Virtual Special Issue: Discourse

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The tradition of discourse analysis is grounded in the idea that language constructs social reality, rather than merely reflecting it (Foucault, 1980). From this perspective, societies, institutions, organisations and identities are seen as constellations of talk and text that can be systematically analysed to understand the processes by which reality is brought into being (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Fairclough, 1995; Grant et al., 2011; van Dijk, 1997). Although 'discourse' remains a contested term, we follow those who have defined discourse as a form of social practice that reflects and shapes how we come to understand the world (Fairclough, 2003; Hardy, 2001; Jaworski and Coupland, 1999).

Discursive research has always found a welcome home at *Management Learning*. The journal's mission of promoting processual and provisional inquiries of knowledge and learning is mobilised through discourse theory and the ways discourse analyses attend to the social construction of organisations through language-in-use.

Beyond the processes of communication, discourse also refers to the wider systems of thought that dominate our views of social reality at any given moment in time. Discourse then also activates the critical ethos of *Management Learning*. Discursive studies have the power to examine the truth claims made by organisational actors, and trace the ways such claims bear the imprint of dominant cultural meanings and relations of power (Ewick and Silbey, 1995; Fairclough, 1995; Mumby, 2004).

The articles we have selected for this Virtual Special Issue demonstrate the diverse applications of discourse theorising and analysis. Spanning two decades, the earliest piece we have selected is David Boje's (1994) seminal article on organisational storytelling. Boje starts from the premise that all organisations are learning organisations, and have been so for several centuries. Critically, he argues that this learning is constituted through storytelling — the relational and ongoing process of sense-making conducted by internal and external stakeholders. As stakeholders join in the storytelling, plotlines vie for legitimacy, each bearing different implications for organisational practice. By adopting a discursive perspective, Boje shows that organisational learning is not the unique virtue of contemporary capitalism, but rather, has been embedded in the stories we tell about organisations across pre-modern, modern and postmodern frames. In laying bare the various discourses of learning, Boje (1994: 449) dislocates the

hegemony of capitalism and calls us to challenge its inherent "racism, sexism, colonialism, [and] anti-ecology".

In addition to storytelling, Monika Kostera and Andrzej Kozminski (2001) illustrate the ways discourse can be utilised to analyse management through the metaphor of theatre. They examine short responses to controversial statements written by Polish managers who undertook an MBA course in order to expose the moral discourses at play in the participants' writing. The managers' responses led Kostera and Kozminski to devise a typology of four genres of theatre: (1) The Japanese Theatre of Dolls (Theatre of Stability); (2) The European-American Theatre (Theatre of Dilemma); (3) The Happening (Theatre of Improvisation and Impression); and (4) The Global Show (Theatre of Everything). Like organisational storytelling, Kostera and Kozminski's organisational dramaturgy sheds light on how managers 'perform' in ways that constitute their preferred mode of change as legitimate.

Joseph Raelin's (2008) article tackles a critical question among researchers interested in the practical implications of organisational discourse studies. Is emancipatory discourse able to foster participatory and inclusive learning cultures or are more wide-ranging structural reforms necessary to address the power inequalities that are tied to differences in race, gender, age, class, rank and point of view? Raelin considers both emancipatory and liberationist perspectives in depth by considering their theoretical ancestry in dialogue theory, action science, critical discourse analysis and critical theory. Importantly, though, the article works towards a synthesis that merges emancipatory discourse and liberationist critique and considers their mutual benefits. In proposing a range of 'discourse conditions' that foster democratic praxis and subvert power asymmetries, Raelin shows the potential synergies between critical and pragmatist camps in organisational discourse studies (Grant and Iedema, 2005). This moves beyond Habermasian calls for conditions of 'ideal speech' and opens up a vital discussion on questions of critical pedagogy in management learning.

The fashionable notion of 'global nomadism' is the focus for deconstruction in Gabriela Whitehead and Robert Halsall's (2016) article. Drawing on personal narratives from transnational professionals (collected through in-depth interviews as well as online forum discussions), Whitehead and Halsall demonstrate how global nomadism functions as a part of the neoliberal ideology. Professionals come to romanticise their subjective detachment from national and local origins and idealise the cosmopolitanism and entrepreneurialism associated with international travel, even when this lifestyle fundamentally opposes the professionals' needs and aspirations in their everyday life. Whitehead and Halsall remind us that discourse is not something we study 'out there'; rather, we also shape and are shaped by discourse. As such, their article concludes

with the call for Business Schools to resist the romanticization of 'global nomadism' and engage critically with the lived experiences of transnational professionals, in order to better prepare future professionals for the existential struggles of nomadic life.

The article by Brigid Carroll and Owain Smolović Jones (2017) is concerned with the aesthetic dimension of discourse in leadership development. Rather than examining the use of arts-based methods and techniques, Carroll and Smolović Jones are interested, much more fundamentally, in the intrinsic aesthetic architecture in which leadership developers and participants operate. Their findings show how a variety of aesthetic discourses underpin participants' discursive practices, thus bringing to light the more embodied, sensual, affective and relational dimension of leadership development. This calls on developers and facilitators to become more sensitive to the ways in which participants experience leadership development aesthetically and to leave 'space' for the exploration of these experiences.

In our own study published in the journal earlier this year (Heizmann and Liu, 2018), we are equally concerned with the context of leadership development, though our focus is specifically on the increasingly influential discourse of sustainability leadership. We investigate the multimodal web-based texts of an Australian sustainability leadership development centre and show how the developers framed the process to become 'sustainability leaders' via a Buddhist enlightenment narrative. This spiritual-heroic interpretation of sustainability leadership meant that the development centre celebrated (and arguably, overplayed) participants' capabilities to single-handedly solve environmental problems. We suggest that sustainability leadership discourse ironically reinforce the very 'preoccupation with the self' that is entrenched in neoliberal regimes and underlies our disconnection from nature.

The articles we have featured here demonstrate the breadth of discursive research in *Management Learning* that has sustained a tradition of bold and provocative critique. We hope that our selection offers a 'taste' of the rich possibilities that lie within discursive research in understanding questions of power, ethics, identity and legitimacy; and, in doing so, inspires researchers to continue developing the critical discursive tradition in management and organisational learning.

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