The Destabilising Moment: Poststructuralism and Management Education

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Critical Management Education Stream: From Pedagogy to Activism

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This paper provides an account of an empirical study which sought to reconceptualise management education as ‘critical language awareness’. Broadly, I am interested in making more accessible a means for both revealing and engaging with the ‘cage’ of order-producing practices that inscribe us. The practical and critical elements of this purpose find expression through ideas emerging from poststructuralism, most notably the work of Derrida.

Poststructuralism posits that the social universe in a constant state of flux and movement. In the absence of any external structure, we create our own, by deliberately slowing down and solidifying the flow of the world in temporal and spatial terms (Hassard, 1993:13). Hence, the ‘real’ is not ‘out there’ to be discovered, but is talked into being. As Lacan (1977:65) suggests, ‘it is the world of words that creates the world of things’; there are only signifiers and no signifieds.

Thus language is seen as a differentiating technology that offers particular spaces through which undifferentiated ‘experience’ is both prescribed and re-inscribed. It thus achieves a disciplinary effect as we complicitly occupy the spaces it determines. However, the power behind any given ‘punctuation’ may be revealed by exploring the ‘differance’ (Derrida 1973) inherent in each term. Norris (1987:19) paraphrasing Derrida, describes the idea of deconstruction as ‘the vigilant seeking-out of those ‘aporias’, blindspots or moments of self-contradiction where a text involuntarily betrays the tension between…what it manifestly means to say and what it is nonetheless constrained to mean’.

The ability, and indeed willingness, of practicing managers to engage in any critical project has been subject to considerable debate, particularly in the management education literature. For example, Alvesson and Deetz (2000:142) suggest that due to ‘practical
restrictions and various mechanisms of discursive closure’, in particular ‘the modern means by which control is exerted and participation undermined’, managers have little opportunity or facility to ‘address critically and reflect on these mechanisms of closure’ or to ‘develop counter-discourses within particular sites of production’.

This paper is an attempt to move away from deconstruction as a ‘self indulgence in the pleasure of the text’ or ‘a mere exercise in exposing textual limitations’ (Kilduff and Mehre (2000:S58). Rather, it presents a deconstructive practice as a very tangible means of investigating ‘how we have become what we are today, which both reveals the limits of what we are and raises the possibility of being otherwise than what we are’ (Chan, 2002:1059).

Drawing on this theoretical resource, I describe the process and outcomes of a series of workshops with MBA students which sought to make more accessible to these managers, a means of engaging with the technology of language. In essence this involved a range of strategies aimed at ‘destabilising’ and ‘re-punctuating continuous experience’ (Weick and Westley, 1996:440). The paper describes the journey undertaken by myself and the other participants, and tries to capture the dynamics of the ‘disturbance’ experienced by us all.

References


