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The History Boys: Critical reflections on our contributions to management learning and their ongoing implications

Michael Reynolds and Russ Vince

Abstract:

In this reflective essay, written for the 50th Anniversary of *Management Learning* (MLQ), we look at the history of the journal from a unique vantage point, our interconnected, academic lived experience of publishing in the journal. Our aim is to undertake an historical review of our publications in *Management Learning* in order to identify the key themes of our work; to make connections with broader academic and social events of the time; and to assert the continuing relevance of these themes for future scholarship. We review twenty-seven papers that we have published in MLQ since Volume 1 (1971) and identify four main themes from our papers. These are set in the context of the development of Critical Management Education (CME). We highlight the broader dimensions to our themes and suggest two areas with implications for future scholarship in *Management Learning*. In our conclusion, we use our findings and reflections to identify what we have learned about management learning, as well as making a call for action in relation to what we are labelling historical reflexivity.

Keywords: management learning, critical management education, historical reflexivity.

The History Boys: Critical reflections on our contributions to management learning and their ongoing implications

“The best moments in reading are when you come across something – a thought, a feeling, a way of looking at things – which you had thought special and particular to you. Now here it is, set down by someone else, a person you have never met, someone even who is long dead. And it is as if a hand has come out and taken yours” (Alan Bennett, the History Boys).

“History is just one fucking thing after another” (Alan Bennett, the History Boys).

Introduction

In this reflective essay we look at the history of *Management Learning* from a unique vantage point, our interconnected, academic lived experience of publication in this journal. We have published 27 papers in the journal (separately, including five Editorials, and not including book reviews). Michael’s first publication was in Volume 1 (1971); Russ first published in Volume 22 (1991) and he was Co-Editor-in-Chief (2005-2010). Our aim in this essay is to undertake a historical review of our publications in *Management Learning* in order to identify the key themes of our work in the journal; to make connections with broader academic and social events of the time; and to assert the continuing relevance of these themes for future scholarship in *Management Learning*.

The quotations from Alan Bennett’s ‘The History Boys’ (above) represent two general aspects to our experience of publishing in academic journals. First, after all these years we have never lost the joy of engaging with existing knowledge, with the insightful work of people we may never have met, so that we can contribute something new; or the excitement and pleasure of seeing our ideas published in *Management Learning*. Second, thinking in broader terms, and slightly amending Alan Bennett’s second quote, *history is just one fucking journal paper after another*. Neither of us would particularly imagine representing our academic lives through a list of publications, and yet here we are. From a certain perspective, management academics’ lives have become lists of publications. Journal publications are the first things considered when shortlisting candidates for jobs in our two Management Schools. This is further reinforced through pressures that arise as a result of the Research Evaluation Framework (REF) in the UK; as well as the use of journal outputs as a primary form of evidence in the assessment of academic career progression.

How and why we got into this state, as well as how we might break free from it, has been articulated elsewhere (Alvesson, Gabriel and Paulsen, 2017; Beverungen, Bohm and Land, 2012; Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018). Here our concern is with what our published papers can say about the history of and the possible futures for management learning scholarship. In addition, we have both lived our academic lives and written our papers in the context of the emergence and development of critical management studies (CMS) and critical management education (CME). In exploring our papers, we are inevitably also exploring a period of significant change in management education, as doubts grew as to its function and its place within the academic institution and in society more generally. The seeds were being sown of

a more critically based approach to the study of management and organisations and to the education and development of managers. It is now more than a quarter of a century since Reed and Anthony expressed the view that: ‘any educational process must develop and encourage critical and sceptical responses. Failure of management education to support this will contribute to its own redundancy’ (Reed and Anthony, 1992: 603).

A few years later, Thomas wrote of contemporary management education being ‘potentially open to crisis’ as influences on curriculum and pedagogy from critical perspectives raised questions about management and management education practice (Thomas, 1997: 692). These developments in the reconceptualising of the role of management education provide one historical context within which we have situated our review. Our essay proceeds as follows. We describe our approach to reviewing the collection of papers and identify four themes emerging from our analysis. Having completed our analysis we noticed that the themes could be aligned with our theoretical framing of critical reflection (Reynolds and Vince, 2004a). This provides us with the opportunity to contextualise our analysis within the broader frame of CME as well as our contribution to it. We highlight two wider dimensions to our themes, *continuity* and *contradiction*, and we consider their importance for future scholarship in *Management Learning*. In our conclusion we use our findings and reflections to identify what we have learned about management learning, as well as making a call for action in relation to what we are calling *historical reflexivity*.

Literature Review and Thematic Analysis

To begin our reflections on our past publications, we each separately read all 27 publications and made written notes on the main ideas and contributions within the papers. We shared these notes and separately used both sets to identify the themes and sub-themes suggested by the papers. We then had a conversation in which we decided on four general thematic areas and the sub-themes that represent and inform them. We outline the themes below and also set them alongside some broader, social dynamics of the time. The four themes are:

- Competing perspectives on democracy;
- The emotional here and now of the classroom;
- Power, learning and Critical Management Education;
- Critical reflection and organising reflection.

Competing Perspectives on Democracy

There is a difference between the academic discourse in the papers before Margaret Thatcher won her first term as UK Prime Minister (in 1979) and those that are published from this point onwards. In Michael’s early papers (1971, 1973 and 1979) a belief in and enthusiasm for the democratising influence of management education is evident; for the freedoms it is possible to create in the classroom, as well as their disruptive and inspirational qualities. This was a discourse of its time, informed by a sincere belief that democratic structures at work and in society could be created and sustained through collaborative groupwork (Lewin, 1947). Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972) and *Education: the Practice of Freedom* (1976) inspired not only experiential management learning, but a broader sense that, for example, ‘a war on poverty’ could be won (Banks and Carpenter, 2017) and oppression eradicated through the emancipatory potential of education. Participative management education was seen as an influence for organisational change; as part of an emancipation agenda that might transform the social order.

By 1979 things were changing in management education just as they were changing in UK society. The democratic component of efforts at radical change relating to the quality of human relationships and to the distribution of power at work, had given way to a less challenging effort to 'humanize' work. In 'experiential learning: a declining force for change' (Reynolds, 1979) the argument could not be clearer. If the source of democratic change declines, so will the ideal of improved relationships. If this happens, then learning will regress and 'will be applied in the interests of efficiency without necessarily modifying social order' (Reynolds, 1979 p. 89). Under such circumstances 'organization development might ultimately be compelled to assume the status of an underground movement' (Reynolds, 1979 p. 90). This analysis was so right and so wrong at the same time. Learning did regress to be applied in the interests of efficiency; and organization development ('OD') started to become a multi-million-dollar industry in support of neo-liberal economic policy. By the mid 1980s social change had been side-lined because 'you know, there's no such thing as society.' (Margaret Thatcher, *The Guardian*, 2013).

The Emotional Here and Now of the Classroom

The explicit hope for university-based management education as an emancipatory practice thus gave way to an understanding that universities socialize us away from democracy through a focus on preparation for conformity to organizational norms and hierarchical relations (Reynolds, 1979). However, for us, a commitment to understanding peoples' conscious and unconscious complicity in creating and sustaining such norms and relations never completely disappeared from management education. We can also set this personal commitment within the broader context of the growth of Critical Management Education. In this journal, Hugh Willmott's (1994) 'provocations to a debate' set an agenda that we both enthusiastically aligned with, particularly in the development of critical reflection, critical action learning, and group relations (all of which are mentioned in Willmott's paper). A central characteristic of group relations as an approach to management education is the need to work with 'here and now' emotions and relations within the Management School classroom as a way to comprehend our individual and collective capabilities to co-construct defensive and self-limiting structures, but also to create opportunities for learning to challenge and change. One example of this is making difference and the experience of processes generated from difference within educational programmes available as a source of learning (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003).

In the papers we analysed, this theme is represented over time in various ways. We saw the promise and the limitations of 'T-Groups' as a medium through which to learn about alternative models for authority and power relationships (Reynolds, 1979). We saw the promise and limitations of action learning, an approach that is explicitly designed to work openly with managerial experience, but that can also help an individual to defend against what such experience means emotionally and politically (Vince and Martin, 1993). Conversely, we perceived both the limitations and the promise of defensive dynamics for learning in groups (Simpson, French and Vince, 2000). Ultimately, our experience over time has shown us that emotional and political dynamics surrounding managerial roles 'have to be felt to be understood' (Vince, 2011). This involves challenging expectations, paying attention to the complex inter-personal emotions that are generated within a learning space, as well as to the ways in which learning groups create self-imposed limitations and boundaries on learning.

While we were focusing our attentions on emotion, reflection and the psychodynamics of the management classroom, the wider world of management education was preoccupied with management competencies. At the centre of such approaches were popular ‘instruments’ for learning styles, like Kolb’s Learning Styles Inventory (LSI) and Honey and Mumford’s Learning Styles Questionnaire (LSQ) (Kolb, 1981,1984; Honey and Mumford, 1992). In ‘learning styles: a critique’ (Reynolds, 1997), such approaches were criticised for their tendency to decontextualize learning. They were examples ‘of a preoccupation with method and technique’ (Reynolds, 1997 p. 121), used to focus on the development of ‘the whole person’. (‘...likely to produce a happy but no less mystifying false consciousness’ Giroux, 1981: p 66). It was argued that LSI/ LSQ were detrimental to efforts towards confronting social inequality in the workplace because they individualized and decontextualized social relations. Therefore, ‘there is a case for learning styles and other versions of labelling to be discontinued.’ (Reynolds, 1997 p. 128). This critique of learning styles helped to set the scene for critical reflection as ‘the cornerstone of emancipatory approaches to education’ (Reynolds, 1998 p. 183; see also French and Grey, 1996), as well as provoking a well-written counter argument (Sadler-Smith, 2001).

Power, Learning and Critical Management Education

In her essay on its history and development, Perriton (2007) succinctly captures the challenge that CME was seeking to address – to ‘wrestle (management education) out of the utilitarian death grip it had been in since the 1980s’ (Perriton, 2007 p. 2). Individuals would not study management as training for a prescribed set of professional capabilities, but ‘in order to understand and analyse management as a social, political and moral practice’ (Perriton, 2007 p. 2). This implied attentiveness to ‘the primacy of power’ (Willmott, 1994). Power in relation to learning is a strong theme in our papers. An early example looks at struggles to implement equalities through an analysis of white, male power – and particularly its strategic expression through ‘management by avoidance’ (Vince, 1991). This paper presents the avoidance of equality issues in public sector bureaucracies: an interconnected set of malign capabilities, practices and inactions that characterised white male managers’ active ambivalence and strategic inaction in the face of differential social power relations. Similarly, management education has largely ignored or suppressed the learning opportunities arising from difference in an educational context (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003). This paper asked the question: can difference in an educational context be learned from without this becoming a subtle manifestation of consensus masquerading as ‘common interest’? The argument is that becoming more aware of the social and political processes associated with difference in learning environments is both a step towards understanding differences and a means of resisting attempts to ‘manage’ them.

Historically, both of these papers have been overwhelmed by the shift from a concern with the learning implications of social power relations, exclusion and difference towards anesthetising discourses of ‘fairness’ and ‘diversity’. Our longitudinal, grumpy discontent at the watering down of the relationship between social power relations and learning could perhaps be softened by a different pedagogy, a ‘pedagogy of refusal’ (Perriton and Reynolds, 2004). Such a pedagogy implies a wider consideration of the role of management education and development and the conflicted role of the critical management educator in the colonizing structures of management. However, in the end we have had to accept, as others have done (Grey, 2007), the importance of engagement between mainstream management education and CME.

Critical Reflection and Organizing Reflection

Critical Management Education, in our shared experience of writing, has been strongly associated with critical reflection. Our mutual concern is with the over-individualisation of reflection, epitomised by ‘the reflective practitioner’ (Schön, 1983). Our response was to outline the characteristics of critical reflection (Reynolds, 1998) and to highlight reflection as an organizing process (Vince, 2002; Reynolds and Vince, 2004b). We sought to shift the emphasis from individual reflection towards understanding reflection as integral to: an organizational role, the political process of belonging to and representing organizations, and how an organization becomes re-established or changed through reflection.

Therefore, critical reflection is not simply about the individual looking back as a way of making improvements. It is concerned with questioning assumptions, its focus is social rather than individual, it pays attention to the analysis of power relations, and it is concerned with emancipation. Within organizations, this perspective is aligned with the notion of ‘public reflection’ (Raelin, 2001), with the idea that giving voice to reflection within a political context can help to broaden authority and accountability beyond individuals to create an environment conducive to multiple interpretation and collective reflection (Vince and Saleem, 2004). Within business and management schools, this perspective implies a distinctive educational methodology, one that engages with the social, political and moral issues at the heart of management practice. For example, a focus on communities of learning has tended to ignore forces of coercion and the assimilation of difference that are integral to notions of community (Reynolds 2000).

We originally saw critical reflection as a process for questioning and challenging existing structures and practices. In the context of management education, this meant questioning whether the function of reflection was to reinforce existing power relations in organizations or to transform them. Over time we recognised that in practice these two sides represent an organizational paradox, ‘contradictory yet interrelated elements (dualities) that exist simultaneously and persist over time’ (Smith and Lewis, 2011 p 382). For example, one of the outcomes of critical reflection in organizations is that it identifies existing relations of power. However, in doing so, it tends to mobilise those relations of power against critical reflection (Vince, et al., 2018). We seem to continuously return to Willmott’s (1994) ‘provocations’, to an acknowledgement of tensions as implicit and inevitable within CME. Therefore, it continues to be

‘entirely possible that they (the insights of critical approaches) ...will be borrowed as much by those who remain preoccupied with defending established values and priorities as they are by those who are more interested in working towards their rational and democratic transformation’ (Willmott, 1994 p. 131).

Discussion

It was only after we had completed our analysis of the themes of our papers that we realised that these themes were consistent with a framework of critical reflection that we had developed previously (Reynolds and Vince, 2004a). The four components of our framework are: emancipation and the realisation of a more just society; employing a social rather than an individual perspective; questioning assumptions and what is taken-for-granted; and an analysis of power relations. We discuss these in broader terms (than our specific papers) below, and we recognise that the themes of our papers and our framing of critical reflection

are both connected to aspects of the critical turn in management learning (Grey, 1996), which itself was informed by accounts from writers of Critical Theory (Fay, 1987; Habermas 1973) and 'radical' educationalists (Giroux, 1983, 1991; McClaren, 1987).

Competing perspectives on democracy - Emancipation and the realisation of a more just society

This element of critical reflection promotes ideas about working towards democratic values and practices both in organisations and in management learning and education. Strongly represented in critical organisation studies literature (see for example Alvesson and Willmott 1992), and in the development of Critical Management Education, these values are reflected in the belief that the social and political structures of management education can be designed to reinforce or to disrupt the corresponding discourses of the workplace. In writing papers that reflected this theme, we promoted experiential approaches to learning: that addressed the emotional and political context in which learning and organising take place; that emphasised the social as much as the individual; and that promoted participative and publicly visible management. In doing so, we acknowledged the intimate, often unconscious, connections between behaviour in organisations and organisational structure; as well as the complex quality of working lives and relationships. We also remained alert to ways in which *apparently* participative designs are only partially democratic. We were aware of the inevitable tensions of CME, for example, that participation is always double-edged because it involves reinforcing conformity and control as much as encouraging challenge and change. The value of this perspective is also in the fact that such tensions provide a realistic model of our lived experience of everyday management roles and organizational relations.

Power, learning and critical management education - Analysis of power relations

Power in its various forms and practices has been at the core of CMS and CME as an essential element in comprehending dynamics of control and domination that surround and infuse management and organization. The development and application of participative designs for learning involves examining power relations implicit in both organizational and educational structures and practices. This includes reflection on how difference is managed out of organizations and classrooms (Reynolds and Trehan, 2003); and how differences of gender, ethnicity or class become the basis of manipulation, inequality and injustice. One challenge for critical management educators is also to be aware of how we avoid engaging with difference and inequality; how we interpret our role in working with the tensions of democratic educational values, the institutional pressures of assessment, and the requirement to create value for students. We have argued elsewhere for Critical Action Learning (CAL) as an approach to management learning that encourages critique of the structures and processes with which learner-managers are working; and presents an opportunity for them to challenge if not change them (Reynolds and Vince, 2004a). However, in exploring CAL we have also found further evidence of how learning approaches that bring power relations to the surface tend to mobilise prevailing relations of power against such approaches to learning (Vince *et al.*, 2018).

The emotional here and now of the classroom - Employing a social rather than an individual perspective

The perspectives we adopt to make sense of complex processes *in context* need to be informed by theoretical perspectives on the social, political and moral issues that underpin

practice. The formative years of the critical turn in management studies addressed the concern that existing management knowledge was ‘intellectually inadequate because it is based on a narrow mainstream of knowledge (i.e. functionalist behavioural science) that is out of touch with intellectual developments across the Human Sciences’ (Jeffcutt, 1997: 677). This critique remains relevant for management learning scholars, particularly in relation to seemingly relentless attempts to focus on individual competence and positive thinking (see Collinson, 2012 for a critique of the effects of such positivity on leadership). The broad field of management learning and education still relies on overly psychologised and overly rational interpretations of individuals’ behaviour, responsibilities and choice in organizations. One value of a social perspective is in the way in which it forefronts the importance of understanding how emotions affect and are affected by relationships and social structures. We see a continuing responsibility in management learning scholarship for engaging with the collective emotions, affective relations, and shared fantasies that shape and are shaped by our lived experience of organizations.

Critical reflection and organizing reflection – Questioning assumptions and taken-for-granted

Central to the academic tradition and very much part of the position taken by CMS and CME, is the commitment to questioning assumptions embodied not only in management theories, but also in professional practice. This involves raising questions about social, political and moral implications through the reflexive examination of our own position and relationships, both as managers and as educators. Our concern as management scholars can never only be about the technicalities of designs for learning. This aspect of critical reflection is in keeping with an axiom of Critical Theory: to be ‘alert to attempts to pass off sectional viewpoints as universal, natural, classless, timeless ones’. (Gibson, 1986: 172).

Here too there are parallels between educational settings and experiencing and understanding the dynamics of the workplace. To comprehend these parallels, we developed both an organizational and a pedagogical practice of critical reflection (e.g. Reynolds, 1998; Vince, 2011; Vince *et al.*, 2018). Reflection is a cornerstone of management learning because of its importance in the theory and practice of learning from experience. Superficially at least, this suggests that practical relevance and the promise of learning are derived from and anchored in professional experience¹. In harmony with the other elements described in this section, we have been preoccupied with reflection as a lens through which we can take account of the relationships and interests that underpin prevailing organizational order and thereby reveal the power relations that sustain ‘the way we do things here’. In the classroom, reflection focuses on the emotions, habits and attachments that students bring with them into the learning environment, and how these are often connected with the organizational dynamics that constrain them.

Reflections on future scholarship

Having analysed the main themes of our papers, and reflected on them within their broader academic context, we have arrived at an important question: *what can our review of our combined scholarship in the journal tell us about the future of management learning scholarship?* In this section of the essay, we provide some of the answers to this question and

¹ For a critical account of the pitfalls in the quest for ‘relevance’ see Grey, 1996.

start to consider the potential impact of these themes on future scholarship in *Management Learning*.

Although our thematic analysis is presented in four sub-sections, it is also possible to pair the themes to create two broader dimensions from our analysis. In the section on ‘Competing Perspectives on Democracy’ we argue that management education has been made (much) less than it could be in order to avoid challenging managers and organisations on the social, political and moral practice of management. In ‘Power, Learning and CME’ we argue for the primacy of power in any analysis of the complex relationship between management and learning. We also argue that the relationship between social power relations and learning in management education tends to be watered down in practice. In this pairing, we identify *tensions that dilute* the effects of management learning.

In our section on ‘The Emotional Here and Now of the Classroom’ we emphasise provocations that engage managers with social and emotional dynamics that have to be felt before they can be understood. For example, this is an aim of the group relations approach, and it is a characteristic of critical action learning. Our section on ‘Critical Reflection and Organising Reflection’ also emphasises provocations, but in relation to tensions mobilised by the interplay of power and learning. For example, critical reflection both reveals relations of power and mobilises established power relations against critical reflection. In this pairing we identify *tensions that strengthen* the effects of management learning.

In summary, we perceive two ongoing, inter-related tensions. First, management education is made less than it could be, to make it acceptable in the context of established managerial and organizational power relations (*tensions that dilute*). Second, management learning can create a strong context for provocations of established ways of thinking and working through engaging with the emotional and political dynamics that underpin knowledge and practice (*tensions that strengthen*). Our awareness of these tensions, which by their nature seem both ever-recurring and paradoxical, leads us to propose two issues that can help to focus further research and discussion. First, we think that there is a need for *continuity* in relation to aspects of the past fifty years of *Management Learning*; and second, we have identified *contradiction* that remains integral to ongoing debates in the journal. We develop these ideas in more detail.

Continuity: There are constant aspects of knowledge about management learning, which have never gone away, and nor should they. For example, right from the earliest publication there is an underlying passion and commitment to focusing on the freedoms it is possible to create in the classroom and their disruptive and inspirational qualities for managers. While the emphasis of this may have changed from direct challenges to the social order (alas, there is no underground OD movement), we cannot imagine a scholarship of management learning that fails to connect with the emotional, relational and political context within which learning is implemented, or its capacity to unsettle and to challenge. We think that CME will always need to be rearticulated and reinvented in order to respond to the specific nature of contemporary challenges and to connect directly with contemporary academic lives.

We have both the benefit and the burden of a back-catalogue. Early career scholars are subject to different pressures and expectations than the ones we felt. Business and Management Schools are different places now and the educational and political context has changed, not entirely (we fear) for the better. Rising fees, a concern with maximising student numbers, the unsophisticated measurement of student satisfaction, pressures to publish, and

growing international competition have contributed to an educational ethos of diminished tolerance for programmes, particularly smaller programmes, based on critical pedagogies (Sambrook and Willmott, 2014; Perriton and Reynolds, 2018; Tosey and Marshall 2018). What has not changed however, is the ongoing importance of CME in making clear the modes of domination that exist in organizations and classrooms; that both management and learning are not about techniques but values; and that freedom and control are both intimately bound up with the role of management educator and the political context of management education.

Contradiction: Some aspects of knowledge in management learning generate ongoing contradictions. For example, critical reflection is a fundamental assumption in CME (Willmott, 1994; Reynolds, 1998) and it has implicit tensions that make it difficult to embed in classrooms and organisations. Critical reflection unsettles established ways of working and, in doing this, it mobilises reactions in support of the status quo. In addition, in our experience, creating the freedom to feel and think in the classroom is desired and loathed in equal measure (Sinclair, 2007; Vince, 2010). In the future, it will be important to see this much more as an advantage than a problem because it points to a paradox that we think of as integral to management learning (Vince, et al., 2018). As we noted above, what makes tensions paradoxical is that they are inter-related, exist simultaneously and persist over time (Smith and Lewis, 2011). We think that it is important to recognise that mainstream management education theory and practice, and theory and practice associated with critical perspectives, do exist simultaneously, persist over time and remain in tension. We see value in sustaining and further exploring ongoing tensions within and between mainstream and critical approaches to management learning.

Conclusion

Our aim in this essay is broader than reflecting back on our own papers. This is inevitable given that some of our articles in *Management Learning* (and most of the other publications we have written together) critique an understanding of reflection as individuals' looking back (Vince, 2002; Reynolds and Vince, 2004b). As we have discussed above, our perspective on critical reflection is that it is more collective than individual, it questions assumptions, and it seeks to unsettle established norms and conventions in the service of learning and change. Therefore, we speculate on the value of an historical, reflexive practice of journal paper publishing in *Management Learning*. This underpins our call for action. We imagine that our paper might inspire other authors, both individually and collectively, to examine their combined contributions to *Management Learning* as a way of engaging with and influencing the future form and content of this journal. Specifically, what we suggest is that this essay can be read both as a stand-alone historical view of two intersecting academic lives represented through publications; and it can be read as an example of an historically reflexive practice of management learning scholarship.

Therefore, one potential avenue for the future of *Management Learning* scholarship is that groupings of academics could practice what we are calling 'historical reflexivity', by looking at their intersecting, collective contributions to knowledge in and of management learning. We think that this would generate a more interactive and critically reflexive view of scholarship in the journal in addition to the current virtual special issues (VSI) (<http://journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq>). The VSIs offer readers a set of papers and brief descriptions of them. It would be interesting to see a deeper analysis of how previously published papers combine: to challenge 'the taken-for-granted aspects of learning, managing,

organizing and management education’ (VSI on Reflexivity); to extend ‘reflexive capabilities... how do individuals work through emotions to negotiate their ideas of self and their interactions with others?’ (VSI on Emotion); or to ‘develop understandings of how issues of power and ideology shape processes and practices of knowledge creation and learning’ (VSI on Power and Politics). We suggest something more than a collection of papers organized around a key *Management Learning* theme. We suggest collaborations in the service of historical reflexivity.

Historical reflexivity refers to a non-chronological analysis of what becomes taken for granted, by recognising that the past, present and future are all implicated in the historical construction of management and organization. The practical value of reflexivity is that it ‘unsettles’ what is taken for granted (Cunliffe, 2016). The practical value of historical reflexivity is that it identifies taken for granted knowledge, relations and structures that have implications in the past, present and future. For example, it can unsettle assumptions of progress within a specific context by showing that such notions are provisional and non-chronological.

We have not extensively developed our thinking about ‘historical reflexivity’. We use the term to help us capture and describe a scholarly endeavour that has a non-chronological element to it; that is about the ongoing relationships between past, present and future scholarship. However, we think that three ideas can be brought together to initially express what historical reflexivity means and involves. First, it can be understood as practical reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2016) on ‘striking moments’ (Corlett, 2013) in our (academic) lives; moments that bring the past and the future closer together. This involves consciously questioning taken-for-granted aspects of our own and others’ knowledge and practice.

Second, emotional narratives from the past have an intimate relationship with our present and futures. These narratives depend on a cast of characters each similarly engaged in making (actual and imagined) histories part of the present. For example, here we wrestle with the apparent tension between the importance of working from a critical, therefore social perspective, and our project in this paper based on our individually or jointly written papers. Emotional narratives can also depend on non-rational connections and on happenstance. For example, one of the ways in which the authors of this paper are historically connected arises from sharing the same birthday (23rd December). Finally, history is imposed upon us in the present to encourage tacit acceptance of a social order or system of domination (Bourdieu, 1990). Our scholarly lives are bound up with this implicit order, for example, in the relentless production of journal papers for the REF.

Our analysis of the themes drawn from our *MLQ* published papers has encouraged us to attach significance to their social and professional context. Our writing, both singly or together, reflects our engagement with debates and discussions within the community of scholars and students of which we were a part, as well as being to various degrees shaped by critiques from colleagues, reviewers and editors. As Grey (2012) reminds us in his ‘Notes for anniversarifiers’ (written for a different journal): ‘...the ‘we’ is important ... in several ways: we the subject, we the journal but, in a more diffuse sense, we a community of people associated with the subject and the journal as readers of and writers for it.’ (p. 9).

We are also conscious of the emergence and development of CMS and CME in a period of significant change which has provided the context to our work. As an example, the theme of ‘competing perspectives on democracy’ draws on ideas developed in a period in which

‘participation’ in the workplace was implemented sometimes as an ideal but just as often in ways that were manipulative.

Publishing a paper in *Management Learning* provides the author with a definite striking moment (Corlett, 2013). As we know from our experience, it can take many months, sometimes years (it feels like forever), for a paper to move from submittable draft to published work. Here we have looked at several of these moments within our academic careers. We have contributed to the development of the theory and practice of critical reflection, but we also see historical reflexivity as an approach for questioning taken-for-granted aspects of our own academic knowledge and practice. We can interrogate how what we write influences our understanding of what’s going on around us (and vice versa), as well as how we have privileged certain ways of thinking over others.

We started this essay by acknowledging that neither of us imagined representing our academic lives through a list of publications. However, something unexpected and surprising has emerged for us, which is that a sensitivity towards historical reflexivity *can* be generated by looking at our academic lives as a series of published papers. If we are going to look at our academic lives as a series of published papers, then our message in this essay is... let’s do it creatively! The history of our publications is more than a list on a CV. It is a representation of thought processes unfolding over time, of values that are within and beyond their time, and a shared connection with the future of management learning.

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