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Connecting with carnival: Developing critical business education through reflective writing

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In response to recent criticisms, and following a sustained effort by Critical Management Scholars, business education, especially the MBA, is increasingly taking seriously the idea that it needs to enable students to develop the capacities of critical and reflective thought. One method in particular is suggested as meeting this end: reflective writing. The aim of this current paper is to consider if this method lives up to the promise of developing critical and reflective corporate citizens. Using a body of critical theory on reflective practice, I argue that reflective writing as done by students tends to be a Truth posing exercise. This is insufficient to the end that critical scholars envision. My aim with this paper is to introduce a new form of reflective writing. Drawing on the based on Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of carnival, I argue for a dialogical text in which different voices and perspectives jostle and claim that this is productive of texts that grant autonomy to the reader to make meaning. This form of writing is more conducive to the constitution of ethical and critical thinking than are the current Truth books (Masschelein, 2006) that dominant reflective writing. I illustrate this through my experiences introducing reflective writing in an undergraduate accounting unit and to an MBA. I argue that the latter is more dialogical and carnivalistic as the reflective writing is a joint effort.

Keywords: reflective writing, business education, MBA, reflective practice

Introduction

Business schools are being urged to develop curriculum focused on the development of the reflective and critical capacities of students. This move was initially propelled by scholars situated within Critical Management Studies (Cunliffe, 2009; Sinclair, 2007a; Betts, 2004; Reynolds, 1998) but has been given added impetus from recent criticisms of MBA education in relation to the recent Global Financial Crisis (Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010; Garcia, 2009; Antonacopoulou, 2010). It is thus timely to contribute to the growing conversation by considering the method chosen by both mainstream and critical scholars for developing critical and ethical students. The method to which attempts to develop the capacities of critical reflection in students by asking them to reflect upon their habits, assumptions, and practices. Business students, especially MBA students, are increasingly being expected to develop the ability to write reflectively about themselves and their organisations. The theory of the method of reflective writing has been further enhanced by the introduction of the idea that language is constitutive of the self (Cunliffe, 2009; Fairhurst, 2009) by Critical Management Scholars (CMS). This understanding allows theorists to analyse reflective writing styles. In this current paper, I use this idea to argue that reflective writing may not live up to its promise because of the tendency of writers to aim for comfort and Truth (Betts, 2004; Masschelein, 2006; Bleakley, 2000, 2000a; Pillow, 2003; Swidler, 2001). These “Truth books” (Masschelein, 2006) privilege the voice of the narrator because the author and narrator are seen as one and the same (Swidler, 2001). This silences the perspectives of others who appear in the text. Such a form of writing
fails to live up to the expectations of critical scholars because it runs the risk of constituting selves who aim to impose their particular Truth.

The argument presented above is important as it not only presents flaws in the method of reflective writing but allows us to consider different forms of writing that are constitutive of ethical and responsible selves. The aim of this paper is to introduce a different style of reflective writing that allows for different perspectives, different truths and gives autonomy to the reader to make meaning. Such writing would presumably be constitutive of corporate selves who are responsible to the voice of others. The work of Alexander Styhre (2008) is adapted in order to introduce a “carnivalistic perspective” (p. 92) that foregrounds experimentation, play and new possibilities for thought and action. This perspective aims to displace the privileged voice of the narrator-who-is-also-the-writer by allowing other voices/ideas/perspectives to regain their rightful position in the text. This ensures that the voice of the narrator is one amongst many and replaces the distance between author and narrator. This style of writing, in which responsibility is paramount, may prove conducive to the constitution of different forms of corporate selves. Finally, I consider how this might be achieved through discussing my experiences in two subject areas; accounting education and the MBA in which I consider both my position as being outside of the faculty and the successes and problems of the curriculum innovations.

Reflectivity as defined in business education

Business education in the academy has been under scrutiny from critical scholars for nearly two decades. Management education (Cunliffe, 2009; Voronov, 2009; Adler, Forbes, & Willmott, 2007; Reynolds, 1998), leadership and the MBA (Warhurst, 2010; Ford, Harding, & Learmonth, 2010; Garcia, 2009; Cunliffe, 2009a; Sinclair, 2007; Currie & Knights, 2010), marketing (Tadajewski, 2010) and accounting (Boyce, Greer, Blair, & Davids, 2012) have all had a critical lens applied. There is great diversity in this criticism not only between disciplines but amongst disciplines. As Alexander Styhre (2008) notes of Critical Management Studies (CMS), it is “not a unified and heterogeneous field of research” (p. 101). However, this research interest shares the opinion that current business education is failing to develop the critical and reflective capacities of students and thus “may serve to ethically ‘cripple’ our students” (Boyce et al., 2012, p. 48). Garcia (2009) writes that the MBA seeks to “sustain the project of bureaucratic-managerial society” (p. 22). This aim of making “leadership [or accounting or management] education more critical” (Ford et al., 2010) in order to produce a “new breed of ethical, reflective and creative decision-makers” (Garcia, 2009, p. 113) has gained impetus since the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) (Datar et al., 2010).

It is beyond the scope of this current paper to engage more fully with the critiques of business education and I refer the reader to papers quoted to gain a deeper understanding of how the criticism that business education does not develop critical capacities and thus has a questionable ethic basis. My focus is on the method that has become the most relied upon path to develop criticality. I am referring to critical reflexivity which has become the de riguer method of developing critical capacities and an ethical basis in business education. The work of Michael Reynolds (1998) in CMS has proven important in this and so, I turn to his work to understand what is meant by critical reflexivity, after which, I discuss a recent development, the implementation of the idea that language is constitutive of the subject (Cunliffe, 2009a; Fairhurst, 2009) which will be fruitful in re-thinking reflexivity in business education.
Reynolds (1998) argues that one of the basic principles of CMS is to “challenge the tacit assumptions prevalent in mainstream literature that managing is a neutral, disinterested process of developing the most effective and efficient means” (Reynolds, 1998, p. 184). The method chosen to this end by Reynolds is critical reflection. He differentiates this style of reflection from the reflection that is a norm of management education; the main difference being that reflection as a norm is used as a problem solving device and is therefore instrumentalist whereas critical reflection is used to consider other possible alternatives. Reynolds argues that critical reflection aims at “questioning of contextual taken-for-granted-social, cultural and political” (Reynolds, p. 183). The aim is to reveal limits on knowledge and action and to and think and do otherwise. It aims at creating “a just and democratic society through reasoned confrontation of the dominant, science-influence rationality” (Reynolds, p. 187). This confrontation is expected to include confronting one’s beliefs and actions.

Reynolds on critical reflectivity has proven hugely influential on CMS and has seen critical such reflection become de riguer in management education. As Fairhurst (2009) argues, “a critical management studies tradition has emerged, the aim of which fosters reflexivity in practising managers” (p. 1617). This is also true for other critical business education fields. For example, Tadajewski (2010) writes that “frequently associated with Critical Marketing […] are commitments to paradigmatic and methodological pluralism, reflexivity and ontological denaturalization” (p. 213). In a manner similar to Reynolds, CMS scholars argue for the need to encourage students to critically reflect in order to develop capacities for “thinking more critically and reflexively about ourselves, our action, and the situations we find ourselves in” (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 88). The preoccupation with critical reflectivity is in terms of research and teaching practice but it is the latter which is of most interest to this paper, especially that which has almost become a mandate; the need for students to reflect upon their own habits, assumptions and thoughts through writing about their experiences.

Reflective self-study is quickly becoming a norm for critical theorists. Students, especially on the MBA, are increasingly being expected to take themselves as objects of study in order to “unsettle the assumptions” (Cunliffe, 2009, p.93) that inform their actions. Mainstream scholars have also suggested that self-reflection is necessary to produce new forms of corporate leadership. Datar et al. (2010) argue that “to inspire and influence others over sustained periods requires careful reflection and introspection of one’s strengths and weaknesses, values and attitudes, and the impact of one’s actions on others” (p. 8). MBA students are being asked to “dig into their own history, investigating their own path as leader and follower, reflecting on major life experiences and values” (Sinclair, 2007a, p. 42). This type of ontology is increasingly becoming a focus for MBA and management education and students are more and more being asked to question their limitations and the limits of knowledge. Andrew Chan (2000) for example, suggests that business educators can support students in this by setting assessments that address questions such as; “What are the limits to which we are subject and how can we free ourselves? What is the possibility of change, how, when and by whom?” (p. 1059).

Such reflective writing is thought bound to develop critical capacities and thus new forms of being corporate citizens. A new insight into language is adding impetus to this type of study. The idea that language is not simply a tool that transmits ideas but is constitutive of the self was introduced to CMS in the first part of the 21 century. Gail Fairhurst (2009) has been instrumental to this introduction, as has Ann Cunliffe, (2009a, 2009). Fairhurst (2009) argues that this belief is closely linked with the “linguistic turn in the social and the organisational sciences” (p. 1607) and is a reaction against “realist conceptions of truth” (optic). The basic premise is that “language does not mirror reality, it constitutes it” (Fairhurst, 2009, p. 1608). Language is
connected with “the ways in which a sense of self is constructed and experienced” (Sinclair, 2007a, p. 43). The self is thus not considered a formed entity that can be unproblematically transmitted but as emergent through language. “We talk what we understand as our social world into existence, and maintain ‘its’ existence in our talk” (Cunliffe, 2009, p. 57). This view of language is not held by all CMS and business education critical theorists who encourage reflective writing. Those of us who do subscribe to this view are able to 1) discern what types of selves are constituted in reflective writing and 2) consider if these selves are the critical and ethically responsive ones said to be required.

Comforting selves

A fundamental premise of reflective writing is that it enables the production of new forms of the self; in the case of business education, critical and ethical selves who can reflect upon the possible impact of their actions. I basically agree with the premise that reflective writing can be productive of critical selves (Pollard, 2008). However, I am unconvinced that this is always the outcome of reflective writing. In fact, I would argue that it is far more normal for reflective writing to be productive of selves far less critical than the forms of self that are expected by transformative intellectuals. This form of writing is recognisable by the value given to truth within the text. My argument is that normally reflective writing positions the Truth of the writer in a privileged position. This silences other voices and is not constitutive of critical and ethical selves. In support of this claim, in this section I examine arguments from reflective writing scholars.

As we have seen above, there are different types of reflection; reflection and critical reflection (Reynolds, 1998). It is my contention that the “reflective” type seeks to showcase a Truth as discovered by the author. Betts (2004) reveals this when she writes that there are different types of reflection and an instrumental form dominants in business; “for managers, reflective practice is used, usually, as a tool for improving competence” (p. 242). She labels this as “theology reflection” because it aims for universal truths and an “alliance with authority” (Betts, p.243). She argues this is not necessarily sinister, but that it “ignores the possible full engagement of the reflexive practitioner” (Betts, p. 242). The aim for Truth and an alliance with authority, in this case trying to do what you think the teacher wants (Hobbs, 2007) is endemic to reflective writing. The problem of the search for Truth is recognised by and Jan Masschelein (2006) who labels such writing, “pastoral writing”. He claims that pastoral-writing results in a “Truth book” that is used to convince others of the Truth the writer has found. “Writing a truth book means to write a book that informs, that puts forward a truth […] it is a book that attempts to inform about something, to explain something, to prove or justify something. In this sense, writing a truth book (Masschelein, p. 556). This type of writing “implies a particular attitude, a particular ethos. […] This attitude implies that one puts oneself in the service of a regime, subjugates to its logos […] and takes up demands and care in its name” (Masschelein, p. 566). The writer of these Truth books adopts an attitude of being a guide to his/her particular truth. The text becomes a vehicle for this idea and the reader is seen as needing guidance in “the light of this regime” (Masschelein, p. 567).

Alan Bleakley (2000) is also aware of the problems with the current ethos and style that dominants reflective writing. His work is important because, following the idea that language is constitutive of the self, he is able to argue that such writing is constitutive of confessing subjects. It also allows him to focus on the style of writing and make a claim for a different style. He argues that most reflective writing tends to be written in the “social realist” genre that
aims to “objectively describe and report through a naïve realist worldview” (Bleakley, p. 12). This form of writing is characterised by a personal-confessional style of writing which has an “introspective gaze, [is] anecdotal, [and uses] value-laden expression” (Bleakley, p. 13). He argues that this form of writing is “characteristically instrumentalised [and reads like] an extended curriculum vitae” (Bleakley, p. 20). This mode of writing is basically a genre of the self-help literature that exploded in the last two decades of the Twentieth Century. Bleakley claims that such writing primary concern is that this is constitutive of a particular type of self, one that is not quite the ethical corporate citizen we hope for. “The very form of confessional writing we employ to apparently free ourselves from subjection to a lack of reflection comes to produce the objects of its inquiry as confessing subjects, thus formulating a new layer of unreflexiveness and subjection” (Bleakley, p. 14). This differs from the ethically responsible and continuously reflective student that business education is thought to produce because the focus is not on examining different perspectives but on asserting their Truth. This Truth seeking effort is further entrenched due to the structural style of reflective writing. Stephen Swidler (2001) argues that it is normal to collapse the narrator with the writer in reflective writing. “The personal experience narrator is also the main character in the story he or she is telling. Structurally speaking, the narrator is the “hero” of her or his own story” (Swidler, p. 119). The strict identification of the author with the narrator of the story lends truth to the story. What is required is a form of reflective writing that foregrounds the distinction between the writer and the narrator, placing the narrator as one more element in a text. The narrator’s voice is not dominant. This allows different voices and elements within the text to come into view and to jostle for the reader’s attention. The onus is on then on the reader to make meaning, thus giving autonomy the leading role. Following on from the idea of language as constitutive, this would see the emergence of forms of the self which privilege the autonomy of other’s to make meaning. The problem is how to write like this. The next section examines Bakhtin’s (1984) notion of the carnival, introduced through the work of organisational theorist Alexander Styhre (2008) “carnivalistic perspective” (p. 94) because it may answer to the need to write reflective texts that are interpretable.

Carnival texts

In this section I propose that the introduction of a “carnivalistic perspective” (Styhre, 2008, p. 94) to reflective writing may answer to the need to disrupt the seeming “natural” tendency towards writing Truth books. Alexander Styhre (2008) argued for such a perspective when writing about the overly-serious ethos of most organisational research. He named this ethos the agelaste ethos a term borrowed comes from the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who took it from the novel Gargantua and Pantagruel by Francois Rabelais (pp. 1494-1593). In the context of Rabelais novel, the agelastes refer to “men without laughter [who] represent a certain ethos, a world view that does not approve what is amusing, entertaining and sources of joie de vivre” (Styhre, p. 94). The defining characteristics of the agelaste ethos is that serious matters take precedence over “play, laughter, humour and experimentation” (Styhre, p. 93). The emphasis is “on what is not ambiguous, playful or creative but rather what is productive, useful, and sincere” (Styhre, p. 98). The problem with the agelaste ethos is that it limits possibilities for thinking and acting.

Being closely bound up with the agelaste ethos is delimiting what is possible to say and to do within a particular field of inquiry. […] the tendency to remain within the fixed grids of such an ethos is preventing the field from developing along unexpected and unpredictable
routes because the *agelaste* ethos is imposing standard formulations and vocabularies (Styhre, p. 94).

Styhre (2008) argues for the need to challenge this ethos through the introduction of a “carnivalistic perspective” (p. 92). Drawing influence from Bakhtin, argues that the carnival is an appropriate ethos for organisational research because it foregrounds satire, of irony, of transgression and joy. Carnival was a time for parody, difference, topsy-turvey logic, all of which could result in the emergence of new forms of thinking. Bakhtin (1984) explains carnival time as follows: “All were considered equal during carnival. […] a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, professions, and age. […] People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations” (p. 10). At carnival time a different logic held sway a “peculiar logic of the “inside out”, of the “turnabout”, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear” (Bakhtin, p. 11). At carnival, people were encouraged to play with this different logic. It is this playing with ideas and logic that is essential to the formation of a new ethos for research. Styhre (2008) argues that such playfulness constitute humanity, “human life is constituted by playfulness, experimentation, creativity, transgression and even destruction” (p. 99).

To think about research that is creative, transgressive and playful is very different from an overly-serious *agelaste* ethos from which reflective writing currently suffers. The main aim of such work is to produce dialogicity, a “dialogic relationships with other ideas, with the ideas of others” (Bakhtin, 1984, p.87, emphasis in original). This ensures that the voice of Truth is, at the least, disrupted, through the inclusion of other voices and perspectives. At its best, such writing makes a conscious effort to be playful and experimental. This different view places the onus on theorists and educationalists to consider what form such writing may take and to teach students how to produce such forms. The notion of carnival has been deployed by social theorists who aim to constitute different forms of the self and is helpful for our considerations. Erica McWilliam (1994) uses the notion to of carnival to develop a “space of a freakish pedagogy – one that refuses to become normal” (p.170). Mandy Schutzman (2002) has used the concept of the *agelaste* ethos in order to develop a style of teaching distinguished by the ability to play and experiment. She attempted to develop herself as an anti-*agelaste* and hoped that her students had a different experience of learning. She argues that she did not want to be seen as an *agelaste* because they “embody archaic ideas of learning, labour and play” (Schutzman, p. 81). She argues that the *agelaste* ethos is dominated by a “monologic seriousness” (Schutzman, p. 77). This critique can also be applied to reflective texts that are Truth books. Styhre (2008) also provides examples of organisational theory that can be said to incorporate a carnivalistic perspective.

This discussion of carnival and the *agelaste* ethos is useful for thinking about how reflective writing might adopt aspects of the carnival to disrupt the tendency to Truth books and to produce dialogical texts. In the next section, I discuss two examples of the attempt to get business students, in accounting and an MBA program, to write reflectively. The first instance had limited success while the second, being a long-term project is proving more successful.

**Carnival perspectives**

The work I am reflecting on in this section was introduced at a Group of Eight university where I was employed as an academic developer. This is an interesting position in terms of carnival
perspective as it is outside of the faculty. Arguably, this offers the opportunity to bring a critical perspective that may not be similar to one held by tenured faculty. It also allows a different research perspective as I do not have a business/economic background. I was asked by a third-year accounting lecturer to consult with him around the problem of group work. The unit had a group work case study that extended over several weeks. Students had to present on the study and produce a report of several thousand words. He had experienced a considerable amount of staff time being spent on settling group “issues”. I suggested the introduction of a reflective assessment half-way through the team project, knowing that one of the promises of reflective writing is the development of responsibility. I also believe that it is good for academic writing generally and use this as a “selling point”.

The academic was happy to introduce this new assessment and gave it ten percent of the overall mark. Initially it was one piece of assessment that was done by as a group and individually. Students were asked to respond to 6 questions (x2) such as: What is going well? How can I improve? What will I do differently? This was submitted at the half-way point I spoke at a lecture on the task and on reflective writing. The experiment was successful from the point of view of “issues” management as much less time was spent by staff. Students found the reflections and discussion that was required to be done to complete the reflections an important way to manage “issues” and look for improvement. In terms of writing, the responses to the questions were somewhat disappointing as students tended to use bullet-points and be very general.

The experiment was continued in the next semester when the subject was repeated, with the addition of an end of project reflection. This was suggested by students as they found that some group members dropped away after the first reflective piece. Thus, several more questions were devised and were submitted when the group project was handed in. This is evidence that the students found it sufficiently useful in terms of group management. I returned to give a lecture on the purposes of reflection and focused more on the actual writing, giving examples and stressing the need not to use bullet-points. This is evidence of the need to overtly teach how to write.

Again, the experiment was a success with better writing resulting but it could further be improved through introducing reflective journaling as an aspect of group work. In terms of the carnival perspective- I see it at work in my positioning as an outsider who can bring a critical perspective. It is also evident in the fact that the search for Truth was somewhat displaced as students wrote together. However, with journaling this could be improved.

The second example I wish to draw from is my work as the co-ordinator of a Reflective Leadership program on the MBA. Again, I am not of the MBA, even though I work on it two days a week. My position is part of a co-curricula program that was, in part, a response to the criticisms of the MBA in terms of lack of criticality. An aspect of the program is the keeping of reflective journals as a way towards developing a critical stance towards leadership. The carnival aspect of this is that the students write the journals with me. They create a Google doc which they write in and I comment, offer advice on readings and the incorporation of reflective writing into their coursework. Sharing the work of the journal means that it is dialogical in that one perspective does not dominant. This also addresses the problem of reflective writing done for professional development as being a personal property of the writer as opposed to a shared experience that involves others (Pollard, 2008). Sharing the journal means that one perspective, one Truth does not dominant. It is owned by both of us and we are free to comment whenever we like. This makes it quite dynamic. The journal is expected to extend over two years so there is opportunity to develop the writing style. Following my arguments above, I expect
this clashing of voices, clashing as in noisy, to generate new subject positions. However, I do face the problems of an instrumentalist ethos in that some students do it simply because they have to (Hobbs, 2007) and some not at all. Nonetheless, the noisy journals we are creating are interesting from the carnival perspective.

**Conclusion**

This paper has been an attempt to argue that reflective writing in business and MBA education is not naturally subversive. Indeed, I have argued that there is a tendency to write Truth books that constitute un-critical selves. This is a problem as the aim of critical reflective writing is to be constitutive of ethical and socially responsible corporate citizens. There is a need then to consider how reflective writing might be done differently. I have used the example of a carnivalesque perspective as a way to disrupt the overly-serious ethos of reflective writing. This perspective aims at developing dialogic texts. This may invigorate debates around reflexivity in business education but we still have to confront issues of students not participating or being unable to achieve the task of writing noisy, messy and jostling texts. The onus is on us, as theorists and educationalists, to learn how to connect with carnival.

It is simply not enough to argue that students need to engage in it in order to develop a difference sense of self – a socially and ethical responsible self. I have argued that, when left to their own devices, students will more often than not present an instrumental piece that reflects exceedingly well upon them. They tend to produce Truths they have developed and thus hold very dear. I have argued that it is necessary to offer students a new sort of ethos; a critical one that engages with the thoughts and views of others. Styhre’s carnivalesque perspective answers to this need and offers an interesting and challenging way of writing both a new self and a new direction for business education.

**References**


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