A Little Learning Is a Dangerous Thing
by Robert F. Bruner

A perfect storm has descended on business schools, challenging them to justify their existence more than at any time I can remember in the last 30 years. The challenge takes many forms, but a common thread is disillusionment with the mission of business learning. My response:

Get a grip. We need business learning now more than ever.

For years I kept a phrenology bust in my office. My colleagues had various reactions to it: some were amused; some were perplexed or even embarrassed. But it reminded us of the perils of junk science, proof that a little learning is a dangerous thing. Phrenology, the "science" of attributing one's personality to cranial features, arose in the nineteenth century, at the dawn of the field of psychology. At that time, the notion of personality entered the popular mind, and physiological foundations for personality, if not rigorously documented, seemed plausible. More than a century later, the field of psychobiology is booming, and phrenology has no place in it. The wheels of scientific study grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine. Discredited by the absence of rigorous theory or empirical evidence, phrenology was tossed into the dustbin. A lot of learning overcame the initial error caused by a little learning.

Every field has its equivalent to phrenology; business is no exception. Business practitioners are pragmatists, prone to assume that what works is what works. Where markets function smoothly and there is open competition among ideas, pragmatism serves pretty well. But like phrenologists in an earlier day, pragmatists are occasionally seized by ideas that seem plausible and help to explain events in a limited arena but are backed by no evidence, sound logic, or general efficacy. Such ideas can do more harm than good. In my writing, I have criticized some of the modern-day phrenologies: conglomerate diversification, bigger is better, the merger of equals, and momentum management. The worst phrenologies of the twentieth century, Marxism and Nazism, taught us the evil consequences of failing to challenge humbug and to do so quickly.

Bad ideas mill about because of a little learning. Thomas Jefferson argued that the antidote to a little learning is a lot of learning: “Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish like evil spirits at the dawn of day.” The key to Jefferson's antidote is the liberalty of one’s learning, the sampling of diverse ideas and facts. About 50 years ago, A. Whitney Griswold, president of Yale University, wrote, “The only sure weapon against bad ideas is better ideas. The source of better ideas is wisdom. The surest path to wisdom is a liberal education.”

With alarm I note the educational...
A Little Learning Is a Dangerous Thing

continued from page 2

trend toward narrow vocationalism, even in business schools. Business phrenologies breed in the back alleys of the field, where thinking can get warped—the poster child here is Enron’s aggressive use of special-purpose entities. Though the practitioner needs to be his or her own best teacher, business schools and institutes can help one get a lot of learning. At its best, the M.B.A. has stood for liberal training across the business specialties and for a graduate who can smell humbug and not be afraid to say so. Learning based on uncritical, rote memorization is no preparation for a career of action and risk taking but is exactly what your local phrenologist depends on. Instead, the learning that matters requires testing and debate. That’s why discussion-based education is so important: it exercises skills of analysis and argument. And it is why penetrating research is crucial. The humanistic tradition of transparent documentation, hypothesis testing, replication of experiments, and debate is the antidote to a little learning. And it is the source of ideas from academia that improve business practice, such as business ethics, linear programming, conjoint analysis, and the theory of option pricing.

Do we need schools to help us learn? The Internet has sprouted many degree programs. Aren’t these just as good as the programs based in physical places? I think not, for at least two reasons. First, learning is deeper and richer when it occurs in a group. As T.S. Eliot said, “There is no life not lived in community.” Learning on the Internet remains a solitary experience. I doubt that the chat room can replace in-person peer coaching, challenge, and debate. Second, learning is better with a teacher. Raw ingredients and a good kitchen aren’t enough to make a great meal. Economist Paul Romer has argued that good cooking requires the human elements of creativity and leadership. So it is with learning: the teacher creatively organizes the resources and leads the student to insights.

Disillusionment about the mission of business learning creates a downward spiral of poor engagement between practitioners and business schools. It’s a race to the bottom: practitioners ask less and less, and the schools oblige. For instance, executives seem to want fewer days in training and less nuance, discussion, and reflection. Corporate recruiters are demanding narrowly trained M.B.A.s exactly when we need liberally trained professionals. At the heart of each of the 22 business scandals that erupted between 1998 and 2002 lay a bad idea cradled by narrow, self-serving professionalism. The slump in corporate and individual philanthropy will chill the business learning that occurs through research, especially the challenging, provocative new work. Many schools, in turn, humbled by their financial problems and the business scandals, have hunkered down into a customer-service mentality, focusing on marketing and league tables, rapid imitation, and toning down the mission of social criticism, testing, and argument. Put this all together and it’s like a picture by Brueghel or Hogarth, in which people are leaving undone the things that ought to be done and doing the other.

Yet I remain cautiously optimistic. The interface between business practice and the academy is a market of ideas. As Joseph Schumpeter wrote 62 years ago, free markets will self-correct, led by entrepreneurs, agents of change who find their opportunities wherever they see room for improvement. Dissatisfaction with the race to the bottom will eventually spur agents of change—both scholars and thoughtful practitioners—to offer a better model for business learning.

The Batten Institute has invested in support of robust business learning. Directing this effort has been fun and stimulating. Come September, my four-year term as executive director ends, after which I will step away for a year of research. The Batten Institute is prospering and has achieved the major goals we laid out four years ago. This is a good moment to hand the leadership to an able colleague at The Darden School, Jeanne Liedtka. I look forward to returning to my main calling, teaching and research, from where I will continue to work for more and better business learning. I see no alternative: a little learning is a dangerous thing.

Robert F. Bruner is executive director of the Batten Institute and Distinguished Professor of Business Administration at The Darden School. He can be reached at bruner@darden.virginia.edu.