

# Developing Phronesis in Business Education: A Student Perspective

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**Abstract:** This paper aims to discuss the results of the analysis of the feedback of business university students on the phronesis-focused course. The course is part of the MA programme at the Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business. Its objective is to develop three intellectual virtues (dimensions of knowledge) defined by Aristotle – the episteme (theoretical knowledge), the techne (skills, practical knowledge) and the phronesis (practical wisdom, ability to use previous two in proper way and context). The course was developed to address one of the major arguments against business-oriented education – its over-orientation to theoretical knowledge. During the course, students work in teams that fulfil three types of assignments – presentation of theory, facilitation of discussion and case study preparation and implementation in the class. The teacher is the coach, helps teams with their work, and provides feedback. Episteme is developed via new theoretical knowledge of management. Techne is developed via training in different skills, like presentation skills, discussion skills, and skills to understand the professional text. Phronesis is developed through the interaction of students when preparing and implementing tasks. It becomes active as the ability to understand the colleague's point of view, discuss and harmonise one's own opinion with the ideas of others or understand the social climate in the class and adjust one's behaviour to it. As one of the course authors said, we do not want to teach students about management; we want to teach them management. The feedback of students was captured and analysed by the research based on three research questions: Q1 What do students like about the course? Q2 What do students dislike about the course? Q3 What do students think they learned in the course? The data were collected by the open-questionnaire with three questions reflecting the research questions. The respondents were students from two classes of the course. The answers were analysed by thematic analysis. The research results show that respondents value the episteme they learn as it allows them to see and understand management holistically. They also like the originality of the course concept based on the cooperation of students and the teacher and the environment the course provides for skills and phronesis development. On the other hand, respondents disliked that the low quality of work of less motivated students influenced the whole class and found the course too demanding for preparation and attention. Even though limited, the research points at important aspects of phronesis-focused courses – they teach students a lot but are demanding and require a change of pedagogical paradigm. Students must be willing to take responsibility for their learning and development and learn even though this may threaten their identity and self-image.

**Keywords:** Knowledge, Skills, Phronesis, Tertiary business education

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## 1. Introduction

The paper discusses the experience of business faculty students with the course targeted to phronesis development. The course is part of the MA programme at the Faculty of Business Administration, Prague University of Economics and Business. Its objective is to develop three intellectual virtues (dimensions of knowledge) defined by Aristotle – the episteme (theoretical knowledge), the techne (skills, practical knowledge) and the phronesis (practical wisdom, ability to use previous two in proper way and context). The course was developed to address one of the major arguments against business-oriented education – its over-orientation to theoretical knowledge. As one of the course authors said, we do not want to teach students about management; we want to teach them management.

The student experience was researched using a simple questionnaire with three questions about the course. The answers were analysed by thematic analysis. The results show that students are not used to such a format of the course, and even though they may find it valuable, they criticise it for being extremely demanding.

## 2. Background

### 2.1 Episteme, Techne and Phronesis in Business Education

The concept of episteme, techne and phronesis goes back to Aristotle (2004). Episteme represents objective (scientific) knowledge, techne practical knowledge. Phronesis (practical wisdom) integrates episteme and techne with values and moral guidance (Aristotle, 2004; Bachman et al., 2018; Kragulj et al., 2024). “Phronesis presents a relational mode of knowing that is founded on virtues and standards of excellence that are pursued on the way to perfection. In other words, phronesis is about the knowledge that defines the way we formulate our intentions and the course of action for achieving these intentions. Central to phronesis is practising as we search continuously to exercise practical/prudent judgements (or wisdom) when being purposeful in defining and pursuing particular objectives” (Antonacopoulou, 2010, p. 57). “Practical wisdom strikes balances between

individual and common interests, short-term and long-term perspectives as well as between adapting to and shaping the environment". (Roos, 2017, p.2). "Where the predictive capacity of scientific knowledge breaks down, practical wisdom steps in to guide decision making about what should occur in the future. And while practical wisdom may draw on cunning to achieve certain goals, it restricts it to focusing only on advantages that can be shared by all members of society" (Roos, 2017, p. 9).

Business education is traditionally based on episteme and, as such, puts major effort into theoretical education. If *techne* is developed, it concerns the application of theoretical concepts in simplified business situations, as students are not exposed to real-life problems (Gosling and Mintzberg, 2004; Kraguj et al., 2024). In business education, we systematically ignore *phronesis* (Antonacopoulou, 2010). The education where "knowledge is imparted from a professor to the students ... only prepares students to become passive, unthinking members of society". They are trained to fit in rather than affect societal change (Kopf, Boje and Torres, 2010, p. 295). "Therefore *Phronesis* (practical wisdom), individual and collective, is an essential competence to be addressed in business education" (Rocha and Pinheiro, 2021, p.1).

There are attempts to integrate *phronesis* into business education. For example, Antonacopoulou (2010) describes the *phronesis* course whose objective was to "encourage participants to distil a more integrative analysis of the multifaceted nature of management and to critically reflect on their experiences of managing" (Antonacopoulou, 2010, p. S12), Kraguj et al. (2024) prepared and tested the method *WiseUpCube* of *phronesis* development for business successors.

Focusing business education not only on episteme and *techne* becomes more and more important due to the conditions organisations operate because, as Roos (2017, p. 10) writes: "practical wisdom describes a form of human intelligence that is most relevant for, and appropriate to, ambiguous or uncertain circumstances in which the limits of scientific knowledge and cunning action are approached or surpassed; is a unique form of intelligence that is both effective and ethical; always involves a creative enactment of the common good" (Roos, 2017, p.10).

## **2.2 The Course**

The course Management 2 is part of the MA programme at one of the leading European business-oriented faculties. The course "moves from theory-centered to more practice-oriented forms of learning, from socially isolated to more relational, and from self-interested to more community-oriented and project-based approaches" (Dierksmeier, 2020, p. 75-76) and provides the environment in which students develop all three types of knowledge defined by Aristotle (2004). The course was created to address one of the major arguments against business-oriented education – its over-orientation to theoretical knowledge. As one of the course authors said, we do not want to teach students about management; we want to teach them management, e.g. "by attempting to understand and solve problems, students gain *phronesis* rather than just *techne*" (Kopf, Boje and Torres, 2010, p. 295).

Every week is dedicated to a different topic. Students work in fixed teams and fulfil three different assignments - presentation of theory, facilitation of discussion on obligatory pre-readings and case study. All teams do all three assignments during the term. The teacher does not lecture but supervises the process of knowledge development and sharing and provides team support. Students are examined individually at the end of the course.

The presentation of theory is the task where teams are assigned the topic. The team responsible reads literature provided by the teacher gains the knowledge, simplifies it and then presents it and teaches classmates. There is an obligatory consultancy with the teacher when the team responsible for the topic discusses their presentation with the teacher. It allows the teacher to give feedback and supervise the quality of presented knowledge.

Every week, the whole class has obligatory pre-readings (papers) allocated. One team is responsible for facilitating discussion on these pre-readings. They are supposed to briefly summarise the significant findings of the assigned papers and then support and facilitate the class discussions on the significant ideas of the paper author. They should lead their classmates to discuss the papers from opposite and conflicting standpoints.

The last assignment, the case study, usually starts with introducing an interesting company relevant to the topic. Then, the responsible team prepares a case study that allows the class to experience the topic.

Episteme, *techne* and *phronesis* are developed in all three assignments. As for episteme, every week's theory presentation provides students with basic theoretical knowledge of the given topic. Obligatory pre-readings

add the perspective of other authors. Case studies provide theoretical knowledge on different organisations with interesting management models.

When preparing individual assignments, students develop their *techne* – the ability to understand theoretical literature and distil relevant knowledge, skills to divide the work among team members, communication skills when discussing the topic and presenting it to classmates, etc.

Phronesis development is more hidden than *episteme* and *techne* development. Phronesis is developed via such tasks as building relationships with teammates, putting materials for presentation together and discussing them, simplifying presented knowledge for classmates, consultation with the teacher, working with risks, choosing the team member responsible for facilitation of discussion, team self-evaluation or redistribution of point the team got for assignment in dependence of performance of individual team members.

The final exam on theoretical knowledge is done individually, but the whole team must be present. When all students are examined, the teacher discusses the course outputs for the *techne* and *episteme* with the students and gives the team final feedback.

The course syllabus explains All assignments in detail (including their detailed grading). Students are given the syllabus during the first class at the latest (students of class B get the syllabus about two weeks ahead of the class), and the teacher dedicates the first class to thoroughly explaining the syllabus and answering questions.

### **3. Objective, Methodology, Limitations**

This paper aims to discuss the results of the analysis of the feedback of business university students on the phronesis-focused course. The research had three research questions: Q1 What do students like about the course? Q2 What do students dislike about the course? Q3 What do students think they learned in the course?

The open-question questionnaire collected the data. We asked three questions reflecting on the research questions: What did I like about the course? What did I not like about the course? What is the course learning outcome for me? The respondents were students from two classes in the course. One class was taught in the local language and one in English.

As for respondents, most students in the local language class (class A, 38 respondents) are graduates of our the Faculty of Business Administration BA programme and already have good knowledge, especially of traditional approaches to management. Most of them come from our country or countries with similar cultural backgrounds. Some students in the English class (class B, 28 respondents) are graduates of English BA of the Faculty of Business Administration, and as students in the local language class, they have good management knowledge. But the number of students who are not graduates of our BA programme is much higher in class B. Students are from different parts of the world, and the cultural diversity is great. Respondents were asked to answer the questions in written form immediately after passing the final exam.

The answers were analysed by thematic analysis. Research questions guide the analysis (Clarke and Braun, 2017). We searched for patterns of meanings, which allowed us to identify codes. To capture the most important patterns and not lose the context, we did sentence-by-sentence *in vivo* coding (Willig, 2013; Glaser and Strauss, 2017) of respondent answers. When it was possible to classify the code into more categories, we classified it into the more context relevant. We used this approach because "These categories are analytic rather than descriptive. They interpret, rather than simply label, instances of phenomena" (Willig, 2013, p. 70). Further coding classified codes into higher-level categories (themes). We applied this coding style to all respondents' answers to achieve coding reliability. Knowing that the courses we used for the research provided a heterogeneous sample of respondents (from the perspective of culture and knowledge of management), we analysed students' answers in individual courses separately.

The validity of the coding was more challenging to achieve. Students officially evaluate the course before registering for another term, but unfortunately, most of these evaluations lacked detailed verbal explanations. Therefore, triangulation was not possible. Checking the research results with respondents was not done as motivating them for further cooperation is very difficult once the students finish the course. To eliminate the bias of the research, the researcher tried to focus strictly on each sentence and suppress personal explanations of its meaning. When the personal explanation was too strong, or the answers raised the emotional response of the researcher, the questionnaire was put aside, and the coding was done later.

The theoretical background of the research is formed by the papers collected using a keyword WOS search. We search two keywords, "phronesis" and "business education". The search led to 8 papers. These papers help us to find additional relevant literature on the topic.

Due to the data collection and analysis methods, the research has two important limits. Even though we tried to suppress the bias caused by the researcher, the researcher is the teacher of the course, which influences coding validity. The research covered the experience of two classes of one course; therefore, its results cannot be generalised.

#### 4. Findings

The analysis of answers to the first question: "What did I like about the course?" identified the same themes in both classes (Table 1), except for theme attendance (we do not do attendance in English class as it is a hybrid one). Students liked the performance of class participants (classmates, the teacher); for example, student A16 wrote: "The teacher was open to different opinions", and student 19 noted that: "The class was very active, we helped each other". Students also liked the course content, course organisation, and activities. Student A3 wrote, "The course has a clear structure. Everything matches together at the end." Student B5 "The lecture structure where students have presentations, and a professor gives additional details when need is unusual". Student A37 liked that "theory was embedded in practical examples".

Both groups also evaluated the relationship of the course to practice and environment for skills and phronesis development. Student B10 wrote, "I liked how it needed cooperation, needed us to improve our public speaking and taught us what to expect in our future jobs" Student B10 "how it needed cooperation, needed us to improve our public speaking and taught us what to expect in our future jobs".

**Table 1: Answers to first question**

<b>Both classes - Class A and Class B</b>	
Examples of codes	Themes
teacher well facilitates discussions; excellent preparation of presentations; good group; good organisation of work; teacher explaining when students took something wrong;	Evaluation of participants
Examples of codes	Themes
first "serious" encounter with management studies, and I liked it; variability of views on management; Birkinshaw model; opportunity to learn various topics of management to deep; interesting content of the course;	Content – K about management and management tools
open discussions; cooperation; cooperation with my team; facilitation by students who led classes; interactivity; presentation of theory forced me to study all materials and understand everything better; students teach via presentations; possible to be creative; that we did presentations; improved our public speaking; it forces to search deeply for knowledge;	Environment for skills and phronesis development
original ideas; originality of the course; the original format of course; creative methods; the original structure of presentation where students have tasks and the teacher provides support when needed;	Originality
good course concept; organisation of the course; the way how teams are distributed; structure of the course gives complex framework; led by students; supervised by the teacher; structure of the course; demanding but at one moment, it all clicks to the big picture;	Concept of the course
games; creative and entertaining games; cases	Cases
discussions;	Discussions
presentations; presentations of theory by students;	Presentations
participation;	Attendance
exam in the group; pre-readings;	Exam, pre-readings
practical course that applies theory into practice; cases showed application of topic and discussions; practical examples; practical examples of companies; showing management in real life situations;	Relationship to practice

Analysis of answers to the second question: "What did I not like about the course?" identified similarities and differences (Table 2). Students of both classes did not like when their colleagues were not fully involved, which influenced the task performance quality. Student A2 wrote, "The fact that presentations of theory were done

only by students was very limiting. I was afraid to learn from them". Student A14 saw the same problem: "Not all students fully participated". Student B5 wrote, "Students were sometimes unable to present properly".

Students also complained that the course is too demanding for pre-class preparation, exercises are too long and demanding attention and covers too many topics. Student A8 noted, "Too long classes", student A12 "Too much work", and student B21 "It was a bit time-consuming".

Students were also unhappy with the prereading exercise – student A23 concluded, "I failed to read all pre-readings". Student B4 wrote, "The discussion on pre-readings. No matter how well prepared you were, if the class did not read them or just did not want to participate, you had no chance to do it (facilitate the discussion) properly". Up to this, class A found the course too theoretical. Class B did not like that students taught the class; some thought the presented knowledge was not properly explained. Students also reported that they had problems extracting knowledge from the literature. For example, student B27 concluded, "I think having students doing theory was a bit more complicated as it was hard trying to understand theory and models by ourselves and then explaining it to our classmates". The last complaint concerns the hybrid form of class B.

**Table 2: Answers to second question**

<b>Both classes - Class A and Class B</b>	
Examples of codes	Themes
some presentations were not of the best quality; I would prefer the theoretical part presented by the teacher; presentations of theory done by students are not good – problem to evaluate the importance of topics; in some presentations, topics were not interconnected; presentations of colleagues limiting; some students are not able to present properly, which leads to lesser learning; some students did not try hard;	When colleagues were not fully involved, the quality of presentations was dubious
Examples of codes	Themes
for some a burden; lot of preparation; time demanding; time consuming; lot of moments of difficulty; time consuming;	Too much demand on preparation
Pre-readings; facilitation of discussions not good; lack of time for facilitation of discussion; discussion on pre-readings – the class did not read it, and this influenced your grade;	Pre-readings
audience attention-demanding; 3 hours of exercise too attention-demanding; challenging to stay focused for 3 hours;	Too long and attention-demanding
topics repetitive, too many concepts in one topic too many smaller topics in one class; too many different approaches;	Too many topics
no presentations from teacher; some approaches old; heterogeneous literature; I miss more company examples; I miss more tool examples;	Other
Only class A	
Examples of codes	Themes
too much theory; too abstract; too much focus on theory and definitions;	Too theoretical
Only class B	
Examples of codes	Themes
self-teaching approach; lectures by schoolmates; being taught by classmates – the teacher could do it better;	Students teach the class
not clear what was expected from presentations; assignments of topics need to be more specific to make clear what should be in presentations;	Not clear what to do
preparing the presentation may be distracting for online students; it was hybrid;	Hybrid form
hard to extract correct definitions from theory; hard to understand the theory and the model concepts and then present them;	Difficult to get knowledge from the literature

Analysis of answers to the third question: "What is the course learning outcome for me?" identified the same themes in both classes (except for theme other in answers of class B). Students reported that they acquired different types of knowledge, learned what management is, and developed certain skills, including phronesis (Table 3). For example, student A13 noted that "I learned that it is important to understand the topic holistically", student A15 learned "Holistic understanding of management tools", and A20 "Ability to think about different approaches to management". Student B6 wrote that he "learned many theories and to

articulate well the things I knew, and I managed to give them clear definitions which helped me understand things deeply". A17 improved "the reading and understanding of the professional text and critical thinking". B7 "learned how to work in a group in different circumstances, collaborate and analyse the information with critical thinking".

**Table 3: Answers to third question**

<b>Both classes - Class A and Class B</b>	
Examples of codes	Themes
completed my previous knowledge; well understandable theories; new knowledge; complex interdisciplinary learning about companies pioneers of MM; ethics; innovations; knowledge of MM; great case studies; different management styles; understand why some companies do what things; information gained; different theories;	Knowledge
we got foundations of management; better overview of management; deeper understanding of management; deeper understanding of management and management practices; I have overview of possibilities in management; understand management holistically; there is no single managerial approach;	What management is
improving skills to interconnect topics in presentation; possible to use methods in everyday life; raising self-confidence in presenting; ability to get knowledge from papers; increasing critical thinking;	Skills and phronesis
Only class B	
Examples of codes	Themes
learned a lot; I learned a lot;	Other

## 5. Discussion

The statement of Ross (2017, p. 11) who writes: "The need for practical wisdom, it is clear the key to a new model of business education must start from a holistic perspective to teach the next generation of leaders about the creation of value, redefining it as shared societal value, i.e., the common good" corresponds with the philosophy on which the course Management 2 was created. It is also related to the research results, where students mentioned that the course provided a significant amount of knowledge of different types and allowed them to understand management from different perspectives.

Answers to the second research question (What I did not like about the course) align with the findings of (Antonacopoulou, 2010). Our students reported that colleagues who were not fully involved in class tasks negatively influenced the class quality. Some students saw the class as too theoretical; some preferred the teacher to lecture. Antonacopoulou (2010, p. S18) identified the same problem: "A small proportion (11%) of managers did raise concerns about the course. They expressed indifference to the need to think critically. They found the course 'too abstract' and 'vague' to deal with. These students appeared to be less willing to take responsibility for their learning and development. Instead, they were more comfortable and keen to be instructed on how to learn and how to think. They were not ready or willing to engage in critique. It seems that for these students, this course was a threat to their identity and self-image, which they were very protective of and hence unwilling to challenge or indeed allow others to challenge". Antonacopoulou (2010, p. 19) follows: "it is also acknowledged that not all participants wish to develop themselves or be developed, nor do they all wish to support others in their development".

This unwillingness to cooperate and be "more reflective about their own lives, to learn to ask questions and deal with ambiguity and uncertainty in the answers" (Roos, 2017, p. 12) is the important limit of phronesis-focused courses. Such courses cause tension (Antonacopoulou, 2010) as students need to "question their practice" (Antonacopoulou, 2010, p. S11) and identity as "the exercise of phronesis is an aspect of who one wants to be" (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014a, p. 239). As phronesis "needs to be learned in practice" (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014a, p. 232), it requires "emotional involvement with it – to feel the diversity of emotions ordinarily encountered in the carrying out of work" (Shotter and Tsoukas, 2014b, p. 384) as "emotional involvement is a prerequisite for acquiring and developing expertise" (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 2005, p. 784). Our research shows that not all students are willing (or capable) to do this.

## 6. Conclusions

"Practical wisdom comprises knowing how to strike balances between individual and collective interests, short-term and long-term perspectives as well as between adapting to and shaping the environment. These important balances must be played out every day, everywhere and in all kinds of situations" (Roos, 2017, p.8). This requires a change in business education (Mintzberg, 2004). "We can argue that management learning in the context of business schools could stand for the development/nurturing of phronesis, encouraging managers to think critically about the decisions they make. Moreover, it could stand for raising the importance of responsibility and accountability for the actions they take" (Antonacopoulou, 2010, S22).

Our research analyses the feedback of students of such phronesis-oriented course on management. Regardless of research limits, it is one of few attempts to capture students' experience of such courses. The results show that students value the episteme they learn but face problems with responsibilities the unusual course format requires. Still, business schools should change their curricula from episteme-oriented to phronesis-oriented.

As Ross (2017, p. 9) formulates it: "Of all contemporary human pursuits, leadership and management, precisely to the extent that they must deal with the uncertainty, ambiguity and unpredictability of the future stretch the limits of scientific certainty—including the certainty that we are heading towards unsustainability—and ultimately must call for alternative epistemological frameworks. Without denying the importance of methodological rigor and peer review, the on-going proliferation of practitioner-oriented, story-based 'straight-from-the-gut' kind of management books is evidence that, despite our bias towards science, people still seek precisely the practical wisdom identified by Aristotle as the most useful—and possibly most truthful—exemplars of intellectual thought".

**Ethics declaration:** The ethical clearance was not necessary for the research. Respondents to the research were asked to confirm that they agreed with publishing the anonymised results of the research.

**AI declaration:** Except for WOS search and language editing (Grammarly), AI was not used in any phase of this paper's development.

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