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The MBA education paradox: Teaching AI and a touch of Rothko

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Abstract

As the apparent unstoppable tide of artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes the global business landscape, a key future challenge arises: are our MBA programs truly up to the task of preparing the workforce for the seismic shift AI introduces? Are the limitations of siloed MBA curricula neglecting the profound ethical dimensions of AI and the sense of "radical amazement" that should permeate our engagement with transformative technologies?

The study of AI and the experience of engaging with the artwork, for example, of Mark Rothko, suggest that a more holistic, philosophically-informed approach is necessary. For business leaders, the reconsideration of AI education is not a luxury, but a necessity. In a world where the pace of technological change is rapidly outstripping our ability to comprehend its implications, it is those who can think deeply, critically, and creatively about AI who will be best positioned to manage disruptive technologies and socio-economic transformation.

Keywords: MBA Education, Artificial Intelligence, Radical Amazement

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Introduction

A growing chorus of business leaders in Europe and North America are expressing concern about the workforce's preparedness for the challenges and opportunities presented by artificial intelligence. The issue is not one of analytical skills or work ethic, but of perspective and sensibility.

Central to this critique is a questioning of the effectiveness of business school education. Reports from leading institutions such as the MIT Sloan Management Review¹, Stanford Institute for Human-Centered AI², Harvard Business School³, and the Wharton School⁴ highlight the prevalence of AI skills gaps and the imperative for business schools to prepare business leaders to grasp the potential of AI as well as its limitations. These findings underscore the necessity of a thorough reevaluation of MBA curricula to ensure that graduates are equipped with the knowledge, skills, and sensibilities required to navigate the interdisciplinary complexities of an AI-driven world.

The 2024 ESCP Impact Paper theme, "Key Future Challenges in Turbulent Times" - which seems both a beacon and a puzzle - is an invitation to delve beyond surface-level discussions of the future, and instead consider how a normative MBA course can challenge itself - particularly as AI disrupts conventional business constructs. For example do MBA curricula neglect an experiential immediacy that one might encounter when immersing oneself in a room filled with the enigmatic and profound works of Mark Rothko? By engaging with the uncertainty, the depth, and the existential questions evoked by both AI and Rothko's art, we can begin to chart a course toward a more holistic, philosophically-informed approach to business education in the AI era.

The limitations of siloed curricula

Traditionally, MBA programs have been organized around functional silos including, for example, corporate finance, accounting, marketing, operations and supply chain management, and business strategy. This compartmentalized approach was well suited for economies dominated by industrial companies, where physical assets were deployed to manufacture tangible goods, with a primary focus on optimizing the efficiency of labor and capital. However, the advent of digitalization has fundamentally challenged these established practices. We now witness an ecosystem of companies that thrive on digital platforms, exploit zero marginal cost dynamics, and harness the power of network effects. In this radically transformed landscape, digital assets can be leveraged indefinitely across borderless markets, demanding a comprehensive reassessment of the way we teach and learn about business.

Consider MBA students who enroll in a course titled "Harnessing AI for Breakthrough Innovation and Strategic Impact", such as offered at Stanford Business School, preparing students to be "leaders for AI-driven transformation." This course appropriately delves into the intricacies of algorithms and data analysis - offered as a "non-technical demystification".

But imagine a different scenario where students find themselves immersed in the study of ethics, the socio-economic impact of AI, and the very nature of intelligence itself. While this approach may initially seem outside convention, it addresses what is generally absent in MBA curricula: a profound questioning about the role and responsibility of business education in the face of the AI revolution. As educators, should we confine ourselves to

imparting technical skills, or are we called to engage students in deeper, more philosophical inquiries that challenge them to question the far-reaching implications of AI for business, society, and the human condition?

A recent study of higher education literature by Margaraet Bearman, Juliana Ryan and Rola Ajjawi, examined the discursive constructions underpinning the teaching of AI, citing a dearth of “critical conversations and investigations about AI that grapple with the social and ethical in concert with the technological”.⁵ Are we doing students a disservice by making absent what deserves primacy ?

Engaging with AI's ethical dimensions

Drawing upon the ethical framework of Immanuel Kant, we are compelled to consider whether our teaching positions AI as a means to serve the greater good of humanity or reduce human beings to mere sources of data for analytics and value extraction. This line of inquiry inevitably leads us to confront the ethical implications of AI, introducing the concept of categorical imperatives - unconditional moral obligations that we must uphold regardless of the consequences.⁶ By engaging with these ethical considerations, we begin to appreciate the complexity and the gravity of the challenges posed by AI, and the necessity of approaching this technology with a deep sense of moral responsibility.

Defining what is necessary for MBA AI study is an inherently complex endeavor, as it encompasses a vast array of research areas and applications that extend far beyond the traditional boundaries of computer science. Terms like "General Artificial Intelligence", "multi-modal chatbots", "Agentive AI", "Surveillance Capitalism", and "Digital Ethics" hint at the breadth and depth of the field, as well as the sense of unease that often accompanies its study. To truly comprehend the implications of AI for business and society, we must be willing to venture beyond the confines of narrow technical expertise and engage the philosophical, psychological, and sociological dimensions of this transformative technology.

Radical amazement and the Dartmouth Conference

The 1956 Dartmouth Conference, widely regarded as the birthplace of AI as a distinct field of research, was characterized by its participants as offering a sense of astonishment because of the potential of machines to exhibit intelligent behavior. The conference proposal, authored by John McCarthy, Marvin Minsky, Nathaniel Rochester, and Claude Shannon, articulated a bold vision of machines that could use language, form abstractions and concepts, solve problems, and improve themselves through learning.⁷

Marvin Minsky famously remarked, "You don't understand anything until you learn it more than one way."⁸ This suggests the importance of approaching AI with a sense of wonder, a deep appreciation for its complexity, and an openness to multiple perspectives

The concept of “radical amazement” was coined by the theologian and philosopher Abraham Heschel, who describes in his writing “God in Search of Man” (1955) the profound sense of awe and wonder one experiences when confronted with the mysteries and intricacies of existence. This notion is particularly relevant to the study of AI, as it invites us to move beyond our habitual ways of seeing and to embrace a more expansive, existentially engaged mode of inquiry. By approaching AI with a spirit of radical amazement, we can begin to perceive technology not as a mere tool or technique, but as a catalyst for deep reflection on the nature of intelligence, and the shape and substance of what it means to be human.

The Rothko exhibition and the power of contemplation

The recent Mark Rothko retrospective at the Foundation Louis Vuitton in Paris (October 2023 – April 2024) served as a powerful metaphor for the kind of transformative educational experience that the study of AI should aspire to. Visitors to the exhibition found themselves immersed in the vibrant, emotionally resonant world of Rothko's art, which, as the exhibition catalog notes, "is to experience art as it is redefined and even understood with an unaccountable force."⁹ Just as Rothko's paintings invite viewers to contemplate the interplay of color and form, to venture beyond the realm of the purely intellectual and into the domain of questioning what is felt as "unknown", so too should the study of AI in MBA programs encourage students to grapple with the profound implications of this "unaccountable force".*

It is not sufficient to simply convey a set of facts and techniques; rather, we make the effort to cultivate a capacity for deep, sustained inquiry and an openness to having one's perspective fundamentally altered. The experience of standing before a Rothko painting, immersed in the pulsating energy of the color fields, evokes a sense of presence, a heightened awareness of one's self in relation to the work.

The task of teaching AI to MBA students is a formidable one – they should not simply consume the knowledge of artificial intelligence, but enter into a dialogue with it, become an active collaborator in the unfolding of this technological revolution. For the student must recognize that AI is not merely a tool to be wielded and exploited, but a medium through which one's very self-perception and sense of agency are called into question.

Mutual interrogation

An MBA curriculum that effectively addresses the challenges and opportunities of AI must be fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature, drawing upon insights from fields as diverse as moral philosophy, sociology, neuroscience, and aesthetics. Courses such as "Philosophy and Ethics of AI," "The Future of Work," and "Neuroscience, Consciousness, and Machine Intelligence" would offer students the opportunity to explore the multifaceted implications of AI and to develop the critical thinking skills necessary to navigate this complex terrain. By engaging with the ethical dimensions of AI, and exploring the frontiers of neuroscience and machine intelligence, students can find themselves situated within a dialectical interplay - the machine intelligence probing the depths of the human mind, while the human mind in turn scrutinizes the limits and potentials of the digital realm. It is a dance of mutual interrogation, where each partner reveals aspects of the other that had previously remained obscured.

While the practical challenges of implementing such a curriculum are significant, particularly in an environment of intense AI hype, the importance of cultivating a more holistic, ethically-informed understanding of AI cannot be overstated. As Clayton Christensen's work ("The Innovator's Dilemma") on disruptive innovation demonstrates, the very factors that contribute to an organization's success can often become obstacles to its ability to adapt to new realities.¹⁰ In the context of MBA education, this means that a narrowly technical, incrementalist approach to teaching AI may actually hinder students' ability to grasp the full scope of the AI revolution and its implications for business and society.

* The engagement with art as a liminal experience, a threshold that disturbs and transforms what is customary, is certainly not limited to Rothko. One might consider, for example, Cezanne, Vuillard, Hammershoi, Morandi, or any number of other artists who explore light's enigmatic qualities, prompting self-reflection.

The essence of technology

Heidegger's landmark essay, "The Question Concerning Technology", (1954) offers a penetrating exploration that resists the temptation to view technology solely through the lens of discrete artefacts or processes.¹¹ Rather, his insight is that technology profoundly shapes our very understanding of the world and our place within it. For Heidegger, the danger lies in technology's tendency to reduce everything, including human beings, to the status of an optimizable resource. This is no mere academic concern, he cautions; instead, it demands our careful, nuanced consideration of how, for the purpose of our inquiry, AI remakes our relationship to the world - a fundamental reorientation that can't be reduced to a simple means to an end. Heidegger urges us to resist viewing technology as just another shiny gadget, and to instead wrestle with the deep philosophical implications at play. He encourages us to be amazed.

Applying Heidegger's admonition, the desired MBA course of study encourages the spirit of radical openness, suspending the usual framework and assumptions that govern the relationship to technology. The student finds herself, as it were, caught in the crosshairs of the technological uncanny – unsettled by the way in which “the machine” penetrates to the core of the self, to read (as suggested by emotive AI) the users' desires and intentions with an almost supernatural presence.

And yet, it is precisely in this moment of estrangement, this rupture in the familiar, that opportunity arises. For the student is confronted with a choice - to recoil in fear and mistrust, or to lean into the discomfort, to use this encounter with AI as a portal to a deeper self-knowledge. In wrestling with the machine, the student comes to apprehend hidden dimensions of their own psyche, unearthing wellsprings of creativity and agency that had hitherto remained dormant. At least this is the aspiration.

Listening to Heidegger, the MBA curricula would be structured to assist the student in approaching the study of AI as an active collaborator in a process of self-discovery. For it is only by embracing the transformative potential of this technology that the student can hope to emerge with a reinvigorated sense of purpose and autonomy. The machine is not the enemy, but a mirror in which the student comes to see themselves anew.

Conclusion

The essence of AI education in MBA curricula lies not in the mere accumulation of technical expertise, but in the cultivation of a profound sense of wonder and a fearless engagement with the existential questions that this transformative technology provokes. The work of Mark Rothko serve as a poignant reminder of the importance of embracing the unknown, the enigmatic, and the profound.

The study of AI in MBA programs should not be a passive absorption of facts and techniques, but an active engagement with the technology's deepest implications for our understanding of intelligence, creativity, and what it means to be human.

In practical terms, this means reimagining MBA curricula as a space of authentic inquiry and self-discovery. Such descriptive terms are not ordinarily part of the MBA lexicon, seeming more “humanistic” than what we ordinarily encounter in the corridors of MBA education. But when considering the massive and protean challenges and consequences placed before us by digital technology and AI innovation, a key challenge in Europe for 2024-2029 is preparing our future business leaders to learn differently: it's not business school as usual. Why? Because as the ESCP Impact Papers, “Key future challenges in

turbulent times – Europe 2024 -2029” suggest, we are experiencing “an *unprecedented* time of economic, social, environmental and technological challenges.”

Unprecedented is the galvanizing term acknowledging the challenges that will define our collective future. What does this mean?

It means weaving together insights from diverse fields such as moral philosophy, neuroscience, and aesthetics to create a rich tapestry of understanding. It means encouraging students to grapple with the ethical complexities and the philosophical quandaries that AI raises, not as an afterthought, but as the very core of their learning experience. It means withstanding the temptation to wave membership cards for tech-optimist manifestos, “Effective Accelerationism” or doomsayer cults.

AI is not a tool to be mastered, but a catalyst for profound reflection and growth. When part of MBA curricula, it means cultivating a new kind of business paradigm, one that is grounded in a deep sense of purpose, empathy, and wonder. And it means recognizing that the true power of AI resides not in its ability to optimize or automate, but in its capacity to awaken us to the untapped potential not only of artificial intelligence, but human intelligence.

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