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## Why Some M.B.A.s Are Reading Plato

### Schools Try Philosophy to Get B-School Students Thinking Beyond the Bottom Line

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London Business School's 'Nobel Thinking' elective explores the origins and influence of economic theories. Above, students at an LBS lecture in April. *Jason Alden for The Wall Street Journal*

Most business-school students are gunning for jobs in banking, consulting or technology. So what are they doing reading Plato?

The philosophy department is invading the M.B.A. program—at least at a handful of schools where the legacy of the global financial crisis has sparked efforts to train business students to think beyond the bottom line. Courses like "Why Capitalism?" and "Thinking about Thinking," and readings by Marx and Kant, give students a break from Excel spreadsheets and push them to ponder business in a broader context, schools say.

The courses also address a common complaint of employers, who say recent graduates are trained to solve single problems but often miss the big picture.

## Have a Think

A sampling of heady B-School courses and readings

### **London Business School**

Course: Nobel Thinking, 2014

Readings: "Maps of Bounded Rationality: A Perspective on Intuitive Judgment and Choice" and "The Problem of Social Cost"

### **Wake Forest University School of Business**

Course: Why Capitalism?, 2014

Readings: "Why not Socialism" and "That Which Is Seen, and That Which Is Not Seen"

### **Bentley University**

Course: Thinking about Thinking, 2013

Readings: "The Yellow Wallpaper" and "Blink: The Power of Thinking Without Thinking"

### **Copenhagen Business School**

Course: Organizational Philosophy, 2007

Readings: "On Humour" and "Modernity and the Holocaust"

### **Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business**

Course: Seminar in Grand Strategy: Conceptual Foundations in Strategic Thought, 2010

Readings: "The Art of War" and "The Leviathan"

"Nobel Thinking," a new elective at London Business School explores the origins and influence of economic theories on topics like market efficiency and decision-making by some Nobel Prize winners. The 10-week course—taught by faculty from the school's economics, finance and organizational behavior departments—might not make students the next James Watson or Francis Crick, but it aims to give them a sense of how revolutionary ideas arise.

"It's important to know why we're doing what we're doing," says Ingrid Marchal-Gérez, a second-year M.B.A. who enrolled in Nobel Thinking to balance her finance and marketing classes. "You can start to understand what idea can have an impact, and how to communicate an idea."

Students write narrative essays to explain how ideas—such as adverse selection, or what happens when buyers and sellers have access to different information—gain currency. Joao Montez, the economics professor leading Nobel Thinking, says he wants students to reflect, if only for a short while, on world-changing thought.

Career advancement and salary outrank ideas about world peace and humanity's future for many M.B.A.s, but Dr. Montez says LBS students have requested more opportunities to step back and consider big-picture ideas.

"You can leave the classroom with these ideas in the back of your mind, and then maybe one day it will be useful," he says.

That's true to a point: Ms. Marchal-Gérez, 38 years old, says she is somewhat concerned she'll "have a good time, but then what?"

Abstract ideas remain a hard sell for many M.B.A.s. Patricia Márquez, an associate professor of management at the University of San Diego's School of Business Administration and an anthropologist by training, has struggled for nearly 20 years to teach M.B.A.s to dream up business solutions for poverty, her area of scholarly focus. Students, she found, needed a great deal of coaching to apply theories from anthropology and ethnography to the business world.

She eventually replaced theory-based readings with traditional case studies, though she still tries to conduct discussions on abstract topics, such as how cultural stereotypes stymie innovation.

"I spent six years thinking about the definition of culture. At a business school, culture can be measured through a survey," she says. "It's so solution-oriented. We don't ask, and we don't let them have space to ask better questions."

To give students room for questions, Bentley University in Waltham, Mass., introduced "Thinking about Thinking" as a unit in its one-year M.B.A. program last year. Students spend two weeks studying art, reading fiction and even meditating.

"There's too much emphasis in leadership work on understanding followers," says Duncan Spelman, management department chair and co-instructor. "We're really trying to emphasize understanding the self" to make students effective leaders.

Mariia Potapkina, a 29-year-old Russia native who plans to work in consulting or strategy after graduation, says the class was "a nonstop, 14-day discovery of yourself." For example, she learned that she became more organized in the face of ambiguity.

But ambiguity can be unsettling for some. Esteban Hunt, an M.B.A. student who hails from Buenos Aires, recalled a class when an artist presented a piece of artwork and asked students to describe what they saw.

The variety of interpretations, and the realization that there was no single right answer, left him frustrated, Mr. Hunt says, and produced palpable anxiety among his classmates.

That's the point, says Dr. Spelman, adding that uncertainty is a reality in life and business.

Expect more abstract ideas in business schools soon.

To meet student demand, Copenhagen Business School is expanding its 15-year-old master of science in business administration and philosophy program this year, shifting to English-language instruction from Danish and taking in more international students.

"The tension between the two words business [and] philosophy appeals to quite a lot of young students," says Kurt Jacobsen, program director and a professor of business history. He says students want to better understand market and business dynamics after the extreme economic upheaval of recent years.

Classes touch on subjects like the blurring line between work and play and the "rational" bureaucracy needed to pursue genocide. Assigned readings include selections from French philosopher Jacques Derrida and management guru Henry Mintzberg.

Students still pursue traditional M.B.A. careers, Dr. Jacobsen says. Top employers for the Copenhagen program include McKinsey & Co., Boston Consulting Group Inc. and the Danish brewing company [Carlsberg](#).