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Chuck out the Chintz? 'Stripped floor' writing and the catalogue of convention: alternative perspectives on management inquiry.

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Abstract for the 3rd CMS conference

Title: Chuck out the Chintz? 'Stripped floor' writing and the catalogue of convention: alternative perspectives on management inquiry.

The proposed paper will explore the dilemmas and tensions involved in working in creative ways with students in the course of their professional studies, and in the wider context of their working lives.


This author contends that the conventions of writing about management inquiry limit the choices for creativity, and engagement with wider audiences, in constructing and representing the results of such endeavour. Using examples taken from his PhD research, critical incidents will be explored by the author to demonstrate different forms of writing that offer the potential for alternative ways of sense making.

Alvesson and Deetz (2000) have argued that 'the point of social science is not to get it right but to challenge guiding assumptions, fixed meanings and relations, and to reopen the formative capacity of human beings in relation to others and the world' (p.107). The practice of representing inquiry is often hidebound by the assumptions and conventions of instrumental reasoning. The researcher or student of management is seen as 'shaping' their data analysis and resulting conclusions to fit the requirements of the 'catalogue' - here writing is identified as being 'done to', or 'done for', a particular audience. This has close parallels to Lather's (1991) view of empowerment, that in such a view empowerment is a process that one undertakes for oneself; it is not something done "to" or "for" someone.' (p.4). Yet the contention of this author is not to suggest that a conflictual field of duality exists between, on the one hand, writing for oneself, and on the other, writing specifically for an 'outside' audience. Rather that the emphasis placed on the latter constrains and constrains the capacity to utilise different forms of writing that encourages the reader to actively think about a range of interpretations.
and ideas. Writing is therefore seen not just ‘for’ an audience but also as a means of critical engagement ‘with’ self ‘in relation to’ an audience.

This paper arises from my involvement in a PhD research programme, as well as my teaching on the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) programme at Coventry University Business School. The foundations that underpin the research approaches I have adopted involve working with notions of collaborative enquiry, cycles of critical reflection and research with rather than on participants. My own PhD research activity has been centred on the rhetoric of empowerment experienced by employees in workplaces across a number of sectors. A common factor of such rhetoric is the supposed enhancing of creative approaches to improvement of processes and actions through increased responsibility and development. My teaching has sought to work with a group of part-time postgraduate students and explore the emerging themes from my research. Two critical incidents will be focused on within the paper to illustrate such critical engagement. Both illustrate the way in which the author utilised different forms of writing to further critical thinking in respect of a PhD inquiry; particularly to illuminate tensions surrounding creativity in the context of the professional awards that the students are seeking and the day to day experience of working in so called 'empowered workplaces'.

Ely, Vinz, Downing and Anzul (1997 p. 37) talk of 'shaping the field' when writing. By this they mean the way in which writers and researchers individually perceive data and show meaning through use of language. It could be argued that this is one of the real dilemmas of qualitative research: of how to come away from the 'facts' without deserting the 'factual ground'. This paper will discuss the way in which the author chose to experiment with different forms of writing in order to meet explicit outcomes of the research set out in the PhD proposal. However, these forms also emerged out of research practice, they were not originally intended, yet became the cornerstones of research methodology. They also served to galvanise different forms of inquiry taking interpretations of experience down different 'back-alleys', so discovering 'hidden' insights. Like the more confident traveller who discards the guidebook and lets their own intuitive self to wander and wonder.

However, the authors PhD thesis (forthcoming) has indicated the strength of discourses that managers encounter in modern-day workplaces that restricts their capacity to act differently. Moreover, the
same forces are present in the researchers own work environment within the HE sector. These discourses centred on both ‘task’ and ‘development’ have resulted in a ‘paring down’ of behaviours and a ‘din’ (Weil 1999) of improvement and advancement. In the industrialised sectors of society, and increasingly in the developing nations, we live in a context where quality and standards are critical organising features of our societies. Workplaces are continuously searching for improved processes, consistency and the dissemination of ‘best practice’, so forming a strategic straitjacket. A web of professional qualifications supports this for employees that seek to ‘standardise’ practice and increase ‘measurable competence’. Yet this is often at odds with encouraging creativity at work and in the classroom which seeks to embrace multiple perspectives, different ways of knowing and working, taking risks and the freeing of the individual from prescribed frameworks of inquiry.

Therefore, the type of writing that managers, researchers and students engage in is often constrained by this ‘strategic straitjacket’. Writing becomes ‘stripped down’, an end to fulfil an outcome: the examination, the report, the essay, and the quality review. Experimentation with different forms of writing – journal keeping, free writing, creative writing to stimulate conversations, metaphor – have potential I contend to address the practising manager or researcher’s lived experience (Knights and Wilmott 1999) of both acting and researching management practice. Moreover, by rejecting the instrumental view of writing then a critical engagement with ways of writing about management can be promoted which enables writing to be seen as an important force in terms of both individual critical reflection, as well as, and in conjunction with, conversations to interpret ‘established social reality in a genuinely novel light’ (Alvesson And Deetz 2000).

**Outline Bibliography for the Abstract**


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