

On the Evolution of an Academic Course - A Digression

B. Shekar*

Note: *This is an interview to unearth the efforts of an innovator in developing a new course in a Post Graduate management programme. The thought process in developing a new course is in establishing connectivity between logic & evidence by searching for a pattern through the Input-Throughput-Output-Outcome paradigm. The science of decision making is strong in logic and hence there is expectation of a perfect outcome. In many cases reality does not work that way. The ability to link the unconnected may emerge as an outcome of the new course. Decision-making, in the real world of uncertainty consisting of multifarious dimensions, is an art by itself. The course may provide cues as to how to make decisions despite many hidden variables present in life of which management is a part.*

-Editor-in-Chief

Prolegomena

Prof. B. Shekar was interviewed by Ms. Caruna Bhat (Strategy Researcher at Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB)) on 7th August 2015 in English. The interview lasted for three hours in a single sitting. This is a part of the "Qualitative Methods Research" course conducted by Professor Ganesh Prabhu. The purpose was to conceptualise a theory based on an ethnographic interview. The researcher explained that the purpose of the interview was to know the cause behind a highly uncommon quirk; and also to figure out the driving forces behind it and understand if it influenced other aspects of the interviewee's life as well. The subject was made aware that the interview was being recorded

and would be used for ethnographic analysis to which the subject agreed with the precondition of masking the answers to some questions. The interview also gives cues to the understanding the genesis of a new course which is of interest to us here. It also gives an idea of personality and environment characteristics that influenced the birth and development of such a course. In the transcript, questions (denoted by Q) have been asked by the interviewer (Caruna Bhat), and the answers (A) have been provided by the interviewee (Prof. B. Shekar). The author wishes to thank Professor Ganesh Prabhu and Ms. Caruna Bhat for permitting this interview to be published in Dharana. Apart from stylistic corrections the responses are not modified

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except in places for improved clarity. The Question-Answer format has been adopted to retain the flavour present at the time of interview. IIMB is not responsible for the views expressed here. The views expressed by the author are solely his and Dharana does not assume responsibility for the same.

The author thankfully acknowledges the help rendered by Mrs. Sugandha Ananth in making stylistic improvements thus enhancing the readability of this article. The author also thankfully acknowledges the help rendered by Dr. Geetha Subramanian in imparting an improved flow by altering the sequence of questions asked during the interview.

The Interview

Q1. Sir, could you talk about yourself -your educational background, your childhood and upbringing?

A. I was born in a town called Madurai in the state of Tamil Nadu. My schooling happened there. After schooling I joined the Bachelors' program in Engineering at REC (Regional Engineering College, now branded as NIT- National Institute of Technology), Trichy. Subsequent to that I joined the Indian Telephone Industries (ITI) in Bangalore. While on the rolls of ITI itself, I completed my postgraduate degree in Computer Technology from Indian Institute of Technology Delhi. After spending a short stint at ITI, I quit and worked in a couple of private sector enterprises for a year. I then joined Bharat Electronics at Bangalore- another public sector unit, and worked for two years. By that time, I had had enough with the industry. I joined the Indian Institute of Science for a Ph.D. in Computer Science. I worked on pattern recognition for about four years. After completion, I was a post-doctoral fellow in the Computer Vision laboratory there itself for a year. Following that, I joined Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) in 1990 and since then, I have been here.

Q2. Given the fact that you have a Computer Science background and those are the people who are usually the most tech savvy ones, the ones that fawn over the latest gadgets (including mobile phones among several others), why don't you carry a mobile phone at all?

A. I think there are health hazards associated with carrying a mobile phone. I have, in fact, read a couple of articles about the associated health concerns with a lot of statistical evidence. Therefore, I decided against carrying one despite the inconvenience caused by the lack of having one.

Q3. Don't other people react to this- when they discover this fact? How about your colleagues or your students?

A. Students find it surprising, but students don't generally question their teachers (smiles). Colleagues know my reasons!

Q4. But haven't you faced a negative reaction sometimes? Doesn't anybody complain that it is difficult to contact you?

A. No, it has never been a problem. It's not at all difficult to contact me, you see. My movements are fairly streamlined. Either I'm at the office, or at home or I'm at one or two other venues with my friends. Incidentally, all of them have mobile phones as well – so if I have to be contacted, one can call their mobile phones and get in touch with me. Plus, all of them have a landline through which one can get in touch with me as well. Therefore contacting me has never been an issue.

Q5. You mentioned that your major cause for not carrying a mobile phone was the associated health hazards. However, seeing people in your family and your friends carrying a mobile, you are exposed to the harmful radiation anyway. How do you justify your choice in this scenario?

A. See it this way; suppose I have a mobile, there is a general tendency to talk a lot over the mobile. So you keep gluing it to your ears. At least that is something I can avoid by not carrying one.

Q6. So you're saying that in case, hypothetically, if we provide you with a mobile phone that has significantly lower health risks, you'd consider carrying one?

A. That's very hypothetical. I know that can never happen! Why should we talk about such situations? But just in case that happens, then it would be more like a landline. And my landline, if I were to carry it with me, that would be fine.

Q7. So then what's your view on basic models of cell phones that would have significantly lesser radiation?

A. ALL of them are bad. All of them. And that's enough a reason!

Q8. What I still fail to understand is that you're surrounded by gadgets anyway! In this office itself I can see your desktop and other devices that emit radio waves - so why just ban the phone?

A. Yes that is true. I'm not saying that isn't. I know about that. Look at it this way. If I'm surrounded by things that are already bad, why should I make it worse? That's all. So I don't want to keep it!

Q9. This is pretty radical for me! People of my generation are practically glued to it. So much so that we are buying power banks to charge our phones multiple times a day. And yet here you are wilfully choosing not to carry one. From my viewpoint, that is pretty radical.

A. It hasn't really made much of difference. Apart from a sporadic inconvenience here and there it hasn't had much of an effect.

Q10. How about when you travel?

A. No, not even then. Why do you need a mobile? Rewind to about fifty years back. There was no mobile and we were functioning just fine! The fabric of the society was fine. Someone may say that it's bad that we're not able to contact you – but my thinking is that's fine. What's so urgent? On hearing this they choose to keep mum! It's like someone with idiosyncrasies like me living with you. To begin with, you may find such people quite different. But as time goes on, one gets used to them. All people I know are now used to the fact that I do not carry a mobile.

Q11. How do people take it when they find this out for the first time?

A. I state my reasons – the health hazards. Many of them know the health hazards mobile phones pose, but they aren't bothered by them. But I am. So, I follow my way and they follow theirs.

Q12. Haven't you lost out on a lot of opportunities because somebody felt it was too much of a hassle

getting in touch with someone who doesn't carry a mobile phone?

A. I have lost out on a lot of opportunities in general as well! (laughs) Doesn't matter! How significant is "losing out opportunities because of this" to me actually depends on how you look at it! This reminds me of the time when I got an opportunity to do my Ph.D. in Canada. But around that time my mother passed away and I had to defer the admission. And finally I just waived it off.

Q13. Why did you waive off the admission?

A. Because staying back with my father was more important for me than going and doing my Ph.D. in Canada. I was at the Indian Institute of Science. I'd already joined the Ph.D. program. But looking back, going to Canada at that point in time would certainly have been more beneficial. In general, we as a country respect degrees from universities in the West. So it might have been to my advantage. But as I told you earlier that is not what drives me. In the end, it boils down to how you look at things and want in life.

Q14. Every person is motivated by one of the dimensions of social systems that drives them. There are five of them – power, wealth, knowledge, values, and aesthetics. Which one or more of these drives you?

A. My value system. I attach values to several dimensions that are related to my being a part of society.

Q15. What are those?

A. Many – Family and friends, and my own personal ethical values to name a few.

Q16. So going back to the question I was asking. Any other radical decision you have made in your life?

A. A radical shift is my career itself! Not very many people who have been in the industry with the scent of money will come over to academics. And that too, to start all over again by doing a Ph.D. and afterwards joining as an assistant professor at the age of thirty eight with absolutely no monetary compensation for your industry experience. So that was a radical choice. Next is the shift in my academic career. I was into

Computer Science when I just shelved all those things and went in a different direction. I now teach a course called Creativity in Arts and Science (CARTS) which is radically different from the courses I was teaching earlier.

Q17. *It's like you shifted from a completely left brained to a completely right brained activity!*

A. I don't know! Maybe I am trying to make the right brain a little bit more left brainish- so to speak. A little bit more of "why is it happening" – as some of my students may say. Maybe you should go over and check my blog. Some of my students' comments are there. I generally keep only my students' comments there, as I don't get the time to write because of paucity of time.

Q18. *Could you tell me more about how you went from computer science- a "bit-by-bit logical and highly structured", to a field like creativity – that is literally as free-wheeling as it can get?*

A. This inclination towards the arts and what are usually called the right brain areas has been in the family for a long time. All the people that I have lived with – my mother, my uncles, my father - had it. My mother could sing very well. My father was a connoisseur and could also sing. My uncle is a writer, a music director, singer, actor, etc. Another uncle of mine a doctor by profession, has learnt music, and is also into literature. One more uncle is a good amateur photographer. So you see, I have been in an environment of this sort since my formative years. This has been at the back of my mind for a very long time. The only thing is that I did not have an opportunity or the courage to shift, and when the opportunity arose, I grabbed it with both hands and shifted.

Q19. *Given the background that you just spoke of, why did you not venture into music or arts in the first place? Why did you go into a more technological field?*

A. That's because many Indian families, especially South-Indian families, are conservative. Their thinking - going into technology-based fields fetch a more reliable source of income as compared to venturing into arts where the income may not be steady or significant enough. That is why I joined an engineering program.

Q20. *So computer science wasn't really your calling?*

A. If I look at it on a relative basis, between Electronics which is what my Bachelor's degree was in and Computer Science, I chose Computer Science. But between Computer Science and Arts, it's Arts! However, I do retain interests in conceptual computing-related research.

Q21. *You seem to have a lot of options! Are there still some you haven't pursued?*

A. I don't really choose based on what I can excel at. It is just my interest – well you may also call it as a deep intent to pursue a field. So if anything crops up in the future, I may pursue that too.

Q22. *Your Ph.D. is in pattern recognition as a part of Computer Science. How did you shift from that to creative arts?*

A. Actually you cannot call it a radical shift either; pattern recognition is what we do even in Arts. To that extent there is a lot of commonality between that and this. The only difference is that one has a more computing flavour while the other has more intuition and insight-oriented flavour. And insight is important in any field that one works in!

Q23. *Did you have to suffer a significant monetary loss by switching from one field that you had quite a lot of years of work experience in, to one that you were just venturing into?*

A. No, there was no significant monetary loss. I am in the same institute and I just switched from teaching computer-related topics to teaching art-related topics.

Q24. *How about when you shifted from industry to teaching?*

A. When I shifted to teaching, I was only teaching computer-based subjects, not arts. That was for the first nine years of my tenure here. There was some loss there, but it was not that important.

Q25. *How did your family react to the shift from the industry to academics and the associated loss?*

A. That of course is subjective. They gave more importance to my being comfortable in my life as compared to being in the perennially stressful industry

with all its tensions. In fact, initially I thought that only industry has a lot of tension and academics would be a lot more relaxed. I later found that to be completely false. (smiles) But let me also add that the tension in academics is of a completely different sort and much less intense.

Q26. How did you react to going from your goals being set by your boss/higher ups in the company to academics where you set your goals yourself?

A. Contrary to popular belief, I don't think it's difficult. I think this is far more interesting and the results are far more long-lasting; and also self-motivating oneself leads to better results! Rather than being externally pressurized to do something, I prefer self-motivation. Isn't the latter much better than the former? And that is a good enough reason for me to shift over, despite monetary losses.

Q27. It is a good enough reason for you, but how about your family? Does the same logic apply there as well?

A. My wife is a doctor, so this aspect didn't matter. My father was a government officer and he retired while holding a senior position, so even he wasn't monetarily dependent on me. So all of that was taken care of.

Q28. So were they neutral about your decision to switch or were they supportive about it?

A. They didn't say anything in fact! They said do what you want. So it was pretty free-wheeling. In fact after completing the Master's Degree my father wanted me to pursue a Ph.D. It was I who decided at that point of time to join Indian Telephone Industry instead of pursuing my Ph.D.

Q29. So at that point of time you actually wanted to be in the industry?

A. What I know is that at some point of time I felt enough is enough with the industry and decided to switch to academics. As for then, I don't know. See when you're very young, you're not very clear about things and of what you want in life, and hence you're not very sure. You're driven by your peers into the so-called right direction. Even right now, I am very sure that some of my colleagues are being driven by their peers.

Q30. Is that not true for literally anybody - being driven by one's peers?

A. No, I don't think so. At least it's not true in my case. I am not driven by them. In fact many a time I tell my students "look I'm sharing my experiences. I'm not going to play to the gallery. I won't give you what each of you wants. What I feel should be given is what you'll get. You're here because you like it. While deciding whether to take up this course, your seniors and your super seniors have advised you that it's worth your time and so you're all here. That's it."

Q31. Given the fact that students would have certain expectations of a course, and that you blatantly tell them that you refuse to play to the gallery, are they really satisfied with the course you offer?

A. It seems to be so for the past several years! (laughs) I cannot say for sure, but from the comments one gets to know. I don't edit any comment, I just tell them to write whatever they want and send them to me so that I can put it up on my blog because I do not have a website. In any case, I do not deviate from the outline except for minor deletions due to time-constraints.

Q32. But they do know that the comments are coming back to you. That may lead to a bias.

A. After passing out, how will it affect them? They can be very frank in what they say. Apprehensive of the grades they may get, they may not be frank while they're in the course. But afterwards, there is little reason to hold back. All comments come in post-facto.

Q33. Do you incorporate any changes in your teaching methods or content based on the comments and the feedback that you receive?

A. I only do that if I'm really convinced. For example, there is a component in my course that is called Creativity Showcase. The last part of each session is an opportunity given to the students to come and display their own creative talents - which can be dancing, singing, skit, orchestration, photography, painting - anything in fact. This was a suggestion from some students of an earlier batch.

Q34. How open are people in coming forth and presenting to the whole class impromptu?

A. It's not impromptu! It is decided well in advance as to which two presentations (either individually or in groups) will be held in a given week. This gets communicated to me through respective class representatives.

Q35. *Is there a proclivity that people have, to present in groups?*

A. No, there is nothing of that sort. In fact a couple of years back, there was this guy who wanted to sing all by himself but then he found a guitar accompaniment and a rhythm accompaniment (some percussion instrument) which turned out pretty well once the three of them teamed up.

Q36. *So the class on creativity, is it linked to the musical background that you had while growing up?*

A. The class is linked not only to music; but also to cinema, drama, literature and math as well. All of these were also a part of my background and hence they too influence my teaching.

Q37. *How did you not go into one of these art-fields as an artist instead? I am not referring to the beginning. You've already told me about the conservative background; how about later?*

A. It's too much of a razor's edge. Getting out of an institute and becoming a music director's assistant, or starting out all by myself will require too much of a technical expertise that I don't possess. I'll never do that. Even in my course, I put across a very basic understanding of creative elements present in various facets of arts. But if you have to perform, that requires a very high degree of technical expertise. I do not have it despite being associated with these fields for so long. For example, I'm not a skilled instrument player. But I can appreciate and look at art from a variety of viewpoints that help discerning the creative elements present; gain insights, translate them into an inspiration for my students.

Q38. *So you're saying that you are a very good conduit but you cannot be a performer?*

A. Well, I won't say conduit, because conduit means just taking and passing it on. I do add my own insights and external experts' insights as well. As far as performing goes, I can sing and play the piano-accordion. I have

also been an actor in plays, a member of an orchestra and such sorts of things. However never with a tremendous amount of technical expertise. Actually it's not even these things. I wouldn't like to venture in that direction at all. Partly because I like it this way and not in any other way.

Q39. *Is that because of your age- something along the lines of its being too late?*

A. Now of course perhaps the age has come wherein I cannot really get into such things, but even at a particular point of time when age would not have been an inhibiting factor, I would prefer this to that.

Q40. *Is this some kind of risk-averse behavior?*

A. What goes on at the back of my mind, I do not know. All I can say is that it's not risk-averseness. To put it mildly I like it this way. Let me re-emphasize - I REALLY like it this way.

Q41. *What I am trying to understand here is why would you not want to be both the performer and the medium?*

A. If I have to perform, I will be performing that and only that and nothing else other than that. Whereas here, the spectrum is vast. We start with elementary forms of music and then we get into cinema, literature, photography, painting, drawing, and then into mathematics! This spectrum is something that I may not be able to cover if I become a performer. And if you ask, why not both, I think both may not be possible. I do not know of any such. I have only read of Leibnitz being a one of the kind you state. I know of some people, but they too are not in the mould you are referring to. If you take Raja Ramanna, he was a good pianist and a physicist, but that's all! Take Einstein, he was a good violinist and a great physicist and that's all. But here, look at the range of topics available to me. I have the privilege of going as much deep as I like and can.

Q42. *So how do you cover that range in a ten week course? We're barely brushing the surface in many of our courses!*

A. That of course is something you will have to figure out all by yourself- you are free to sit in my class and find out for yourself! (laughs)

Q43. How do the PGP's (MBA students of IIMB), who have been in strict teaching courses mostly, react to a course such as yours?

A. They like it. They want it. The reactions and points of view may differ, but in general they have been positive about the course. Incidentally such a course is offered only at IIMB.

Q44. What are the best reactions that you have gotten to your course?

A. Best reactions by students, right? For that I suggest you go and read the comments on my blog. Its easy reading and sometimes it will make interesting reading too. (The interviewer visited the above mentioned blog and found various comments, the most noteworthy being the following : One by a former student who mistakenly attended a class when he came in for a bag he'd left behind and was so impressed that he took up the course.)

Q45. What is the best criticism that you have gotten?

A. I cannot call it as best criticism. However I remember one girl saying, "Sir you should bring creativity in Management into your course." To this I replied - that is up to you. I cannot bring creativity in finance, I cannot bring creativity in marketing, I cannot bring creativity in POM (Production and Operations Management), and I cannot bring creativity into OB (Organisational Behavior). These are not in my

jurisdiction. I try to identify the creative elements in various art forms. The rest is yours – choose, take away, go back, go out, pass out and practice. At the very basic level, creativity does not need expertise. It requires a very good intrinsic mind-set. You do not need technical expertise. That is why, regardless of background, we are able to appreciate and get inspired. Take a tune or a musical piece. I may create a musical piece without needing any technical expertise. But if I want it to reach the masses, I need someone who is a technical expert- who'll implement what I have in my mind.

Q46. This covers your professional life. I have noticed that people who are into music and arts are usually disciplined in their lifestyle. Does that hold for you as well?

A. Oh no! You see any artist's work station and you'll find colours splattered all around. That's where their art emerges from. However, I do have a set routine with respect to my physical self. I wake up fairly early and take a walk. Due to some health-related issues, I also have a regulated diet with a limited intake of oil, salt, etc. I drink warm water most of the time. My meal timings do not vary much either. I spend my day in the office and in the evenings I may go for a walk. So yes, if you call this as disciplined, then it is. What I do in the office or outside the mentioned activities does not have a set structure.