Beyond Managism: negotiated narratives and critical management education in practice

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Management education and learning stream

Abstract

A pragmatist conception of critical management education and learning is first set out. This accepts a degree of ‘functionality’ between management study and management practice. It is, however, a non-managerialist and non-technicist functionality. The criterion for judging critical management learning cannot be how well it reveals truths in any absolute or foundationalist sense. The only possible criterion is how well, relative to alternative types of learning, it informs the practices of people involved in managerial situations (regardless whether these are managers or not). Next, one way of applying pragmatist critical management principles is outlined. This works through negotiated narratives and stands as an alternative to orthodox management education approaches – ones to which the critical concept of scholarism is applied. The outline is then developed through an ethnographic style account of an instance of such a practice. Central to this piece of teaching and learning practice is the critical concept of managism. Managist discourse and its role in framing managerial thinking and practices is examined and debated by the management class in the process of attempting collectively to make sense of stories brought to the class by students, as managerial practitioners, and by the teacher, as an ethnographic researcher. The basic ‘story’ that the paper tells is rehearsed at the end in the form of a fairy tale. This is done as an alternative to concluding or ‘closing’ the paper. The story of critical management education and learning and what is done in its name continues to unfold.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. First, it argues for a pragmatist conception of critical management education and learning. And, second, it presents an account of such an approach in practice. This is offered as a possible way forward for critical management studies and an alternative to certain non-critical practices that currently occur within management education. The paper is written in the spirit of the reflective practitioner (Schön 1983) and its style will reflect its content. It will use narrative, as
well as critical reflection and social science concepts, to put forward thoughts that can be taken up in debates about management education and learning practices. The paper is intended to encourage the development of new negotiated narratives about critical activities in this field of endeavour.

The first task is to argue the case for a pragmatist style of critical management studies. At present there is no single conception of what critical management study entails and this makes it necessary for anyone claiming to be operating in such a spirit to explain his or her own position. Following this, the basic principles of a negotiated narrative style of pragmatist critical management study are outlined. As this is very much an emergent notion of how practitioners’ own stories, academic research ‘stories’ and academic theory might be brought together, the notion is more fully developed in an ethnographic account of one attempt to apply these principles. We will therefore look closely at a particular episode of management teaching and learning – one which focuses on a particular ‘critical concept’ - that of managism. First, though, the pragmatist approach to critical management is introduced.

A pragmatist conception of critical management education and learning

A variety of views exist about what critical management studies are or might be (Alvesson and Willmott 1996; Grey and French 1996). Behind much of the debate that has occurred so far has been a distinction with a long history in discussions about ‘relevance’ in management or business education. This is the distinction between education for management or business and education about business and management. The position taken here is that this distinction is useful, but only as a starting point for reflection on the relationship between educational work and power. Its value lies in helping us to distinguish between education and training by suggesting that the former is about the occupational activity whilst the latter is for it - in the sense that it serves or ‘services’ members of the occupational group. Those engaged in anything calling itself education might quite reasonably want to avoid taking on a ‘servicing’ role and acting, in Baritz’s famous phrase, as ‘servants of power’ (1960). However, the distinction is not one that can be carried over straightforwardly into educational practice.

It is quite unrealistic, and possibly morally questionable, for those employed in management education to turn their backs on the role that most of them are paid to fulfil as employees of business schools or management schools. This is a role in improving the quality of the practices which the managers and would-be managers who enrol in those schools undertake. It would naïve to take a view that the considerable investment in business schools and management departments has not had such a basic rationale, as the various investigations and reports on British management education and development attest (Handy et al. 1988; Silver 1991). Given the underlying assumption behind the employment contract which most management academics sign on joining a management school and given the expectation of the bulk of the students who sign up for the courses that they will receive something more than a period of liberal studies, the critical management researcher and educator must come to terms with the basic logic of their occupational role. Is this inimical to being critical? Not at all.
A starting point for a concept of critical management studies must be a refusal to act in a spirit of ‘managerialism’. To eschew managerialism, for some commentators, involves refusing to accept any kind of functional relationship whatsoever between management education and management itself – one in which management education would ‘contribute to and improve organisational performance and the performance of individual managers’, as Grey and Mitev (1995 p 74) put it. But it is unrealistic to turn one’s back completely upon such a relationship (or one aspired to, at least) given what the course fees and the academic salaries are paid for. And if acceptance of some degree of functionality is inevitable, which I believe it to be, then that functionality has to be seen in a far less direct way than managerialists tend to do. The managerialism which must be rejected is the technicist thinking which Grey and Mitev attack: a view of management as a morally and politically neutral technical activity which regards management education as ‘the acquisition of techniques, regardless of the context of their application’ (1995 p 74). What primarily has to be rejected is the implication of this technicism that problems – in society at large as well as within work organisations - which are ‘fundamentally social and political in organisation come to be interpreted as amenable to technical solutions’ (Alvesson and Willmott 1996 p 10).

In effect, then, one concurs with Grey and Mitev that critical management academics should ‘analyse management in terms of its social, moral and political significance’ and that they ‘challenge management practice’. But one hesitates to take on the invitation (1995 p 76) to ‘speak truth to power’ and to ‘expose the social, political and moral nature – and, usually, the shortcomings – of management’ (my emphases). Why should one hesitate here to endorse what at first seems like a worthy critical intent? It is simply because one can accept neither the moral superiority of the management academic which is implicit in such aspirations nor the notion of their possessing the kind of ‘truth’ which, presumably, can be set against the ideological impurities and untruths of the powerful. A less foundationalist conception of critical practice needs to be adopted.

The view of critical management education taken here is a non-managerialist one (indeed is anti-managerialist). The managerialist perspective which is being rejected has three characteristics in addition to its essential one of taking a technicist (and morally neutral) view of management (Watson 1994c). First, managerialism privileges managers’ views of the world above that of other groups. Second, it avoids the use of concepts like class, power or career interest, which might be distasteful or politically discomforting to managers as an interest group. And, third, it encourages the belief that there can be a form of analysis or knowledge that would be helpful only to managers. And it is here that managerialism’s essential nonsense reveals itself. It is inconceivable that there could exist knowledge which would be helpful to managers – in the sense of helping them to be effective in carrying out their purposes which would not also be useful to groups which wished to defeat those purposes. Let’s imagine, for example, that there emerged knowledge which could teach managers how to achieve perfect team co-operation among employees to achieve business goals. Then groups who wished to muster co-operative efforts to undermine such goal achievement could use that same knowledge. To put it another way, any theory which could help a leader to increase their power over others could equally well be used by dissidents to undermine that power. Knowledge which has the potential to serve the powerful, by its very nature, has a potential to serve the powerless.
The concept of managerially ‘biased’ knowledge that can be used to the advantage of managers, then, is a nonsense. The political issues with regard to knowledge are not about the knowledge itself but about, first, the quality of access to that knowledge and, second, about the availability of resources to act upon that knowledge. The issue is one of realising the potential which is in the knowledge, not in the content of that knowledge as such. Managerially biased knowledge might indeed exist (ideological material which legitimated or comforted rather than explained, for example) but it would be as useless to managers as it would to non-managers. And, by the same token, it is inconceivable that critical management knowledge could be developed which would be useful only to those who wished to oppose the power of managerial groups. ‘Revolutionary knowledge’, to take an extreme case, would be as useful to the anti-revolutionary as it would to the revolutionary.

The upshot of all of this is that there is only one criterion by which we can judge critical management studies: its effectiveness in informing the activities of any individual or group who involves themselves in managerial situations (regardless of whether they are managers or opponents of managers). This is clearly to adopt a pragmatist conception of truth: an epistemological position which denies any notion of absolute truth but recognises that some accounts or theories about the world are more true than others in the sense that they are better guides to effective action in the sphere of activity with which they deal (Rorty 1982; Urmson 1989; Watson 1997; Watson 1999 forthcoming). Critical management studies, then, involves the application of all the traditional scholarly criteria of rigour, challenge to taken-for-granted assumptions, debate, logical consistency and the setting of claims to valid generalisation and theories against the best evidence that can be mustered about what occurs in the world. The product of these studies will not be guides to action as such, but knowledge and insights which can be used by managers, and non-managers involved in managerial situations alike, in deciding how to act. If these studies are not developed in the critical sense identified here they are less likely to inform successfully the actions of their students. In simple terms, ‘good’ management studies are critical management studies; ‘bad’ management studies are uncritical.

Critique is an activity engaged in by the wise scholar and the wise man or woman of action equally. To engage in ongoing critique of one’s own activities or the activities of others is to act as a rational human being. To engage with managerial activity rationally – whether as a learning manager or as a disinterested student of the world of affairs – is therefore to engage with it critically. It is a mistake of the academic who puts emotion or political sentiment before reason to confuse the notion of scholarly critique with the everyday notion of ‘being critical’ in the sense of condemning or scorning a whole occupational group. And critical management studies, conceived of as a means of attacking managerial power, is a nonsense. Any research, theory or analysis that demonstrates, for example, how certain managerial practices exploit the weak or oppress the vulnerable might indeed encourage opposition to those practices. But it could equally be used by the exploiters and oppressors to inform their practices and hence push exploitation and oppression to even higher levels.

In a sense I have demonstrated my notion of critical management studies by engaging as a critical management student with one facet of management education discourse – an anti-management or ‘critique as attack’ conception of critical management studies.
Such a critical engagement is only one intention of the present paper. The more significant one is to look for some positive ways forward. Critical thinking needs to be creative and not just reactive. I shall therefore introduce, next, the basic principles of a pragmatist approach to critical management study that operates in a spirit of collaborative story telling. This works towards the ideal of achieving a *negotiated narrative* between learners and management academics, but as we shall see later, it is an ideal we would not expect to see fully achieved in practice. It is only in the third part of the paper when I give an account of an experimental teaching and learning session of my own that this point will become clear. As this ethnographic account should reveal, what I am writing about in this paper is a set of emergent ideas – ones developing in a process of ongoing reflection on practice and continuous dialogue with management students.

**Teaching and learning through negotiated narratives**

The basic principle of the negotiated narrative approach to critical management study is a simple one. It involves management students and management academics bringing together accounts of their various experiences and observations (from practical experience or research work) and working together, using where appropriate academic concepts and theories, to draw out any possible ‘story behind the stories’ which can inform practices in managerial contexts. Such negotiated narratives have a basic theme of ‘what might work and what might not work’ in practices related to managerial activity. These is not necessarily the theme of the stories which are drawn into this process of comparison and debate however. These will include students’ own anecdotes and reported experiences together with research accounts – especially of an ethnographic kind – and may well use fictional narratives where these have bearing on organisational or managerial issues (Czarniawska 1997; Jermier 1992; Watson 1999 forthcoming). The elements of the approach are outlined in Fig 1.
Fig 1 Elements of the negotiated narrative

The focus on narratives and their place in learning is adopted for a number of reasons. Primarily, it is to recognise the centrality of the narrative form to human thinking, learning and memory in general. They are increasingly seen as fundamental devices of human sensemaking (Barthes 1966; Bruner 1987; Czarniawska 1998; Polkinghorne 1988; Weick 1995). And, for present purposes, narratives are simply taken to be accounts of the world which follow a basic form of ‘this, then that, then that’ and which, when applied to human affairs, typically take on a more developed story-like form involving characters with interests, motives, emotions and moralities. It is the interaction of these characters together with the interplay of the variety of motives, values, feelings and which moves the story forward and shows human beings interacting with the cultural and material worlds and the contingencies which arise. Narrative forms are thus very well fitted to research and theorising which adopts a *processual* as opposed to a systems perspective on the social world (Clark et al. 1988; Dawson 1994; Elger 1974; Hosking and Morley 1991; Pettigrew 1985; Tsoukas 1994; Watson and Harris 1999 in press). And this further means that they fit well with the type of critical study which has been outlined so far: they help us highlight the social and political dimension of managerial work and locate its technical elements within its broader *relational* context.

It is fully recognised, in using relatively loose terms here like ‘story’ (Gabriel 1998) or ‘story behind the story’, that there is a pragmatic rhetorical intent. This is one of finding terminology that practitioner students are likely to be relatively comfortable with. Indeed, I first found myself using the invitation to look for the ‘story behind the story’ long ago as an alternative to suggesting ‘Let’s do some *theorising*’. Issues about the nature and role of theory are not ones that should be avoided in management education but such are the negative pejorative overtones of the notion of ‘theory’ that
an alternative expression for ‘seeking generalisations’ often needs to be found. What Tsoukas identifies as ‘propositional knowledge’ in management thinking (Tsoukas 1998), and which may take a more obviously theoretical form, has clear value in informing practice. But negotiated narrative practice celebrates all the advantages which Tsoukas shows narrative knowledge to have compared to propositional knowledge – not least because narratives have a ‘mnemonic value since they are registered in, and recalled from, human memory more easily than complex sets of propositional statements’ (1998 p 57).

So powerful, I would argue, is the attraction of narrative forms that management teachers – and their students – readily slip over into them when attempting to organise and compare the propositional knowledge which forms the bulk of management teaching. This occurs within what I label scholarism – a form of pseudo scholarly management teaching, especially prevalent in Organisation Behaviour courses, which organises writings about management into ‘schools’ or identifies ‘approaches’ with particular characters (Maslow through to Braverman, Porter through to Mintzberg). The names of these figures must be learned and endlessly repeated – leading to a nonsense beautifully expressed in a student utterance, ‘Motivation, that’s Maslow isn’t it?’ (Watson 1996). All of this may be seen as a harmless way of ‘organising material’ but its typical failure lies in its incapability of connecting ‘knowledge’ to ‘practice’. And its spurious scholarly gloss and pseudo-critical intent (‘comparing and contrasting’), on closer examination, is just a form of story-telling or myth-making with management writers as heroes and villains rather than characters in organisational practice settings. The narrative may be the serial hero and villain type which takes the form ‘X was the founding father of…he showed that…but Y came along and did some work on this, coming up with two types of…But the new school led by Z challenged this by showing that…’. Alternatively, it might take the more abstract form of setting ‘approaches’ against each other: scientific management against human relations, personnel management against HRM and so on.

Critical management study faces a major challenge of engaging with the ideas which exist within all of this ‘knowledge’ without allowing the scholarist tales of ‘founding fathers’ and bookish debates to divert attention from the stories which research fieldworkers and managers themselves can bring to the party. The negotiated narrative type of practice is an attempt to do this. I shall now adopt a directly narrative style to expand on what has been outlined so far.

It’s a fair cop?

It was the night before a management class in which a group of MBA students were to consider the ‘nature of management’. In the class, it was hoped that students would reflect on their own management learning processes as well as review trends in academic thinking about managerial work. I was watching a television programme which was using a strongly documentary style to present a piece of dramatised fiction about police officers, crime and policing in the north-west of England. It was called The Cops. One of the characters was a rather prim and determinedly ‘new style’ senior officer. His approach, in the story, was to argue the case for an alternative way of doing police work to that which was clearly favoured by most of the ‘old style’
police officers who surrounded him. In the middle of the play this man said to a group of his officers that he was intent upon making changes in the station. He was, he said,

…looking to re-engineer the job, adopt a more client-responsive, intelligence-led, pro-active approach.

I immediately saw a connection between this piece of television drama and my forthcoming class and reached for a pen to write down these words. The scriptwriter had provided, and put in a convincingly realistic context, a slice of managerial discourse which could be used as a valuable resource in the following day’s teaching. Managerial discourse was something I wanted to discuss in the class and finding an example which was located in a concrete organisational and human context would be a helpful way into encouraging students to reflect on such matters in the organisational and social contexts with which they were familiar.

In the class the following evening, I outlined to the students, most of whose ‘day jobs’ were in managerial posts in a variety of public and private sector organisations, the story of the previous night’s piece of drama. Several of them had, like me, seen the episode and, between us, we presented to the larger group a fairly full account of the story put on the screen the previous night. This covered the way the basic plot unfolded and how the various characters contributed to the pattern of events. I then suggested that we all consider ‘what was going on’ when the senior officer spoke about ‘re-engineering the job’. To do this, people might reflect upon similar cases of ‘language use’ in their workplaces.

‘Let’s see if, between us, we can agree some basic kind of “story” about what is going on when this kind of talk is used – if indeed it is used – in the organisations where we all work’, I suggested. One woman immediately jumped in to tell the story of a man who had joined her organisation eighteen months previously’. ‘He’s the kind of person who is never going to fit in’, she explained. She told how he had ‘done a full-time MBA’ and come to the conclusion that he had to implement all the ideas he had learned on his ‘very expensive course’. The story she told was, in effect, about a character whose use of language was similar to that of the senior officer in The Cops, largely because he had ‘little idea of how to relate to people’ and partly ‘because he paid out so much money to learn this weird language’ felt he must talk in this way. A couple of occasions where this individual failed to ‘get things done’ were recounted and the student was then invited to suggest what, to her, the ‘basic story behind your story is’. What was offered, and contributed to by two other course members, was that all managements include people who do not really know how to ‘relate’ and that some of these individuals, who have ‘read too many books or been on too many courses’ ‘hide behind the smokescreen of fancy ideas’ and ‘talk about these ideas in language which few people understand’ with the result that the ideas have ‘no chance of being implemented’.

In working on this ‘story behind the story’ this person, and two of her colleagues, were working towards something we can recognise as theorising. This was my intention. I wanted the class to develop some broad theoretical propositions out of the variety of narratives that they could bring forward into the discussion. Theorising is a social process. It comes out of the interaction of various propositions put forward by a variety of protagonists (including, of course, the academic teacher in the university
situation, whose job can be seen as one of contributing to this process ideas from ‘formal’ academic research and debate). And in the MBA classroom that evening, such an interaction soon got under way. One man responded to the first contribution with the words, ‘I don’t go along with your story at all’. He admitted that he did not know the manager who had been spoken about, or the details of the context in which he operated. But, he said, ‘I think that the story could be told another way’.

The speaker began with the phrase ‘It’s a fair cop’. He was a civilian manager, he explained, ‘in the police service’. And he said, in a tone of guarded irony, that he ‘confessed’ that he himself had used some of the language used by the man in The Cops. ‘We don’t go for that re-engineering crap, but some of us strongly believe in what the bloke called a pro-active and intelligence-led approach’. Indeed, he claimed that he used these very terms and argued that such use was anything but a ‘smokescreen’. An argument was passionately put to the class for policing which did not ‘simply react to trouble-making as and when it arises’ but which ‘targets resources and efforts’ on ‘getting to know the criminals and likely criminals’ and ‘what they are up to’ before the offence is committed. In large part, the class accepted the case that was put. But, to cut a long story short as we might say, a position was negotiated among the class that there are new concepts or ideas around in management which can usefully be adopted. Sometimes these do need new words to describe them. But if this goes too far, or if managers are not capable of getting behind the ‘fancy language’ and persuading people of the value of those new ideas (as their colleague had done in talking about new approaches to policing), then there was ‘a real problem’.

So could ‘things be left like that?’ I asked the class. At first, the class was not too sure. And, as part of my own reflection on their inconclusiveness, I presented a story from my own research. This was a story about two managers which I reported in an ethnographic study which was published as part of an article in an academic journal that went on to analyse the tendency of managers to ‘be ambivalent’ about managerial ‘fashions and flavours of the month’ (Watson 1994b). The students decided that, in their group as a whole, there was some similar ambivalence about the discursive style of the senior ‘cop’. They could see that his way of speaking had some value in that it signalled an interest in going about policing in a new and potentially more effective way. Yet they saw his way of expressing this, in the words of one student, as ‘ugly, hollow-sounding and counter-productive’. These words were spoken in response to an invitation to sum up the position of the student group as a whole. Another person said that the ‘a real issue’ which concerned a number of them about ‘management generally these days’ was one of ‘pretentious language getting in the way of sensible management’.

The promise was now made to the group that some academic thinking would be put before them which might ‘help us all understand these matters better’. I would be taking them beyond the term ‘language’ to the concept of discourse and would be introducing the new concept of managism. One challenge which had to be met was that of avoiding the accusation that I was engaging in my own form of ‘fancy new language’ by introducing the new concept of managism. It was a necessary and useful notion I argued. Managism was to be introduced as a type of discourse which is available to everyone in management. And it was a discourse which needs to be approached critically. First, however, the notion of discourse had to be explained.
Enter ‘managism’

The starting point for getting the class to think about discourse as something more than simply the language that people use to describe or report the world and their involvement in it was to establish with them the assumption basic to the so-called linguistic turn in the social sciences, that language is action as opposed to something which simply reports action or ‘mirrors’ the world (Rorty 1980). The common idea that it is ‘what you do’ that counts rather than ‘what you say’ has to be questioned (Marshak 1998). Instead of presenting this as a novel idea or as any kind of ‘intellectual breakthrough’ (like a ‘linguistic turn’!), I argued that most of us recognise the truth of this in our everyday lives – we know that when someone speaks to us they are ‘acting towards us’ whether it is in an attempt to persuade us to appoint them to a job or it is to gain our goodwill by asking about our health. Having established this, and established with the group the idea that the way we speak about a given matter frames our subsequent actions with regard to that matter, the concept of discourse was introduced. The following definition was put on the overhead projector screen:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discourse</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a connected set of statements, concepts, terms and expressions which constitute a way of talking or writing about an aspect of life, a phenomenon or an issue, thus framing the way people understand and act with respect to such matters</td>
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Managism, then, is a particular discourse which we can hear being used by people in the managerial world all the time. It is a way of thinking and talking about and managerial work which, by setting what occurs managerially in a certain frame of reference, helps shape the actions of managers. The notion of managism was introduced by screening the following slide:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Managism</th>
<th>Managist discourse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is a discourse about directing work organisations (or parts of them) which stresses the role of special techniques, practices, technologies and terminologies</td>
<td>is a way of talking, thinking and acting with regard to managerial work in which the organisation is treated like a big machine and managers are the engineers who design, maintain and drive it</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I explained that the notion of managism was first devised when working on an in-company MBA programme where the course members were generally critical of their employing organisation’s increasingly frequent adoption of management initiatives,
restructurings and new management terminology. I had been briefed that the students were hoping for an academic input which might help them make sense of all of this by setting it in the context of wider trends going on in the management and business world. There was no hint that I was being invited to help legitimate the company’s changes and I set about considering what ‘critical concepts’ I might deploy. What concepts, I asked myself, might be deployed by the course members to ‘get beneath the surface’ of the practices and languages that they were being encouraged to adopt? Managerialism was an obvious one to think about but, as a sociologist, I wished to retain the long-standing sociological use of this term to refer to a type of political system in which there is ‘rule by managers’ (Burnham 1945). A narrower concept was needed. It would focus on the discursive patterns associated with a status for management as a special and distinctive occupation. Such a notion could serve or legitimate a managerialist social or political order. But managism could exist separately from managerialism, even if part of its inherent logic took adherents in the direction of societal managerial hegemony.

Managism sees managers as people who deploy specialist technologies and techniques to the organisation of work in a way that parallels how an engineer approaches a machine. The organisation is not seen as a community or a moral order and management is not regarded as a social practice whose legitimacy comes from contributing to that order (Anthony 1986; MacIntyre 1981; Reed 1989; Roberts 1984; Roberts 1996; Watson 1998). The organisation, ‘instead, is that which the manager designs and structures. Even the culture of the organisation is something that the managers create or, at least, manipulate (Anthony 1994; Willmott 1995). The iconic expression of managism is to put in place organisation structures, pay systems, appraisal processes, work arrangements, marketing practices and so on and so on. To work in the spirit of managism is to work at the drawing board applying management science to the blueprint and, having carefully applied tried and tested management principles to the design, to put the rationally unassailable new arrangement firmly in place. Managerial work is not essentially to do with bargaining, persuading, legitimating, compromising or living with ambiguity. To the managist, such practices are marginal and are only necessary insofar as management knowledge is, as yet, relatively ‘under developed’.

Although it is primarily a practitioner discourse, managism has close parallels with more intellectual traditions of thinking about management- especially ones in the traditions of systems thinking and functionalist analysis (Alvesson and Willmott 1996 pp 95-96). And it incorporates a faith in the value of searching for new solutions both to deal with long-standing management problems and to cope with the allegedly ever-increasing pace of change in the world (Thompson and O’Connell Davidson 1995). Thus, within the overall managist perspective there are various ‘sub-discourses’ which concentrate on particular managerial issues or problems. In a sense, these are ‘dialects’ of the main ‘language’. Such dialects are regularly introduced, as management writers and consultants offer new frameworks for thought about management and, especially, for shaping managerial behaviours which are claimed to help make the corporation more effective or, to borrow from a favourite managist mantra ‘deliver competitive advantage’.
The following slide was screened to the class who were invited to contribute to an extended list of such sub-discourses which soon filled the lecture theatre’s white board:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sub-discourses of new-style managism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Packaged innovations, change initiatives and ‘flavours of the month’ like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HRM  TQM  JIT  BPR</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning organisation?</td>
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Many of the initiatives described were particular (at first sight at least) to students’ own employing organisations. And several of the course members who named their own domestic variant of one of the main sub-discourses quickly reeled off the ‘bundle of terms’ (as one of them put it) which were associated with their organisation’s particular variant of ‘culture change’, process re-engineering or quality management. But the reason for there being a question mark against empowerment and the learning organisation was soon raised. ‘Why do you think it might be?’ I asked back. After some discussion, it was inferred that perhaps I ‘favoured empowerment and learning organisations’ and wasn’t sure whether I ‘wanted to attack them or not’. There might be something in this, I responded. It was true that I had seen particular managers take the idea of empowerment very seriously and consequently make some job design changes that both ‘made people happier’ and ‘improved output’. And the idea of organisations which treated mutual learning as a key way of relating to the world seemed rather attractive to me in principle. However, I said, my question marks were intended to do more than suggest any ambivalence on my part about any aspect of managerial discourses. They were intended to avoid our ‘critical analysis’ of management discourses degenerating into an automatic ‘knocking’ of every new idea or initiative which came along. In sensitising ourselves to the managist dangers in adopting willy-nilly any new idea or ‘discursive resource’ that came along, we should not automatically reject every discursive novelty which presented itself as a potential resource which the manager might creatively use. There was always, however, the issue of the danger of abandoning ‘plain language’, and hence risking everything as a result of consequent communication failures.

Ever since my early experiments with the concept of managism, I had recognised a need to distinguish between language use which functioned discursively (that is, worked to frame events and actions) and language use which was more a reflection of managers’ struggles to communicate in complex or anxiety-inducing situations, whilst still having managist connotations. The frequent use of the metaphor of ‘drivers’ and driving was, like ‘putting in place’, clearly discursive in a strong sense. To talk about being ‘customer-driven’ or ‘technology-driven’; to refer to the ‘key drivers of strategic change’ or to speak of managers ‘driving through changes’ (phrases one frequently hears in the world of management practice) is clearly to frame managerial work in mechanistic terms. It is to take the mainspring of action away from human beings and human choices and give it to forces and motors which have to be engineered or steered by the manager-engineer. But other language use can be seen as supportive of managist discourse rather than direct expressions of it. When managers
say things like ‘we will facilitate you in achieving your critical success factors’ (instead of ‘we will help you do your job’) or when they splatter about acronyms and abbreviations (‘following TQM and DOC in BSG, we are now implementing the PDS which will incorporate PDP and PRP’, to take another genuine example) the connotation is clearly there that the speaker is some kind of technical expert – a member of a group which has a ‘special’ language to describe the ‘special’ work it does. Such talk is clearly discursive but, relatively, is discursive in a weak or indirect way. To provoke discussion and collect examples of this kind of thing I presented the following slide:

**Language styles associated with managism**

| Tortured metaphors and borrowings from psycho-babble which attempt to make abstract human processes sound more concrete, such as ‘up and running’, ‘bottoming out’ ‘climbing the learning curve’ |

Some quite furious debate followed this. Several members of the class enthusiastically offered illustrations of organisational catch phrases, pseudo-technical terms and corporate euphemisms. But one or two others balked at this. Accusations of pedantry and elitism were thrown about and one woman argued at length that the ‘this so-called managist language’ was, in fact, to be welcomed because it was ‘more democratic’. She argued that the technicising of language and the replacement of ‘power language’ with ‘more neutral terms’ was making the workplace more ‘democratic’ and ‘less macho’. She illustrated her point by suggesting that to speak about ‘fulfilling an agenda’ was ‘infinitely preferable’ to ‘macho talk about management goals’. This, not surprisingly, got a heated response from a self-proclaimed member of ‘the anti jargon brigade’. After some minutes of this I declared that it would be a good time to take a coffee break – after which ‘we’ll try to make sense of why we are all getting rather sensitive about these issues’. And, after the break, I presented the following slide:
Managerial anxieties and managism

- managers have all the frailties and angst of the ordinary human being
- they have to manage (‘cope with’) normal problems of human existence, identity and personal insecurity
- on top of this, they are expected to ‘manage’ the activities and meanings of others
- this creates a particular type of occupational angst and often a sense of isolation
- ‘managism’ helps handle these problems

Here I was seeking a common factor behind the managerial use of language mainly to make one more comfortable (language which is discursive in a weak sense) and language which more directly functioned to frame actions and circumstances in a particular way (language which is discursive in a strong sense). The common factor was a combination of a general human existential angst and a more specific managerial occupational angst. The words on the screen represented an attempt to summarise some of the arguments on this theme which I had developed at length in In Search of Management (Watson 1994a) and to relate it to the phenomenon of managism. I had argued in the book that, in human life generally, our ‘engaging with stories in popular culture, fiction, reportage and gossip to help us handle our deeper existential anxieties’ parallels the Freudian notion of ‘dreams functioning as vehicles for the working out of problems which we do not recognise in our conscious lives’ (1994a, p 22). The managist ‘story’ of the manager as the hero engineer who rationally designs and ‘builds worlds’, I suggested to the group, was perhaps in part a fairy tale that managers tell to each other to help them cope with the potentially terrifying challenges which they face in their work. The discussion which followed was framed by me as one about whether or not this was acceptable as a possible ‘story behind the story’.

Inevitably no full consensus emerged about these matters. We did not agree a clear ‘story of stories’ which we could all take away to help us make sense in the future of the managerial languages and discourses which we come across. However, there had been some significant negotiation about realities and a setting of stories against stories. To varying extents people had learned from each other – students and ‘teacher’ alike. The negotiated narrative, as a broadly accepted ‘story behind the stories’ which practitioners and researchers bring to the ‘critical management learning’ class, is something which, in principle, we can work towards in critical learning practice, rather than something we can be confident about arriving at. Each participant at the class I have written about here will have taken away their own version of the ‘story’ that emerged.

The day after the class, in the process of making notes on what happened that evening (in preparation for the writing of the present paper), I attempted to create an explicitly story-like narrative which could represent one outcome of the previous evening’s
‘negotiations’. In effect, this is the story I am trying to tell in this paper – expressed more or less in the style of a fairy tale. I shall close with this rather than attempt to draw conclusions in the traditional formal sense. The fairy tale has its own conclusion, its own closure. But it is only a temporary closure – the story is closed only to await a further opening up when it is taken into the process of further negotiation of narratives with people with different stories to tell.

**Once upon a time**

Once upon a time, after many years of evolution, the human species who inhabited the Earth devised an industrial capitalist way of life. At the heart of this were complex work organisations. These enabled humans to produce goods and services (as well as dominate each other and fight wars) on a scale they had never dreamed of before. They brought large numbers of people together to co-operate in achieving complex tasks and some of these people were given the work of directing the efforts of others. Such people were called ‘managers’. Getting large numbers of people to co-operate with each other and take instructions from the managers was immensely difficult and could only ever be partially achieved. This made it a very frightening job to do and the managers invented magic chants to make them feel better in the face of their fears. This was Managism.

The managers chanted various managist chants to each other every day. ‘Put in place – competitive advantage’, they would intone for example, ‘Put in place – competitive advantage, Put in place – competitive advantage, Put in place – competitive advantage’. They came to believe that if they got the chants right and sat in their caves drawing up really clever plans, policies and blueprints they would eventually solve all their problems and live happily ever after. However, the more they chanted their mantras and the more they sat in their caves drawing up their plans, the less attention they paid to talking and listening to all the non-managers inside and outside their organisations, and the less time they spent persuading and bargaining with such people. Their problems got worse and worse and they got more and more anxious and more and more stressed.

Some of the managers turned to business schools and the Church of Scholarism for help and comfort. Here, the Business Professor Priests, in return for magic certificates, required them to rehearse and debate the merits and demerits of various clay-footed gurus and spurious ‘schools of thought’ and made them play at silly rituals called ‘case-studies’. This merely encouraged the managers to pay less attention to their workers, clients and customers. Things got worse and worse until, one day, they heard about the Negotiated Narrative rite. This involved getting together with other managers and with ethnographer-bards to tell each other stories about things they had seen and done in work organisations. These were useful stories about things that had gone well and things that had gone badly. The stories were debated, compared and negotiated in a spirit of critical learning. Once the managers got themselves involved in this story-based learning about what tends to work and what tends not to work in organisations, they felt much more relaxed. They began to come to terms with the unavoidable realities of managerial work as a social, political and economic practice. They accepted that it was a practice that was full of moral dilemmas. It was one in which they would never get everything right. And it was one
in which they would have to go on learning forever. The managers did not achieve perfect bliss or total corporate success, however, but they were a lot happier and much better at their jobs than they had been when they had bent their knees at the altar of Managism or wasted their time in the halls of Scholarism.

References


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