



Disruptive Innovations in Business Education Research Group
The University of Sydney Business School



Sites of productive messiness: The critical need for Business Schools to develop and integrate the capabilities for effective and impactful business and management education research

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Working Paper No. 3 May 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25910/905p-td46>

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DIBERG is a research group of the University of Sydney Business School. It was established in 2021 by Professor Peter Bryant, Professor Juliette Overland and Professor Elaine Huber as a transdisciplinary group of engaged and evaluative pedagogical and higher education researchers generating rigorous applied and theoretical research that seeks to innovate, reshape, and disrupt the understanding and landscape of business education. We interrogate the future of business education and how the forces that shape the role and focus of Business Schools influences how we design for a better education and a more effective role of Business Schools as leaders for good.

The 2025/2026 Directors of DIBERG are Professor Peter Bryant and Dr Sandris Zeivots. The DIBERG working papers series is published under a Creative Commons CC BY (Attribution 4.0 International) license.

Editorial notes

The working paper is based on two short essays written and published on the DIBERG blog in 2022 entitled 'Making education better is not a nice to have: Why Business Schools need to engage in and value pedagogical research'. It has been extensively rewritten in 2026.

The context of this paper is business and management education research. The author has used the term 'educational research' as shorthand for the business context framing.

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Cite as: Bryant, P (2026). Sites of productive messiness: The critical need for Business Schools to develop and integrate the capabilities for effective and impactful business and management education research. DIBERG Working Paper 3. The University of Sydney Business School. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25910/905p-td46>

Introduction

Business and management education research has a challenged and often undervalued place in the administration, metricisation and strategic operation of Business Schools (Johnson & Ellis, 2023). Despite its clear relevance to pedagogical quality, professional formation, and institutional impact, educational research is often perceived as peripheral to the strategic mission of the School and accorded lower status within academic reward systems (Siddiqui & Lento, 2022). As a result, the professional standing of academics specialising in business and management education is frequently marginalised in favour of more traditional, discipline-based research trajectories that privilege publication in narrowly defined elite journals (Shinn, 2022). Others have critiqued business and management education research as focusing on arcane or overly abstract theorisation of practical actions (Macdonald et al., 2002) or as a form of scholarship that should only be conducted teaching focused faculty (Evans et al., 2021). This structural bias reflects enduring tensions between rigour and relevance, and between scholarly prestige and educational impact, which continue to shape research priorities and career progression within Business Schools (Mason et al., 2024; Norton, 2018).

As part of formal research assessment exercises (such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in the UK and the Excellence for Research in Australia (ERA), business and management education is not explicitly referenced in the ranked metrics within the fields of business and management. This omission reflects the structure of national research classification systems. Both the UK REF Units of Assessment and the Australian Fields of Research (FoR) classification framework do not include a distinct category for business and management education as a scholarly domain. This has been widely noted as contributing to the marginal positioning of pedagogical and educational research within Business Schools, as evaluation frameworks privilege disciplinary outputs aligned with established research fields rather than scholarship focused on teaching and learning (Redgrave et al., 2023). In the UK, the most recent REF had historically low success rates for submissions of pedagogical research, in part attributable to the exclusion of research that focused on the impacts on students or teaching within the submitting institution (the core evidence base for many studies of pedagogical impact) (Kneale et al., 2014).

These grant allocation and research quality metrics and their relationship to academic performance, reward and recognition tell only part of the story of the efficacy and impact of educational research in Business Schools. The marginalisation of metricised recognition extends to the impact of business and management education journals as ranked on national and international lists. The Australian Business Deans Council (ABDC) journal quality list only ranked one management education journal A*. The Financial Times 50 (FT50) has none. In the UK, the Academic Journal Guide (2021) only has one 4* entry for education. The consequences of this are both rewards centred (publication awards, research funding) and progression centred (promotion and tenure). Some Business Schools have developed their own lists of business and management education journals ranked in equivalence with national rankings (see

Monash and the University of Sydney). Whilst such efforts help with the evidencing of the Sustainable Development Goals and the critical accreditation criteria such as AACSB and EQUIS (which reference Scholarship of Teaching and Learning and educational research in their standards), business and management education research remains difficult to assess against many Business Schools research performance frameworks.

Drawing on these critical dissonances, this working paper argues that business and management education research is not a 'nice to have' in Business Schools, nor is it the same as the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). Business and management education research is critical to the future of Business Schools, from both their managerial structures and actions through to the ways in which they engage with students, industry and wider society. Within the corporatised operating models of many universities educational research is a mission critical investment in the product, supporting innovation as a competitive advantage and leveraging teaching as a factor of brand value. For the transformative public good operating models, it is an investment in better teaching and learning.

Taking a step back

In the early 19th Century, German philosopher Wilhelm von Humboldt argued that the 'soul' of a university emerges through the living tension between *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*, words without clear, translatable meaning in English. *Bildung* is an inner-looking process of the self-cultivation of autonomous, reflective individuals through transformative learning, where students develop intellectual maturity, ethical awareness, and self-formation beyond vocational outcomes. *Wissenschaft* is a more outwards form of truth-seeking. It is the collective, disciplined pursuit of knowledge through rigorous, inquiry-driven research and scholarship, grounded in shared standards of truth, method, and academic freedom (Barnett, 2024; Kergel, 2023)

Humboldt's argument goes that the university is a dynamic equilibrium between *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*. He argued that genuine learning emerges only when students engage freely with inquiry (in modern senses research, curiosity, discovery), allowing personal self-cultivation to unfold through participation in the creation of knowledge. Humboldt argued that genuine scholarly research depends on maintaining a productive tension between *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft*, rather than collapsing one into the other. *Wissenschaft* provides the disciplined, truth-seeking inquiry essential for generating reliable knowledge, while *Bildung* ensures that this inquiry remains rooted in the intellectual self-cultivation of both the researcher and the student (Sjöström & Eilks, 2020). This tension is not a flaw but the university's defining *raison d'être*. *Bildung* prevents *Wissenschaft* from becoming mechanical or purely utilitarian, while *Wissenschaft* anchors *Bildung* in rigorous, shared standards of truth. Together, they shape a community devoted to intellectual freedom, holistic development, and the open-ended pursuit of understanding (Bongaerts, 2022; Humboldt, 1970).

Ernest Boyer in his classic 1990 book *Scholarship Reconsidered* (1990) argued that the relationships between the research and teaching functions in a university were far more complex, quite presciently echoing the tensions described earlier in this paper:

Research and publication have become the primary means by which most professors achieve academic status, and yet many academics are, in fact, drawn to the profession precisely because of their love for teaching or for service even for making the world a better place. Yet these professional obligations do not get the recognition they deserve, and what we have, on many campuses, is a climate that restricts creativity rather than sustains it. (p.xii)

Debates on the tensions between teaching and research in higher education centre on whether these activities are inherently complementary or structurally antagonistic. There are three established dynamics that define how the two mission critical processes intersect. One dynamic is the *synergy thesis*, derived from the Humboldtian ideal, which posits that teaching is enriched by engagement with research and that students benefit from proximity to active knowledge production and the symbiotic relationship between (Humboldt, 1970; Jenkins, 2004). The *trade-off thesis* argues that research and teaching compete for scarce time, attention, and institutional rewards, particularly in massified and

performance-managed systems, and that one function must be traded-off against the other in order to ensure academic or professional success against objectives, often resulting in a zero-sum game (Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Ramsden & Moses, 1992). A third dynamic, the *marketised thesis* argues that the relationship between teaching and research varies by discipline, career stage, and organisational incentives rather than following a universal rule. In recent years, this contextual framing has been significantly influenced by the growth of education-focused academics and the entrenching of the publish or perish rhetoric in performance management (Bull et al., 2025; Smith & Walker, 2024).

Boyer, amongst many others, advocated for the end of the decades of teaching versus research debates, as they create value judgement spaces and marginalised communities fuelled by funding and reward inequities and the perceptions of indexed and ranked quality subjectivity (Burke-Smalley et al., 2017; Lewicki & Bailey, 2009). The nature of a truly Humboldtian university is one where teachers are researchers and researchers are teachers, delivering research informed teaching and critically teaching informed research (Daumiller & Dresel, 2018). In the Humboldtian utopia, both research and teaching have more than equal value to the institution and to the academic, they are interdependent, as Enders (2007) notes:

The creation of a teaching-research nexus gave the professionalization project in academe an important push. It provided a kind of mutual legitimacy base for basic research and academic teaching that were supposed to benefit from each other (p.6)

In the modern context of the Business School as cash cow (Howieson & Robson, 2022; Marginson, 2013), funding institutional growth through exponential increases in student numbers, the Humboldtian ideal becomes more of a utopian vision, undermined by increasing pressure on teaching as a process of graduate employability (Tomlinson, 2017) and research as the critical tool of dialogue between the university and the industry that demands innovation and ideation from public universities (Etzkowitz et al., 2000).

What happens when the two critical components of the academic workload go out of alignment in a Business School? What are the consequences for the effective functioning on a Business School when teaching is traded off for research? In the modern Business School this ditheistic debate seems almost nostalgic as the pressures on good teaching are existential, driven by scale, casualisation and process obsession (over epistemic ideation and integration) and the pressures on good research are polarised by external funding entreaties, ranked journals timelines and rejection rates and publish or perish imperatives.

When teaching and research are structurally misaligned, the Business School risks becoming organisationally incoherent: pedagogical quality is instrumentalised while research becomes decoupled from epistemic contribution and social relevance (Wang et al., 2024). The consequence is not merely workload intensification but a loss of institutional purpose: teaching is reduced to delivery, research to metric attainment, and the formative nexus between them collapses. In such conditions, the Business School's capacity to educate reflective practitioners and produce consequential knowledge is weakened, threatening long-term academic legitimacy and societal trust. Taken together, these pressures invite a broader reconsideration of what counts as legitimate academic work in a Business School, particularly in contexts where knowledge creation, synthesis, application, and pedagogy are increasingly differentiated yet institutionally interdependent. It is in this space that my focus shifts to the conduct, integration and credibility of business and management education research.

Revisiting the Boyer Scholarships Model

Boyer (1990) proposed four forms of scholarship that, when seen through the prism of reward and recognition, represent the richness and creativity of academic work. Boyer's model seeks to recalibrate academic value by challenging narrow, research-dominant hierarchies and recognising the plurality of intellectual work required for contemporary universities to fulfil their public purpose, extending the duality of *Bildung* and *Wissenschaft* into more modern operating models. His model responds to systemic distortions produced by performance metrics, marketisation, and managerial governance that

fragment academic identity and labour. Its underlying intention is normative and restorative: to reassert coherence across the academic role by affirming that knowledge is advanced not only through original inquiry, but also through interpretation, contextual engagement, and pedagogical practice. In doing so, it offers a conceptual language for aligning institutional missions, reward structures, and academic professionalism with the complex societal expectations placed upon modern universities.

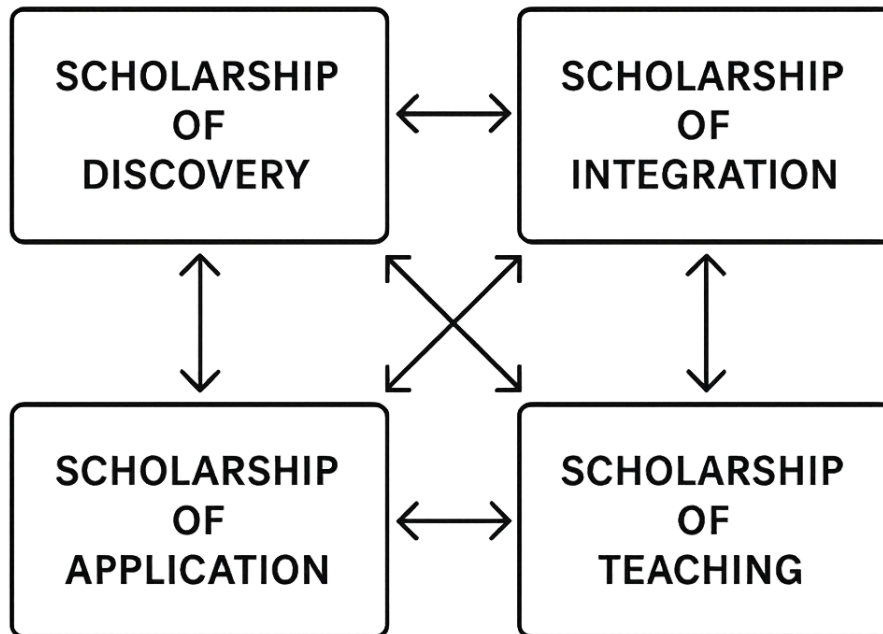


Figure 1: The Scholarship Model (Boyer, 1990)

He argued that there were four inter-connected forms of scholarship that defined academic work. The first, the *scholarship of discovery* describes the traditional forms of discipline-based research. The second, the *scholarship of teaching* relates to the study of teaching and learning processes through rigorous and practice lead research. The third is the *scholarship of integration*, which is the synthesis of information and practice across disciplines. The final one is the *scholarship of the application of knowledge*, representing the advocacy and engagement with peers outside the institution to solve real world problems. The four scholarships are articulated as a dynamically interdependent system rather than discrete domains, each deriving epistemic meaning through its relationship to the others. Knowledge generation gains significance through interpretation and connection, finds legitimacy through contextual use, and is sustained through pedagogical enactment. Conversely, teaching, application, and integration are rendered scholarly precisely through their intellectual reciprocity with inquiry, forming a recursive ecology of academic practice rather than a linear hierarchy of value. Boyer argues that all four scholarships are equally relevant to defining and rewarding academic work, and if recognised would support greater alignment between academic activity and the mission of the university.

Business and management education research is a hybrid epistemology that does not fit neatly into Boyers model. It can be argued that the actions of educational research are wholly located within the scholarship of teaching. Business and management education research sits uneasily within the scholarships model, in part because it operates at the intersection of academic inquiry, professional training, and market responsiveness (Khurana, 2010). Educational research is essentially transdisciplinary, drawing on theories from education through to disciplinary norms and the neatness between the scholarships of teaching and research become messy. It is this messiness that can explain the challenges of impact and efficacy that business and management education research practices and practitioners experience in many Business Schools. Aristotle, Kant and Heidegger have argued that messiness (chaos) needs to seek order to ensure sense (especially in chaotic and crisis-ridden contexts) (Heidegger, 2010; Loux, 2003). Scholarship on the practices of teaching can seem, in the face of the neat metricisation discussed earlier, to be self-referential and lacking the methodological parsimoniousness of disciplinary research. This inherent tension leads us to the consideration of the rationale for engaging

in business and management education research. Whilst institutionally the nexus becomes a balancing act of workload and priority, the intellectual and epistemic practice is inseparable, blurred and often contrary.

Business and management education research as a third space

To realise the impact and efficacy of business and management education research in a Business School (a concept we shall return to later in this paper) it is necessary to locate it within the established and understood principles of scholarship as articulated by Boyer. This is not a clean overlay and it is here that messiness is created, in spaces where practice, methodology and theory blur in the nexus of teaching and discovery. A useful representation of this complexity is the notion of the third space, representing what Bhabha (2021) refers to as the emergence of a new (productive) space, where cultures deeply rooted in history and tradition meet and challenge each other's assumptions and behaviours. Third spaces refer to hybrid domains that are conceptual, social, and material, where disciplinary, professional, and institutional boundaries are productively blurred. Philosophically, third spaces draw on Soja's (2008) spatial theory, emphasising lived, relational space beyond binaries. In education, third spaces disrupt the traditional separation of teaching and research by enabling dialogic, co-constructed knowledge practices (Gutiérrez, 2008). Experienced collectively, third spaces foster reflexivity, inclusivity, and creativity, aligning teaching and research as mutually reinforcing but productively messy practices rather than hierarchical or sequential activities.

Whilst there are some intersections, the processes of teaching and research in Business Schools are represented as separate cultures. They have separate leadership structures, different reward frameworks and, where market forces play a part in remuneration such as loadings and bonuses, they are rewarded differentially (Queenan & Nargundkar, 2023). Becher and Trowler (2001) argue that different forms of academic work develop their own norms, values, language, and status hierarchies. Research, particularly in research-intensive institutions and Business Schools, is culturally positioned as more prestigious and identity-defining than teaching, which is frequently framed as routine or service work (Khurana, 2010). Mingers and Willmott (2013) note that that performance management regimes linked to journal rankings (e.g., ABDC, FT50) systematically privilege research outputs, creating a stratified academic labour market in which research-active faculty accrue symbolic and material advantages over teaching-focused colleagues.

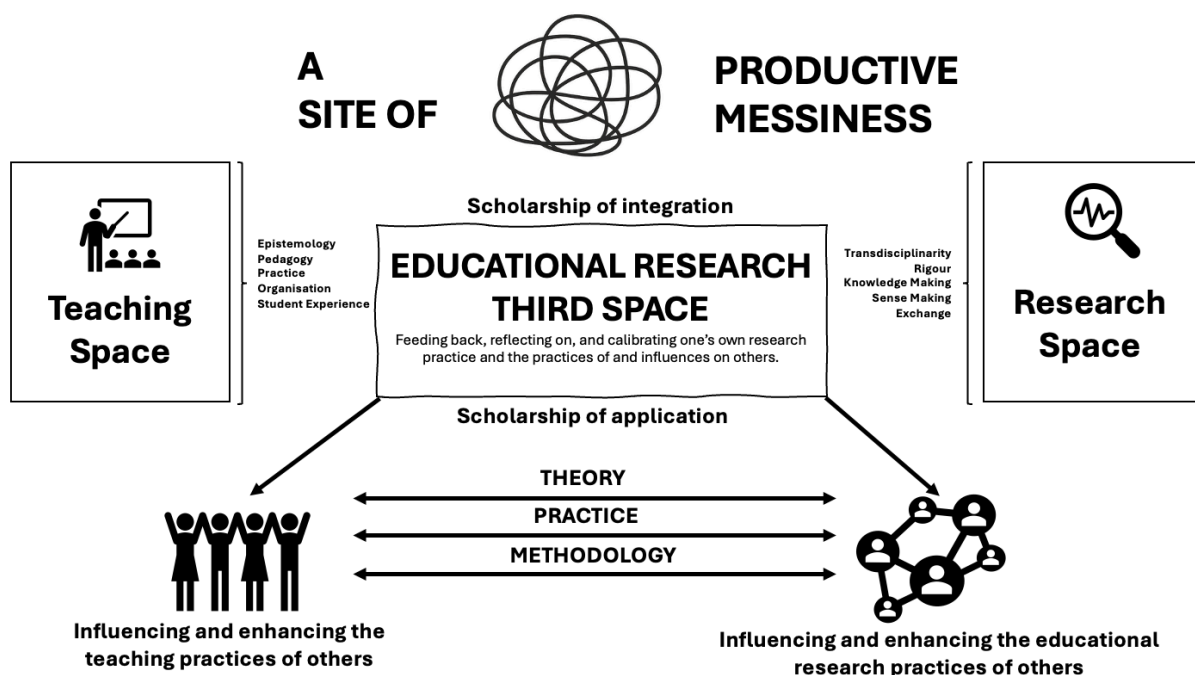
These cultures are deeply informed by methodological, intellectual, and practical traditions, which are often difficult to change and can appear rusted onto infrastructural decisions and resourcing, even where they are allocated equal workload time. My argument here is that in many Business Schools, teaching has the perception of being the lesser of the two practices. As Bennis and O'Toole (2005) note, Business Schools treat teaching as managerial training rather than intellectual labour (extended more recently through the graduate employability discourse), reinforcing the belief that it is less cognitively demanding and more care-oriented. Fairweather (1993) argues that academics quickly internalise the lesson that time spent teaching signals lower ambition or ability, even when this is empirically challenged. In Business Schools, where labour markets reward research reputation, teaching becomes symbolically associated with deficit identities (non-research active, teaching-only, education focused) as labels separating academics into categories, often with unequal in workload and remuneration (Bull et al., 2025).

This cultural disparity does not sit entirely comfortably when defining the epistemology and impact of business and management education research. There is a rhizomatic connection between theory and practice, between disciplinary notions of methodology and how disciplines are taught and learnt, and between the disciplines, contexts, subjects, and courses themselves. In effect, as educational research is often undertaken on teaching practice that is not considered as intellectual as research, it gets burdened with the same assertions of value, complexity and worth. Business and management education research is a self-sustaining and in part self-replicating ecosystem where understanding, theorising, reflecting, and learning about the phenomena of education feed into both the practice of teaching and the practice of learning, which themselves are shaped by how students and academics learn how to learn. There is a direct relationship between the practices of the academic conducting the

research and then applying it to improve their own and others' practice through publication, dissemination and sharing. There is also a direct relationship between the practices of educational research and the support and mentoring of others to do the same (especially within the publishing and dissemination communities of business and management education research).

I have brought these complexities together in a model informed by Boyer that articulates the relationships between teaching spaces (sites of epistemology, pedagogy, practice, organisation and the student experience) and research spaces (transdisciplinarity, rigour, knowledge making, sense making and exchange). The space between teaching and research in this model becomes an educational research third space, where the scholarships of integration and application enable the feeding back, reflecting on, and calibrating one's own research practice and the practices of and influences on others. The epistemic and intellectual dynamics of the space (informed by theory, methodology and practice) support how business and management education influence and enhance both the teaching and research practices of others.

Rather than resolving the competing dynamics of disciplinary knowledge production and pedagogical practice, this third space is constituted through their ongoing negotiation. In Business Schools, this produces a form of productive messiness, in which epistemic authority, professional relevance, and educational judgment are continuously re-worked in often non-linear or at least concurrent ways. This educational research third space exposes the limits of the dynamics of both the scholarships of teaching and discovery when operating alone in the context of education, creating a site where knowledge is translated, not merely transferred. Messiness benefits individuals by legitimising uncertainty, reflexivity, and judgment as essential conditions of intellectual growth (or put more simply, better teaching) rather than signs of deficiency (Schön, 1987). The in-betweenness of messiness can be closely aligned with that of liminality, where established structures are suspended and meaning is renegotiated. Liminal spaces are inherently messy: norms become destructured, identities become transitional, and outcomes remain indeterminate. This messiness is generative, enabling reflexivity and transformation by navigating uncertainty. In such spaces, uncertainty becomes a resource for learning rather than a problem to be resolved (Eller, 2024; Turner, 1987).



Influencing and enhancing the teaching practices of others

THEORY

PRACTICE

METHODOLOGY

Influencing and enhancing the educational research practices of others

Figure 2: A site of productive messiness: Educational research as a third space (after Boyer 1990)

Educational research as a third space of academic work promotes multilateral flows of knowing and doing, often iteratively and frequently integrated. It is in Boyer's scholarship of integration where the connectedness of authenticity, the connectedness of knowledge and the connectedness of learning that span disciplines and fields are integrated to explore a bigger, more ambitious vision of the world. As academic and critic Mark Van Doren noted in his 1943 book *Liberal Education*:

The connectedness of things is what the educator contemplates to the limit of his capacity. The student [who] begins early in life to see things as connected has begun the life of learning. No human capacity is great enough to permit a vision of the world as simple, but if the educator does not aim at the vision no one else will, and the consequences are dire when no one does. (Van Doren, 1943, p. 115)

Research into pedagogy in whatever form it takes (evaluative, reflective, analytical) exists in transdisciplinary (or third) spaces, where the capacity to undertake large scale learning analytics research sits side-by-side with deeply personal reflections of teaching practice and how we design our business education better. The design of effective pedagogy '...emphasizes the interrelationships between policy, theory, knowledge and rationale, all framed by political and social agendas, cultures of practice and power relations' (Evans & Waring, 2015, p. 27).

Why business and management education research is critical for Business Schools

The successful design of business education is a complex human, systemic and technological process. Teaching and learning are not unitary in how they are enacted, and they are deeply behavioural, personal, and difficult to categorise and apply common frames of agreed understanding to. In the context of the marketisation of higher education and the increasing role of metrics in measuring comparative performance in student recruitment or retention success, being better at education is not a 'nice to have' function (Hogan et al., 2021). Even within the neoliberal vision of higher education, the delivery of more effective, impactful and high quality teaching and learning is critical for ensuring sustainable competitive advantage (Hart & Rodgers, 2024), the capability to deliver lasting educational outcomes and future engagement of students as alumni (Baumann & Halpern, 2024) and the relevance of a business education to a rapidly pivoting and disrupted global and local economy (de Freitas et al., 2025; Friedland & Jain, 2022).

Educational research has deep connections to the practices of teaching and learning and the capabilities of academics to learn from each other's reflexivity and innovation (Gurung & Schwartz, 2010). It is informed by a long tradition of theory development, intellectual debate and the trans-mediation of perspectives and methodologies from a broad span of social science disciplines. There is little evidentiary doubt that well designed educational research can improve the experiences of students and deliver better educational outcomes (Bacon & Stewart, 2017; Daniel & Poole, 2009). The capacity of educational research to enhance the practices of teaching and learning and the skills of academics in the classroom does not mean it lacks the methodological rigour, the epistemological interrogation or the theory development that define other forms of research. Alternately, the capacity to engage in deeply theoretical, reflective, or empirical analyses of educational data does not mean it cannot enhance, inform, or shift practice.

It is in this third space, a site of productive messiness, that the benefits of effective educational research can be found. In the highly competitive market of Business School education, disrupted intensely by the pandemic and the increasing hyperbole and uncritical deployment of generative AI, the capacity to leverage the teaching/research nexus within the third spaces of business and management education research and transform the ways in which both teaching and research are integrated and applied to the *business* of Business Schools is where sustainable competitive advantages lie. Noted management scholars Harold Enarson and Peter Drucker observed back in 1960 that:

Here we come to a paradox. Though the university community is a major force of innovation in our society, it is curiously resistant-even hostile-to innovations attempted within the university.

The universities send out skilled specialists who spearhead purposeful change. But though specialists in the strategy and techniques of innovation crowd the campus, rarely are their skills brought to bear on the university itself. (Enarson & Drucker, 1960, p. 496)

The evaluation and enhancement of teaching, learning and assessment are mission critical activities for the modern Business School. Through rhizomatic connections between theory and practice (where theory begets practice begetting new theory) and between the academic and others inside and outside the Business School (supporting and inspiring innovation and reimagining of teaching practices in others) business and management education research makes for a creative, aspirational, and successful community of teaching and learning.

Effective, recognised, and impactful educational research requires skills sets for academics that are not part of the recruitment or researcher training processes. The development of evaluative research skills needs to start during doctoral education and feed through into the way in which Business Schools hire and train early career academics. Educational research needs to be effectively recognised in administrative instruments and policy, such as professional development standards, normative promotion criteria, recruitment and selection and workload allocation models (Chalmers, 2011). It is through this deeper integration and recognition of these third space practices that Business Schools will reap the benefits for entire spectrum of academic (scholarship) activity and the societal impact catalysed by it. For academics whose work resides within the third space sites of productive messiness, there is often a concurrent sense of liminality; an uncomfortable rite of passage away from established social structures of academia and into an uncertain epistemic state, filled with theoretical, methodological and institutional threshold concepts significantly different from their own frames of reference so as to feel disconcerting and disorientating (Webb & Tierney, 2019).

I contend that the research/teaching is already fundamentally broken in business education (more so in research-intensive research ambitious Business Schools). There is no consensus in the literature around this tension with some arguing that there has been a fundamental separation of the two functions in terms of how they are viewed and rewarded (McKinley et al., 2021). Others argue the overly heavy teaching workload resulting from increasing student numbers and rising international student load is putting significant pressure on research time and the more holistic senses of belonging (Hawa et al., 2026). This debate has only intensified in the current era of budget crises, generative AI and the proliferation of education or teaching focused staff. Business and management education research represents a strategic way to reinforce the teaching/research nexus. Kaasila, et al., (2021) argue the nexus is often defined by tension but is integral to the identity and effective practices of an academic (also see Hassaniyan, 2024). Alternately, Marsh & Hattie (2002) argue that any entwining of these practices exists as ‘an enduring myth’. There is an unashamed primacy of research as a metric of performance, ranking, accreditation and prestige. The recent debates played out on social and mainstream media over the FT50 journal rankings changes in 2026 (Rhodes & Pullen, 2026) are prescient demonstrations of this assertion. At the undergraduate level, the integration of disciplinary research into teaching is limited (although I have long argued for the leading professors and thinkers to take first year units, even if to argue I became who I am because I learnt all the foundations first). The breakdown of the research/teaching nexus is amplified these structural organisational principles. The nexus is substantially stronger in educational research, though not exclusively so, with the integration of practice and research messily sharing the third space (Calucag et al., 2025).

Finally, I want to return to the issue of trust in higher education (Bryant, 2026a). Trust in higher education is eroding not because institutions lack reflexivity, but because it has been increasingly replaced by responsibility. Trust has become an algorithm populated by compliance and policy. Good teaching and good research should not be aspirations for a Business School, they should be the baseline that all stakeholders must expect, without question. Brilliant research should not come at the cost of quality teaching. When good teaching is enacted through either of these truisms, a widening gap emerges between institutional language and lived experience. Students encounter discourses of care, authenticity, and empowerment alongside practices that presume risk, embed surveillance, and externalise responsibility. Staff experience leadership narratives of trust and autonomy that coexist with intensified control, compliance, and accountability without authority. As Business Schools face heightened uncertainty, reputational risk, and technological disruption, the pressure to maintain a

coherent image reassured by quality teaching and research will only increase. The consequences of not enabling quality as the proliferation of alternative seeking behaviours, many of which undermine the financial viability of already precarious institutions.

This is a descent marked in fractions, not leaps. Millennials' and Generation Z's trust in the value proposition of university education is declining as rising costs, uncertain labour-market opportunities, and mental-health weaken the perceived value for money of a higher education (Gallup & Lumina, 2023). While most still recognise degrees as valuable, confidence in institutions ability to deliver fair, affordable, and future-relevant outcomes has eroded, particularly among younger cohorts who increasingly view higher education as high-risk rather than transformative (Deloitte, 2023, 2024). By 2030, Generation Z will comprise 30% of the sectors postgraduate market. Losing trust through teaching that does not meet their expectations during or after their experience represents an existential tipping point. Effective business and management education research informs the future pathways of change that will be critical to redesigning an experience for these students and the generation yet to enter higher education (Generation Alpha born after 2012). In a declining market, increasing competitive within and outside the traditional offerings of a Business School, the under-interrogation and evaluation of educational aspiration is a dangerous ignorance that no school can afford.

The Business Education Research Capability framework

Despite the over sixty years since Enarson and Drucker made their observations about higher education, little has changed. This has been starkly apparent in how Business Schools have reacted and responded to challenges such as the disruptive influence of MOOCs (Rosenbaum et al., 2021), the decoupling of the actions and assertions around responsible management education (Maloni et al., 2021), their complex relationships with central institutional forces, policies, practices and objectives (Peters & Thomas, 2020). Moratis and Melissen (2022) make the case that Business Schools '...face a choice: urgently embark on an existential innovation journey inspired by what they can become or submit to certain obsolescence following from what they have been'.

Developing academic staff capability for effective and impactful business and management education research is critical to a Business School's legitimacy, societal relevance, and strategic sustainability. Whatever the opportunities and threats there are for economic, societal, or sustainable, responsible impact, these four capabilities and how they leverage possibility and creativity from the teaching/research nexus (as well as the other Boyer scholarships) will be critical to how Business Schools can compete and innovate in activities like micro-credentialing, commercialisation, global mobility, knowledge exchange, crisis management and the disruptions of AI.

Since we started the Disruptive Innovations in Business Education research group in 2021, one of our core activities has been to support academic and professional staff to engage in effective educational research. We have strongly supported SoTL as a pathway to that, and as an end in itself. Good SoTL outputs offer complementary antidotes to the organisational and epistemic challenges I have outlined in this paper. Our focus as a group has been translating the insights and reflections of SoTL into more formal research projects and outputs. We have worked with education-focused academics, early career researchers, professional services staff wanting to engage in research and more experienced academics wanting to explore education research. We regularly run sessions in the University and globally on how to start your journey as a business and management education researcher.

The Business Education Research Capability framework (BERC) has emerged from that work. The BERC framework articulates the higher-order capabilities that effective business and management education researchers need to develop throughout their journey from early career to professorial levels. They can also inform the structure and outcomes of researcher training and development activities, creating alignments within the third space that inform better teaching and research.

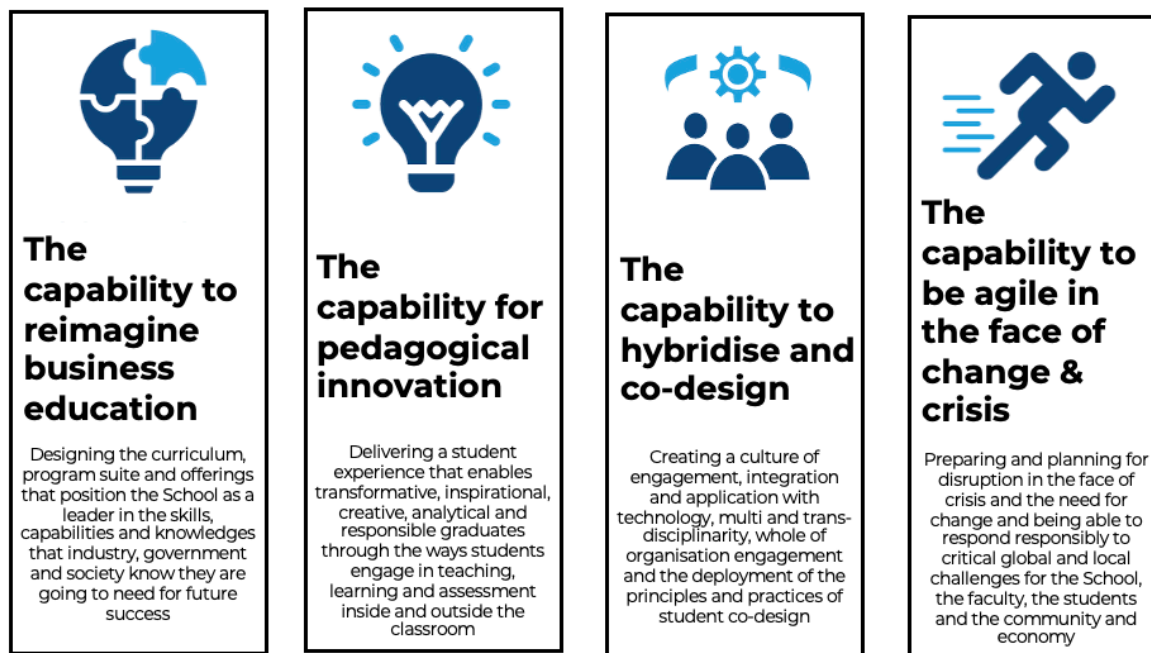


Figure 3: The Business Education Research Capability framework

1. The capability to reimagine business education

This capability is about designing the curriculum, program suite and offerings that position the Business School as a leader in the skills, capabilities and knowledges that industry, government and society know they are going to need for future success. Simply put, it is reimagining *what* we teach.

One of the biggest criticisms of business education is the perception that all Business Schools teach essentially the same thing, with the basics of accounting, marketing, statistics, economics, and management repeated ad infinitum across the world (Schlegelmilch, 2020). Overlay the refrain from industry that Business Schools teach graduates the ‘wrong’ skills for their immediate and future needs (Baird & Parayitam, 2017; Cengage, 2025), with this skills mismatch perception amplified exponentially in the era of AI (Zhou et al., 2025). Both are unfair critiques, in part because all disciplines have foundational knowledges that are necessary to form the structures of competencies required to engage in the less certain discourses that move the disciplines forward. The same applies to how we teach and research business education. An area that Boyer’s model is silent on is the administration of the scholarships. In terms of teaching, the administration burden has been well researched and debated.

The impacts of that burden are felt in the practices of educational research. The administrative and organisational structures of universities often create systemic inertia that constrains attempts to reimagine business education. inhabiting a policy, regulatory and compliance stance, universities operate as loosely coupled, professional bureaucracies, in which authority is distributed across departments, faculties, and committees, limiting the capacity for coordinated curriculum transformation or individual redesign informed by (or to inform) educational research (Pambudi et al., 2025; Teelken, 2012). In Business Schools, external institutional pressures further reinforce conservatism. Accreditation regimes and global rankings standardise program architectures, encouraging convergence and discouraging radical redesign of teaching practices (Schlegelmilch, 2020).

In terms of competitive advantage, whether that be for research funding, industry engagement and advocacy or student recruitment, innovating what is taught, what learning experiences are created and the types of graduates being produced, evaluating the success and impact in a publicly trustworthy form, offer fertile grounds to differentiate a Business School from others and carve out a unique selling point in the market. As Hibbert and Foster (2022) argue, the general structures of business and management education (courses, units, programs) are relatively homogenous in Business Schools, but the more

intangible elements of the experience, the epistemic uniqueness (amongst others they cite) is where competitive advantage can be drawn. In the conclusion of their chapter, they make the case that:

We believe that research and scholarship will continue to be the most highlighted features of most individual narratives, but the Scholarship of Discovery focused on education theory and the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning...could now be more important elements in all our narratives, if we wish them to be.

My argument is that whilst the structural rigidity limits innovation, it does not prevent it. It is critical for the future of Business Schools where enrolment trajectories are softening to declining, to identify new ways of imaging business education. I agree with Hibbert and Fosters assertion of the criticality of discovery to that ambition. Educational research enables Business Schools to design new and innovative curriculum, program suite and micro-credentialed offerings that can position the institution as a leader in the skills, capabilities, and knowledges that industry, government and society know they are going to need for future success. This is built on the foundations, the explorations, the risks and the inspiration of business and management education research. The teaching/research nexus here is especially critical in that evaluation, experimentation and learning analytics feed into the iterative redesign of business education from within, but also engages the institution outwards with industry, the community and society through dissemination, translation and engaged research. It is a unique interaction between practice, research and engagement that creates the environment that supports an effective and successful reimagination of the philosophy and activities of business education at an institution.

What are the skills that underpin this capability?

a. Risk appetite

Reimagination comes with reputational, financial and experiential risks. How do you design your research incorporating and managing risk and how do you feel safe taking risks (considering the connected nature of the third space).

b. Influencing

How do you translate the findings, insights and theories emerging from your research into recommendations for actions and change. The best papers I publish are the one that make theoretical contributions with clear and evidenced calls for action. How does the research influence and enhance the practices of others.

c. Ideation

Reimagination links strategy with vision. A strategy without a vision is a series of connected tasks. A vision without a strategy is a daydream. How do you ideate new ways of doing and new areas of learning. This capability is a critical nexus between reportage and progression.

d. Ethics

Ethics will come up regularly across these capabilities. Educational research ethics are complex to navigate due to overlapping institutional roles and embedded power asymmetries. When academics research their own students, hierarchical relationships complicate genuinely voluntary consent and raise risks of coercion (Noy et al., 2025; Rendos & Wilburn, 2025). Additionally, insider research, privacy concerns, and the use of digital data environments create evolving ethical ambiguities that are not easily resolved through standard protocols (Golding & Ince, 2024). Reimagination ambitions are a leap into the unknown for both the researcher and the students, amplifying these concerns.

e. Governance

This is where the third space messiness emerges. Teaching spaces have unique, defined and sometimes burdensome governance. Change takes time. A new program might take two years to wind its way through governance hurdles at faculty and institutional level. Research can be deeply compromised by a governance system not designed to support research rather pedagogical action. Effective governance literacy is critical for the educational researcher driving change through the third space.

2. The capability for pedagogical innovation

This capability is about delivering a student experience that enables transformative, inspirational, creative, analytical and responsible graduates through the ways students engage in teaching, learning and assessment inside and outside the classroom. It is the *how* we teach.

As Enarson and Drucker noted, universities are good at sending innovators out to industry but not so good at innovating their own practices. In the disrupted marketised world of Business Schools, innovation in pedagogy and teaching is a currency that builds competitive advantage both at the point of collaborations between Business Schools and other faculties. The student experience as operationalised through teaching, learning, and assessment is central to both the viability and competitive positioning of contemporary Business Schools. In increasingly marketised higher education systems, prospective students evaluate programmes not only on reputation but on the perceived quality, relevance, and employability outcomes of the learning experience (Tomlinson et al., 2021). Differentiation in pedagogical design has become a key competitive lever, especially for Business Schools strategically bound by student recruitment, retention and achievement. Business Schools that embed innovative assessment and more discursive forms of teaching and learning, engage in forward thinking as students capabilities and characteristics change.

Educational research enables a Business School to deliver a student experience that is transformative, inspirational, creative, analytical, and responsible for graduates through the ways students engage in teaching, learning and assessment inside and outside the classroom. This can happen in many forms, from pure experimental research, through to post-facto evaluation through to theorising the impact of interventions. One critical benefit for the practice of teaching is how educational research connects curriculum design and innovative teaching practice to the theories of adult education. Masterman (2019) explores the complex relationship that many academics have with theoretical frameworks of adult education and pedagogy, noting ‘Although theory can inform their practice, lecturers do not necessarily set out to implement a specific approach. Rather, theories tend to become interwoven into their general world view’ (p.126). Masterman’s observation is directly related to the third space nature of educational research and how the teaching/educational research nexus is transdisciplinary and dynamic.

What are the skills that underpin this capability?

a. Theory development

Effective educational research is underpinned by the rich intellectual traditions of education and the wider social sciences. As a disciplinary researcher, these may represent a new field of knowing. Being able to articulate a theoretical plane relevant to the field (across all the supportive, systematic and counter perspectives within that articulation) is critical

b. Student engagement

The skills of identifying and interrogating the factors that define mission-critical outcomes such as retention, satisfaction, attainment and experience are key for effective business and management education research, moving the student from subject to participant.

c. Learning, teaching and assessment practice

Learning, teaching and assessment are frequently framed in habit and rolling forms of repetition (not helped by the complexity of change within the governance structures). The skills of being able to (re)design these practices effectively and in alignment with the vision of the education and the authenticities within the discipline are critical (Bryant, 2026b).

3. The capability to hybridise and co-design

New markets, technological disruption and changing demographics for Business Schools have initiated several false dawns over the last decade. De Meyer (2022) makes the case that Business Schools have reached ‘...a tipping point that can become a quantum leap if scholars and researchers are brave enough to break out of their comfort zones, combine their arsenal of expertise and confidently propose analysis, insights and solutions on a smorgasbord of issues that confront organisations across multiple disciplines’ (p.53). He argues that Business Schools need to hybridise and co-design their scholarship

and their research with academics and students from outside the traditional disciplines, from faculties across the universities and schools of thought outside the academy. He states that the challenges of a modern Business School cannot be addressed:

...by the traditional management disciplines alone. They require fresh eyes looking through multi-disciplinary lenses beyond just management. To do this effectively, business schools need to bring onboard scholars and experts in political science, sociology, nuclear physics, ethics and morality, technology, national security and engineering sciences. (p.53)

Business and management education research enables a Business School to create a culture of engagement, integration, and application with technology, multi and trans-disciplinarity, whole of organisation engagement and the deployment of the principles and practices of student co-design. It brings together educational developers, learning designers, teaching academics and students with a common lexicon and measures of success (or failure). It provides a framework for cross-discipline, cross-functional or even cross-faculty teams to engage in innovation, transformation or change and find common grounds for impact and teaching and learning practices.

Co-design improves learning, empowers students as active contributors, and strengthens relationships across the institution, especially within the third space of educational research (Omland et al., 2025). Co-design broadens the epistemic base of inquiry. By involving professional services staff, such as learning designers, librarians, and student support specialists, researchers gain access to operational knowledge, data infrastructures, and student experience insights that enrich both design and analysis. Integrating academic and professional expertise leads to outputs that are simultaneously rigorous, practical, and responsive to diverse student cohorts (Khan et al., 2025).

What are the skills that underpin this capability?

a. Collaboration

This is a singular but critical skill. Collaboration widens the scope and impact of educational research from the design, the methodology, the analysis and the dissemination. As with all academic collaboration, clear expectation setting, responsibilities and attribution should be set up as the project starts, otherwise tensions and unethical behaviour can tear apart collaborative projects. This is especially the case where power relationships may influence the structure and undertaking of research (such as with students).

4. The capability to be agile in the face of change and crisis

Business Schools have navigated and continue to navigate concurrent and existential crises of confidence, capability or relevance in the modern world. Henry Mintzberg (2014) argued that if Business Schools were 'really doing their job' their graduates would leave the institution with an epistemic humility or as Mintzberg put it 'an acute appreciation of what they do not know' (p.75). Writing in *The Guardian*, Parker (2018) argued that whilst:

Business Schools have huge influence...they are also widely regarded to be intellectually fraudulent places, fostering a culture of short-termism and greed....employers complain that graduates lack practical skills, conservative voices scorn the arriviste MBA, Europeans moan about Americanisation, radicals wail about the concentration of power in the hands of the running dogs of capital.

Business Schools are always in crisis. They are not in my opinion, as Parker asserts, intellectually fraudulent. They do face crises of confidence regarding their relevance, the role in shaping the ethical and responsible frameworks shaping how societies and economies *do* business and what role business has in a productive and successful democracy. They are also at the nexus of both the influence and solutions for successive critical global and local challenges, with the expectations that curriculum and graduates can keep pace with the crisis that is yet to have happened or is unfolding in front of them at

pace. To that end, they are often reactive, slowed down further by labyrinthine governance and leadership structures

Business and management education research supports how a Business School can prepare and plan for disruption in the face of crisis and the need for change. It helps create a culture of crisis-preparedness that can respond responsibly to critical global and local challenges. Educational research provides a reliable and rigorous foundation on which agile decisions and rapid responses can be made with a higher degree of confidence (Bryant et al., 2025). It stress-tests models of curriculum and delivery, student experience strategies, uses of technology amongst many other interventions that can be deployed as part of a design portfolio to new and emerging challenges, opportunities and threats.

The ability to pivot so quickly from face-to-face teaching to remote during the COVID-19 pandemic (and do it well) was strongly informed by educational research and its direct feeding back into practice (Cutri et al., 2020). Educational research was epistemically critical in enabling Business Schools to pivot effectively to online delivery during the pandemic by providing a robust, pre-existing knowledge base on digital pedagogy, instructional design, and technology-enhanced learning (which was super-charged during the MOOC hype cycle earlier). Whilst the shift was abrupt, educators drew on established frameworks for online engagement, assessment, and blended learning to maintain continuity and quality (Koh & Daniel, 2022). The pandemic accelerated the application and refinement of these epistemic practices, transforming online learning into a core strategic modality for business education rather than a temporary substitute (Aristovnik et al., 2023). For the historians amongst you, it is interesting to observe that there was a rapid and sometimes uncritical snapback to the teaching practices of 2019 after the pandemic 'ended', as if those practices were the ones that had been forged in the research evaluation fire of decades of experimentation in the same way online and blended learning had been (Bryant, 2021, 2022).

What are the skills that underpin this capability?

a. Agility

Agility enables educational researchers to rapidly adapt pedagogical, methodological, and technological approaches in response to disruption, ensuring continuity and relevance. It underpins the capacity to translate emerging evidence into timely, context-sensitive educational innovations during crises.

b. Innovation

Innovation equips educational researchers to design novel, evidence-based solutions that respond to unprecedented challenges in business education. It drives the creation of scalable, impactful practices that extend beyond crisis response to long-term transformation.

c. Future thinking

Future thinking enables educational researchers to envision plausible future states of business education and proactively design for them. It supports the anticipation of emerging disruptions, allowing pre-emptive, evidence-informed responses rather than reactive adaptation.

Conclusion

Business Schools face an uncertain future, with disruptions to international student recruitment, global mobility, intergenerational change, an ongoing cost of living crisis matched with labour shortages and structural upheavals enacted by generative AI. Their activities and their growth strategies exist within the existential storms of the climate crisis, an energy crisis, and a burgeoning stability crisis in geo-politics. Business and management education research will not dictate how Business Schools respond and flourish in this environment. What it does do, aside from the obvious betterment of the teaching and learning experience for students and staff, is that it enables a culture of rhizomatic connection.

Changing the culture of Business Schools from essentially linear to connected transforms the skills and capabilities students graduate with. But more importantly, these connections, knowledges, and experiences spawn others, related and unrelated to their own. One teacher evaluating their practice inspires another one across the hall to make a change, impacting the experiences of even more students.

Rhizomatic connection making is a transferable skill that if applied to curriculum design, research, engagement, advocacy, and strategic development will truly transform a Business School to lead for the betterment of society.

The context for this paper has been business education as delivered with Business Schools and faculties. The notion of educational research as a messy third space is not unique to that context. It is true to argue that other disciplinary education contexts enjoy different relationships within their operating models, the core premise of this paper remains relevant. I argue that all educational research that focuses on disciplinary specific educational contexts resides in similar sites of productive messiness. They will vary according to status, reward, recognition and reputation. For example, engineering education has its discipline located Field of Research code and STEM education exists as a sub-code in the education category. What does not change is the formation of the third spaces between research and teaching and the critical importance of Boyer's scholarships of integration and application, generating and sustaining the messiness.

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