping him with the event and I jumped at the chance. I knew he was as keen as I was to look at where management education could go, and the Jam offered a unique platform to explore many key issues.

As one of the Jam hosts, I was involved in framing the debate talking points. My topic was 21st Century management competencies and together with my wife, Lynne, with whom I have been writing on the subject for a number of years, I engaged in a 60-hour continual email debate going across the world. Over the three days of the Jam we led 20 hours of discussions based on a carefully selected group of trigger questions. Using the contributions from the first day of the proceedings, we sat with a team from IBM, ran some basic analyses of the responses, and noticed interesting themes which we then fed into the second and third days.

How does your wife's academic specialism complement your own?

One thing that is conventionally taught in business schools is analytical intelligence. If you look at any business school curriculum you'll find plenty of analysis in there, but both my wife and myself argue that there is no meaning without context. Every country, community and culture is different.

My wife's training is in sociology and psychotherapy, while I'm a mathematician and statistician, so we couldn't be two poles further apart. I trained in conventional analytical intelligence, but my wife is very good at emotional intelligence. Through our academic partnership, which was not a

conscious decision, she has offered me great understanding I would not have otherwise seen.

Why do you think the crowdsourcing method was so effective in achieving the Jam's aims?

What I would stress is that the Jam's success relied on the co-called 'wisdom of crowds'. The event was important because people who would not have necessarily offered an opinion on management were encouraged to come forward. Through the dynamic online conversations, we were able to tease out people from a broad range of countries, cultures and emerging markets. The audience, made up from 6,000 sign-up participants collated by the team at Boston University, were not limited to North America or academic staff. Over the three days, 10-15 per cent of the responses were from students, and we saw participants enter the debate from all over the world.

At the moment I'm conducting a research project on management education in Africa, which will ultimately lead to a book, and the experience was a natural extension of this. The Jam really reinforced this project – it has been extremely eye opening and truly insightful.

Did you unearth any surprising findings during the debate?

The findings from the Jam were recently published in a briefing report, 'Reimagining Business Education, A World of Ideas', available at www.bu.edu/jam. A number of areas are highlighted: enhancing value for students and business, producing relevant research, embracing technology, supporting millennials, collaborating with industry, fostering ethics, developing next-generation entrepreneurs and revamping rankings.

One really interesting phenomenon that happened – which absolutely followed the notion of the musical jam – was that people were enticed into the debate who I had never heard of before, and they offered some very interesting views. We had to work harder to attract contributions to the Jam from people in emerging countries such as in South and Central America, parts of Asia and untapped areas of management education in Africa, but it did encourage wider debate and to that end it was very successful.

What types of conversations stood out for you?

Three very intriguing themes emerged from the debate: student participation in the learning process, the importance of entrepreneurship and what I call 'responsible leadership.'

Jam participants agreed that the millennial generation will change education and industry. What we found was a desire from students to be more involved in the instructional process. By allowing students to become equal partners in the education process, the face-to-face part of educational instruction will become much more rewarding. Student-centred learning and participant-centred learning have great potential to be mutually rewarding for both staff and

students. Deeper involvement from students will also help industry better understand what motivates this innovative generation, and more effectively leverage these insights in the workplace.

The next thing that absolutely stood out was the notion that entrepreneurship is completely here to stay. It doesn't matter which country you look at; the growth of small business and new enterprises is essential.

The third area, responsible leadership, is the combined notion of ethics, corporate responsibility and sustainability. The students bring their lens to this debate and talked about responsible business a lot. This was a topic in which students were particularly engaged. It does not just mean business, which is simply about capitalism, but more broadly about the sustainability of what we do. I think sustainability is an extremely interesting issue, and one that has to be in the corporate and management psyche.

What can be done in order for business schools, or indeed management education, to remain relevant and viable?

Well that's a very interesting question. I think there are several points that are tremendously important. The skills we need to develop are not just skills of analytic intelligence, which we probably overplay in business schools, but also those of emotional intelligence. We have redressed the balance in recent years, and I believe management schools have to go back to the general principles. We teach mathematical statistics, accountancy and so on, but are we actually teaching students the other two skills: criticism and synthesis?

Criticism requires students to understand a much broader set of perspectives about a problem, while synthesis is a skill of integrated thinking. I'm a great believer in a liberal arts method of education for nurturing these abilities. In the future, we cannot just teach people the functional

areas of business, we have to be able to get them to think critically. This means they must understand the methods of critical thinking, not just philosophical methods, but problem solving and problem framing. It is wrong for a student to walk out of a finance course and think every problem is a financial problem, because it isn't.

The ability to integrate and think across perspectives and come to a conclusion is as important as passing exams. This comes full circle to what the students were saying in the Jam: "Make learning more participative, and make us learn from each other as much as we learn from you".

Are you able to reveal any future plans for the Jam?

The Business Education Jam was the first event of its kind to unite people from around the world to spark collaboration and debate around the future of business education. Our goal was to bring out as many people from different cultures and backgrounds as possible. As we move forward, it is important to have even more response from students and emerging countries. I will be joining the Questrom School of Business as the inaugural Ahmass Fakahany Visiting Professor later this summer to help the School strengthen and advance these efforts around the world.

I think that we gained a great deal and I know people were truly engaged in this debate. The Jam briefing report summarizes these viewpoints and provides insight for how to move forward (available for download at www.bu.edu/jam). Other efforts include hosting a conference to review Jam findings and identify next steps in bridging the interests of academia and industry, launching webinars in collaboration with the *Financial Times*, and conducting additional events with broader global participation in 2016.



Howard Thomas

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

Currently undertaking a sabbatical from his position as Dean of Singapore Management University, Howard Thomas is undertaking a research project on management education in Africa, in an effort to foster Western understanding of business in this vast and diverse continent:

"At this point of my life, if I write books and there's something insightful in them, then I will encourage debate in management education. Africa is certainly an area that merits further attention.

"Of course, in this region there is not just the problem of generating business schools, there are much broader problems such as infrastructure development and geopolitical stability. There is also the need to develop high quality human capital through, for example, improved K12 education.

"It is absolutely crucial that human and demographic aspects are taken into consideration when looking at management in different parts of the world. If you don't understand these people and you go in and plant a model based on Western culture into non-Western cultures, then you're in danger of doing completely the wrong thing."