You can do it!: Critical Management Research

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Introduction

In 2002 the journal *Organization* devoted a Special Issue to a Symposium on critical management (CM) and the concerns of Mayer Zald who had raised issues about the relevance of CM in his *Keynote Address* to the Critical Management Studies (CMS) group at the Academy of Management’s August 2001 meeting. Zald had concluded his paper (which is reproduced in the Special Issue) with a call for CMS academics to build within the institutional context a form of reflexivity or reflexive curricula that would see “…scholarship as discourse based on a pragmatist endeavor within a community of practice” (Zald, 2002: 382). This call to reflexivity seems to be one of the defining features of CM today, though versions of if vary markedly (see Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000; Johnson and Duberley, 2000).

As one of the invited contributors, I focused my rejoinder on teaching CMS and producing teaching materials for this purpose (Fulop, 2002). Few of the contributors had much to say about how students make sense of their educational experiences learning about CMS. Walter Nord (2002) was the only other to address the issue of classroom teaching in business schools and the challenges facing CMS. None of us dealt with research training of students *per se*. No student’s view was canvassed or included in my expose, as is common with many CM writings. There are few multivocal perspectives presented by CMS academics of their teaching achievements or failures.

This paper explores how I have approached teaching CM epistemology to Honours students in a Bachelor of Business program and how one of my PhD students (Lyn) has been grappling with using CM and critical ethnography in her research. The setting for this expose is a School of Marketing and Management in a large university in Australia. The university has had a history of championing multidisciplinary teaching and was and is a leader in its field. The School in question had until two years ago little or no CM in its business curricula and nothing on postmodernism at the undergraduate or postgraduate levels save for an honours
subject that had one reading on the topic. Labour Process Theory dominated the School’s curriculum and this reflected its Industrial Relations and Employment Relations teaching as well the union background of key staff. Psychology, as opposed to Organizational Behaviour, also figured prominently in many Human Resource Management and mainstream management subjects and much of the curriculum was (and still is to a large extent) taught without a framework for critique or reflexivity. The challenge in the honours seminar is to present CMS to new research students and there are several ways to do this. One is to follow Nord’s advice and use the philosophy of science as the bases for critiquing positivism, which many of us already do, and to engage students with analyses of the historical conditions that give rise to many social phenomena so that they start to see knowledge as context bound and not in terms of absolute truths (Nord, 2002: 445).

There are other ways as well and this paper will explore several of these to show how certain questions and issues can only be addressed using critical management theory (CMT) to make sense of them. The paper explores the learning experiences that are being built into the honours seminar, starting with the “You can do it” story that builds on the lessons and experiences of students (such as Lyn) who have learnt to use CM in their research and who are now grappling with the difficulties and rewards of using CMT. Lyn presented one of the first “You can do it” sessions in the honours seminar, telling her story of a remarkably different honours experience just two years earlier to the one which students are now exposed, and how she came to use CMT in her PhD. Over to Lyn!

After I received an undergraduate business degree with a management major grounded in positivist research methods taught by a psychology school, I progressed into an honours degree. Course work in the honours program comprised a summary of a different philosophical/epistemological position each week with the Marxist readings resonating the loudest. My honours thesis was based on an industrial relations approach, using ideas of the flexible firm. Research questions were framed around an adversarial model of the employment relationship, and investigated a workplace using the case study method through questionnaires, interviews and reading company documents. Both my supervisors for the honours year were keen on industrial relations theory and research and I dutifully followed their lead and passion.

When it came time to frame my PhD study, Labour Process Theory was an obvious choice given its support by two of my supervisory team (I have three supervisors on my panel with Liz as the Principal one) and seeming fit with an investigation of an exploited group of workers. As the research was about extended hours of work in the real estate industry, it could easily have been accomplished by traditional survey method in line with my training. However, it was decided that a small pilot study, using qualitative methods, had to be undertaken to immerse myself in the field and to get a better feel for the area I was investigating. I used open-ended questions as the main source of data collection and approached the exercise with some fairly strong presuppositions that came from my labour process lenses. A dilemma arose when the two pilot studies revealed a group of workers who enjoyed, even prided, their jobs and were able to access substantial financial and desirable lifestyle rewards from an occupation that from the outside appears undesirable, exploitative and degrading. This did not reconcile with the labour process idea that this group
(always presented as homogeneous) needed to be rescued from the poor or exploitative practices of management by institutions, unions or legislation.

At a seminar presentation of the pilot study results, the audience challenged the responses of the interviewees: what if they didn’t know they were oppressed? What about the social costs of extended hours? What about the voices of the other people who were affected by these workers? What about the role of this industry in creating wealth and the rising personal debt plaguing Australia? Being unprepared for this twist in the thesis, a massive and frantic effort began to master CM epistemology and methodology and Alvesson and Deetz’s (2001) book was consulted, read, thrown down in frustration and then re-read again and again. At this point in time I wanted someone just to tell me how to use CM but Liz merely gave me readings and told me I had to find out if CM was the approach that would work for my research problem.

From the outset of reading the Alvesson and Deetz book it became obvious that some of their ideas linked directly with the study, but the text was hard going. It takes for granted a good working knowledge range of theoretical positions underpinning contemporary research in business disciplines. Many business graduates without grounding in the philosophy of science would also find the work difficult to follow without constant reference to the dictionary and reference books. At the same time, the search for the appropriate approach was under way, Liz and I were negotiating the supervisory relationship, and she was frustrating me with her lack of willingness to give a specific CM approach for me to use. As an undergraduate, I was accustomed to prescribed readings, as well as being rewarded for producing work that fell in line with the thinking of each lecturer or convenor. Now as the methodology chosen began to fail, I was encouraged to criticise the limitations of the labour process theory, which was problematic as the icons my undergraduate study were now found wanting. In addition, I was challenged to find another theory to take its place and only given some suggested readings. This was a difficult period – giving up what seemed to be the promised theory for one that was unfamiliar and complex.

Once enticed by the promises of the research rewards of a critical study and after many months of emotional and intellectual struggle and anguish, critical ethnography has emerged as my preferred method for the study though this is still being worked out and will be reported in the paper. The method has appeal because it allows me a way of discovering unintended consequences of managerial decisions and alternative readings of what is said and how this translates into particular forms of practice that give rise to extended work hours. Labour process assumptions about capitalism can still be questioned but from a different position for both the researcher and the subjects of investigation, who in my study can occupy shifting and ambiguous positions of management, employee and self-employed and escape easy categorization.

Together we intend to make this paper a form of dialogue in which our collective experiences provide a multi-vocal view of how students can become active learners daring and relishing critique and reflexivity in all their endeavours, including co-designing curriculum.
References


