Writing dangerously: Creating fictional narratives as an alternative form of critique within business schools

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abstract

Organisational scholars employing arts-based methods offer a potent alternative to traditional forms of critique. While other faculties encourage arts-based methods of enquiry, creativity has largely kept to the fringes of business schools. My decision to employ a creative narrative method to examine intra-organisational authenticity through the writing of a children's book unearthed the division and tensions that such an approach elicits. This paper points to a climate of insecurity as the source of internal resistance to critical narrative-based methods that move beyond the accepted traditions of organisational storytelling. It further highlights the opportunities for critique that such creative narrative methods offer business schools. It makes the argument that business schools must embrace those experimenting with alternative methods of critique to be relevant to the organisations they study.

The piano man and other cocktails best stirred

> I know a management scholar who's also a concert pianist! Should he be allowed to present his research as a concerto?

This question was put to me by an esteemed academic during a presentation for my doctoral studies. On the surface, it might seem like a strange question

to ask a student in a business school, but I had just announced that my method of research would be to write a children's book. I was asking for it. The room was full of unfamiliar faces, including a cheery scholar, who later told me he just came along because he thought what I was proposing all sounded so strange. I was a two-headed bearded lady standing in a business school showing everyone her knickers. The man with the piano question was not impressed. My knees silently quaking. My tired brain quickly sifting through the middens of research that are created in your mind when preparing for a PhD presentation.

'Yes', I replied. After all, you learn more than how to hit the keys when you learn the piano. You learn history through a musical canon, musicology through experience, language through sheet music, communication through tutorial and musical expression, creativity and collaboration through composition and performance. Issues of power and control through followership, discipline, work ethic. The fine relationship between talent and drive. You learn how to *learn* the piano and much more.

But who was this inexperienced student with her ridiculous plan, piano analogies and her apparent lack of awareness or respect of everything that ever happened before? Not to mention an inability to *actually* play the *actual* piano. That would be me. But not only me. In the field of organisational scholars, there is a rich tradition of narrative as a means of inquiry (Sliwa and Cairns, 2007; Rhodes and Brown, 2005; Beigi et al., 2019). Many scholars argue that narrative methods offer a critical tool that allows us to understand both organisations and our experience within them (Czarniawska, 2018; Gilmore et al., 2019), through its ability to provide analysis as an 'additional point of contact' to the everyday world (Phillips, 1995: 945). These benefits have led to an increase in the use of narrative as a tool of critical inquiry.

The ways in which narrative methods are now deployed in the organisational space are as diverse as the topics they traverse (Beigi et al., 2019; Gilmore et al., 2019; Conroy and Batty, 2020; Nair et al., 2018; Knowles et al., 2017; Grey and Sinclair, 2006; Phillips, 1995). And it is this diversity of

applications within organisational studies that has inspired me to employ this narrative methodology.

In this article, I address the issue of creativity in organisational studies through my own work as a children's author working with arts-based narrative methods within a business school.

As a children's author, I know only too well the power of narrative to explore topics that can seem out of reach. My own picture book, *Room on our rock* (Temple and Temple, 2020), whilst not an academic text, used a reversible narrative to allow children to experience two stories of displacement, providing a moment of intimacy with subject matter that is difficult for young audiences. Likewise, narrative methods within the academic sphere are also capable of exposing new ground. For example, Czarniawska (2018) investigates the researcher's ability to effectively investigate anxiety at work by analysing two Polish works of fiction. Knowles et al. (2017) use Joyce's Ulysses to uncover truths about organisational life. Weatherall (2019) documents an unconventional approach to her doctoral thesis with the aim of better capturing the humanity and meaning in her research. Conroy and Betty (2020) write a play to disrupt conventions of leadership. Rhodes (2015) explores the importance of joy and humanity in organisational writing by blurring genre with fictocriticism. While Grafström and Jonsson (2019) challenge the idea of the static case study with its rationalistic perspective by commissioning a work of fiction and documenting the potential of this twist on narrative methodology. All these examples are a challenge, a test of the norm. They tease the edges of what can be done and offer new ways of thinking. They employ diverse narrative methods with the purpose of uncovering knowledge previously out of reach.

So, with such a clear precedent for the use of narrative, why then is there resistance to creating a children's book within a business school? Instinctively, we know it is an endeavour that lies somewhere between risky and ludicrous. It certainly requires justification in a way that other methods would not.

This paper argues for a broader use of arts-based methods within business schools – but specifically here, for the creation of narrative fictions. I posit that narrative is in a unique position to wedge open the door to creativity within business schools because of its burgeoning acceptance and proliferation. But whilst narrative methods have found a foothold in organisational studies, they are more widely accepted as 'surrogate cases' (Sliwa and Cairns, 2007), which can be understood as employing narrative in a realistic sense to gain insight examples that can be directly applied to organisational studies (Short and Reeves, 2009; Grafström and Jonsson, 2019). Also accepted are methods that use narrative as 'stories of organising' which allow for meaning through the extraction of analogy or interpretation (Rhodes, 2016; Czarniawska, 2018; Knowles et al., 2017). Despite the groundswell of daring, insightful and imaginative uses of narrative in organisational studies, when it comes to creation of fiction, business schools are particularly wary. It is not the use of narrative that is questioned, it is taking a seat at the piano and inventing things. Masking this unease is a display of concern for the validity of creative work. It begs the question, is the true source of resistance an insecurity within the business school based in its own relevance and the destabilising possibilities of opening the door widely to creativity?

Who might walk in if business schools were flourishing hubs of fictions and imagination? And more worryingly, what might walk out...

The issue with business schools is one I have experienced myself completing an MBA. Jammed classes, case studies glorifying masculine power structures and neo-liberalist jargon filled the syllabus. There was no storytelling, save that storytelling that reinforces the existing capitalist ideals. It did not feel dangerous. This curriculum has been linked with a preoccupation with maintaining an appearance for the sake of relationships with the corporate world (Gioia, 2002) and its ability to generate profit from students (Parker, 2018). It reinforces hierarchies that rely on inequalities, and it presents little alternative to a capitalist paradigm (Davies and Starkey, 2020) despite the constant cry for critical thinking. Some go further suggesting that business schools have committed a moral failure (McDonald, 2017) and would be better razed to the ground (Parker, 2018).

This is not my position. Instead, I argue that arts-based methods should be warmly welcomed by the establishment, as they may be a lifebuoy to an institution suffering a crisis of relevance. Even organisational scholars, who would rather see business schools bulldozed, assert that our imaginations are where we need to start to create better worlds (Parker, 2018). These critics suggest that ways of improving the business school model could include broadening the curriculum (Godfrey et al., 2005) and including new disciplines (Parker, 2018). While others advocate for moral imagination and engaging in organisational experiments (Patriotta and Starkey, 2008). Creativity, it seems, is key. The presence of more arts-based methods would reimagine what it means to be a business school and open a door to a diversity of perspectives. It is norm defying work, and perhaps for some, still welded to academic conventions and well-trodden methodologies, it is dangerous work.

Opening the door and other unwanted house guests

Harnessing my professional experience as a children's author to create a unique art-based method has allowed me to explore aspects of the subjective experience once hard to reach. In addition, creative narrative methods like my own also contribute to a broadening of methods within organisational studies more widely and allow us to expose the human within the organisation. This is only made possible because of the purchase narrative methods already have within organisational studies and the ability of story to amplify convention, as well as to subvert. Organisational storytelling has a history of reaffirming management conventions and positivist norms (Beigi et al., 2019). It is a tool used to control and consolidate power, to assist management in navigating change, to assist individuals with issues of identity, to communicate information. Writing is not just a conduit for perpetrating norms but complicit and integral. The 'facts' and 'science' act as a barrier for the manager to hide behind during uncomfortable decisions. At the other end of the spectrum, narrative methods allow for the subjective lived experience to re-enter the room. Storytelling is also a tool of sensemaking that allows for a coherence of the subjective experience (Rhodes and Brown, 2005). Put another way, storytelling threads the

incongruities of organisational life so that they may hang together. This intrinsic dichotomy of organisational storytelling (Sliwa and Cairns, 2007) is what provides it with the ability to subvert and conform. It is both conventional and disruptive, and as creative methods go, it is also accessible. For this reason, narrative methods offer the greatest access for creativity and change, bringing with them new ideas and new people.

Making it up and other bedtime stories

The use of narrative methods has now well outgrown its origins of storytelling as a means of simply reinforcing convention. It is an established and expanding tool of critical enquiry. A review of 165 papers on organisational storytelling found only seven of those papers published before 2005 had a critical lens. There were an additional 32 papers identified as using a critical lens published between 2005-2015 (Beigi et al., 2019). The review amplifies Rhodes and Brown's (2005) assertion that beyond story's ability to reinforce the dominant management narrative is a potent means of disrupting convention and debunking assumptions. Like all forms of creative expression, it allows us to dive deeper into the subjective by embracing emotion and a textural humanity in a field that is inextricably linked to people and their lived experience (Czarniawska, 2008; Gilmore et al., 2019). The emergence of critical storytelling and its acceptance as a methodology can be credited to those organisational scholars who have long wrestled with the stifling constraints of normative academic convention. In Phillips' seminal article 'Telling organizational tales: On the role of narrative fiction in the study of organizations' (1995) he argues for the use of narrative fiction as a research method. He posits that strict divisions between traditional methods and narrative fiction are overdrawn. This cleft between truth as fact and art as fiction is becoming increasingly difficult to defend. Instead of doing so, scholars exploring this tension suggest that it offers exciting opportunity to learn more about organisations (Czarniawska, 2008; Gilmore et al., 2019; Phillips, 1995).

This call to engage in narrative fiction and widen the critical lens has also been answered by those organisational scholars looking to examine the way

in which we write and its effect on what we learn and how we teach. Those engaged in the 'writing differently' movement shine a light on the growing resistance to the 'scientific' norms of organisational writing and highlight the capacity for critical narrative-based methods as a powerful form of critique. The special issue in Management Learning on 'Writing Differently' (Gilmore et al., 2019) unearthed a diversity of approaches to writing that challenges academic convention. They identify that by conforming to academic conventions of writing, we are conforming to the norms that have created it (Gilmore et al., 2019), and that by exploring new ways of writing, we advance the ways and nature of our learning. They argue that engaging directly with how we write can challenge and change management conventions and stimulate transformation (Gilmore et al., 2019; Harris, 2016; Grey and Sinclair, 2006) whilst making organisational writing more impactful and pleasurable for the author and reader (Kiriakos and Tienari, 2018; Grey and Sinclair, 2006; Phillips, 1995). The diversity of knowledge and intent in narrative-based methods is certainly varied, but all share a common goal. They aim to resist the 'suffocating scientific norms' of academic writing motivated by a desire to 'demonstrate one's cleverness, or to accrue publications as an end to themselves' (Grey and Sinclair, 2006: 443). These scholars argue such stale writing extracts the humanity from learning and research and inhibits our ability to make more creative and interesting contributions (Gilmore et al., 2019; Weatherall, 2019; Grey and Sinclair, 2006).

As both a professional writer of children's books and an organisational scholar, this resistance of conventional writing and storytelling calls to me. The 'scientific' extraction of the humanity from the organisation seems a response to the mess that comes with subjectivity. But for an author, the mess is where the truth lies. Without the mess of subjectivity, the writer is left with a clinical palette that limits the options for furthering knowledge and furthering the story. Finding value and knowledge only in positivist methodologies denies organisational scholars their positions as scholars, not just of the organisation, but of the human experience that created the organisation.

It is this ability of fiction and narrative methods to reach beyond and offer better ways of critiquing the subjective human experience that eludes scientific method (Beigi et al., 2019). Many aspects of work life are out of reach of empirical studies and our ability to critique them is compromised by their hidden human nature. Scientific attempts to force the invisible into the light somehow flatten and weaken its authenticity making it unreliable to study (Czarniawska, 2018). At their heart, alternative narrative methods help us to find a way in, to critique what is not seen on the surface. In my own work, creating a work of fiction to explore personal authenticity in an organisational setting, exposed the personal strain on the individual as it juggles a constructed self at work. A fictional approach here allowed for a thought experiment to take place that yielded unexpected insights about the politics of self at work. These narrative methods are employed in order to develop radically new insights about working life to reach beyond what is available on the surface. They offer powerful modes of critique through their merging of consideration for the audience and the effect that writing has on the author at work.

But is there a difference between using narrative methods, embodied writing styles, and just plain making it up? Joyce, Kafka, William Dean Howel, even SpongeBob SquarePants have all been used effectively as an alternative lens for critiquing organisation. Whilst examples of original narrative creation are more limited, there are examples of poetry (Richardson, 2003), graphic novel (Short and Reeves, 2009), and short form fiction (Rhodes, 2001), as well as long form (Grafström and Jonsson, 2019), but these examples are far from common. What can creation of story lend to organisational scholars? It can create a new source of data, a new method, and reintroduce the self into the research, allowing the readers to gain some further knowledge about themselves (Phillips, 1995). All these things are true. But the most unique contribution fiction offers organisational critique is derived from the way in which it inverts the arts-based model. The criticism levelled at some creating fictions within the arts faculty is that they are really practitioners with little interest in the rigour of research (Bourke and Neilsen, 2004). Not so for the organisational scholar who comes to narrative-based methods, not for the sake of practicing the methodology, but as a tool of organisational

critique. This cross-contamination from arts-based methods has the potential to yield new knowledge and approaches in business schools that are largely untapped.

For my own work on critical study of intra-organisational authenticity, the possibilities presented by narrative methods are profound. Here, traditional writing is not just stifling, it is limited to probing the surface murky waters of the self at work. What goes on beneath is unknown and obscured by many things including our presentation of self. Those studying emotions at work have found that while traditional ethnographic methods mean the researcher is present, this does not guarantee that the people they are studying are (Czarniawska, 2015). I wanted to *find* the people I was studying and understand their subjective experience. Arts-based methods present a potent means of critiquing constructs by tracking the human experience at work. By injecting a fiction, I am able to extract some of what it means to be human at work. When researching intangible constructs, such as personal authenticity, narrative methodology provides a way of rupturing the surface tension that the individual so carefully creates at work. Van Maanen (2006) supports this approach arguing that traditional ethnographic writing can gain textural sophistication from being blended and combined with other genres.

Reattaching the heart to the head and other questionable procedures

It is a strange thing that whilst many of the organisations we study look to harness creativity to ignite culture and gain competitive advantage, business schools remain constricted, when it comes to narrative forms of critique (Gilmore et al., 2019). Emotion is often seen as an irrelevance and an obstacle to clear and clinical analysis. Somehow, it makes scientific sense to sever the organisations from the dynamic human emotions that inhabit them. Those who practice arts-based narrative methods as a means for deeper learning must make a strong case for such transformative writing, as there is still a need to legitimise creativity within business schools and particularly at the doctoral level, where we should be encouraging

experimentation. But with all this talk of writing plays, poetry and (God forbid) a children's book, one question hangs around the business scholar's mind like a fly trapped in a bottle: What does all this talk of writing have to do with management? Are these concerns of generating fiction not *really* more appropriately suited to the arts faculty, where they belong? And while Phillips (1995) vigorously defends his call for narrative fiction as a methodology that evolves our knowledge and deepens our study of organisations, it is met with resistance. And while Gilmore et al. (2019), point to the importance of questioning and breaking scientific norms perpetuated through writing styles so that we might develop new ideas, the resistance remains. And though Savage et al. (2018) call for fiction to be a central concern to management scholars, still there is doubt. Doubt that something as fluffy as *making things up* can have any relevance to the confident unyielding and definable scientific norms of organisational study. And yet, it does. For all the thoughtful critical arguments that surround this issue of writing in organisations, one common truth binds them. We are, what we write. For managers, this is of vital importance. Gilmore et al. (2019) observe the link between how we write, and who we become:

> ...we literally write out the vast hinterlands that are our lives, then we constitute ourselves in the image of the disembodied scientist whose goal is a scientific knowledge bereft of ethics, care and understanding. (2019: 3)

The act of writing impacts on us physically and on the reader (Bevan, 2019), and therefore, how we feel, when we write, matters to our learning and to the knowledge we plough. Much like work, writing can be laborious. It can be dirty. It can be dangerous. It can also be fun. The process of writing in the appropriate conventions of organisational studies is often not fun or dirty or dangerous. It is removed from the human experience and feels (dare I say *feels*!) absent and *tricky*. Employing fictional methodologies and combining them with the rigor of the academic provides a freedom to delve into your own knowledge as it merges with lived or embodied experience. It is at this nexus between the scholar and the writer that insights are formed, and it is through the process of reflexivity and creativity that they are extracted.

Jumping the shark and other final reflections

I do not advocate for all scholars to try their hand at the short story, spin a clay pot, or weave an org chart into a tapestry (although I'd like to see that!), but the inclusion of arts-based methods within the business school makes business sense. Whilst thin off the ground, examples are already emerging, like Conroy and Batty's exportation of embodied leadership engaged through the lens of a playscript (2020). Imagine the possibilities for business schools that are open to more ideas like this, more dangerous creativity. There is a particularly exciting opportunity for working creatives, such as myself, to merge their academic selves with their practice to gain new insights. Work like this enlivens a business school and creates a climate for exciting discourse of a diversity of students with an array of views, not all simply tamed by a middle-class dream. The time is right. The expansion of critical narrative work has created 'the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of social and cultural structures' (Cixous, 1976, as cited in Phillips et al., 2014: 348).

If we value and employ a variety of methodologies to our research, then we should similarly value and employ a more expansive and varied approach to our writing, inclusive of creative work. In doing so, we broaden our understanding of what different approaches to writing can offer our work (Conroy and Batty, 2020; Gilmore et al., 2019). This aims to avoid the *deadening* effects of formulaic writing in favour of imaginative, experimental and reflective learning (Gilmore et al., 2019). This is not done to avoid the rigour of academic work or to replace it – instead the intention is to augment and enhance.

An evolution of the traditions of narrative draws on more aspects of the researcher as artist and has the potential to extract the unexpected. Narrative fiction probes the subject matter in interesting ways, whilst also contributing to the way in which we study organisations. In taking the risk to write differently, or even dangerously – to create, we demonstrate innovation through both our failures and successes. Business schools, brave enough to embrace those looking to *make it up,* display, not just a confidence

in themselves, but stand poised to be the first in line for the spoils of an emergent methodology.

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