

***LIQUID SPIRITS:***  
***The (re)production of academic identities through***  
***practices***

A thesis submitted by

**Marco Berti**

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# CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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There is some rhetoric around the challenges of doing a PhD. This is undoubtedly an enterprise that requires a great deal of commitment and hard work. However I did not find the production of this dissertation a ‘herculean effort’ or a ‘descent into the underworld’. Even though I had to devote many weekends and evenings to my research, I found my doctoral studies an enjoyable, gratifying and stimulating journey. In part this was due to the fact that, as a mature student, I have been able to build on the experiences and the readings of half a lifetime. Still, what really made my PhD experience so pleasurable were the fabulous people who mentored and supported me; the ideal setting in which I was able to study and do research as well as the blissful presence of friends and family.

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# Acronyms used in the text

<b>AACSB:</b>	Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business
<b>AMBA:</b>	Association of MBAs
<b>ANT:</b>	Actor Network Theory
<b>AQF:</b>	Australian Qualifications Framework
<b>CFO:</b>	Chief Financial Officer
<b>DCCW</b>	Dr Chau Chak Wing (Building)
<b>EMBA:</b>	Executive MBA
<b>EQUIS:</b>	European Quality Improvement System
<b>ERA:</b>	Excellence in Research for Australia
<b>ERP:</b>	Enterprise Resource Planning
<b>ICT:</b>	Information and Communications Technology
<b>MBA:</b>	Master in Business Administration
<b>MDG:</b>	Management Discipline Group
<b>NPM</b>	New Public Management
<b>NSWIT:</b>	New South Wales Institute of Technology
<b>TEQSA:</b>	Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency
<b>UTS:</b>	University of Technology Sydney
<b>UTSB:</b>	UTS Business School
<b>VET:</b>	Vocational Education and Training



# Abstract

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Business schools have important social, economic and moral responsibilities, since their teaching and research influence managerial and entrepreneurial practices. A rich debate surrounds the characteristics and limitations of the current model of business education as well as what should be done now and in the future to create better managers and entrepreneurs. The intent of this research is to offer an original contribution to this discussion by investigating the factors that shape the behaviour of management academics.

Business Schools seek to capture not only the best knowledge, research and teaching in their ranks but also to direct it towards goal-oriented corporate purposes, whether in the pursuit of accreditation, rankings, or some other measure of 'excellence'. In doing so, they necessarily seek to shape and frame the activities, choices and performances of management academics. Some pertinent questions that arise in regards to their doing so are the following: are the behaviours of management and business school academics primarily shaped by their individual agency, by the managerial efforts of the organizations in which they are embedded or by other forces? What can be done to enhance collaboration or direct individual efforts towards specific goals? By addressing these questions, my thesis problematizes some assumptions that are implicit in the current debate, to which I propose alternatives.

The research adopts two theoretical lenses to pursue this objective, practice theory and social identity theory. These theories are used to interpret data on narrative accounts of professional identities and on the working practices of a group of management academics that operate in the context of a transforming business school. The sources of data include 72 questionnaires, 16 semi-structured interviews, as well as two years of ethnographic field observations. This 'micro' analysis is situated in the context of a large spectrum critical

analysis of the discursive landscape in which academic work is performed. This includes both a 'mapping' of the global Discourses of business education and of academic work (performed through a genealogic discourse analysis of the literature) and an examination of the local discourses characterizing the specific workplace of my informants.

By combining these multiple sources of information, this work depicts a representation of the life-world of management academics, one that includes social, technological, political, organizational and emotional forces. My findings demonstrate that the relationship between academic identities and practices is situated in a liminal space characterized by exposure to a variety of material, discursive and relational tensions. I suggest this induces liquefaction of academic identities, which I describe as 'liquid spirits'. As such, they are resistant to direct managerial supervision but remain 'bottled up' in facilitative circuits of power. In conclusion I suggest that, in order to 'organize' management academics' efforts productively, it is necessary to take this complexity into account and I offer some concrete example of possible (albeit not uncontroversial) alternatives to facilitate academic work.

# Introduction

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## Scope and Significance of the Research

The purpose of this research is to investigate the factors shaping academic behaviour, focusing in particular on the case of management academics. Are the activities, choices, performances of scholars primarily influenced by their individual agency, by the managerial efforts of the organizations in which they are embedded or by other forces? What can be done to change these behaviours, enhancing collaboration or directing them towards specific goals? In answering these questions, the thesis aims to contribute to debate by problematizing some of its tacit assumptions, using this problematization to propose alternatives.

In the last two decades a rich theoretical debate has emerged about the social role, efficacy and limitations of the current model of business education. Numerous voices have put forward alternative proposals for improving business schools' pedagogy and for making their research outcomes more relevant for practitioners and society. Most of the controversy is about what 'should be done' in order to train better managers and entrepreneurs. Despite this rich discussion, a key practical issue remains underrepresented and undecided in the literature. How are current teaching and research practices formed and what can be done concretely to transform them effectively?

The importance of individual identities and practices cannot be underestimated in this context. Academia is not just a high labour-intensive industry but also one in which performances rest on the individual efforts of highly skilled and motivated staff members. Factors such as research outputs and students' satisfaction are in large part determined by

the quality of the work of each academic. As a consequence, the way in which academics perceive their characteristic job, understand their unique responsibilities and functions, interpret their specific role, in sum how they assume their social and professional identity, is pivotal in shaping work practices that, in turn impact on the economic, social, environmental and political outcomes of tertiary education. This is not the only possible approach to study this complex phenomenon; for instance it would be fruitful to use the framework offered by the sociology of the professions (MacDonald 1995) to analyse the subject matter. However, in consideration of the nature of my empirical data, drawn from an in depth observation of a single case study, I chose to privilege a 'micro' over a 'macro' perspective.

Looking at the interaction between identity and practices appears at first a challenging proposition. Identity is usually thought of, especially in lay understanding, as a purely cognitive phenomenon, something that impinges on the inner psychological sphere. On the other hand practices are seen as eminently social accomplishments, involving institutional norms and material tools. Yet, this research endeavours to demonstrate that identity and practices both result from a structuration process, bridging the individual and social sphere, through which social, linguistic and physical elements are combined. Rather than being invariable essences, identities and practices share a phenomenological nature, being emergent accomplishments, produced by the interaction between structure and agency. The former comprises components of the social sphere, discursive forces, institutional norms and material constraints. The latter refers to the space where individuals interpret the external stimuli and (re)produce social routines and behaviours, either through conscious choices, tacit knowledge or improvisation.



Building on a critical review of two literatures, one on identity and one on practice theory, I maintain that these approaches are related and complementary and that a practice perspective allows understanding of the role played by symbolic, social and material elements in shaping professional identities. In order to facilitate the integration between these two distinct models and to clarify some of the ontological and epistemological assumptions on which my work is grounded, a unifying theme, discourse theory, is proposed. The resulting conceptual framework is instrumental to organizing, collating and interpreting the rich harvest of ethnographic data that I gathered during my field research.

## **Looking at practices, practitioners and praxis**

A specific problem that is encountered when studying practices derives from the fact that practices emerge from the interaction of multiple social, material and individual forces. It is therefore possible to focus on three different (albeit linked) objects of study: *practice*, (shared routines and institutional norms and structures supporting them), *praxis* (what people actually do), or *practitioners* (Whittington 2006, p. 619). All these factors are intertwined in reality, since practices gain existence only by means of the praxis of individual practitioners' who constantly *re-produce* them. However, in the perspective of my research interest, this analytic distinction is helpful. It enables reflection on how practices interlock with identities. The identities of individual practitioners, the discursive forces that regulate those identities and the performances through which professional identities are reproduced and maintained parallel the three concepts of practitioner, practice and praxis.

In essence, my research interest is the study of those factors, both material and immaterial, that shape and influence the behaviour of agents operating in a context where the

relationship between individuals, their organization and the wider institutional field in which they are embedded, is complex and contested. The choice to focus on a specific type of practitioner, management academics, is due precisely to the unsettled and tensions-rich characteristic of their work environment.

Business schools must face, as any other organization, tensions between control and learning, integration and differentiation, adaptation and standardization. However, on top of these, they also have to fulfil an exceptionally ambiguous mission; even if one focuses on a single organizational unit, the identification of the primal goal or function is problematic. Different stakeholders will have different understanding of the *raison d'être* of a management department. In the literature but also in the corridors of a business school one can encounter many different (when not contradictory) rationales justifying scholarly practice. Is the goal the advancement of the practice of management through scientific inquiry? Or is it to produce 'better' managers (which could mean more skilful, more cunning, or more responsible managers)? Could it be the generation of an economic return for their parent institution? Might it be an advance critically to unveil the contradictions and the ethical dilemmas intrinsic to organizational phenomena? A case can be made for all and any, some more compellingly perhaps, dependent on ethical interests.

Ambiguity of purpose is enhanced by the contested and transforming nature of the professional identity of business researchers and lecturers. As academics, they experience the consequences of the corporatization that is transforming higher education (Bok 2003) and they are on the cutting edge of the distinction between the quest for rigor and the demand for relevance in academic work. They also exemplify the growing category of knowledge workers into which the professoriate is metamorphosing (Scott 2007). Since extracting productivity from knowledge work has been identified as the key management

challenge of our time (Drucker 1969, p. 248), looking at the factors shaping the behaviours of these 'exemplar' intellectual labourers has relevance not just for higher education studied but for management studies in general.

Similarly to other contemporary knowledge workers, management academics are not limited in their activities by the physical and bureaucratic boundaries of the institutions that employ them. The extensive use of information and communication technologies, the globalized nature of the market for their education and research offerings, the possibility to tap into a vast international network of collaboration and resources, allow them to transcend the physical limits of their workplace and to project themselves in a truly borderless and post-industrial reality. As labourers they can be controlled and exploited but the means to manage and direct the effort of a cosmopolitan practitioner able to obtain legitimacy and resources from a wide array of sources (their organization, networks, relationships with industry) cannot be the same as is used to yoke a traditional blue collar worker to an assembly line or a white collar clerk to an office space.

It is reasonable to hypothesize that soft, post-bureaucratic, types of control will emerge to govern this type of human resource, including ones based on identity regulation. At the same time, the practices of agents operating in a globalized context will probably be shaped by environmental and institutional transformation that go beyond the possibility of control of any given organization. Describing some of the work practices of a group of academics, trying to understand how these define and anchor their professional identity, while placing this interplay in the context of organizational regulation attempt and of wider discursive forces is, in essence, the purpose of this study.

## Methodological issues

The ontological premise from which this study starts is that even an established institution such as a university is an emergent accomplishment (Tsoukas & Chia 2002). Studying how actual *work* is performed, rather than formal structures, is especially critical to understand the implication of the change from industrial-bureaucratic into a post-industrial economy (Markus & Nurius 1986). For this reason I found it necessary to document professional practices, instead of systems, and performed identities, instead of formal roles. Choosing to approach my object of study by means of an ethnographic exploration of a single organization was a natural consequence of this stance. Only by capturing the “humdrum, everyday experiences of people working” (Drucker 1969, p. 1) is it possible to understand the multifaceted process of *organizing* (Weick 1969/1979) that produce the institution that we recognize as a business school.

Having decided to focus my attention on *emerging* aspects of the social, the choice of a constructivist, rather than objectivist, perspective was almost inevitable. Moving from a relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology, the purpose of my study is to observe the interplay between actors’ self-representations, their work routines, and the wider organizational and social structures in which they are embedded.

Despite, or maybe in virtue of, this constructivist viewpoint I do not deny the existence of a ‘bedrock’ of shared perceptions, assumptions and experiences which, for practical purposes, constitute a ‘reality’ we all have to deal with. However, this foundation is not solid because of its essential nature but is made real by common agreement. As eloquently stated by the ‘Thomas Theorem’: “if men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas 1928:572, cited in Merton 1995, p. 380). This led me to make use of some concepts and methodologies inspired by critical realism (Fairclough

2005; Easton 2010). In this regards I consider both practices and identities as born of the intersection of material and symbolic means, producing consequences that are both tangible (i.e. subject to the construction of a common agreement that functions as 'reality') and subject to sensemaking (Weick 1995).

By acknowledging this interplay between symbolic and material, between actions and explanations, this study does not have nomothetic ambitions, such as formulating general statements about the essence of academic work or a taxonomy of 'academic selves'. Its main purpose is not to spot and fill gaps in management theory but to problematize (Alvesson & Sandberg 2011; Sandberg & Alvesson 2011; Alvesson & Sandberg 2013) some underlying assumptions of the discourse on academic practice and on the management of academic work. Its goals are rather to present a narrative account of a lived reality, enabling discussion and comparison of interpretations of situated and emergent phenomena. Therefore an ideographic approach, offered by an ethnographic case study research, appears suitable for exposing the elusive and contested nature of these phenomena. At the same time, I attempt to generalize my observations by 'zooming out' (Nicolini 2009), by means of a broad, albeit unavoidably partial, exploration of the contemporary literature on management academics' identity and practices.

The choice of looking at academic work through an ethnographic lens appears both reasonable and promising. After all ethnographic investigations of scholarly practices have been instrumental in revealing the social construction of scientific facts (Latour & Woolgar 1979), and they have effectively denounced the consequences of the excessive use of audits, rankings and performance measure in higher education (Tuchman 2009). Nevertheless, in an otherwise copious literature discussing the many aspects of university life, ethnographies rarely feature (Lucas 2012). Probably the richest (and most candid)

sources of narrative accounts on academic life have been written in a fictional genre, that of 'campus novels'. Some notable examples include Bradbury (1975), Lodge (1975, 1984, 1988) and Roth (2000).

On the other hand, "it is rare that academics study the 'lived realities' of their own organizations" (Alvesson 2009, p. 156). In the specific field of management education only an handful of ethnographies, for instance Zell (2001) or Timm (2003), have tried to describe 'from inside' the practices of business academics in the context of their organizations. This is a remarkable omission, especially considering the increasing interest in the use of ethnographic methods in management studies (Czarniawska 1992, 2008b). The reticence of academics to conduct 'close up' qualitative research of their own workplace has been attributed to the fear of breaching peers' trust, the desire of not exposing 'backstage' conditions and to the problematic issue of balancing closeness and perspective (Alvesson 2003).

Maintaining a correct 'distance' from the object of study is one of the key challenges for the ethnographer (Ybema & Kamsteeg 2009) . Organizational ethnographies aspire to combine both an 'emic' and an 'etic' perspective (Lancione 2013) in other words to marry an insider's intimate understanding of a context with an outsider view which can provide analytic insight, generalizability and problematization. In case of studies of academic work this is a particularly challenging achievement because of the involvement of the researchers in the object of study. Although conceptually and methodologically equipped to produce an etic understanding of their work context, academics are often too 'close' to it to do so. Even the choice of performing self-ethnographies, advocated by Alvesson (2003), is fraught with difficulties.

The balance between 'strangeness' and 'immersion' has in my case, rather than being the outcome of an arduous reflexive act, been an inherent consequence of my status and background. My 'professional' identity, as a management consultant with various experiences as an executive trainer and business school adjunct, mixes the alien and the familiar. Similarly, my 'ethnic identity', as a born and bred Italian who, at a mature age, embraced Australia as a second motherland, is both exotic and local. These features make me akin to the *stranger* described by Georg Simmel:

“not [...] the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the person who comes today and stays tomorrow... [and whose] position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.” (Simmel 1950, p. 402).

This 'partial strangeness' made it easier to understand the local discourse, while at the same time putting in perspective what might appear obvious to the 'natives', becoming the one who can “place in question nearly everything that seems to be unquestionable to the members of the approached group” (Schütz 1943b, p. 502).

## **The choice of the empirical setting**

A specific heuristic challenge that I had to face was the difficulty of empirically documenting phenomena that are so deeply embedded in both the members' bodies and in the social structures that they had become naturalized. Facing this challenge involved assuming a constructivist rather than positivist perspective, becoming concerned not with discovering universal truths but rather with revealing “how the-taken-for-granted becomes taken for granted” (Czarniawska 2003, p. 137).

The choice of the specific object of study contributed greatly to my efforts to surface these tacit elements. The empirical setting of my research is the same department, the Management Discipline Group (MDG) in which I was embedded, initially as a research student and subsequently as a casual academic. This choice, apparently justified by ease of access reasons, is actually motivated mainly by methodological and conceptual considerations.

In the first place, this context is ripe with dialectical tensions that help highlight the contested nature of identity work and reveal its often-subliminal nature. These tensions operate at many different levels of 'scale' (Spicer 2006), ranging from the local to the global: at the most local level, the department researched is highly diversified because of the co-presence of two different disciplinary groups which were until recently physically separated and characterized by remarkably different research interests. One level up, the MDG is part of a Business School, UTS Business, which is undergoing a strategic transformation inspired by the ideas of integrated and design thinking, a change program epitomized by the construction of a new workspace, designed by a world famous architect. The very fact that alternative, albeit theoretical, work models are being actively endorsed produces a distinction that facilitate the emergence of taken-for-granted practices.

Going further up in scale, the institution that comprises the Business School, the University of Technology Sydney is a young, 'rising star', tertiary education organization, endeavouring to develop and to consolidate its international reputation, which implies both achieving research excellence and maintaining financial sustainability through service delivery, catering for a large number of local and international students. The university is characterized by a tension, typical of academia, between teaching and research, between coordinated and standardized service delivery effort and individualistic creative drive.



Finally, at a macro-discursive level, the business education sector is characterized by dialectic debates between formal rigor and relevance, scientific legitimation and practical application, while the tertiary education sector in general is torn between two possible identities: one as a public good, a state subsidized provider of universally available knowledge and education and one as a privately controlled corporation selling intangible commodities (such as accreditation and knowhow) on the market.

All these dialectical oppositions generate breakdowns and disruptions in routines and practices. Practitioners in this context are confronted with alternative, “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius 1986); their established ‘collegiate’ routines are under corporate pressures to increase measurable outputs; they are forced to balance trade-offs between contradictory goals, alternative practices and identities. Aspects that would otherwise remain tacit and taken for granted are more likely to be exposed, becoming observable.

## **The intent: problematizing the discourse of academic management**

One of the positive outcomes of choosing a case study focus in research is that the result of the analysis often allows for formulating new and previously unthought-of research questions (Flyvbjerg 2011, p. 314). At its inception this study was intended to explore the impact on academic practice of a change initiative hinging on a powerful ‘rhetorical move’, the creation of a new building, designed by a world famous architect, to house the business school. I was hoping to observe the impact of the idea of a new, different workplace embodying the principles of interdisciplinarity and creative collaboration, would have on current practices, identifying resistances and driving forces and reflecting on the possible unforeseen social consequences of the transformation. However, as my data collection

proceeded, I became aware of a series of ‘games’ and forces that transcended the context and managerial efforts of any individual organization. Looking at the internal power plays of a single organization could not provide a satisfactory account of how power dynamics shape not just the behaviours but also the very meaning of academic activity. I realized that the observed individuals are, in most cases, not simply ‘victims’ or ‘oppressors’ (of administrators, other academics, other stakeholders...), but they contribute to re-produce the social context in which they are entangled.

I therefore adjusted my aim, deciding to observe the complex dialectic of organizational, discursive and material dynamics that shape both members’ actions and their accounts.

My purpose is broadly to consider the vast array of forces and influences that contribute to form the professional behaviour and the decisions of academics. To meet this challenge, I chose an unorthodox structure for this dissertation, one where theory is used as a device to ‘sensitise’ and organize observations, not to formulate questions or hypothesis. On their part, empirical observations are drawn both from the literature, which is treated as a primary source of data on the discourses that enable and constraint academic activities, and from direct observations and data collections.

In the end the intent of this work is to problematize, that is to “deliberately try to identify and challenge the assumptions underlying existing literature” (Alvesson & Sandberg 2011, p. 252). The way in which relationship of power shape both the action of individual political actor and the disciplinary influences of underlying discursive structures is ignored by a great part of the debate on business education<sup>1</sup>. Even when issues of power/knowledge relationship in academia are explicitly addressed, as in the stream of critical management

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<sup>1</sup> This debate is outlined further on, in chapters 6 and 7.

studies, for instance in the works of authors such as Martin Parker, Hugh Willmot, David Knights, a strong anti-managerialist stance seems to inform the discussion. Very critical of the way in which corporate universities and New Public Management inspired policy makers are constraining scholarly liberties these commentators are insufficiently ponder alternatives to the current state of things. Perhaps under the influence of a nostalgic reminiscence of an imaginary era, the Golden Age of the collegial university, they fail to produce a comprehensive reflection on how to coordinate and give directions to individual academic work; how to avoid the risk of self-referential drifts in scholarly pursuits and to guarantee accountability; how to produce synergies and make good use of scarce resources invested in academic activities.

Discussing which forms of management (even collegiality is, after all, a form of control and discipline) can maximize the production and communication of relevant and influent knowledge and wisdom, and reflecting on the ethical, social, economic and political implications of such forms, are certainly more fecund activities for academics than merely 'resisting being managed'. However, before considering the issue of how to manage academic activities it is necessary to understand what forces actually shape these activities.

My work is positioned as a problematizing critique of the current literature. When dealing with this topic issue of 'managing academic work' most studies assume a reductionist stance, attempting to isolate the effect on academic behaviours of specific factors (for instance scholar and universities ranking, publication practices, managerial models), neglecting the fact that human activities and decisions are shaped by multiple, simultaneous influences and forces.

Some influential works have in fact transcended this limit, assuming a broader perspective, discussing how the institutional field of science produces the conditions that shape and

constrain research and that individual academic choices are more influenced by their *habitus* than by their methodological rigour (Bourdieu 2004), or looking at how business education tend simplistically to reproduce particular ideologies without considering the complexity and the moral implication of managerial work (Mintzberg 2004). These reflections have even been applied to the specific area of management studies, pointing at the fact that publishing practices are disciplining research practices and that together with the development of particular subjectivities, these drive management scholars toward conservative approaches (Alvesson & Sandberg 2013). These important contributions are, however, constrained by their exclusive focus on one aspect of academic work (research or teaching) and by the fact that, not being empirically founded, they risk overlooking some aspects of the multifarious and intricate reality that they aim to describe.

Since being a ‘problematizer’ does not mean to be neutral (Alvesson & Sandberg 2011) it is important to clarify my stance within a ‘logic of practice’ (Bourdieu 1990), one that overcomes the separation between subject and knowledge, focusing instead on the entwinement among social, material, narrative and cognitive factors (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011). The study also has an explicit phronetic foundation and purpose (Flyvbjerg 2001), since it considers the ethical implications of the observed transformations. By looking at identity work and practice (re)production not as natural occurrences but as social creations it becomes evident that they are imbued with political implications. The awareness of the knowledge shaping capabilities of power led me to question and investigate all those circumstances that are described and justified by members as “obvious”, “rational” or “logical”. Therefore this research aspires to help practitioners to develop ‘practical wisdom’ about factors that are driving and shaping their actions and performances, enabling them better to understand the historical, political and narrative structure of the social world they inhabit (Clegg & Pitsis 2012).

Summing up, I can formulate the rationale and the purpose of my research endeavour in the form of some 'lines of inquiry':

- Which elements shape and regulate management academic work in the chosen setting?
- What is the studied organization doing to regulate and control its members' identities and work practices? Are these attempts at managing work effective?
- What is the role played by material, structural, institutional and embodied aspects, such as workplace layout, technology, rhetoric, reward systems, in shaping these practices?
- What are the political and ethical consequences of different arrangements of practices and of the identity regulation?

If considered from a positivist viewpoint an obvious shortcoming of this study is the fact that the specific group of academics that have been the subject of my inquiry are hardly 'representative' of the entirety of their professional group and that the specific conditions in which they operate, in a transforming business school embedded in a young, well-endowed and ambitious Australian University, are different from those of their colleagues operating in different countries or organizations. In fact the idiosyncrasy of my case has probably circumscribed the variety of forces and influences that are shown to shape academic work, while in a different context other factors would become salient in defining the identity or practices of academics. For instance in other countries the high social status conferred by an academic job or the participation in non-academic socio-political networks could play a relevant role. However, since my intended contribution to knowledge is to show that psychological, social, material, political and organizational factors influencing academics must not be considered in isolation and that their entwinement causes specific

professional conditions that require innovative and non-bureaucratic forms of management, this 'limitation' is hardly a problem. Expanding this research to other contexts would simply show that in those other situations a different mix of drivers needs to be considered when designing and implementing academic management systems.

## **Structure of the dissertation**

This work is composed of five parts. The first, comprising Chapters 1 to 4, provides the theoretical framework for the study, in which some practical pointers that will increase the receptiveness of the analysis are inscribed and distilled. Chapter 1 offers theoretical premises for the following discussion by critically reflecting on two fundamental concepts that underlie both the debate on identity and that on practice: discourse and power. Conceptually probing the potentiality of discourse both as an epistemological and ontological paradigm, the intertwinement between *socius* and *logos* that characterizes the idea of discourse is understood through the idea of power, showing how the latter is, rather than an ethereal substance, the product of a relationship between social subjects, the disposition of which alters the social space (akin to gravity). Chapter 2 presents a literature review outlining the debate around the problem of identity creation in organizations and showing how the conceptualization of identity has progressively evolved, from an essentialist and individualist conception to its portrayal as a social and emergent phenomenon. Addressing the limits of 'narrative-based' accounts of identity production, Chapter 3 reviews practice theory. The contemporary literature on practice theory is discussed, highlighting how the concept of practice inhabits, in the social realm, a very similar position to that occupied by identity in the intra-psychic sphere. Based on these reflections, in Chapter 4 I propose a heuristic framework combining the two concepts, accounting for how identity is consistently reproduced through practices that provide

individuals with a sense of continuity and 'embeddedness' in a social sphere, affording them ontological security. The aim is to show the compatibility of these two different lenses, arguing that they can be productively used in combination to make sense of the ethnographic data gathered during the research.

The second part (Chapter 5) presents the methodology of the empirical study. The core of the data derives from an ethnographic case study that involves the observation of a group of about 50 academics and the chosen observation techniques and instruments, which include interviews, a survey, observant participation, and shadowing, are described and justified. In particular, methodological reasons are provided for the choice of the empirical setting, a department of UTS Business School. In this section how the data was gathered through the case study is described and considered in the light of two other sources of information: the debate on business education and the specific history of the observed empirical setting. This information, obtained through an analysis of relevant literature, allows one both to contextualize the ethnographic data and to triangulate their interpretation against the work of other researchers, allowing a generalization of the findings.

The third part, including Chapter 6 and 7, focuses on the big 'D' Discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b) in which my observation are embedded, that is, the paradigmatic sets of statements that shapes our way of talking and thinking about the topic of business education. Chapter 6 uses a diachronic lens to reveal the power/knowledge structure of this Discourse, exploring in an archaeological perspective (Foucault 1972) the history and development of the 'life world' (Husserl 1935/1965) of management education. Chapter 7 examines the same Discourse in a synchronic perspective, using the presence of conflicts

and dualisms to survey and map the discursive landscape informing the conversations and practices of the observed academics.

The following part (Chapters 8 to 10) is devoted to observations that zoom into the small 'd' discourse, the situated, local discussion that characterizes my empirical research setting. A brief history of UTS Business and of its parent institution, the University of Technology Sydney is outlined in Chapter 8, focusing in particular on the recent transformation initiative, substantiated by the construction of a new building that will host the faculty. Since this 'strategic move' is justified and inspired by a 'fashionable idea' in management education, that of integrative and design thinking, a succinct critical review of this concept is also presented, together with a short summary of some other works that describe contemporary research on the ongoing transformation affecting the Business school. The description of the local milieu continues in Chapter 9 by illustrating the results of a quantitative survey aimed at obtaining information on the actual practices of business academics. This empirical evidence, collected through a self-administered questionnaire, is used to commence the exploration on practices and identities, by looking at how the academics of UTSB employ their working time as well as enquiring into their emotional and rational reactions to the current arrangements. Since this questionnaire has been administered to the entire population of UTSB academics, it provides a first test of the transferability of the results of the ethnographic observations, which have involved only one of the five discipline groups of the business school. Chapter 10 completes the section, describing the bulk of the data collected during one year of ethnographic observation on the chosen group of academics. The results from 15 semi-structured interviews, the participation in 35 seminars and research workshops, a full day of shadowing, plus hundreds of hours of informal observation of behaviours and dynamics are summarized in this chapter, using the heuristic framework described in chapter four. The 'voices' of the



observed academics, represented by means of verbatim citations from interviews and occasional utterances are presented to exemplify and give authenticity to the observations.

The final part (Chapter 11) offers a discussion of the empirical evidence, drawing conclusions and outlining some implication for management practices applied to academic work. The argument is built in abductive manner, as a partner in a critical dialogue aimed at reviewing and expanding theoretical frameworks (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007) where theory and observations support and shape each other. My findings demonstrate the relationship between academic identities and practices as situated in liminal space characterized by exposure to a variety of material, discursive and relational tensions. I suggest this induces liquefaction of academic identities, which I describe as 'liquid spirits'. As such, they are resistant to direct managerial supervision but remain 'bottled up' in facilitative circuits of power (Clegg, 1989). In the conclusion the implications of this liquefaction of identity are discussed, both from a managerial, political and ethical perspective. How the quality, in term of rigor, relevance and phronetic value of management research and education depends on an academic praxis that emerges from the interplay of material and institutional forces, organizational attempts at disciplining behaviours and individual performances, is described. The liquid spirit of academics and their liminal collocation; the viscous, rather than ordering, effect of organizational and managerial action; the environmental effects, creating at one time a heteroglossic landscape (Rhodes 2001) and an 'a-cephalous' disciplinary system: all these elements contribute to shape identities and practices and, in conclusion, it is suggested that only by taking this complexity into account is it possible productively to 'organize' academic efforts.

# Part 1.

## The theoretical framework

# Chapter 1.

## Socius meet logos: an onto-epistemological preface

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### Organization as persistent ephemera

When looking at an organization, such as a business school, it is normal to conceive it as a tangible, well demarcated entity, embodied in a set of buildings, represented by a distinct brand identity, characterized by a specific set of policies and procedures, staffed in impersonal positions by individuals who perform well defined roles arranged in an ordered structure. The ontological approach that considers such object as a concrete and stable essence is so entrenched as to have become commonsensical, to the point that, when thinking or writing of a specific organization, anyone by default ends up reifying and anthropomorphizing it. Consequently the 'golem' is breathed into life (Czarniawska 2008a): roaming free, business schools can 'lose their way' (Bennis & O'Toole 2005), have an 'evolving role and purpose' (Starkey & Tempest 2008), "dominate" or "do a bad job" (Pfeffer & Fong 2004, p.1501-2), just to cite a few examples. Assuming this standard perspective can be useful if one is interested in plotting the diffusion of organizational forms, assessing the influence of institutional, mimetic forces, or assessing the impact of different management control systems. This stance, however, does not allow one to look at the way in which organizations are made what they are, hiding in a dull 'black box' the composite, disputed, intriguing dynamics and behaviours that produces this appearance of stability and order.

Building on a philosophical tradition that was inaugurated by Heraclites (Hernes 2007, p. 24) many management students have moved away from the idea of organizations as fixed objects, considering them instead as phenomena “in a constant state of becoming [...] Rather than 'existing', what we think of as an organization is the momentary apprehension of an ongoing process of organizing that never results in an actual entity.” (Clegg, Kornberger & Rhodes 2005, p. 158).

According to this approach organization is not a container of processes and dynamics but an emergent accomplishment (Feldman 2000), “an outcome, a pattern, emerging from the reflective application of the very same rules in local contexts over time” (Tsoukas & Chia 2002, p.570). This conceptualization emerged in organization studies in the late 1960s, thanks to two major contributions. Silverman (1970) criticized the prevailing paradigm of system theory, proposing instead to consider organizations through an action framework, seeing them as inseparable from the broader social context in which they are embedded. The departure from the essentialist view of organization was even more marked, at least in terminological term, in the work of Weick (1969/1979), who pioneered the redirection of the analytic glance from organization as a noun to organizing as a verb, thus re-conceptualizing organizations as processes.

These innovative forms of theorization had initially limited purchase in a disciplinary field that was at the time dominated by positivist approaches, such as contingency theory, preoccupied with measuring the correlation between quantifiable attributes of discrete entities. This approach epitomized the epistemic process through which a phenomenon becomes objectified through the act of ascribing it a value, thus enabling its comparison to other phenomena (Hernes 2007, p. 144). The researchers who follow this paradigm aspire to producing generalizable knowledge, “formulating and empirically testing the hypotheses

derived from each theory (...) [allowing one] to conclude validly that one theory is false and the other confirmed" (Donaldson 2005, p. 1075). However, by doing so they inevitably turn a blind eye to the fuzziness of an entangled social reality, becoming oblivious to all the aspects of the studied 'object' that are not captured by their measurements. For instance, by deciding to measure the 'size' of an organization by counting the number of its employees, they inevitably create a legitimate boundary setting that typically includes employees who are engaged on a permanent basis but excluding those who are hired on a 'causal' basis, or who 'belong' to different organizations but are subcontracted. By doing this they contribute to the creation of that "set of legitimate rhetorics" (Silverman 1994, p. 2) that forms a particular conception of the organization as a stable, concrete entity.

The number of management researchers that are now embracing a post-modern, constructivist, process view of the organization has increased, in part attributable to a transformation in the characteristics of the organizational phenomenon. While bureaucratic organizations are still widespread, the dramatic shift from manufacturing to service and knowledge intensive industries, the extension of value chains and the relevance of identity regulation over labour and behaviour control are transforming the way in which organizations operate and are represented (Alvesson & Deetz 2006). Organizations lacking substance in terms of formal lines of command, control and supply can produce very concrete and powerful effects, as the case of Al-Qaeda demonstrates (Hernes 2007, pp. 1-2) and the experience of being part of multiple semi-tangible organization structures that are in a constant state of re-arrangement, expansion and intersection is familiar to many, thanks to the diffusion of social networking media.

While this change of scenario has certainly contributed to the legitimation of post-modernist organizational studies (or has at least produced a de-legitimation of the

modernist ones), it is essential to keep in mind that 'stability' and 'becoming' are in the eye of the beholder, and that transformation and permanence, homogeneity and difference are functions of the perspective and acuteness of observation. In fact, when observed empirically in a process-oriented perspective, even those organizational routines that characterize more traditional and apparently 'solid' types of organizations are not inert but alive because they are not simply mindless repetition of actions but "involve a range of actions, behaviours, thinking, and feeling" (Feldman 2000, p. 622). Moreover, when performed in a constantly changing situation, routines demand frequent corrections to achieve consistency and identity. Especially in those contexts where speed is a key requirement for organizing (Czarniawska 2013) permanence and continuity can only be preserved by resorting to constant adjustments, a concept encapsulated in a famous quote from *The Leopard*: "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" (Tomas di Lampedusa 1963, p. 29).

A process view enables one to recognize that, while organization is an ordering device, this ordering is as much a narrative and ideal reconstruction as a pragmatic arranging of bodies and actions towards an end (Rhodes 2001; Clegg et al. 2005). As eloquently put by Chia (2002, p. 866): "organization is a censoring/centring device that works to create a figure/ground effect so that attention, focus and purposefulness are directed towards productive outcomes. (...). 'Organizations' are conceptually-stabilized abstractions: 'islands' of fabricated coherence in a sea of chaos and change." Therefore, the use of formal and conventional means to represent or analyse the systematic disposition of expectations, relationships and exchanges that characterize an organization is more than a descriptive act: it is generative. The subjects created by these narrative and practical performances can be considered *persistent ephemera*. Their substance and integrity is ephemeral, since it can only be preserved by a constant labour of a multitude of actors engaging in "chronic

rebuilding” (Weick 1969/1979, p. 44). On the other hand they gain stability and persistence by a inter-subjective agreement that fixes them in a series of coherent narratives, which have both an ostensive (ideal, conjectural, notional) and a performative (producing action, thinking, and feeling) quality (Latour 1986).

Organization researchers take different parts in this constant social construction: at one extreme, some maintain that there are objective fictions of stable structure while, for others, all is process. For the latter, embracing a non-essentialist, process-oriented view demands both an ontological and an epistemological re-orientation from the assumptions of structuralist models. The ontological reorientation is not conceptually difficult to accept; time-lapse photography can enable us to appreciate the transience of apparently unchanging entities by altering our temporal scale of observation; likewise, looking at border roles can sensitize the observer to the phenomenological nature of reality. More challenging is to draw the epistemological consequences of a post-modern viewpoint, since it necessitates steering away from the search for absolute clarity and reliability of the theoretical concepts. The categories that researchers use to label, describe and categorize organizational phenomena (‘actors’, ‘rules’, ‘routines’, ‘decisions’, ‘strategies’, ‘change’, ‘learning’ etcetera) cannot represent discrete and separate entities but are interrelated and necessarily muddled (Hernes 2007, p. 148). Accepting muddle implies renouncing the comforting presence of a secure frame of reference, accepting that “our descriptions of it reveal as much about ourselves as about the world” (Antonacopoulou & Tsoukas, 2002, p. 858).

Considering the symbolic, narrative, discursive dimension of organizing, which includes the code that one uses to analyse and represent it, is therefore essential to achieve a reflexive understanding of this phenomenon.

## Using a discursive lens to frame the object of study

One way to conceptualize the object of study, UTS Business (UTSB), is by looking at it as a linguistic performance. Doing so is not to doubt the physical reality and the material substance of its buildings, furniture, technological equipment and people but to stress, in coherence with the phenomenological perspective espoused in the previous section, that language is the factor that makes it possible both to function and to persist as an organization.

Any activity performed in a business school context, such as teaching, learning, researching, administering and promoting the school, demands the agency of language. In the absence of name places, signs, written policies, rules, procedures and a myriad of oral performances the institution UTSB would become effectively immaterial, indistinct from the urban background in which is situated. It is only through linguistic construction that we can, individually and socially, make sense of the phenomena that we label 'business school activities'. Language, however, is not a neutral medium, a simple tool that we use to communicate ideas and intentions. By structuring coherent systems of meaning, coalescing in stable (but not immutable) patterns, it shapes reality and subjectivity. It becomes 'discourse'.

When approaching the subject of organizational discourse any reader risks feeling overwhelmed by the staggering assortment of definitions and approaches to the concept. "It is perfectly possible to have two books on discourse analysis with no overlap in content at all" (Wetherell & Potter 1987, p. 6) and consequently the notion "seems to be stretched to incorporate almost everything" (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011, p. 1135). The confusion can be attributed to the diversity of theoretical antecedents of the approach, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, philosophy etc. (Grant et al. 2004, p. 1),



and has both positive and negative consequences. While such a plurality of perspectives denotes the fecundity of the concept, it can at the same time produce confusion, leading to ambiguity.

My purpose in exploring this rugged terrain of disparate interpretations, methodologies and practices is not to generate 'ultimate' definition. Discourse is better treated as a Kantian *noumenon*, a *Ding an sich* that can be imagined but not reduced to a set of sensible quantifications. Instead, I am concerned with the phenomenology of discourses, the different ways in which they are produced by and in which they affect social interactions. First, I will position discourse analysis in the broader paradigm of studies that examine the linguistic and cultural aspects of organizing. Second, I will propose a metaphor (discourse as a map) that can be used to reflect on the issues surrounding discourse analysis. Finally the interpolation of the symbolic and pragmatic side of social life will be discussed, focusing on the issue of *power* and its constitutive effects.

## **Language: the 'stuff' that makes organizations possible**

Putting discourse, or "structured collections of texts embodied in the practices of talking and writing (as well as a wide variety of visual representations and cultural artefacts)" (Grant et al. 2004, p. 3) at the centre of the inquiry implies considering language, in all its forms and representations, as the 'mortar' of social action. Assuming a phenomenological perspective on organizational life means focusing on relationships rather than entities (Weick 1969/1979), and this implies focusing on the role of communication in organizing. The 'phenomenological shift' in organization studies is tangled with a parallel 'linguistic turn' (Jacques 2005). This is based on the recognition that language "is not a transparent medium for the transport of meaning" (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a, p. 141) but a shaping

force that influences our way of relating to the world. In this perspective studying verbal and nonverbal 'texts' is the main avenue for understanding organizational phenomena.

Looking for a definition of language it is difficult to better Fichte's statement describing language as "the expression of our thoughts by means of arbitrary signs" (Fichte 1995 [1794], p. 120). The formulation highlights the intrinsic complexity of the concept. First, language is arbitrary, conventional and context dependent. Even if one accepts the position that sees language structures and grammars as (at least partially) innate and constitutive of the human mind, thus considering language as an 'organ' (Chomsky 2000), it is undeniable that the way in which language is used and performed is culture and context specific. The importance of context can never be underestimated, not just because any interpretation of the text is context dependent but also because the same may be said of human rationality (Wittgenstein 1958). At the same time Fichte's definition draws attention to the central issue of the relationship between language and thought. This relationship is not linear. Verbal communication attempts to convey ideas and emotions faithfully but at the same time language affects meanings. On the one hand it degrades our complex and fluid ideas, by pigeonholing them in word sequences. The attempt to escape this verbal straitjacket by using linguistic or material tropes will have the consequence of emphasizing connotative meanings that exist only in the eye of the beholder. The observation of this trade-off led Bateson & Ruesch (1951, pp. 170-1), to describe two alternative coding modalities for human communication, digital and analogical. The former involves the type of arbitrary signification that Fichte mentions, for instance the use of the word 'sadness' to represent an emotion, while the latter entails representing event in a socially recognizable way, using posture and gesture that convey that feeling, or evoking the emotion by means of metaphors or music. Analogical communication is easier to understand, because it "can be more readily referred to the thing it stands for" (Watzlawick, Jackson & Bavelas 1967, p. 62)

but this broad intelligibility comes at the expense of precision, exactness of meaning and economy of expression. For instance, while gesturing sadness comes easily to an accomplished actor or mime such as Marcel Marceau, one needs to resort to a digital language to argue the distinction between sadness and depression or their performance as theatre. A number of fundamental features can be identified that can be used to frame the complex issue of how language, discourse, interior thought world, materiality, performativity, and social phenomena are connected.

First, language plays a pervasive, plural and complex role in structuring human thoughts, actions and interactions. Language can be used to make statement about reality (that can be true or false) but is also able to express and convey ideas and emotions, or to perform what Jakobson (1960) defined as *phatic* function, that is performing social tasks, acting as a 'social lubricant', rather than merely transmitting information. Moreover language can be used to bring about change, by expressing ideals and visions, appealing for support, setting rules or bargaining deals, performing a political function (Sillince 1999, pp. 488-90). These different functions are deeply intertwined and sometimes produce complex and contradictory statements. Language it is at the same time a tool to describe an external reality, an inner thought world, yet it is also constitutive of social relationships and as such becomes part and parcel of the world that it describes.

Second, it is necessary to acknowledge the fact that the use of the word 'language' as a singular noun is highly inaccurate. Human beings have produced an incredibly vast array of alternative sets of arbitrary signs to convey meanings. To start with, thousands of different languages are used, produced and reproduced by different ethnic groups and nations, each with its own specific lexicon, grammar and syntaxes. These were evolved reacting to different historical and environmental settings and despite 'Whorfian' claims of linguistic

relativism (that the language that we use shapes our thoughts) being largely dismissed (Pinker 2008), differences in the languages used by different groups can make visible some historically developed cultural assumptions.

Another element of plurality in language can be found in the existence of many different specialized jargons that are in use within the same linguistic community. For instance, the version of English language used by a British post-modern sociologist can be so different to that of an American economist as to render their texts mutually unintelligible. Finally, it would be reductive to consider only 'natural' languages: any symbolic system shared by a community and which uses signs and rules to order them in order to communicate meaning can be defined as a language, including mathematics, logic and musical notation, to name just a few. Therefore communication involves not only using language but also choosing among languages; this choice is often tacit but never unimportant or inconsequential.

Organizing is founded on language. While simple communicative interactions (expressing threat or friendliness, conveying elementary meanings etc.) do not require a codified language to be performed, organized behaviour is founded on the use of a sophisticated sign system, allowing transfer of articulated meanings:

“...every perception is dependent on the conceptual apparatus which makes it possible and meaningful as this conceptual apparatus is inscribed in language. Talk and writing are thus much more than the means of expression of individual meanings: they connect each perception to a larger orientation and system of meaning. The conceptual distinctions in an organization are inscribed in the systems of speaking and writing. (Deetz 1982, p. 135)

Languages are not neutral vehicles for concepts. The difficulty of transmitting meanings in a social setting transcends the mere difficulties of “diffusion”, where the information spread by virtue of an intrinsic inertia is only opposed by resistance offered by the medium or by

the receiver (Latour 1986). In order to convey ideas we need to translate them into a code a process in which any translation is also a transformation, hence an alteration, of original meaning (Latour 2005).

While this meta-linguistic wisdom is often preached, it is rarely practiced in organization studies, least of all when the object of inquiry is not strictly semiotic or linguistic: “in almost all empirical research, the research design and the research text are developed and written as if language is strictly controlled by the researcher, a simple tool through which she or he mirrors the world” (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000a, p. 138). Since it is not possible to renounce language as vehicle for describing experience, it is necessary to develop a reflexive appreciation of the ways in which language, meanings and practices intermix. To do this requires introducing the concept of discourse, as the locus of confluence of *socius* (the realm of action and practical knowledge) and *logos* (the space of symbolic representation).

## **Language, practices and political performances: *enter* discourse**

When structured in statements and practices, language becomes much more than a vehicle to transfer information or requests. It is productive of an order, made of meanings and roles. The way in which language produces structured meanings that order, make predictable and guide social action is captured by the concept of *discourse*. To consider matter as discourse involves investigating how texts “bring organizationally related objects into being as these texts are produced, disseminated and consumed” (Grant et al. 2004, p. 3). As this definition highlights, discourse is not simply an umbrella term to include all the oral and written conversations performed in an organization or social system. It rather

signifies that this communication produces meanings and statements that discipline organizational members' actions and interactions.

When organized in discourse, language is not merely descriptive but becomes constitutive of reality: "discourse is not what is said; it is that which constrains and enables what can be said" (Barad 2003, p. 819). As a consequence, discourse is an ordering principle and the basis for organized behaviour: "the idea of a discourse about organizations is an oxymoron. Discourse itself is a form of organization" (Chia 2000, p. 517). Such conceptualizations of discourse have all been influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, who recognized how the objects of our knowledge are defined and produced by discourses which "systematically form the object of which they speak" (Foucault 1979, p. 49). According to Foucault discourse "governs the way that a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others" (Hall 2001, p. 72).

Discourse can be described as an idiosyncratic but pervasive way of representing and understanding the world, constituted by a set of statements that typify reality, enabling a "regime of truth" (Foucault 1980a, p. 131). These statements are not simply propositions or sentences that can be defined as true or false but they are a mesh of assertions, signs and practices, of norms and rules of inclusion and exclusion. The difference between linguistic utterances and social performances collapses in discourse since what matters is not the factual veracity of a statement but rather the fact that it is believed to be true and acted upon as such by society and institutions such that it has 'truth effects'. For instance, the 'truth' of statements about the nature of homosexuality is of little consequence. What really counts is whether homosexuals are accepted or rejected, committed to institutions or live openly, celebrated for who they are or persecuted. These 'practical statements'

demarcate also social roles and ordering. According to Foucault discourse defines its subjects both by producing 'role models' (e.g. the madman, the homosexual, the criminal) and by creating positions for the subjects to interact through discursive practices (Hall 2001). As a consequence "power and discourse are mutually constitutive" (Hardy & Phillips 2004, p. 299), since discursive practices shape power relations and – in turn – discourses evolve as result of political struggles which produce new 'texts' (Hardy & Phillips 2004) or reconfigure circuits of power and domination (Clegg 1989). In Foucault's own words: "We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth" (Foucault 1980a, p. 93).

Discourse in Foucault is foremost an epistemological device, used to highlight the complex interplay among language, power, rationality and the many realities that these produce. He aspires to scrutinize and problematize the obvious and the familiar, by interrogating "the discourses of true and false... the correlative formation of domains and objects... the verifiable, falsifiable discourses that bear on them, and ... the effects in the real to which they are linked." (Foucault 1980b, p. 237).

Foucault introduces two separate methods to perform this analysis. On the one hand an 'archaeological' approach, aimed at describe the *savoir*, the implicit knowledge base that give meaning and coherence to the way of thinking, working, acting in a specific a society. This knowledge, which is distinct from the formal bodies of learning found in literary, religious and scientific texts, which he names *connaissances* (Levy 2013, p. 261), is not simply made of concepts but includes also the norms, institutions and practices that embody, empower and support social practices. For instance the appearance of the discipline of psychiatry in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is, according to Foucault, made possible by "a whole set of relations between hospitalization, internment, the conditions and procedures

of social exclusion, the rules of jurisprudence, the norms of industrial labour and bourgeois morality” (Foucault 1972, p. 179). *Savoir* is therefore not the consequence of “a rational historical trajectory” followed by a discipline (Durkheim 1915/1976, p. 1773) but a construct emerging from an array of practices. As such it can be ‘discovered’ by analysing and collating a cross-section of the events, statements, artefacts that characterize a set of practices in an historical period, as archaeologists do when excavating a stratum of deposits.

The second ‘approach’ developed by Foucault, genealogical analysis, complements the archaeological method, showing that discourses are the outcome of contingent turns of history. While investigating the antecedents of a system of thought, “it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality (...) it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles” (Ekman 1992, p. 76)

The effects of Foucauldian discourses seemingly resemble those of cultural domination or hegemony described by Gramsci (1975), those ‘universal’ and ‘common sense’ bourgeois values that are taken for granted by the majority. However, while Gramscian hegemony is the product of a dominant ideology, Foucauldian discourse does not serve any master or class interest; moreover, while ideologies distort truth as the counter-hegemonist views it, discourse will produce its own truths. Laclau & Mouffe (1985), introduced a more radical form of constructivism into Marxist analysis, influenced by Foucault’s position, one that transcended the distinction between structure and superstructure and argued that all our perception of reality is mediated entirely by discourse, especially by virtue of its stable frames and closed interpretative horizons .



Similarities can also be drawn between a discursive and a cultural approach. Differences exist between discourse and culture, however, since culture has a subliminal character, and while it is reflected in symbols and language, it is not embedded in them, as is discourse (Alvesson 2004, pp. 328-31). Again, discursive acts constitute meanings through language, while culture preserves and transmits them, also using non-verbal means. Finally, cultural studies are more 'humanistic', because they consider culture to be produced by subjects. Foucauldian discourse analysis reverses this picture, maintaining that the subjects are produced by the discourse. This latter position is well represented by Actor Network Theory (Law 2009), which posits that even non-human actors ('actants') can play a decisive role in transforming relationships and meaning and in constructing social interaction (Callon 1986). So for instance, while a cultural perspective will investigate how distinct meanings are attributed to the same artefact (e.g. a building) by different groups, a discursive ANT informed approach would examine how the building itself contributes to generating a system of practices and meanings that defines the identity and the subjectivity of all the agents involved in social field (Latour 2005).

Discourse is, therefore, the sensemaking device (Weick 1988) implicitly in use in any specific historical and cultural context; it is taken for granted by its subjects, who end up assuming subject positions that the discourse makes available. Discourses are implicit in everyday use but can be made visible, escaping tautological truth, by comparing specific cases to alternative discourses, noticing differences and discontinuities. Foucault decided to focus, for instance, on the historical evolution of certain discourses (medicine, sexuality, madness, sexuality, discipline etcetera) within the same cultural framework (France). However it is possible to use space, as an alternative to or in addition to time, as a divider, contrasting alternative industries, organizations, or different geographical contexts.

In line with his anti-essentialism, Foucault chose as his main objects of analysis not the statements that 'constitute' the discourse but rather the rules that govern their production and the way they structure the discourse (Foucault 1972, p. 38). Only characters that have now become almost mythical, such as Foucault, roam this far end of the spectrum, where things have no meaning outside discourse and consequently the presence of a material reality is not negated but made irrelevant. Discourse here is more an epistemological tool than an ontological object.

In empirical terms, a limitation of discourse studies is the paucity of research devoted to exploring the cognitive side of organizational discourse (Grant et al. 2004, p. 23), leaving the issue of the interplay between 'affect' and 'discourse' almost unexplored (Iedema 2011). It is therefore "hard to gain a sense of how active agential selves 'make a difference' through 'playing' with discursive practices" (Newton 1998, p. 425).

Another relationship that would merit a better articulation is the relationship between sensemaking devices and disciplinary structures. This would involve exploring the interplay between the enabling and constraining capacity of discursive power. A useful step in this direction has been made by showing how institutions are created and transformed through discourses (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy 2004) but it would be valuable to expand the reflection on the paradoxical effects of absence of institutional/discursive constrictions. Without the disciplinary effects of discourses the possibilities of meaningful interaction and of productive action are severely limited. Moreover, the lack of any structure of domination precludes the possibility of resistance: without an orthodoxy against which to rebel it is impossible to conceive innovation, making an 'anything goes' utopia more stultifying and conservative than any oppressive regime.

## **Researching discourse: an epistemological premise**

Three conceptual issues need to be confronted to disentangle the complexities and ambiguities of discourse analysis: how to make sense of and to conciliate the vast array of definitions of discourse present in the literature; the problem of the ontological status of discourse, and the oppressive versus productive function of discourse.

I have already observed how the field of organizational discourse analysis is occupied by a plethora of alternative and often-contradictory definitions of the concept (Grant et al. 2004; Alvesson & Kärreman 2011). This proliferation of meanings is driven by a number of factors: the variety of functions performed by language; the different interests and objects of study of the researchers; the diverse disciplinary approaches of the student of the subject, who range from socio-linguistics to organizational studies, from semiotics to ethnology.

One of the most successful attempts to produce a taxonomy of approaches to discourse is the one proposed by Alvesson & Kärreman (2000b) who ordered “varieties of discourse” along two dimensions, one relative to the ‘muscularity’ of the discourse, and the other to the scope and scale of discourse. The first factor refers to the relationship between discourse and meaning that different approaches posit: on one end of the scale we have Foucauldian discourse, seen as the locus of production of meanings and subjectivity, a powerful force that shapes practices and beliefs; on the opposite end we find a ‘fragile’ discourse (Alvesson 2004), conceived as a purely linguistic performance, while cognition, feelings and practices are constituted elsewhere. The second dimension refers instead to the formative range of discourse, which can vary from a micro-discourse (with a small ‘d’), produced and consumed within a specific local context, to a grandiose, macro-Discourse (with a capital ‘D’), a wide-ranging formally produced and reproduced language

encompassing multiple social realities. The researchers interested in close-range discourse will be more attentive to the detail, emphasizing the local social context of language use (e.g. within a specific site or group), while those who try to reveal an overarching grand Discourse (e.g. on HRM, Strategy or TQM) will look for regularities and will try to abstract from special cases.

The major contribution of the framework offered by Alvesson and Kärreman resides in its capacity to highlight two inescapable tensions in discourse analysis. On the one hand it warns against the temptations of picturing a too-powerful, solipsistic discourse that cancels all other material and conceptual dimensions, in contrast to that of a mere description of linguistic details, where researchers become amanuenses who record a multifarious but scarcely relevant Babel of local idioms. On the other hand it highlights the trade-off between alternative foci in the analysis: a rigorous – but myopic – view of local contexts, versus a grandiose view where the research of significant aggregated patterns is conducted at the expense of a more fine-grain understanding.

According to Alvesson & Kärreman (2011) discourse studies tread dangerously between the Scylla and Charybdis of two opposite reductionist tendencies: a linguistic reductionism, laced with lack of clarity on what constitute context, that can affect text-based (little 'd') discourse studies, versus a paradigmatic (big 'D') reductionism that traces everything back to the Foucauldian Word, a Discourse that is the beginning of any social creation. It is this latter, quasi-magical, belief in the generative capacity of language that is the target of Alvesson and Kärreman's fiercest attack. They advocate a 'de-cluttering' of the concept of discourse, which has come to include too many different elements; a separation of little d and big D discourse studies; the contemplation of the interplay between textual and other non-discursive social elements (such as culture or institutions) and a relativisation of the

power of language, which can sometimes constitute reality but at other times simply connects or transfers meanings created elsewhere. These authors try to take a high epistemological ground, warning disingenuous researchers against the risk of a-critically embracing the Foucauldian paradigm, ending up with tautological conceptions, in which, since discourse is postulated to be constitutive of reality, everything is discourse or is produced by discourse.

A highly critical stance towards paradigmatic discourse studies is not shared by everyone: Mumby (2011) has provided a strong argument showing that Alvesson and Kärreman's critique is founded on a misunderstood conception of the role of the linguistic turn. According to him, a discourse-based epistemology is based on transcending the subject-object dualism and on exploring "the linguistic character of all experience (and all knowledge claims!), and the ways that experiences and objects are constituted in dialectical relationship to one another" (Mumby 2011, p. 1149). In other words, assuming a 'muscular' view of discourse does not mean embracing a linguistic determinism where language creates reality. Rather, it means considering the pragmatic effects of a paradigmatic Discourse; for instance, investigating how material objects are used (or misused, reinvented, neglected), depending on the meaning attributed to them by the Discourse. At the same time, discourse is the locus where culture is performed, played out, reproduced, in a public meaning-making process; therefore, while discourse is not 'the only game in town', it remains an obligatory passage for other social processes. The debate introduces the issue of defining the ontological nature of discourse, which is not simply about deciding which elements should be included in the 'texts'. Instead, it is about questioning the nature of these ingredients and of discourse itself.

It is possible to identify a few different ontological stances about discourse. These can be positioned in a continuum between a purely essentialist and a totally constructivist view. At one end of the spectrum we find those who see discourse as material collection of linguistic traces, “text and talk in social practices” (Potter 2004, p. 203). Here discourse is text and texts are an objective, tangible reality.

Still anchored to a substantive view of reality are the studies informed by Critical Realism. This approach combines realist ontology with a relativist epistemology, arguing that “reality could be analytically distinguished into structures, the outcome of their complex interplay, and human experience, perception, or interpretation of those outcomes.” (Jack et al. 2012, p. 871). As a consequence while the world is thought to exist independently of our knowledge, an articulated view of reality is proposed, distinguishing between the ‘real’ (the domain of structures), the ‘actual’ (the domain of processes) and the ‘empirical’ (what is experienced by social actors) (Fairclough 2005). Within this framework discourse is concerned with the relationship and the tensions between texts, processes and structures (Fairclough 2005).

Another step away from the materiality of discourse but still distinct from a purely constructionist conception is the idea of materiality and discourse as non-separable but co-emergent (Iedema 2007). A contingent, multi-modal view of discourse, which includes not just linguistic elements but also other mode of meaning making, such as architecture, technology, embodiment etc, is entailed. Barad’s thesis, according materiality and discourse to be inseparable (Barad 2003), distances its self so much from the safe shores of positivistic realisms that they are completely out of sight. In an ironic turn, her argument is inspired by findings from the traditional stronghold of hard science, physics. In fact, in the ‘philosophy-physics’ developed by Bohr to make sense of the weird realm of quantum

mechanics, Barad finds support for challenging the representationally triadic structure of “words, knowers and things” (2003, p. 813). Things cease to have inherent properties or borders; measurements do not represent measurement-independent states of things: “phenomena are constitutive of reality. Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things behind-phenomena but ‘things’-in-phenomena” (2003, p. 817). Consequently meaning is not a property but an ongoing performance, and discourse is not (just) a human production. Even the distinction between epistemology and ontology collapses and she proposes instead the term “Onto-epistemology—the study of practices of knowing in being” (2003, p. 829).

## **Understanding political power**

Another issue that needs to be addressed concerns the oppressive or constructive role played by discourse, which introduces the fundamental notion of *power*. Critical Discourse Analysis (Mumby 2004) seems to imply that discourse is a means for domination. The Foucauldian idea of discourse as productive of identity through “disciplinary techniques and normalization” creating “limited subject positions from which only certain identities can speak” (Ainsworth & Hardy 2004, p. 166), interlocks discourse and power and suggests that the ‘power of discourse’ affects everyone equally. Therefore it cannot be manipulated or employed as a strategy of control.

Critical Discourse Analysis proposes an alternative view, arguing that the internal inconsistencies of any discourse and the presence of multiple discourses create a “discursive space in which the agent can play one discourse off against other” (Hardy & Phillips 2004, p. 304). A fragmented discursive reality allows for ‘discursive strategies’. These can be used to marginalize or exclude, since “power is also exercised when A devotes

his energies to creating or reinforcing social and political values and institutional practices that limit the scope of the political process to public consideration of only those issues which are comparatively innocuous to A" (Bachrach & Baratz 1962, p. 948). Moreover discourse can lock up people's "perceptions, cognitions, and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things" (Lukes 1974, p. 24). Based on Lukes' claims, Mumby and Clair state that "the most effective use of power [...] is exercised through a set of interpretive frames that each worker incorporates as part of his or her organizational identity." (1997, p. 184). Such an explanation risks underplaying the role of discourse in reproducing the system of interests of the 'ruling class', since no one is immune from the discourse's hegemonic qualities, not even the Hegemon. It can in fact be argued that, while despots can impose statements that legitimize and reinforce their rule, they also end up becoming encumbered by the trappings that embody that discourse: a divine king must constantly keep a God-like conduct. The paradox is that an approach that aims to unveil how existing inequities and domination are maintained through ideological manipulation, risks treating both oppressors and oppressed as 'prisoners of discourse'.

A way out of this impasse is to resort, once again, to the distinction between micro discourses and macro Discourses (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b). When focusing on 'small d' discourses the researcher faces a fragmented, highly dialogical reality, where discursive struggles provide a fertile soil for practices of domination (Keenoy, Oswick & Grant 1997). The strategic dimension of discourse (Cheney et al. 2004) can be researched and conceptualized considering organizational rhetoric as a means both for persuading and for establishing identification (Sillince 2005; Jarzabkowski & Sillince 2010). On the other hand, 'big D' Discourses are less pliable, because they "structure the social space for action" (Hardy & Phillips 2004, p. 301) and can hardly be controlled and intentionally shaped by the strategic effort of any group.



This debate on the relationship between domination and discourse is limited, however, since it assumes that power is only a form of oppression, 'power over' (Clegg, Courpasson & Phillips 2006). A different conceptualization contemplates power's generative nature. Power as "ability not just to act, but to act in concert" (Arendt 1972, p. 143), becomes a property of groups, while individuals can only be 'empowered', not 'own' power, and discourse becomes productive of order. In fact, according to Arendt constructive acts stem out of a collaboration that is made possible by a shared language and a common understanding of roles and subjectivities. Discourses are never chaotic but they produce rationality, becoming "the principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are" (Mumby & Clair 1997, p. 181).

It is also useful to consider that the opposite of 'order' in a social context is not necessarily 'disorder' but a different order, an alternative modality of ordering bodies and thoughts, artefacts and spaces: in brief an alternative discourse. The tension between alternative discourses can be productive, since it represents a *contraposition* between two different orders. The generative quality of opposing paradigms is, for instance, what Lakatos (1978) identified as the driving force of scientific development, encapsulating it in the concept of *research program*. Conversely, reactive opposition to a dominating discourse can easily turn into purely destructive acts of violence on the signs of that dominance, which in the end represents impotence, since "rule by sheer violence comes into play where power is being lost" (Arendt 1970, p. 4). As a consequence both the oppressive and the generative aspects of power-discourse need to be contemplated, since these two dimensions coexist and there is a continuous tension between the two. However it is essential, in the perspective of my inquiry, to depart from an analysis of the productive side of power, since the alternative is fraught with conceptual problems.

When looking at the constitution of practices and identities, having a focus on the oppressive side of power relations can lead one to conclude that both identities and practices are shaped on the basis of a pre-existing template, imposed by some hegemonic entity. In other words it seems to imply that individuals are forced against their will to adopt certain behaviours and conform to certain subjectivities by an external agency. In this case the very existence of these templates would be left unexplained. A limited, agency based view of power is suggested that fails to consider the role of discourse: “power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress [...] on the contrary, power is strong [...] because, as we are beginning to realise, it produces effects at the level of desire-and also at the level of knowledge” (Foucault 1980a, p. 59).

Most management theorists have historically neglected the importance of power relations to organization. More often than not power has been either ignored or dismissed as pathology, a view epitomized by Senge’s statement “most organizations reek with its odor” (1994, p. 273). Alternatively, a line has been drawn between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ power, re-labelling some of its manifestations ‘authority’ or ‘leadership’, and rationalizing it as an accepted (legitimized) source of direction, and/or a means to the end of a greater good, an approach which is fraught with ethical dangers, as Goffman’s work on total institutions (1961) and Milgram’s experiments on unquestioned authority (1974) demonstrated.

No meaningful discourse on organization is possible without including a discourse on power; if we want to understand and even predict the capacity of an organization to reproduce itself and to survive we need to start by acknowledging that power is not just a waste product of organized activity but its essential ingredient because it allows integration, collective action, learning, and change. In this sense the complex approach proposed by Clegg (1989) with the idea of “circuits of power” is particularly valuable

because it underpins a multidimensional approach to power, seen as space-temporal arrangement of relations, which includes both episodic and systemic forms. The analytical potential of this approach is the fact that it allows for understanding of the flow and transformation of power and social relations. The outcomes of episodic power reproduce, reinforce, or transform the architecture of power relationships, flowing through while also forging a dispositional circuit made up of rule fixing relations of meaning and membership.

In the dispositional power circuit, resistance to power wanes thanks to a redefinition of meaning; thus the use of direct, discretionary commands based on the control of uncertainty (Crozier & Friedberg 1980) is replaced by a rationalization of power relationships, which become routinized in the form of impersonal norms and procedures, or included in a hegemonic organizational culture. At the same time organizations are embedded in an overarching 'facilitative circuit' of power where ruling becomes a "sensemaking process", politically producing meaning (Clegg 1989, p. 200): 200), fixing it in discourses, rationality and technologies, all of which have a disciplinary content. At this level different elites try to outflank each other or are outflanked because of changes produced by non-human actants and events. While episodic power relations, which are explicit and coercive, unavoidably cause resistance and political struggle, in dispositional circuits based on disciplinary systems and legitimacy conflict becomes tacit and consensus is produced, while in the facilitative circuit the outcome of political transformations is a new regime of truth, a process of meaning making and rationalization that reifies beliefs into accepted realities (Haugaard 2009).

In all its manifestations power is an essential bond for social action: it both enables and is (re)produced by the network of relationships that occurs everywhere in everyday life, which operate not only by direct imposition but also through the operation of disciplinary

technologies, that catalogue and order reality: “power has its principles not so much in a person as in a certain concerted distribution of bodies, surfaces, lights, gazes; in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (Foucault 1979, p. 202).

The idea of a power as generated by the way in which human and non-human agents are collocated in a social space brings to mind the concept of gravity as an apt metaphor with which to capture the essence of the idea. Power (as gravity) pulls together all social ‘matter’, being a consequence of the existence of social relationships. Rather than an ethereal substance that can be owned or exchanged it is a ‘curvature of the social space’ produced by the distribution of relationships, resources, and meanings. It consubstantiates the material and the ideal aspects of society because it affects both bodies and knowledge, being generative of both the *socius* and the *logos*.

Considering the productive nature of power does not exclude its oppressive uses, it simply considers them a consequence, a side effect rather than a teleological aspect of power. In fact stating that discursive power affects everyone does not mean that the resulting social arrangements are fair or that everyone has access to the same chances. On the contrary the current discourse is a consequence of past power struggles that different actors managed to shape to their advantage: “existing organisational structures and systems are not neutral or apolitical, but structurally sedimented phenomena. There is a history of struggles already embedded in the organisation” (Hardy & Clegg 1996, p. 629).

The crux of the matter is that is indispensable to consider power effects when looking at how practices and identities are formed both because they cannot exist in a relational void (hence they will be affected by power dynamics) and also because the shared meaning and systems of knowledge on which they are based are shaped by power effects.

## **‘Map’ as a metaphor for discourse**

A way to sum up the complex issues raised in the previous section is to identify a suitable metaphor that can help us to encapsulate and reflect on the implications of discourse analysis. In order to capture the complexity, ambiguities and tensions that are inherent to the concept of discourse, it is useful to compare it to a map, equating discourse formation with map-making. My argument is that the processes and the outcomes of discourse production and reproduction have much in common with representation of a territory in a map.

This idea is not entirely original. For instance Foucauldian discourse analysis has been employed to criticize a positivistic view of cartography, showing that cartography practices are governed by discursive rules, have a rhetorical quality and are ultimately a form of power-knowledge (Harley 1989). While I am not taking the practice of map-making as my topic I will instead use the concept of map as a metaphor. By juxtaposing ideas from different domains, a metaphor can be a useful heuristic tool, enabling the emergence of new meaning and new insight on an object of discussion (Cornelissen 2005).

Similarly to discourses:

1. *Maps include symbols, artefacts and practices*: mapping the world entails a sociotechnical network, which enmeshes a set of propositions – the codified signs that we use to symbolize the features of the territory – and empirical realities, mediated by inscriptions (Latour & Woolgar 1979). These inscriptions (topological coordinates) are produced using cartographic instruments, such as theodolites, sextants, satellite positioning systems, etcetera, which act as translation devices (Latour 2005). The back and forth translation between map and territory involves rational practices, which are

founded on conventions. These produce apparently objective but in effect socially constructed representations of the world. Similarly, discourses are based on a language that pretends to give a coherent and truthful account of what is correct, just, or desirable. They seek legitimacy in reason and sentiment; they develop or enrol techniques and technologies to extend their reach and to be reproduced. In order to understand discourses and their genealogy, it is useful to see them not just as sets of fixed statements that can be found in texts but rather as actor networks, produced and reproduced by an entanglement of declarations, conversations, technologies, practices and performances.

2. *Maps create subjects, include and exclude:* Foucauldian discourses produce their subjects; equally maps do not simply describe but *construct* nations and regions. Discourses and maps' representational practice are not a reproduction of reality but a selection of the differences that matter. This idea, based on Korzybski (1933) remark that "the map is not the territory", has been articulated by Bateson<sup>2</sup>:

Differences are the things that get onto a map. But what is a difference? [...] I suggest to you, now, that the word 'idea, ' in its most elementary sense, is synonymous with 'difference.' [...] There is an infinite number of differences around and within the piece of chalk. [...] Of this infinitude, we select a very limited number, which be-come information. In fact, what we mean by information—the elementary unit of information—is a difference which makes a difference. [...]

But what is the territory? Operationally, somebody went out with a retina or a measuring stick and made representations which were then put upon paper. What is on the paper map is a representation of what was in the retinal

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<sup>2</sup> A related idea, highlighting how meaning is produced only within con-texts, is also proposed by Jacques Derrida with his concept of *différance*, which plays on the double meaning in French of 'to differ' and 'to defer', and shows how our knowledge is always produced by dynamic patterns of references (Derrida 1982).

representation of the man who made the map; and as you push the question back, what you find is an infinite regress, an infinite series of maps. The territory never gets in at all. The territory is *Ding an sich* and you can't do anything with it. Always the process of representation will filter it out so that the mental world is only maps of maps of maps, ad infinitum. All 'phenomena' are literally appearances." (Bateson 1972, pp. 320-2)

Maps and discourses create a shared *Grand Illusion* that allows us to give coherent meanings to an ever transforming and infinitely textured world. By doing so they emphasize or hide features of the territory, allowing certain readings of it. They do so by representing and highlighting (thus legitimizing) or ignoring (thus negating) the existence of a region, of an ethnic group, or of a feature of the terrain, such as a mountain or a water stream. On other occasions mapmakers explicitly choose to ignore certain dimensions completely to serve the purpose of the map: for instance topological maps, as with the famous London Tube Map, focus only on the relations between places, ignoring distances or elevation. Something similar often happens in discourses, when complex realities are simplified and pigeonholed, sometimes with sinister effects. An example of this is the way in which the dominant discourse of psychiatry categorizes and labels complex human conditions in a discrete set of 'mental disorders', with dramatic consequences for the lives of patients. In discourse analysis acknowledging what is absent, and how complexity is reduced, can be as important as identifying what is present. The most practical way to do so is to focus on differences among discourses, comparing and contrasting them, and looking at Discourses from a critical standpoint, trying to disclose the presence of implicit assumptions that bolster the explicit statements.

3. *Maps can use different scales*, thus focusing on a local territory, as 'discourses' do or represent a much broader worldview, as 'Discourse' does (Alvesson & Kärreman

2000b). The trade-off between detail and scope make them useful for different purposes. Consulting a topographic map will enable us to navigate a local area, while using a planisphere permits us to contemplate geopolitical and economic issues. In the same way micro-discourse analysis can help us understanding the internal debates and plot the political geography of an organization, while macro-Discourse analysis can be useful to identify both the ideas that can be mobilized by local actors and the sensemaking devices that they will use. To understand the relationship between discourses and practices it is useful to employ both a local and general 'cartography', and investigate the relationship between the two (that is how local discourses tap into macro Discourses, and how the former contribute shaping the latter).

4. *Maps are forms of power-knowledge*: while both cartography and discourse may claim to produce a 'correct' representation of the world they are, nevertheless, both ineluctably political instruments. The map is a "spatial panopticon" (Harley 1989, p. 13) used to normalize and discipline subjects, influencing their perception of the world. Power can shape cartographic knowledge in more or less explicit ways. These can range from situations in which political interest openly censor or alter maps, as used to happen in Soviet Union, where cities and even physical features of the land were erased for political and military purposes (Harley 1989, p. 5). In a less explicit, but still highly 'muscular' fashion, political maps give a social meaning to the territory, highlighting artificial borders, over-representing human-made features such as roads or infrastructures, marking administrative divisions and cancelling undesirable ethnic or tribal realities. But even the supposedly objective and neutral 'physical maps' are loci of power-knowledge production: the rule of ethnocentricity, for instance, has almost universally brought cartographers to use either their homeland or their 'holy city' as the center of the map. Finally, it has been argued that the development of cartographic science was an enabler of the formation of modern nation states, with their clearly



defined boundaries and centralized control (Branch 2011), an example of the recursive relationship between knowledge and power. In order to describe the rules employed by a discourse it is necessary to investigate the interplay between knowledge and power, trying to understand how power constitutes discourse. This does not mean to investigate only visible power struggles but especially stable power relations, to understand how they produce rationality and rationalizations, knowledge and ignorance, truth and falsity (Flyvbjerg 1998, pp. 319-25).

The use of the map metaphor has enabled me to identify a number of specific 'heuristic guidelines' that will be explicitly employed in the analysis of the empirical data on which this study is based:

1. Discourses are to be analysed as socio-material actor networks, not as linguistic apparatuses;
2. Discourses elide and highlight and looking at remarkable omissions in a discourse can be as enlightening as counting occurrences;
3. The interplay between local and global scale is constant and the influence of small 'd' discourses and capital 'D' Discourses must be taken into account;
4. Power and knowledge are imbricated and shape each other. Therefore the production of knowledge reveals power relationships: power is productive of knowledge.

## **Organizational rhetoric as an interpretive key**

The use of rhetoric in management has been widely discussed in the recent literature (see Hartelius & Browning (2008) for a review of the debate). Rhetoric is defined as the use of language in order to persuade and to establish identification (Sillince 2005). It is the latter function that differentiates the classic Aristotelian idea of rhetoric from the contemporary

uses. 'New rhetoric' is more concerned with values, construction of self and identification: this approach can be used to reformulate the concept as a means of identifying the self in relation to a particular issue, and of using that self-identification persuasively (Jarzabkowski & Sillince 2010).

When used to formulate strategic intents, rhetoric creates consistency by removing uncertainty about future actions, or by eliminating options that are incompatible, creating purpose by setting directions, regulating internal debate by relativizing and managing opinions and interpretation and emphasizing context defining and protecting organizational boundaries (Mantere & Sillince 2007).

Also, while rhetoric usually involves the use of language, it also has a symbolic meaning beyond the literal (Sillince 2006). By leveraging its symbolic meaning rhetoric also provides a means of managing organizational ambiguity (in goals, means, directions) and of using it as a resource (Jarzabkowski & Sillince 2010). A specific aspect of rhetoric is the use of metaphors to make sense of organizational phenomena. Metaphors prove to be handy devices, since they are "tools to create compact descriptions of complex phenomena" (Weick 1989, p.529). The pervasiveness of the explicit or implicit use of metaphors in organizational studies has even driven the idea that all research paradigms can be situated within certain "images", or master-metaphors of organization (Morgan 2006). Metaphors also enable one to manage the contradictory and dilemmatic nature of organizational dynamics thanks to their ambiguity (Jarzabkowski & Sillince 2010): they act as a cloaking device, masking contradictions and irreducible conflicts in management. Metaphors can also be used to dramatize events, providing a distorted image of facts that serves certain vested interest, artificially creating conflicts and manipulating public opinion: "metaphors

can disorganize a city while organizing the understanding of its citizens” (Czarniawska 2004a, p.64)

The role played by rhetoric and metaphors, intended as an explicit (if superficial) manifestation of the power/knowledge effects of discourse will be specifically addressed in the discussion of the UTS Business case.

## **Discourse and reality: methodological implications**

If truth is only the end product of language-mediated power struggles (Foucault 1972, 1979), how can a meaningful account of reality be produced? The use of reductionist approaches to content analysis, such as the count of frequencies of concepts and themes in texts, does not appear to be a viable option. While coding texts remains a potentially useful strategy to identify differences and similarities in discursive practices, it is better to resist the temptation to attempt legitimizing discourse analysis by giving it the veneer of positivism that a ‘reliable’ coding and a smattering of statistics on print media indicators or semantic traces can provide.

Two methodological consequences follow. First the need be reflexive in order to become aware of how the researcher’s discursive practices can influence the understanding of the examined texts (Hardy & Clegg 1997). Second, acknowledging that producing a robust two way correspondence between an empirical object and a symbol system (Stablein 1996, p. 351) using an ethnographic, post-modern informed heuristics is not the linear and unvarnished process that is expected by reviewer and examiners and that is consequently depicted in most of the literature. It is an open secret, though, that ethnographers are rarely (if ever) completely honest, candid, observant, precise, fair, unobtrusive (Fine & Shulman 2009). Even discounting the occasional white lies, the partially biased

observations, the missing field note imperfectly recalled, the focal issue remains how to account for something that is so ethereal, fragmented and plural as discursively shaped professional identities and practices. The description of something that is as complex and tangled as 'the Discourse of business education' or the 'local discourse' of UTS business, cannot be effectively produced by simply collecting and counting utterances.

A viable alternative is assuming what Bateson (1972, p. 318) describes as a Pythagorean stance, which means considering the patterns of discourses rather than sticking to the substance of the meanings. For instance, a discourse's consistency, coherence and univocity can be a sign of its hegemonic qualities, while the presence (and permanence) of contrasting and contradictory representations indicate a more plural and flexible social setting (Laclau & Mouffe 1985). What is relevant in this case is not the specific meaning conveyed and represented by the discourse but rather the capacity of certain hegemonic discourses to fix meanings (Hardy & Phillips 2004, p. 239), versus the fluidity and plurality of other discursive fields.

Identifying these morphological characteristics of the discourse can be useful because it can shed light on the alignment between organizational discourse and environmental challenges. Without looking at discourses in a functionalist way, it is conceivable that dominant discourses can benefit or hinder a social grouping. If a discourse produces a 'regime of truth' that leads an organized system to jeopardize its resource basis, the ensuing disintegration of the system will in turn annihilate the discourse. Such is not a hypothetical situation, since history is filled with such occurrences; exemplary are the humanly caused ecological collapse that led to the demise of Easter Island civilization (Diamond 2005) and the socio-economic downfall of the Soviet bloc. Environmental unsustainability can topple the semantic pyramids built by humans.

The 'pragmatic wisdom' embedded in discourses is not necessarily synonymic with scientific rationality. It could be labelled 'ecological rationality': it is not defined by its form or justification as Weberian ideal typical forms of rationalities but is supported by its intrinsic ability to preserve the discourse through adaptation to environmental conditions. Even the type of rationality based on values and typical of magical and religious cults that Weber defined as *substantive* (Kalberg 1980), can express this ecological rationality. Weick provides an effective illustration of this point, showing how an organized group can thrive in virtue of a magical belief, while an application of evidence- and experience-based planning strategy could be detrimental. He describes how the Naskapi Indians of Labrador for centuries successfully managed game hunting by resorting to a 'magical device', the use of cracks formed on caribou shoulder bones as a map with which to locate game. By randomizing their hunting practices, this strategy prevented stock depletion and contemporarily made hunting more efficient because it made hunters' behaviour unpredictable, avoiding the game becoming sensitized to human actions (Weick 1969/1979, p. 262). The ecological success of this 'magical' practice primarily explains its permanence, more than the co-existing political side effects, which can justify social resistance to its transformation, such as the fact that it perpetuates the power of the shamans and the tribal elders over the young warriors.

The final methodological consequence that can be drawn from these reflections is that my analysis will attempt to consider two separate 'functions' of the observed discourses, which inform and mitigate my critical stance. On the one hand, I am interested in political and ethical issues, such as the truth bending effects of power (Flyvbjerg 1998, 2001) and the ideological work of discourse (Fairclough & Wodak 1997), viewing discourse as an instrument of social control (vanDijk 2001). On the other hand I regard discourse as an indispensable sensemaking device (Weick 1995), indispensable to individual and collective

action. Current social practices certainly support and are supported by a (probably oppressive) system of power but must have worked well enough not to lead their practitioners to extinction. Before proposing to transform them is it healthy to question the capacity of alternative, 'better' practices, to achieve the same result.

# Chapter 2.

## On the (re)production of identity in organizations

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### Explaining the focus on identity

The construct of identity is attracting constantly increasing attention in the field of management studies (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas 2008), a preoccupation that can be seen as a sign of the individualization of expectations and responsibilities that characterizes contemporary western societies (Clarke & Knights 2014). The interest in the role played by individual identity in organized behaviour started in the 1980s and can be inscribed in the wider strand of studies on organizational culture and culture change (Morrill 2008). Initially the focus was on the influence of organizational socialization on individual identities and the effect that identification has on organizational behaviour (Ashforth & Mael 1989; Ibarra 1999). More recently, critical management researchers have pointed to how organizations use identity regulation to control and normalize their members' behaviours (Alvesson & Willmott 2002)

As an increasing number of organizations transcend traditional bureaucratic impulses, becoming less akin to 'iron cages', understanding of identity work has become more nuanced. The panoptical corporate 'Big Brother' observing and imposing conformity to specific identity templates has been replaced, at least in some contexts, by a precarious flow of recursively co-coproduced liquid identities (Clegg & Baumeler 2010). In several contemporary organizations, characterized by 'casualised' and 'nomadic' affiliation, which result in an insecure membership (Collinson 2003), the acquisition of a regulated social identity is not anymore the default outcome of a socialization process in which the

individual adheres (or resists) to a scripted model but is rather a constantly moving target, either an ongoing achievement or a continual threat.

Depending on the context, we observe either the hegemonic imposition of an “appropriate” identity (Alvesson & Willmott 2002) guaranteeing unquestioned commitment to organizational purposes, or a situation in which individuals are left to their own devices, developing “less secure, more open and increasingly differentiated” identities (Coupland & Brown 2012, p. 1). In any case in the contemporary workplace identity-work is an area of struggle that is becoming increasingly relevant. This is because post-bureaucratic organizations require empowered, self-motivated and self-managed individuals (Josserand, Teo & Clegg 2006), whose activities involve a larger component of emotional labour (Hochschild 1983; Illouz 2007). Rule based forms of managerial control are insufficient to supervise and direct this type of workers and they are progressively supplemented, if not replaced, by identity management practices (McKenna, Garcia-Lorenzo & Bridgman 2010). This dynamics effectively make organizations “arenas in which subjects assemble and reassemble their identities” (Clarke & Knights 2014, p. 337).

Academic work is performed in a context that can certainly be assimilated to that of a post-bureaucratic workplace. Universities are often highly regulated organizations (March, Schulz & Zhou 2000) and display several traits of Weberian bureaucracies, such as formal division of labour, an administrative hierarchy and a clerical apparatus (Blau 1973/1994, p. 11). However, if we consider the structural characteristics of ideal typical post-bureaucratic organizations, such as a process and project division of labour, a diffused decentralized decision making, and control based on personal discretion, motivation and creativity (Härenstam & Bolin 2008), most academic activities are performed according to post-bureaucratic practices. A survey administered as part of this study (the results are



presented in chapter 9) confirms that a great part of business academics' work is performed autonomously, as part of self-managed and regulated projects, to the point that even physical presence in the workplace ceases to be an essential, formal requirement. I use this as the justification for my focus on the shaping and construction of identities of the business academic workforce as one of the sites where the essential elements of behaviour regulation and decision making, the dominant ideological modes of rationality (Clegg & Baunsgaard 2013), must be ensconced.

## **From cognitive to discursively performed identities**

Two paradigmatic views of identity have historically emerged in social science: an essentialist one and a socially constructed one (Coupland 2007). The former understands identity as a unitary property of "coherent and autonomous individuals" (Collinson 2003, p. 527). This conception, embodied by the idea of psyche (soul), has been part of Western philosophical discourse since Pythagoras but came under attack in the 20th century (Barresi & Martin 2006). The Frankfurt School's critical thought played a central role in deconstructing identity, showing that the Enlightenment conception of a reasoning individual replaces the old oppressor (mystery and myth) with new ones: bureaucratic control, production systems and technology (Adorno & Horkheimer 1944/2002). In this view the constitution of the self is influenced by economic and material forces, such as level of income, wealth, class awareness, making the individual "a mere reflection-form of property-relations. [Therefore] not only is the self entwined in society, it owes society its existence" (Adorno 1951/1978, pp. 153-4).

Social identity theory investigates the idea that social forces mould the 'ego', a formulation that highlights how self-concepts are the combined product of group membership and

emotional significance (Tajfel 1974, 1978). Identities are produced through processes of group categorization, identification and comparison (Tajfel & Turner 2004), in which individuals access a social repository of ideal selves, “expectations for what a good person should be” (Wieland 2010, p.504). The individual is therefore shaped by external benchmarks: “the interplay of identity and alterity is continuous” (Czarniawska 2008b, p. 7), creating an “inter-subjective reality constituted through agreement and sharing of meaning” (Clegg, Rhodes & Kornberger 2007, p. 497).

Defining identity as a social construction implies that power relationships play a role in shaping it: “subjects are gradually, progressively, really and materially constituted through a multiplicity of organisms, forces, energies, materials, desires, thoughts etc.” (Foucault (Foucault 1980a, p. 97). Identities are disciplined and normalized by organizational regulation efforts (Alvesson & Willmott 2002) but also by big “D” Discourses (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b, 2011), which are not contained in a specific workplace but produced across multiple intersecting contexts (Kuhn 2006), such as institutionalized professional practices or broader social conventions. As a consequence what was thought to be an essential and unique ‘soul’ turns out to be just a “typified, discursive construction” (Rafols et al. 2012, p. 10)

Post-modern identities are difficult to capture, since their conceptions can be extended, confounded or confirmed by double hermeneutic effects (Giddens 1984): successful theorizations of professional identities can be assimilated in practices by social agents, as demonstrated by the impact that management fashions have on practitioners’ identities (Abrahamson 1991, 1996; Kieser 1997; Sturdy 2004). For instance, Emotional Intelligence (Goleman 1995, 1998), a manipulation technology which fits well with post-bureaucratic organizational contexts (Clegg & Baumeler 2010), has become a requisite skill for successful

executives, with the consequence that numerous managers have striven to re-craft (or at least re-brand) themselves as emotionally intelligent leaders.

As the idea of identity morphs from a natural object into a constructed negotiation of meaning, “contingent, provisional, achieved and not given” (Clegg 1989, p. 151), organization studies’ accounts of the phenomenon sprouted in multiple directions, producing different representations of identity. Alvesson (2010) classified them using seven images: Self-doubter (reflections focusing on the intrinsic ambiguity of identities), Struggler (critical accounts of the tension between self-view and external identity demands), Surfer (poststructuralist views of the fluidity and fragmentation of identities), Storyteller (identity as a self-narrative creation of meaning); Strategist (identity as a resource used by individuals in their careers or life courses), Stencil (identity as a normalization and disciplinary device) and Soldier (the drive towards individual identification in attractive social categories).

These seven theoretical branches share a common stem. First, as they reflexively understand experience, individuals tend to produce narrative accounts of their selves (Giddens 1991/2013, p. 53): identity becomes the way in which a character reflexively and discursively narrates itself (Kuhn 2006, p. 1360). In these self-narrations individuals actively mix fiction and history, anticipated events and past experiences, to produce a coherent account that gives them a sense of self-continuity (Ezzy 1998) around the identity being posited. Constant storytelling can engender an illusion of absolute control in organizational members over the process of identity formation (*narro ergo sum*), overlooking how this narration includes also an audience who, alongside the auteur, “formulate, edit, applaud and refuse various elements of the constantly produced narrative” (Czarniawska 1997, p. 198). The idea of an audience is linked to a conceptualization of identity as a performance

aimed at managing the impression of others (Goffman 1959). Such a performance is not just the enactment of a script, the external projection of an internal self-image (Wieland 2010) since identity itself becomes “instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (Butler 1988, p. 519), that allow individuals to “gain and confirm a (...) sense of their own normality” (Willmott 1994, p. 106).

The very act of setting a boundary to individual identity is arbitrary and problematic since material elements can also affect identity (re)production by becoming essential conduits of our perception and action. As Gregory Bateson eloquently explains, it is necessary to consider a whole embodied system, which includes non-human objects:

“Consider a man felling a tree with an axe. (...) He says, ‘I cut down the tree’ and he even believes that there is a delimited agent, the ‘self,’ which performed a delimited ‘purposive’ action upon a de-limited object. (...) The mind itself becomes reified by the notion that, since the ‘self’ acted upon the axe which acted upon the tree, the ‘self’ must also be a ‘thing.’ (...)”

If you ask anybody about the localization and boundaries of the self, these confusions are immediately displayed. Or consider a blind man with a stick. Where does the blind man’s self begin? At the tip of the stick? At the handle of the stick? Or at some point halfway up the stick? These questions are nonsense, because the stick is a pathway along which differences are transmitted under transformation, so that to draw a delimiting line across this pathway is to cut off a part of the systemic circuit which determines the blind man’s locomotion.”(Bateson 1972, pp. 230-1).

The working tools of a craftsperson, or – in the case of an academic – their literary outputs, clearly play a relevant role in providing identification and in offering crucial turning points in the plot in their self-narrative and helping them to assess their professional ‘authenticity’ (Archer 2008).

If identity is constituted through material and performative interactions, it cannot be considered a purely cognitive phenomenon, as social identity theory purports (Ashforth & Mael 1989). Identity is also embodied, and organizational members' bodies are often transformed to conform to a 'correct' aesthetic image consistent with the identity being posited. The disciplinary shaping of the body is sometimes explicitly demanded by corporate identity regulation policies, as shown by the recent case of a flight attendant fired for not complying with his airline guidelines about staff appearance (Lucas 2013) or by the example of Asian call centre operators who are trained to impersonate Anglo-Saxon individuals (Collinson 2003). In addition to explicit 'body policies', it is often implicitly assumed that one has to comply with specific aesthetic ideals to personify a 'successful', 'dynamic', or simply 'adequate' professional identity properly (Trethewey 1999). The body becomes a stage, which is set up for the performance of a regulated identity. However, "embodied subjects are not passive receivers of structures" (Shilling 2012, p. 241): forms of resistance to identities cognitively or corporeally imposed are present in organizations and "subjectivity" should be seen as "a medium and outcome of processes of resistance" (Brown, Clarke & Hailey 2009, p. 345). In addition to passive resistance, members can also actively select and use discursive resources to advance their agendas. For instance, Goffman (1970) described how individuals can make strategic use of a repertoire of available social identities. Likewise, the concept of "identity politics" has been proposed in social studies to describe the processes through which group identification is employed as a resource in political struggles (Bernstein & Taylor 2005). Consequently identity can be better understood as the outcome of a structuration process in which social models, concrete social interactions and individual choices play a role (Czarniawska 1995a; Ybema et al. 2009). Therefore self-identity is the outcome of "a precarious and often contested process" (Alvesson & Willmott 2002, p.621), fusing organizational practice of material and ideological control ("identity regulation") with the "identity work" constantly performed by

organizational members to interpret their reality and actions. Both political implications and sub-conscious, embodied associations can be encapsulated in the use of metaphors to build and affirm social identity (Vaara, Tienari & Sääntti 2003). The precariousness of identity, its dependence from external judgments and explicit discourses of regulation causes insecurity and fragility, a fragility that is however also a source (and promise) of transformation (Clarke & Knights 2014).

In summary, identities provide “a lynchpin in the social constitution of self and society” (Ybema et al. 2009, p. 302). Identity is performed on the basis of discursive repertoires and dominant rationalities but also improvised; it is narrated but also embodied and influenced by material aspects but also by ideals and values.

## **A framework to map the forces that shape identities**

In Chapter 1 I argued for the necessity of considering the role played by discourses and political power when looking at social phenomena, regarding these two interrelated elements in their dual dimension as constraints and enablers. Power relationships, which become entrenched in discourses, can be oppressive, limiting freedom and possibilities of expression but at the same time can be productive of meaning and act as points of reference, without which social action would be impossible. This dualism is incorporated in identities, which represent an expression of individuality and self-expression and that, at the same time, are anchored in roles and standard subjectivities as these are incorporated in dominant discourses.

To be conserved and safeguarded, an identity (especially a professional one) must be constantly performed. These performances are influenced and directed by material forces, such as social expectations, the distribution of rewards and the punishments, the social and

symbolic capital that is attached to a particular professional identity. At the same time they are shaped and regulated by symbolic elements: each performance is, ultimately a form of communication and in order to be intelligible this communication needs to abide to conventional codes and modalities.

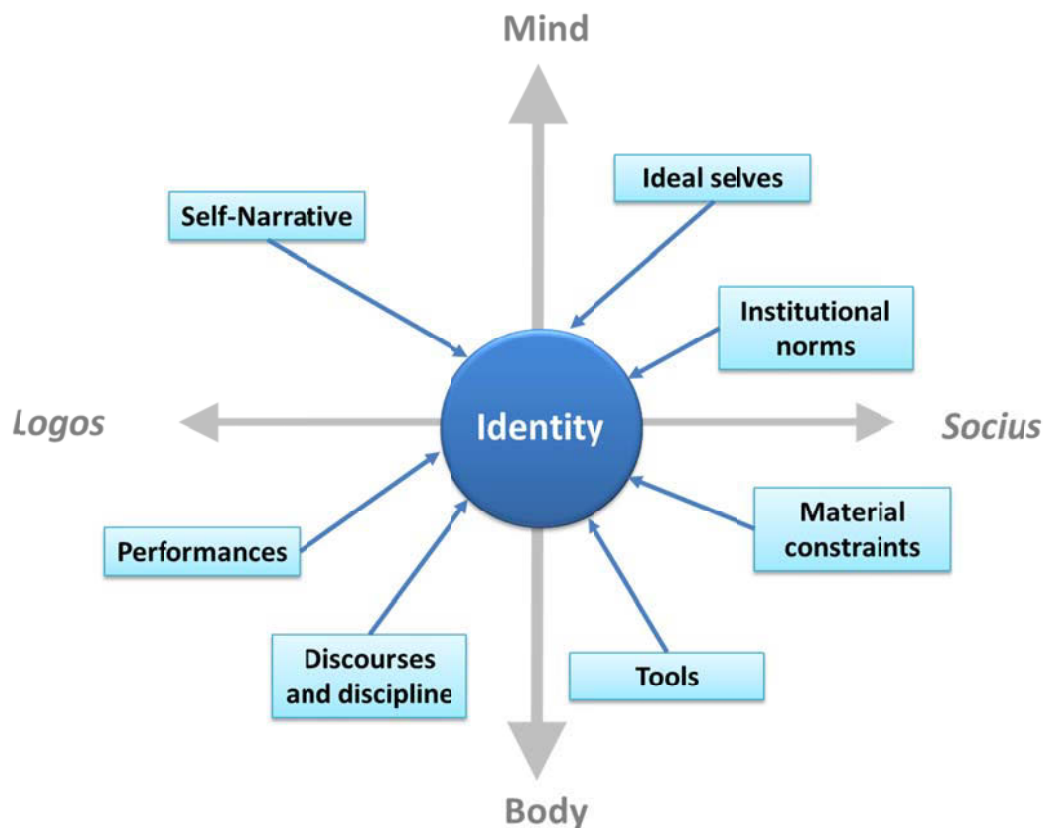
This intertwinement of material and symbolic elements is deployed both in realm of interaction, the social sphere, and in the ambit of the individual, the inner sphere. Two different dimensions characterize the former: *logos*, the sphere of language and *socius*, the sphere of social relations (Clegg 1979/2013). These are not phenomenologically separated since they require each other. As exposed by Derrida (1976, 1981, 1982) language is a tautology, a hollow, endless chain of signifiers referring only to each other. However, when incorporated in social interactions, language assumes a 'practical' existence, prompting behaviours and producing material consequences. Analogously no form of complex social interaction is conceivable in the absence of a symbolic medium that enables the projection of meanings, intentions and indications. The distinction between *logos* and *socius* is therefore an epistemological, rather than an ontological one, since their manifestations are inextricably connected.

Analogously, when one considers the realm of interiority, looking at the individual, it is possible to distinguish conceptually between two contrasting dimensions: *body* (the province of materiality and action) and *mind* (the domain of thought and reflection). This distinction derives from a philosophical tradition dating back to Descartes (Hatfield 2014). The validity of the notion of an ontological distinction between the two has been seriously questioned in philosophy, in particular by Spinoza (1677/2007) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), but also in contemporary neurosciences (Damasio 2006). Knowledge and representations are not an incorporeal activity: for instance theory does not precede practice but it follows

it, since theorizing is the product of a practical activity. Yet it can still be useful as an epistemological distinction. It be useful to make a distinction between purely (or predominantly) conceptual elements and factors that have an explicit material connotation, as far as one remembers that the former will need a physical referent or medium to be conveyed or memorized and the latter will require a set of immaterial ideas to be understood and employed.

These distinctions (between logos and socius and between body and mind) are therefore to be considered as heuristic devices that can be used to direct attention and to organize observations. By drawing a diagram which uses them as a coordinate system (Figure 1) it is possible to position the elements of different expressions and enablers of identity.

**Figure 1 - Elements constituting emergent social identities**





This chapter has emphasised the non-essential nature of identity, considering it as a phenomenon that emerges from the interplay of ideas and material elements, language and interactions. Identity is assembled and (re)produced through actions on the cusp between individuals and society. The name for these actions is *practices*. In the next chapter I will reflect on this issue.

## Chapter 3. Conceptualizing business schools as systems of emergent practices

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Using the concept of *practice* to make sense of organized action means much more than considering what actors actually do, as opposed to what they are formally supposed to do. It implies a distinctive onto-epistemological stance, one that “assumes an ecological model in which agency is distributed between humans and non-humans and in which the relationality between the social world and materiality can be subjected to inquiry” (Benski & Fisher 2014, p. 115). The concept of *practice* has been used in sociology to maintain that human actions are always situated, drawing meaning and substance from their embeddedness in a social and material network that they contribute to reproduce, thus overcoming dualisms between body and mind, individual and society, organism and environment. In this perspective, therefore, “thinking and feeling are not preparations for action, they are action (...) individuals’ thoughts are indefinable apart from the public protocols in which they come to expression.” (Bernacki 2007, p. 3608).

The notion of practice was present in Marxist circles in the 1960s (Bjørkeng, Clegg & Pitsis 2009) and its philosophical origins can be traced back to Heidegger and to the pragmatist philosophy of Dewey and Pierce (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011) but it is in the last decades that the concept has experienced a significant revival in organization studies. This ‘practice turn’ (Savigny, Schatzki & Knorr-Cetina 2001) can be framed in terms of the conceptual shift from organization to *organizing* that I described in the first chapter. The concept of practices – as

social phenomena<sup>3</sup> – enables us to fill the gap between the two opposite extremes of organization as reified, quasi-natural objects, and organization as symbolic abstraction. But before penetrating the idea of organizations as products of practices and its implications for change it is necessary to unpack the notion of practice.

## The meaning of practice and its onto-epistemological implication

Theories about what constitutes practice are numerous and controversial. Providing a clear definition of the concept seems particularly difficult (Antonacopoulou 2008), also because practice can be viewed as a phenomenon (what people actually ‘do’), as a theoretical perspective, using practice as a lens to interpret social interactions, or as a philosophical stance, considering practices as constitutive of social world, thus questioning the separation between the world and its representations (Orlikowski 2010).

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<sup>3</sup> It is necessary to unpack the concept of phenomenon that I intend to employ in my investigation. Borrowing from Heidegger and Bateson, I’ll use a definition of *phenomena as emergent manifestations of social events*. Heidegger defines "phenomenon" as "what shows itself in itself, what is manifest" (Heidegger 1927, p. 25), therefore including in the definition not only sensory data but their cultural understanding in relation with others (Wheeler 2013). The specific ‘phenomena’ that I am describing are sets of *social events* that are products of intersubjective interaction that involve both material acts and symbolic representations. Since I am concerned with representing and discussing these phenomena, it is crucial their transformation in *information*. However, "all receipt of information is necessarily the receipt of news of difference, and all perception of difference is limited by threshold. (...) Knowledge at any given moment will be a function of the thresholds of our available means of perception" (Bateson 1979, p. 29). The social phenomena that I describe are therefore *emergent*, both in the sense of being in a state of becoming and in that of appearing conspicuous, relevant, and therefore meaningful in the perspective of a coherent narrative reconstruction of the world.

Various studies have shown how practices have a powerful impact on the way in which we learn notions and behaviours (Gherardi & Nicolini 2002), structure and apply knowledge (Orlikowski 2010), adopt and use technology (Gherardi 2006). Also practices have been shown to be both shaped by and shaping our bodies, preferences and tastes (Gherardi 2009). Corradi, Gherardi & Verzelloni (2010) identify three dimensions around which practice studies has built its central concept: practices can be represented as sets of interconnected activities ordering reality and orienting collective action; as processes that produces shared meaning among practitioners; as elements that reproduce the social, due to their interconnectedness and recursiveness. Geiger (2009) differentiates the field between those who study practices as 'what people do' (hence practice become almost synonymous with routine) and those who use the concept as an alternative paradigm, "criticizing rationalist, cognitivist and positivist positions in organization studies" (Geiger 2009, p. 133).

The polysemic nature of the concept of practice explains some of the confusion that surrounds it. The term can denote a performative activity, a way of knowing, a model of social organization; it is both a noun and a verb, making the differentiation between practice as process and practice as an object problematic, reflected by the complex nature of any sound sociological description of the phenomenon. Since we need to sort out this semantic entanglement the frequently cited definition proposed by Schatzki as a starting point is as good as any other. He sees "practice as embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding" (Schatzki 2001a, p. 11). The embodiment and the materiality are key elements in the constitution of practice: practice theory explicitly rejects the Cartesian separation between mind and spirit (Gherardi 2012b, p. 207) . The collapse of the spirit-material duality questions other forms of dualism: different practice inspired thinkers have attacked specific aspect of the illusion

of disembodied ideals as a *Deus ex machina* able to manipulate reality without being in turn altered and polluted by it. For instance, Bourdieu, in introducing the concept of *habitus*, seeks to shatter “the illusion created in hindsight in which all the traces of a life [...] appear as the realization of an essence that seems to pre-exist them” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 55). Garfinkel (1967) contributed to this epistemological revolution by breaking down the barrier between theorist and practitioners, arguing that the latter are capable of reflexively producing order that allows them “to discriminate the orderly and expected social ‘things’ from purely contingent happenings” (Rawls 2010, p. 113) and that “social action [does] not need to be ‘baptized’ by language [...] to be intelligible and indexical to [...] participants” (Gherardi 2006, p. 30). Building on these foundations, Giddens (1984) has been intent on demolishing the separation between agency and structure, showing how the former recursively constitutes the latter, showing that institutions and social realities that appear ostensibly solid and definite are the product of a repeated performance by social actors.

Assuming a practice perspective does not simply mean paying attention to what practitioners do but implies a Copernican revolution in the way in which knowledge is traditionally conceived, dethroning the *logos* as the supreme tool with which to represent reality and produce sense. Derrida (1981) has critiqued the logocentrism on which western rationality is based, the idea that language, and speech in particular, has a superior status to the things it denotes. Instead, he argued, there is a constant interplay between signifier and signified.

Modern scientific rationality is, in fact, founded on the relationship between an observer (subject), who by using rigorous observation methods can ‘capture’, using different signifiers, the pre-given, objective properties of an observed phenomenon (the object) (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011). This subject-object relationship is funded on the assumption

that a scientific mind will produce a formal account of the world, represented as relationship among variables that can provide a blueprint for practical action. By contrast, embracing a 'practical rationality' paradigm means instead acknowledging the Heideggerian notion of *Dasein*, or 'being-in-the world' (Wheeler 2013), from which Sandberg and Tsoukas derive the idea of 'entwinement': "we are never separated but always already entwined with others and things in specific sociomaterial practice worlds" (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011, p. 343). A central feature of such pragmatic entanglement is the fact that practices are spatiotemporally situated: "Time and space are irreversibly intertwined in practice, but they become separated in theory" (Czarniawska 2004c, p.786). The spatial placement of an activity (its embodiment, its interrelationship with material objects) and its timing (the temporal flow, the sense of anticipation and urgency) immerse practitioners in a meaningful relational totality that cannot be abstracted and linguistically represented as a mechanistic relationship among discrete factors and entities (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011). The principle behind this thinking is summed up in the idea, central to Practice Theory, that "phenomena always exist in relation to each other, produced through a process of mutual constitution" (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011, p. 1242), a process where the regularities that we observe in social systems are an ongoing achievement, requiring constant production and reproduction.

Schatzki suggests the notion of 'sites' as a meaningful ontological category with which to capture the contextuality of action: these do not "need not be spatial [...] practices are the site, but not the spatial site, of activities." (Schatzki 2005, p.468). These practices are defined as "an organized, open-ended spatial-temporal manifold of actions [...] organized by three phenomena: understandings of how to do things, rules, and teleoaffective structure" (Schatzki 2005, p.472). Gherardi concurs that a practice is an organizing principle, "a mode, relatively stable in time and socially recognized, of ordering

heterogeneous items into a coherent set” (Gherardi 2006, p. 34). Practices have therefore a temporal, social and ordering character: they are not just bundles of activities performed by skilled people. Sets of activities become a practice when they are recognized as a specific arrangement of knowing-how, bodies and technologies valid in a specific context, reproduced over time and – by being performed – produce a temporarily stable arrangement of human and non-human elements.

When studying practices it is important not to reduce them to mere routines, nor to the application of rules. While these elements play a part in defining a practice, they are not constitutive of it, both because their relationship with practices is problematic, and because their own ontological status is fickle. Rules, for instance, need to be interpreted in a specific context, thus assuming very different status and cogency in the eyes of the members (Gouldner 1955). Moreover they “are not only repositories of knowledge, they are also means of socialization” (Antonacopoulou 2008, p. 1292). Consequently they end up being “disregarded not through ignorance or deceit, but through a mutual understanding of what it takes to get on with the job in hand” (Whittington 2006, p. 183). Instead of anchoring practices to pre-ordained tracks, rules are ‘activated’, put into effect *through* practices.

Similarly, routines are not fixed behavioural patterns. Empirical research (Feldman 2000) has revealed their performative nature showing that, far from being inert and strictly bound by rules, they are constantly reinvented by agents. Routines, and the practices they contribute to form, should therefore be considered as “emergent accomplishments. They are often works in progress rather than finished products” (Feldman 2000, p. 613). Feldman also borrows from Latour the idea that routines, and hence practices, have both a performative and an ostensive dimension (Feldman 2000, p. 622). On the one hand they exist only when performed by agents but on the other they also have a symbolic essence

(their 'ostensive' nature) as the sum of the explicit (e.g. under the form of standard operating procedures) and tacit knowledge of the participants (Feldman & Pentland 2003).

One of the most important contribution of Practice Theory is to do away with the widespread 'commodification' of practices that is often found in the management consulting discourse, the idea that it is possible to isolate a "simplified, portable and therefore de-contextualized 'best practice'" (Newell, Swan & Robertson 2001, p.9). Commodification is "a situation in which social phenomena become endowed with thing-like qualities and embedded in economic calculation" (Ledford et al. 1989, p. 11). When commodified, practice becomes reified and de-contextualised, turning into an object that, can be transplanted from one part of an organization to another, using a 'para-gardening' technique otherwise known as benchmarking, albeit with some difficulties due to the 'stickiness' of practice (Szulanski 1996). When resourceful and rhetorically endowed consultants and management gurus translate practices into a commodity form, they can become the centrepiece of management fads and fashions.

Conceptualizing practices as performative, emergent, and situated does not mean that they are phenomena so transient and idiosyncratic as to make their study and comparison fruitless. It simply means that:

1. A social constructivist epistemological approach, inspired by a phenomenological philosophy, can capture and describe practice better than a positivist perspective.
2. Practice replication and adoption is not simply a matter of knowledge transfer in the form of 'practice templates' but it is rather a political process that involves drift and adaptation (Friesl & Larty 2013).



The use of a metaphor can be useful to show how different aspects of practices come together in an integrated whole. Metaphors, by “mapping entities, structures and relations from one (...) domain and transposing them to another” (Røvik 2011, p. 633), have proved to be handy devices to manage the irreducible intricacy of organizational phenomena. In fact they are frequently used in organization sciences (Morgan 2006) enabling the creation of “compact descriptions of complex phenomena” (Weick 1989, p. 529). Metaphors help the emergence of new meaning thanks to the hybridization of ideas from different domains (Cornelissen 2005), allowing researchers to generate new interpretation or to highlight otherwise overlooked features of the phenomenon. They also have aesthetic value, providing “color and entertainment to the sometimes dreary everyday-life in work organizations” (Czarniawska 2004a, p.46)<sup>4</sup>.

In order to capture the key features of what a practice is, it is useful to consider all practices as ‘crafts’. The juxtaposition of these two concepts is not particularly creative; in fact it could be argued that this is not even a metaphor but rather a synecdoche, dealing with craft-types of practice characterized by the manipulation of material objects. However the semantic closeness of the two terms, along with the mundane and everyday nature of crafts, allow us better to understand how the different aspects of practices come together, constituting a systemic and coherent bundle. A craft is always embodied in a person (for instance a painter, plumber, or potter), who literally ‘incorporates’ a corpus of knowledge that is in large part tacit. The practice of a craft entails knowing more than knowledge per se: the former is resolutely subjective while the latter may be objectified. “Practices are inscribed in bodies, and bodies are therefore the artefacts through which people know and work” (Gherardi 2012b, p. 61).

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<sup>4</sup> The implication of the use of metaphors in organizational research will be further discussed in Chapter 8.

Practice of a craft also demands the use of specific tools that shape the practice of the trade and even its social status: plumbing is still a 'dirty job' but travelling in an expensive 'ute' and using high tech tools, such as fibre optics cameras, to identify clogged sewer lines or drains provides a much more 'professional' image than carrying buckets full of excrement. Moreover, institutional bodies regulate access to the practice of the craft and craftspeople belong to communities whose interactions influence the *metier*. Tradespeople practicing their craft tackle problems that – even when of a standard nature – are always situated and distinctive, requiring an experience-based creative use of material and intellectual resources while for creative crafts people each object designed is unique. Are the practices of a chartered accountant working as CFO of a company, or those of an academic teaching in a business school conceptually different from those of a plumber? Aren't they using the same mesh of tacit and explicit knowledge, material resources, embedded in specific institutional fields (and, in colloquial term, frequently having to 'put up with some crap')?

Since the focus of my inquiry is on how practices change, I am specifically interested in understanding the phenomena that drive and characterize the emergence (and fading) of practices in a specific organizational setting. What causes practice to change? To what extent is change occurring through incremental transformation or sudden revolution? What are the political consequences of the transformations that ensue? While it is important to base the answer to these questions on empirical evidence, I believe that, before approaching the rich amount of data that an ethnographic investigation makes available to the researcher it is necessary to expand theoretical reflection, in order to sensitize perception, enabling richer and more nuanced, descriptions (Silverman 2010, p. 89).

I will start by considering practices as the product of learning processes, repositories of knowledge contrasted with a reflection on their material, embodied aspects and the role played by non-human actants in shaping these practices. Next, I will critically assess the political dimension of practices, and the role they play as discursive and disciplinary forces. Finally, by considering them as constitutive of the essence of organizations, it will be possible to investigate the issue of practice in the specific context of my case study, outlining some heuristic guidelines.

## **Knowing and learning in practice**

Focusing on cognitive aspects of practices and considering them from the agents' perspective, they can be seen as a repository of that unspoken knowledge that allow individuals to perform complex tasks by bringing together experiences, formal principles, embodied know-how. As argued by Polanyi (1966), such knowledge is 'tacit' not because secret but because language is not well suited to contain and communicate it. It is still possible to learn and transmit it, but we need "adequate means for expressing ourselves" (Polanyi 1966, p. 5).

Bateson captures the ineffability of practice, labelling this the "artist's dilemma":

"He must practice in order to perform the craft components of his job. But to practice has always a double effect. It makes him, on the one hand, more able to do whatever it is he is attempting; and, on the other hand, by the phenomenon of habit formation, it makes him less aware of how he does it."  
(Bateson 1972, p. 114)

Since tacit knowledge resists attempts to be encapsulated and codified in words, the only way to transfer it is to resort to an analogical form of communication (Watzlawick et al.

1967), such as the use of examples, or demonstrations. But the best option is to obtain it by first-hand experimentation, since no amount of theoretical explanation can replace a practical trial. Direct experience allows one to bring in extra resources that are not mobilized during observation, ‘hidden senses’ such as proprioception (the sense of position of the part of our body) and kinaesthesia (the sense of body motion), allowing individuals to acquire a much richer set of information, effectively ‘feeling’ how the practice is performed. Take the example of someone learning how to ride a bicycle: only the lived experience of riding can bridge the gulf between *knowing-that* and *knowing-how* (Koschmann, Kuutti & Hickman 1998, p. 40).

A facet of this tacit knowledge is what Strati (2010) defines as *aesthetic understanding*, “the sensory knowledge of work practice; sensitive-aesthetic judgment on work and organization; the artistry of the performance of individuals and groups in organizational routine” (2010, p. 886). “This is personal knowledge that is ineradicable and irreducible” (Gherardi 2006, p. 82), which allows skilled individuals to make rapid judgments on complex matters that would otherwise be very difficult to evaluate or calculate, using tacit knowledge as the base for conscious operations, even if it is not necessarily mediated by conscious knowledge (Raelin 2007, p. 500).

Considering this form of non-mental knowledge points again to that fundamental aspect of practices described in the previous section, their embodiment. One way in which the practitioner’s body “knows” is through “sensible knowledge [which] concerns what is perceived through the senses, judged through the senses, and produced and reproduced through the senses” (Strati 2007, p. 62). Using cognitive psychology terminology it is possible to say that mastering a practice involves an embodiment of skills, enabling a more frequent use of the effortless “System 1” of thinking (based on intuition and unconscious

decision making) rather than the effortful “System 2”, the deliberate and calculating thinking mode, typically associated with the experience of agency and concentration (Kahneman 2011).

The idea that we conduct our day-to-day activities taking for granted the material resources that we use and that these aspects are brought into view only when our non-reflective practices are interrupted (e.g. a craftsperson’s tool breaks) was originally introduced by Heidegger (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011) but is also present in the works of the Russian psychologist Leont’ev and of the American Pragmatist philosopher Dewey (Koschmann et al. 1998). Leont’ev’s activity theory is particularly valuable for understanding the way in which complex practices form, become unconscious and re-surface in the event of a breakdown. He conceptualizes complex activities as made of actions and – at a lower level – operations. Activities provide the context to understand the motivations and meaning of human actions; for instance the action of bush-beaters can only be understood against the framework of the overall activity of coordinated hunting. In turn activities are made of simpler, automatic operations, which – while lacking conscious motives – are executed as ways of performing the action in the specific conditions of a given situation. The separation between actions and operations in the context of an activity is not fixed but fluid and linked to the acquisition of skills and with the occurrence of breakdowns. When we approach a new activity (e.g. learning to drive a car) we need to perform a series of actions in a deliberate, planned way; as we become proficient these actions become automated and are routinized into operations. Conversely, when a breakdown occurs and unconscious operations cannot fluidly produce the desired action anymore, the operator will have to resort to conscious actions (Koschmann et al. 1998, pp. 28-30). If we replace the term ‘Activity’ with ‘Practice’ we realize that Leont’ev’s account helps shed light on at least one of the processes through which practices are reproduced and made available to novices.

Similarly to Heidegger and Leont'ev, one of the forefathers of contemporary sociology, W.I. Thomas, described breakdown as crisis which "interrupts the flow of habit and gives rise to changed conditions of consciousness and practice" (cited in Schütz 1943b, p. 502).

It is important to stress that learning a set of operations does not equate to being programmed as an automaton. The job to be done, the activity to be executed is never completely knowable or predictable. The practitioner is similar to the *bricoleur* described by Levi-Strauss, who – in the absence of perfect information on the problem or the procedure to follow – reflectively manipulates a set of resources, using experience as a guide (Orr 1990, p. 194). Since they need to adapt to an ever changing context, they have to improvise, and this improvisation involves both impromptu action and bricolage (Cunha 2004). The latter can be defined as "the ability to draw on the available resources (material, cognitive, affective and social) to solve the problem at hand" (Cunha 2007, p. 14). This is "facilitated by the ingenious use of intimately known materials" (Cunha 2004, p. 5), which include not only objects but also cognitive, affective and social resources.

The fact that practitioners mobilize a vast repository of resources in creative ways points to the fact that *knowing-how* is not the only element that needs to enter into the arsenal of an apprentice in order to become a journeyman (not to mention a master). Gherardi (2006, p. 229) identifies three processes of practice learning that need to be deployed: categorization (acquiring knowledge of a technical vocabulary, appropriate gestures, routines); highlighting (signalling exceptional circumstances), and production of texts. Leont'ev's theory of action (Koschmann et al. 1998) on the other hand provides a description of the way in which symbolic information (instructions, texts) and experiential observations are integrated and embodied by the novice as s/he becomes skilled in the practice.

Learning a practice is more than a cognitive and behavioural endeavour since it entails “both belonging and positioning oneself in a discourse” (Gherardi & Nicolini 2002, p. 421) situated in the community of practice in which relations of mutual accountability are constantly negotiated. Other elements that need to be learnt are a discipline, an appropriate way of communicating and a way of thinking.

Since *know-how* represents a situated practical ability that is qualitatively different from factual, decontextualized knowledge, or *know-that* (Koschmann et al. 1998, p. 40), learning a practice is part of a complex socialization process, that involves a constitution or a transformation of the mental maps that underlie our behaviour (Argyris & Schön 1974, 1978). Learning and practicing become mutually constitutive, since we also experience reality through the material tools of our practices and we order and make sense of our experience through those mental maps that are shaped by our practices, under the influence of the specific discursive forces that belonging to a community of practitioners enables. In sum, ‘knowing-in-practice’ implicates *docta ignorantia*, “a mode of practical knowledge unaware of its own principles” (Gherardi 2012a, p. 20). This opacity is due to the fact that practices involve “situated accomplishment that accommodates a full range of practical resources and interactional forms” (p. 34), making practice conception of practice “a construct ‘in-between’ habit and action” (p. 35).

## **The role of non-human actants in practices**

Discussing practices as forms of (tacit or explicit) knowledge runs the risk of conceptualizing them in purely anthropocentric terms. On the contrary, the role of non-humans in shaping practices is more than ancillary. Dispositions of spaces and surfaces, available technologies, tools and implements are given meaning by our representations but become also part and

parcel of our actions. Certain actions are meaningless in the absence of certain tools, for instance and the presence of these unthinking objects make a difference in our social actions (Latour 2005, p. 71). At the same time each artefact produced while practicing (a filled form, a diagnostic file, a meeting minute, a building model, etcetera) “activates a texture of practices and becomes an agent within a plurality of organisational relations” (Gherardi 2012a, p. 30).

Material objects are part of our practices (Gherardi 2000) and function in ways that are intermediary, connecting and translating, producing change and altering meaning (Gherardi 2006, p. 226). A possible objection to the ‘idolization’ of non-human materials in practices is the fact that artefacts (utensils, architectural structures, vehicles, procedures etc.) are designed and created with the specific purpose of enhancing and expanding but also of funnelling, disciplining, or imprisoning, the capacities of humans and that they consequently are simply the ‘long hand’ of their creators. However, the ways in which these entities affect our behaviour go beyond the plans and the intents of their inventors. A machine that breaks down; a software application prone to glitches; a set of regulations so contradictory and complex that makes both compliance and enforcement impossible; a traffic plan that – because of political tampering – becomes so ineffectual as to damage all stakeholders: all these social artefacts become golems that – without rhyme or reason – raid the world of their creators.

Practice based studies are both inspired by and aligned with the Sociology of Translation (a.k.a. Actor Network Theory) in illustrating the role of non-human actants in mediating relationships (Callon 1986; Latour 1996; Law 1999; Latour 2005; Law 2009). For instance, research practices are impinged by the instruments used; even in the hard sciences propositions and empirical realities are tangled up in a sociotechnical network where



research tools translate ('inscribe') physical phenomena relating them to theoretical propositions (Latour & Woolgar 1979).

One could argue that since practices are not fixed but are constantly reproduced and situated, the status of humans is not equal to that of non-human actants, since the former can learn novel ways of using the latter, something that seems particularly true when materials are more plastic and malleable (a flexible software, an open workspace) and when there is causal indeterminacy (unclear cause-effect relationship) between activities and results. In these cases ambiguity allows space for creativity not only in a symbolic but also a pragmatic sense, such that resourceful humans can turn material constraints into opportunities.

The rapport between humans and tools is not simply functional. As Ledford et al. (1989) noted, in contemporary knowledge society humans develop complex social relationship with objects. Such phenomena, originally involving only experts (e.g. scientists or professional sportspeople) developing intimate, libidic relationship with their specialized equipment, are now spreading in daily practices because of the diffusion of high tech devices (think of the relationship individuals develop with their smart phones). The issue is the irreducible complexity of the relationship between material object and subject: for instance, could a lawyer still be a lawyer in the absence of a legal and judiciary system; what is a bricklayer without tools or building materials?

Practices are conceivable as *socio-material systems*, in which the separation between non-human (object) and human (subject) is problematic, since tools play an active role in (per)forming the practice and our dependency on artefacts as means for knowing and interacting with the world is utterly constitutive of normalcy (Orlikowski 2007). The systemic boundary between practices should not be set at the level of individual human –

non-human interactions. Embodied practices are not only a possession of individual actants but also a social phenomena; they “presuppose an institutional system which has inscribed the norms that enable those practices... to be recognised [....], sustained [...] and therefore reproduced” (Gherardi 2006, p. 35). Bourdieu defines this as a *field*, “a network, or a configuration, of objective relations between positions objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation [...] in the structure of the distribution of power (or capital) whose possession commands access to the specific profits that are at stake in the field” (Bourdieu 1991, pp. 229-31). Institutional fields in particular play an important role – through isomorphic processes – in homogenizing different locally situated practices (Powell & DiMaggio 1991; Greenwood et al. 2012).

Institutions are historically developed “conventions that are self-policing” (Phillips et al. 2004, p. 637) and they represent the components of Discourses that explicitly enforce compliance to their rules. This does not mean that practitioners are only passive ‘consumers’ of norms. The concept of ‘institutional work’ (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006; Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2009a) has been proposed to describe how individuals forcefully and purposefully contribute to the creation, maintenance and disruption of those enduring template of social life that we call institutions. This approach shifts the focus from the macro to the micro dynamics of fields, looking at how a myriad of acts of individual agency bring to life and transform institutions (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2011). It does so by focusing on the process, the actions through which institutions emerge, reflecting on actors’ intentions and efforts (Lawrence, Suddaby & Leca 2009b). This perspective bridges critical and institutional views of organization because it allows to consider of the complex dynamics of compliance, resistance and emancipation that characterize the relationship between individual agency and institutional structures (Lawrence et al. 2011).

## Practices, power and knowledge

Discursive and disciplinary practices include a power/knowledge dimension. For instance, practice replication and adoption is always a political process, one that involves drift and adaptation (Friesl & Larty 2013) as translation and resistance occur. Sometimes these aspects become highly visible and institutionalized, when specific set of practices and practitioners manage to become legitimated as a profession but they are always present, even when the field is not highly regulated or institutionalized. Learning, for instance, assumes distinct political implications, especially when it is 'situated' within everyday work practices and in social systems (Lave & Wenger 1991; Contu & Willmott 2003), producing disciplinary effects.

A concrete example is the transmission of practical knowledge through apprenticeship. Paradoxically, while the de-reification of knowledge and its social and not merely cognitive component could – in a Marxist perspective– subtract the control of an essential means of production from the capitalist, the entanglement of practice, knowledge, experience and bodies situates inexperienced labour under the surveillance of a master, the mastery of whose wisdom cannot be codified and therefore questioned. In theory, novices can free themselves from this subjection if displaying sufficient mastery of the practice but this is a difficult predicament, especially in knowledge rich contexts such as the Academy, in which only the legitimately credentialed that are appropriately embedded in the Knowledge-status hierarchy are licensed to make a judgment of standards of mastery. Consequently neophytes are forced to go through a painstakingly long period of training and scrutiny motivated by their need to understand, embody and assimilate a complex set of skills, aesthetic understandings, languages, relationships. The process also serves implicit and less

noble purposes: it protects the status quo, preserves the position of individuals with higher seniority and limits the potential of change.

The high status members of the community of practice maintain the authority “of bestowing a degree of legitimacy upon novices” (Contu & Willmott 2003, p. 285). The problem for the apprentices is that they need to acquire not only intellectual capital (the know-how), but also social (the affiliation with other practitioners) and symbolic capital (the acknowledgment of completed apprenticeship) with access to these resources being strictly controlled. Psychological dynamics in the relationship between experts and novices also play a role through role modelling: practices are in fact learnt through direct interaction, since “the primary sources of knowing are the relationship with the persons close by” (Gherardi 2006, p. 90). When a practitioner has to face a new complex task and no help can be found either in experience, other colleagues or in normative prescriptions, s/he will often resort to asking ‘what would my mentor do in my place?’ But the phantom summoned by such answer bears only a pale resemblance to the flesh and blood master. It is rather a figment of the novices’ imagination, a projection of their own sensations, filtered memories and anxieties.

These examples reveal that the ways in which practices can become vehicle of power are many and complex. Clegg’s framework of circuits of power (1989) can help us to identify different levels at which this happens. At an episodic level we can witness the exercise of power by the experts who use their role as gatekeepers and trainer to protect their position and interests by teaching what they constitute as legitimate forms of practice. At a dispositional level, social and institutional structures control membership criteria and the social construction of meaning, safeguarding the orthodoxy of the practice, and extracting

cheap or free labour from aspiring practitioners<sup>5</sup>. At a facilitative level practice become a powerful discursive force, shaping truth and reality; according to Heidegger truth is achieved through fulfilment in practice: for instance, a researcher can only understand what a hammer is by using it (Sandberg 2005, p. 51). But by learning the 'correct use' of the hammer (or of the penal code, a CAT scan machine, a literature review, etc.) practitioners become entangled in a power/knowledge loop where the embodied mastery of the technique defines the possibility to interact cognitively with the world and the technology.

The latter is actually the 'darker side' of practice, revealing the capacity not just to discipline the practitioners' bodies but also to generate knowledge, understanding and truth. In fact practices become that power described by Foucault:

“power would be a fragile thing if its only function were to repress, if it worked only through the mode of censorship, exclusion, blockage and repression, [...] on the contrary, power is strong [...] because, as we are beginning to realise, it produces effects at the level of desire-and also at the level of knowledge. Far from preventing knowledge, power produces it.” (Foucault 1980a, p. 59)

As practitioners become habituated to the dispositions of techniques, tools, principles and relationships that constitute their practice, their critical capacity (intended as their ability to question taken for granted assumptions) is impaired, since “it is tempting, if the only tool you have is a hammer, to treat everything as if it were a nail” (Maslow 1966, p. 15). In the Zen adage quoted by Bateson “To become accustomed to anything is a terrible thing.” (1972, p. 221). The rigidity of practice is not as inflexible as that characterizing those bureaucrats who apply rules in ritualistic terms (Merton 1940), since the practitioners

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<sup>5</sup> A clear example of this form of exploitation is given by the extensive use of unpaid labour (performed by authors, reviewers, editors) on which the academic publishing industry relies (see Chapter 7).

“develop their expertise not only by repeated practice in a single domain but by acquiring skills across multiple contexts.” (Raelin 2007, p. 502). Such flexibility does not translate in awareness. As we have seen, “actors are immersed in practice without being aware of their involvement in it” (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011, p. 344), such that it is only when we encounter a breakdown that we start questioning what we do.

The paradox of pragmatic learning is encountered again: as we acquire and master actionable knowledge we become less and less aware of it, thus becoming more exposed to the power/knowledge effects of practical knowledge. When an activity becomes an operation, it is naturalized, becoming part of what actors perceive as innate behaviour and thus is not subject to critique or dissent. The operations of entering a lecture theatre, sitting at the allocated seats, memorizing the information uttered by the lecturer, are not seen just as the product of a disciplinary discourse (Foucault 1979) but as an unquestionable , thus taken for granted, part of the practice of attending tertiary education.

Another reason that makes our practices a potential vehicle of hegemonic thinking is their ‘functional’ nature. Practices are for doing and the only acceptable measure of their worth and acceptability is their efficacy. The ‘whatever works’ principle becomes a revamping of the Machiavellian dictum ‘the ends justify the means’, whereas questionable aspects of the practices are justified. At the same time, the push to guarantee the ‘functional integrity’ of the practice hinders questioning or debate on specific operations and arrangements, effectively acting as a form of power based on non-decision (Bachrach & Baratz 1962).

Practices can also have an emancipatory function, constituting a space for dissent and political struggle. Different studies performed in the workplace have highlighted how practices can become a site of resistance to managerialism and to bureaucratic attempts to

normalize and standardize behaviours, attempts that are ultimately functional to maintaining the status quo in organizational relationships. For instance, the classic study of Crozier (1964) shows how the practices of repair technicians in a state owned tobacco factory became a means to reconfigure power relations, replacing the uncertainty based on the control of norms application (foundation for managerial power), with the control of other types of unplanned events, such as machine breakdowns or industrial disputes. Their practices, based on craftsman-like methods, training on-the-job for new staff members and active suppression of formalized knowledge through the destruction or concealing of manuals, were functional to alter the balance of power sustained by that the discourse of formal rationality characteristic of that company.

A very similar situation is reported by Orr (1990) in his ethnographic study of machine copier repairers. Orr's analysis is not specifically concerned with power relations, since he is more interested in the learning processes through which repairmen develop practices allowing them to make customers happy while using limited resources to cope with an unreliable and complex technology. When the events reported in his study are read through a critical management lens, however, the relationship between practices, power, and resistance becomes apparent, as when technicians resist the attempts of the management to standardize and regulate (and therefore control) their repair practices (Contu & Willmott 2003).

Practices can therefore be both hegemonic and anti-hegemonic, even if practitioners are in the iron grip of their logics: in fact individual agents can both have a role either as reproducers or disruptors of institutions. To understand this duality, a multidimensional view of agency has been proposed, involving the interplay of habit, imagination and judgement (Battilana & D'Aunno 2009). The different articulation of these dimensions underpins

different ways which practitioners perform their 'institutional work' work' (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006; Lawrence et al. 2009a) maintaining, creating or transforming the practices.

How is it possible for agents to deploy their judgment and imagination, avoiding to become trapped, through habit, in the oppressive nature of practices? Geiger, following Habermas' line of thought, while acknowledging the prevalence of an implicit (unconscious, non-reflexive and unquestioning) mode of practicing, highlights that, especially in reaction to breakdowns, also explicit modes of reflection upon practices can emerge, situations "in which practitioners explicitly question the underlying norms of a particular practice" (Geiger 2009, p. 140).

Raelin (2007) maintains that this is possible through the application of an "epistemology of practice" based on reflexivity, interplay of theoretical and practical understanding and open-mindedness. An alternate and more articulated alternative is given by the application to practices of a phronetic method (Blackler & Regan 2009), an action and decision oriented research, aimed at intervening in social phenomena with a moral intent, by using the knowledge we develop through the observation of practices<sup>6</sup>.

## **Organizations and practices: systems, coupling and discourses**

Practices are, first and foremost, organizing principles, and it is possible to consider them as the building block of organizations, introducing a dynamic ontology of the organizational phenomenon. Social systems become, in Schatzki's account, meshes woven from practices and material arrangements: by connecting, overlapping and sometimes conflicting,

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<sup>6</sup> An extended discussion on the phronetic method and on its application in social sciences is presented in Chapter 5



practices originate and perpetuate social phenomena and by studying organization as nets of practice/arrangements bundles we can provide a richer account of their reality (Schatzki 2005).

Similarly, Gherardi states that “an organization can be conceived as a field of practices, which are constantly practised” (Gherardi 2006, p. 227). In this view organizations are neither empirical objects nor pure abstractions but virtual objects, or in Czarniawska’s definition, *action nets* (Czarniawska 2004c, 2008a). She describes an action net as a set of “connections between and among actions [that], when stabilized, are used to construct the identities of actors” (2008a, p. 18). The practices of actors are defining their identities and in turn constitute the fabric of the organizations we acknowledge as empiric objects. In the specific context of the object of my inquiry, academic practices in a business school, professional practices (and identities) have a specific ‘organizational valence’ since they are a crucial factor in bonding and aligning behaviours, because of the *loose coupling* (Weick 1976; Orton & Weick 1990) characterizing organizations devoted to education<sup>7</sup>.

As we have seen, practices include different elements: require the interaction of various human and non-human actants; they are both embodied and situated in a context and shaped by institutional pressures and partially codified. The contribution of all these elements is required to produce the overall practice (responsiveness) but they still retain a recognizable identity and they can change in independent fashion (distinctiveness). Moreover it can be argued that – if organizations are conceptualized as nets of practice/material arrangements bundles – then different systems of practice can exhibit different levels of coupling. Even better, by adopting an ‘organization-as-practice-net’ perspective we can stay true to the dialectical interpretation of the concept of loose

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of *loose coupling* is discussed in Chapter 8.

coupling advocated by Orton and Weick (1990). Instead of assuming it as a desirable or undesirable wholesale property of an organization, loose coupling is seen as a distinct way of operating under certain circumstances, conceiving organization “as an arena for complex, ongoing processes” (Orton & Weick 1990, p.219).

A practice lens permits one to approach some apparently untreatable problems that have puzzled organizational scholars with a fresh outlook. For instance, the issue of the coexistence of rationality and indeterminacy in organized behaviour (Thompson 1967) is resolved in the concept of recursiveness (Clegg 2009). While practices include rational heuristics to solve problems, these are constantly recreated to adapt them to always-different situations. Moreover, the combination of action rules, ethical principles, institutional norms, creativity, aesthetic understanding, social *savoir faire* that constitutes a practice is an ideal example of the interplay between rationalities and emotions, relations and structures, knowledge and materiality that is experienced by anyone looking at the organizational phenomenon without wearing reductionist blinkers. Seeing organizations as contingent accomplishments, emerging from the performance of interlacing practices (Czarniawska 2004c; Schatzki 2005) permits one serenely to accept “that organizing is not necessarily logical or linear” (Clegg et al. 2005, p. 152) and that decision cannot be explained by rational choice models that prescribe a straightforward ‘problem-alternatives-preferences-decision’ sequence (Cohen, March & Olsen 1972).

Another organizational conundrum that becomes treatable thanks to the concept of practice is the problematic nature of organizational goals. While organizations are created for teleological reasons, a fact that is reflected in the etymology of their name (ὄργανον [*Organon*] is Ancient Greek for ‘instrument’), the taken-for-granted idea that organizations can be explained by their goal has been severely criticized (Georgiou 1973).

Prominent management scholars have highlighted the presence of conflicting objectives and purposes and the political and symbolic mature nature of goal determination (Perrow 1978), showing how the interests of self-preservation tend to replace the instrumental nature of organizations (Selznick 1949).

In universities, in particular, the multiplicity of goals, their interdependence and complex evaluation render difficult the use of a rational paradigm (Patterson 2001). But if ordering is made for no other purpose than ordering itself, the very idea of organization is at risk of becoming tautological. A way out of this puzzle is to consider practices as the primary organizing force and formal organizations as the result of a dynamic overlapping and intersection of different practices. Practices are defined by their ends, and they include a “normative teleoaffective structure, a range of acceptable or correct ends [...] tasks [...] and beliefs” (Schatzki 2001b, pp. 60-1). They are not exempt from institutionalization pressures but such dynamics affect them only indirectly, and the performative nature of practices guarantee that the localized, contingent but practical intents of the practitioner remain a solid anchor, enabling them both to perform the activity as well as producing a meaningful account of that activity.

If organizations are meshes of practices, then organizational goals are formed and transformed as the result of the interplay of the teleoaffective structures of different practices that constrain and drive different local and individual objectives. Such interaction generates a super-individual discursive field that is then acknowledged both by internal and external observers, as ‘the set of organizational objectives’. Accounts of this become – depending on the identity and motivation of the subject – rhetorical statements of intentions (mission, vision, strategy) or ‘scientific narratives’ based on the observation of regularities in social behaviours. Such a conclusion is aligned with the argument put

forward by Simon (1964), who proposes that, instead of considering specific, clearly defined goals as the propellers for action, we should “view decisions as being concerned with discovering courses of action that satisfy a whole set of constraints” (1964, p. 20). By doing so, he links goals and constraints to individual’s roles, showing how these roles are the product of the interaction among practices (which he refers to as “professional” style, role or training), personal preferences and organizational constraints. He therefore conceptualizes organizational objectives as emergent from satisfactory courses of actions considering the set of constraints produced by individual actions (1964, p. 18).

In fact practices dwell more comfortably than institutionalized organizations “in the border zones, in the grey area, where the collision of order and chaos, inside and outside, formal and informal, rationality and irrationality, structure and process, occurs” (Clegg et al. 2005, pp. 154-5), because, as practice theorists acknowledge they are always “the negotiated products of agency, with some aspects defined quite firmly by the wider apparatus of their respective professions, some highly adaptive to local contexts and others richly permissive of individual improvisation in the moment” (Ouchi 1977, p. 185).

The dynamic tension between central themes, standard modes of expressions (*topoi*) and agentic improvisation is well portrayed by the metaphor of *Commedia dell’Arte* (Czarniawska 1995c). This is popular form of theatre, the first examples of which date back to the XVI century – where masked actors perform a dramatic improvisation while impersonating stereotypical social characters. While the ‘scenarios’ (typical situations or dramatic sketches) are usually scripted, the actors become playwrights, effectively creating the text of the play through their improvisation. An empirical exemplification of the constant negotiation between prescribed modes and informal invention in workplace practices is given once more by Orr’s ethnographic description of the level of improvisation

put in place by photocopier repairer (1990), where agents creatively knead together prescribed rules, material constraints and experience based creativity in order to bring order in the chaotic intersection among machine erratic functioning, customers' needs and company's requirements.

The idea of action as based on improvisation aided by a repository of learnt solutions acquired through direct experience can also be found in the idea of design thinking (Schön 1983). While I will discuss this concept in more detail further ahead (chapter 8), for the moment it is useful to consider the idea that 'practicing' requires one to think like a designer, since this supports the view that there is nothing mechanical in practices.

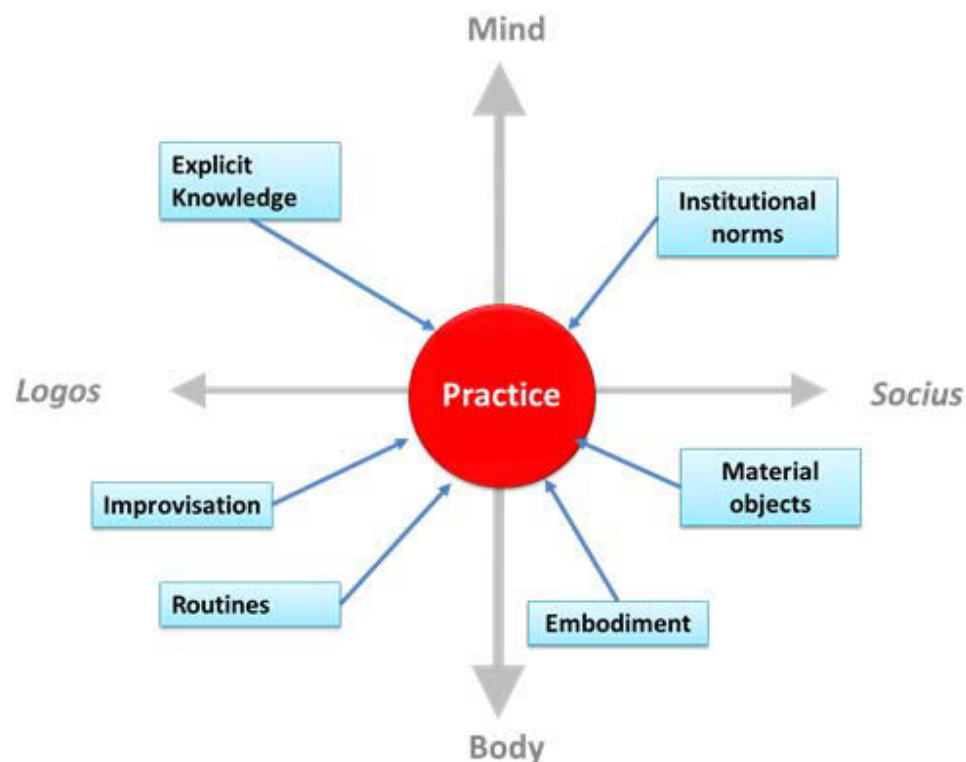
Summing up, practice theory identifies a number of different factors that combine in constituting practice. Such elements are summarized in Table 1

**Table 1 - Element constituting practices**

Element of practice	Description	Some key concepts
Knowledge	Practices incorporate both explicit and ‘tacit knowledge’. The latter is acquired in the form of a <i>gestalt</i> and cannot be codified by language but allows skilled individuals to make rapid judgments on complex matters	Tacit knowledge (Polanyi 1966) Aesthetic understanding (Strati 2010) Knowing-that versus knowing-how (Koschmann et al. 1998) Docta ignorantia (Gherardi 2012a)
Embodiment	Practices are also “inscribed in bodies, and bodies are therefore the artefacts through which people know and work” (Gherardi 2012b, p. 61); therefore they become automated and unconscious and emerge only in the event of a breakdown	Sensible knowledge (Strati 2007) Breakdown (Koschmann et al. 1998; Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011) ‘System 1’ and ‘System 2’ thinking modes (Kahneman 2011)
Materiality	Material objects are part of human practices and act as intermediary, connecting and translating, producing change and altering meaning, even providing emotional comfort	Actor Network Theory (Callon 1986; Latour 1996; Law 1999; Latour 2005; Law 2009) Translation (“inscription”) operated by research tools (Latour & Woolgar 1979) Libidic relationships with objects (Ledford et al. 1989)
Institutions	Practices are inscribed in, and enabled by, an institutional system (Gherardi 2006, p. 35). Consequently individual practices are subject to relations of power and capital but also contribute to reproducing and transforming these institutions	Field (Bourdieu 1991) Institutional fields and isomorphic forces (Powell & DiMaggio 1991; Greenwood et al. 2012) Institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006; Lawrence et al. 2011)
Routines	Routines are not fixed behavioural patterns but have a performative nature	Practices as emergent accomplishments (Feldman 2000) Practices as means of socialization (Antonacopoulou 2008)
Improvisation	Adaptation and improvisation to local circumstances play a central role in practice constitution.	The practitioner reflectively manipulates a set of resources using experience (Orr 1990, p. 194) Bricolage (Cunha 2007) <i>Commedia dell’Arte</i> metaphor (Czarniawska 1995c)

Outlining the principal features and attributes ascribed to practices shows that, while identity formation is the 'battlefield', located in the actors' psyche, where agency and structure skirmish, practices represent the same struggle in social space. This similarity can be illustrated by situating the elements that constitute practices in the same frame of reference that was previously used to identify the constituent of identity (Figure 2). However, the struggle between agency and structure is also a generative embrace: institutions and organized action in general is created and maintained through the individual re-production of practices. The logical consequence of conceptualizing practices as the locus of negotiation between agency and structure is that they are in a constant state of becoming. If we see organizations as a network of activities then a practice perspective is ideal for investigating the problem of organizational change. Since this topic is central to my empirical inquiry, I will next articulate the analysis further.

**Figure 2 - Elements constituting emergent practices**



## **Using the practice lens to understand organizing in a transforming business school**

Practices combine emergent and institutional aspects, showing both normative regularity and improvisation. Organizations made of practices cannot be conceived as other than in a state of constant becoming (Tsoukas & Chia 2002). What is the space for planned, deliberate change in this Heraclitean world where practices are in constant flux? While it is certainly naive to think of the organizational body as an inert entity unless breathed into life by its managerial brain (Clegg et al. 2005, p. 157), the evidence of the profound transformations that recurrently interest any organization and industry, the quantum leaps appearance that these changes sometime assume and the fact that they are often the outcome of an explicit political intent, impede denial of the intentionality and consequences of change efforts.

While it is foolish to assume that organizational change can be planned and engineered in detail, it would be equally farfetched to believe that change is only the effect of uncontrollable structural dynamics and that human agents only provide ex-post rationalization to it. Tsoukas and Chia offer a more balanced view: “change programs trigger ongoing change; they provide the discursive resources for making certain things possible, although what exactly will happen remains uncertain when a change program is initiated” (2002, p. 578). These questions are clearly relevant to my investigation since my observations of academic practices and identity took place in a setting where the dominant rhetoric was bent on ‘transforming the organization’, introducing a new approach to learning, teaching and researching, as this extract from a UTS Business promotional brochure demonstrates:



“We recognise the imperative to develop new, more flexible and sustainable business models that accelerate decision-making in high performance organisations (...). So, UTS Business School has redesigned its undergraduate Bachelor of Business, and we are reviewing and evolving our postgraduate, MBA and Executive MBA programs in close consultation with business and industry. We have taken an innovative approach to transforming business education and are now inviting business and the community to join us in reshaping the future of business. In Australia, UTS Business School is leading the way in developing a truly integrative management curriculum that reflects real-world complexity with themes such as ‘Integrating Business Perspectives’. (...) UTS Business School is founded on a strong educational tradition, but our sights are set firmly on the future. Our innovative approach to business education will be embodied in our new building, the Dr Chau Chak Wing Building” (UTSB 2012b)

The emphasis on transformation produced an effective breakdown mechanism that helped in surfacing otherwise tacit practice-related tensions, such as the issue of the requirement for physical presence on the ‘shop-floor’, and the relevance of the site where the academic work can (or ought to be) performed (this topic is discussed in chapters 9 and 10). However, what is really central to my analysis is that this explicit attempt at altering ‘what academics do’ (and therefore who they are) draws attention on the issue of the management of (and through) practices and identities. The relationship between change, power and practices is the crux of the matter.

Most approaches to change management tend to assume an essentialist, reified view of organization, conceiving change as “as an accomplished event whose key features and variations, and causal antecedents and consequences, need to be explored and described” (Tsoukas & Chia 2002, p.570). Change is often seen as the transition from one stable configuration of a bureaucratic structure to another and the alternative voices conceiving change as unintended or non-controllable are overshadowed by directorial, agent-centric

models that make organizational change a delimited object that can be handled, controlled, and marketed as a service or a commodity (see Lawrence & Suddaby 2006 for a broad review of the literature showing different approaches to change management).

The explicit and sustained transformation efforts affecting the observed context become an unintended device that forces the emergence of political tensions and contradiction. Even assuming that “change is ontologically prior to organization” (Tsoukas & Chia 2002, p.570) and that what might seem stable and constant when observed from a sufficient spatial or chronological distance is always undergoing transformation and adaptation (Weick & Quinn 1999) it is clear that not all organizational changes are equal. When an organization is subject to an intentional attempt at large scale change, enrolling the entirety of its elements and deeply affecting individuals’ ways of acting and thinking (Ledford et al. 1989), we are facing a major exercise of power that strives to be both disciplinary and productive, negative as well as positive.

The ontogeny of change management initiatives seems to recapitulates the phylogeny of management practices. As the history of management can be – in a Foucauldian archaeological sense – recapitulated as a stratification of disciplinary actions that initially interested the body of the workers, then also the collective disposition of the workforce and finally even the ‘soul’ of the employee (Clegg 2009), similarly large scale planned change displaces bodies (through downsizing, workspace transformation, re-structuring), disposition (offering a new vision, strategic directions, altering reward systems), and re-shape the soul of the ‘appropriate’ staff member (producing new identities).

Framing change in the perspective of disciplinary power allows one to break down the artificial barrier between *power to* and *power over* (Clegg et al. 2006), showing that one form of power is implicated in the other. ‘Developing new models’, ‘redesigning’ courses,

‘transforming business education’, ‘innovating’ imply both a ‘negative’ disciplinary act (‘Thou shall not repeat your practices’) and a ‘positive’ one (‘Behold the promised land’). When operating in a strictly controlled, bureaucratic system, it is possible to assume a mechanistic image of the transformation. By altering the set of norms, procedures, roles, technologies, sites and formal relationships that harness individual action the desired transformation can be achieved. Change management translates into project management (the implementation of a new blueprint for organized action) and the human element is taken into account by moves designed to induce compliance and remove resistances. This paradigm appears challenged by the emergence of a post-bureaucratic organization form that is founded on the idea of enterprising, autonomous individuals (Bardon, Clegg & Josserand 2012).

UTS Business is a context that, despite its strong bureaucratic foundations, has several ‘post-bureaucratic’ characteristics, as discussed in the previous chapter. In a condition of stability, the bureaucratic, administrative side and the post (or pre) bureaucratic collegiate academic persona share the same roof in an uneasy but partly detached relationship. Academics could consider many disciplinary sallies of the administrators as scarcely relevant nuisances, treating them as a form of mock bureaucracy (Gouldner 1955). On their part administrators have difficulty in implementing effective bureaucratic controls on academics, both because of the imperfect understanding of the transformation process which characterizes their teaching and researching activities and because of a relative difficulty in precisely measuring their outputs (Ouchi 1977). However, the presence of an explicit attempt at restructuring and innovating the organization, an attempt that in the case of UTS Business has been at least in part ‘successful’, in the sense that relevant resources have been committed, new headquarters built, internal structure reshuffled, explicitly poses the problem of the intentional *organization* of academic efforts, raising two

key questions: ‘to what extent can academic practice be regulated?’ and ‘What forms of managerial regulation are more likely to be effective to foster collaboration and integration’?

Addressing these problems does not necessarily imply embracing an a-critical, *managerialist* stance, accepting “the idea that management is essentially a matter of the apolitical application of technical expertise to human affairs” (Watson 2004, p. 75). On the contrary the purpose of my inquiry is *phronetic*: to better understand what is truly happening, through which processes, and to the advantage (or detriment) of whom, so that we can use this understanding to inform future choices (Flyvbjerg 2001; Flyvbjerg, Landman & Schram 2012b)<sup>8</sup>. A practice lens can be a useful instrument to investigate what could be defined, paraphrasing Foucault, as a microphysics of change. Researchers observing practices have to renounce the comfortable duality between idealized phases of stability and moments of change. Rather, stability and change in practices constitute each other; they are “different outcomes of the same dynamic rather than different dynamics.” (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011, p. 1245). In fact practitioners constantly adjust their behaviours to preserve the integrity and stability of their practice. At the same time, practices require specific modes of interaction of knowledge, technology, institutions and practitioners’ agency; they have, therefore, a systemic nature. Consequently modifying one or more elements or their relationship will produce a complete alteration of the practice: the introduction of a new technology, for instance, brings about turbulences that have an impact both on the practitioners’ behaviours and on the institutional field, disrupting any equilibrium.

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<sup>8</sup> An extended discussion on the phronetic method and on its application in social sciences is presented in Chapter 5

A model that fits both with the dynamic and the systemic conception of practices is offered by Activity Theory (Blackler & Regan 2009) and focuses on 'objects of activity', the entities that practitioners are working to transform. These can be projects, products, even people: for instance in a Business School, as in any university context, students are an object of activity. Objects are at the same time given, socially constructed, contested and emergent and activities (practices) need to be studied focusing "on what actually is happening rather than on what people say is happening or think ought to be" (Blackler & Regan 2009, p. 165). Collective projects that seek to change systems can be "stabilized by ... shared tools, signs and procedures" (Blackler & Regan 2009, p. 166). Heuristically, three 'practical' directions for inquiry can be outlined:

1. Mapping how different 'objects of activities' that are central to the practices of business schools are seen, understood and treated by different practitioners
2. Following the practices, expanding Latour's dictum to "follow the actors" (2005, p. 30), which means exploring the flows of socio-material activities that enable formal and structural elements of the organization
3. Including both narrative accounts of practices and actual events. Especially in a context where the work outputs, the commodities being produced, have a narrative character (both teaching and publishing are, after all, discursive acts, forms of story-telling) the symbolic representation of practice is an essential component of the practice itself. In any case, narrative activities, embodied performances and their material outcomes must be conceived as mutually constitutive.

These 'heuristic guidelines' will become clearer once incorporated in the methodological framework that is presented in Chapter 5. Before doing that, however, it is necessary to

consider conceptually the interplay between identity and practice, a task to which the next chapter is devoted.

## Chapter 4.

# Combining practice and identity theory

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As discussed above, both the construct of identity and that of practice are well suited to examining organized action in a phenomenological perspective, conceptualizing organizations as emergent and situated social processes of organizing. However, some of the heuristic potential of these two approaches is lost if considered separately. In this chapter I will instead argue for the utility of employing an analytic framework that combines the two concepts of identity and practice.

Drawing from the phenomenological sociology of Alfred Schütz (1932, 1943a, 1945, 1953, 1970) and from the ethnomethodological studies of Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks (1972), I support the idea that practice and identity are interdependent and mutually necessary. I contend that identity is consistently reproduced through practices that provide individuals with a sense of continuity and ‘embeddedness’ in a social sphere, affording them ontological security. These practices are also indexical devices that enable individuals to demonstrate ‘who they are’. On the other hand, professional identity is not just another ‘ingredient’ in the discursive, socio-material formation that we describe as practice. It is rather the primal repository for the categorization devices used by practitioners to perform their praxis, assembling the vast array of tacit and explicit knowledge, relationships, objects, norms that constitute practice. In other words, it is only through their work-identity that individuals can make sense of and operate this ‘abstract machine’.

My conclusions propose that, using a heuristic approach considering both the cognitive interiorization of social experience and its external manifestation in behaviours and

arrangements of objects, it is possible to overcome fully the 'Cartesian error' often lurking in organization studies discourse, thus breaking down the barrier between cognitive-narrative and the material-embodied aspects of action. Accordingly, I propose a practical framing device that integrates both perspectives, and that will find application in the last chapters, to organize the ethnographic data gathered in this research.

## **The benefits of combining an identity and a practice lens**

The advantages of conceptually 'interlocking' practice and identity are multiple. In the first place it has been noted that practices play a central role in the definition and re(production) of social identities: "thinking and feeling are not preparations for action, they are action (...) individuals' thoughts are indefinable apart from the public protocols in which they come to expression" (Bernacki 2007, p. 3608). Gherardi is even more explicit in establishing the link between practicing and the creation of identity: "while people work (...) they affirm an individual and collective work identity" (Gherardi 2012b, p. 11). The work/identity dynamic has been exploited by organizations to manage individuals: "social and organizational practices can produce 'normalized' and 'disciplined' selves (Collinson 2003, p. 528), an effect that is present even when they don't presuppose a "fine tuning" of individual selves, as in the case of assembly line workers (Alvesson & Willmott 2002).

In this view the self loses its ontological integrity, its independence from action. The practitioner's identity "is a process of social learning performed through discursive capacities and interaction with the artefacts of the practice" (Gherardi 2012b, p. 75). The body/mind separation is broken down and the *self* ceases to be a unitary, intact object and becomes an *arrangement*, a network made of organic, inorganic, social, and symbolic bits and pieces (Jacobs 2014, p. 33). The multiple social and professional practices in which we



engage generate a kaleidoscope of possible identities: even casual amusements, like going to the movies, represent social practices that can be productive of “specific subjectivities” (Gherardi 2012b, p. 155).

A second justification for looking at identity formation in practices is related to the ease of observation. Practices are by definition social, representing the expression of collective values, customs and systems of knowledge and, as such, happen ‘in the open’. Moreover, while people, influenced by the rhetoric of individualism, might tend to mask or conceal the clichéd, typecast aspects of their identities, making the observation of common traits more difficult, practices find legitimization in repetition and conformity to ideals so that ‘normalcy’ is stressed.

Finally, by adopting a practice lens the combined dimensions of materiality, power, body and ideals all become equally salient. When considering the phenomenon of identity a researcher is typically confronted with the necessity of taking a stance in relation to two antagonist modes of knowledge, subjectivism and objectivism, either opting for a reflexive account of lived, situated experiences, or establishing “objective regularities”, thus shedding light on the social conditions that make possible those experiences (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 25-6). While the objectivist approach raises the necessary question about the structural conditions that shape the actors’ constructs, it fails to turn its inquisitive gaze on itself, challenging its dubious epistemological presuppositions, such as the idea of an ‘objective observer’ witnessing the world from a superior viewpoint, and that of the primacy of symbolic representation over knowledge-in-practice (Bourdieu 1990, p. 27).

Neither a subjectivist nor an objectivist epistemology can produce satisfactory results when applied to the object of professional identity. The former generates ‘thick’ descriptions of the multiplicity of idiosyncratic experiences and social categorizations that constitute

identity but limits the possibility of inquiry on the forces that shape and influence its becoming. This is because identity is irremediably opaque to itself, since “there is no ‘I’ that can stand fully apart from the social conditions of its emergence, no ‘I’ that is not implicated in a set of conditioning moral norms, which, being norms, have a social character that exceeds a purely personal or idiosyncratic meaning” (Butler 2005, p. 7).

On the other hand an objectivist approach allows taxonomies of identity types to be produced and can reveal factors influencing their constitution. However, it fails to raise questions concerning the very nature of this object of study, assuming that ‘identity’ is a thing that has an essential nature rather than a social construct embedded in a discourse which researchers in part co-constitute (Lancione 2013, p. 154).

In fact the etymology of the term ‘identity’ (from the Latin *idem*, ‘the same’), points to the discursive and political implications of assuming that the construct of ‘identity’ has ontological substance. Alleging that individuals have a singular ‘identity’ implies submitting them to an implicit injunction, demanding that they adopt and adhere to a fixed, conventional, and predictable role. By contrast, the term ‘individual’ comes from the Latin *individuus*, indivisible, a concept that is not prescriptive of social behaviour but merely descriptive of the ‘atomic’ nature of the person. Different people can (and will) engage in the same practice; they will display similar behaviour; they will make use of similar stories and categories to account for their experience, which does not make them the same. In other words the very fact of objectifying transforms observable regularities in rules binding actors’ actions, reducing them to mere epiphenomena (Bourdieu 1990, pp. 39-41). Although it is perfectly acceptable to use the term ‘identity’ as shorthand for describing socially constructed behavioural regularities, it is both dangerous and deceptive to presuppose that those who display these traits must be the same.

Considering the couplet of ‘practice of identity’ and ‘identity in practice’ offers a way to overcome the dualism of subjectivism-objectivism, leading to a more complete understanding of the phenomenon of identity. Identity can be seen as a the outcome of a series of practical performances, involving embodied experiences; equally we experience (professional) identity through the performance of routines, the donning of work clothes, the use of work tools. It is the repetition of actions that are “regular without being in any way the product of obedience to rules” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 53) that provides the coherence and sameness that is the foundation of identity. The purpose of inquiry thus becomes understanding the origin of *habitus* and of the *illusio* that empower, that make possible the games of identity and practice. The first concept refers to the “embodied history, internalized as a second nature” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 56) that empowers the practical performances of the subjects, not by determining their actions but disposing “the actor to feel the rightness and even the necessity of particular ways of acting” (Frank 2012). The second concept relates to the recognition of the existence of a collective game and an actor’s desire of investing in its stakes (Bourdieu 1998, p. 77).

Instead of describing identities or reifying them it my intent is to look at the social conditions that shape them and that are, in turn, reproduced by the ‘acting out’ of these identities. The research approach that appears most suitable for investigating this dialectic, bringing to light (and criticizing) the background conditions that make both behaviours and narratives possible, is one informed by a phronetic perspective (Flyvbjerg 1998, 2001; Flyvbjerg et al. 2012b)<sup>9</sup>. Phronetic research, as a practice-based approach to knowledge, promises a more truthful understanding of social phenomena, in the sense of being able “to unfold and vividly render the relations of power in which we are enmeshed” (Lancione

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<sup>9</sup> Phronetic research is discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

2013, p. 154). This promise is fulfilled by illustrating the way in which power relations affects the condition of knowledge, questioning the taken-for-granted nature of the 'games' that both the observed actors and researchers are playing (Clegg & Pitsis 2012).

Despite these compelling reasons for looking at the pragmatics of identity constitution, it is only very recently that explicit appeals have been made to include the analysis of concrete practices in the study of the constitution of identity (Ravasi and Canato, 2013; Bardon et al, 2012). This could be motivated by the fact that these two constructs are not related, and that their 'morphological similarities' are simply a consequence of a case of parallel evolution in two distinct lines of theorization. After all, the commonsensical understandings of 'identity' and 'practice' could not be more divergent, the former designating a cognitive, inner-world based entity, the latter referring to an inter-subjective action that has tangible outcomes.

Justifying the combination of the two 'lenses' on the basis that the observation of practices can reveal professional identity could be derided as the case of the proverbial drunk who looks for lost car-keys near a street lamp not because that is where their loss occurred but simply because it is easier to conduct the search where there is light. It is therefore necessary to articulate the reasons why identity and practice might imply each other. In pursuing this objective I found an important support and inspiration in Schütz's theorization on socially constructed frameworks of meaning.

## **The typification of individual experience: practices as “provinces of meaning”**

Schütz is a pivotal figure in the history of sociological thought, since his ideas have directly spurred fundamental conceptualizations, such as social constructionism and

ethnomethodology (Barber 2014). However, regardless of this influence, the full potential of his work has remained unrealized (Hall 2007). His major contribution has been the idea, based on the application of Husserl's phenomenology that social actors, not unlike social scientists, develop ideal types to make sense and share their flow of experiences (Schütz 1932). Actions become meaningful only retrospectively, since "meaning (...) is not a quality inherent to certain experiences emerging within our stream of consciousness but the result of an interpretation of a past experience looked at from the present" (Schütz 1945, p. 535). The inter-subjective characterization of these experiences produces a life-world, "the taken-for-granted 'common-sense reality' of the social world as it is lived by ordinary individuals" (Harrington 2006). The concept was originally introduced by Husserl (1935/1965) denotes the intersubjective agreement that members of one or more social groups use to structure the world into objects, defining a world-horizon of potential future experiences, thus defining what is expected and the canon of normality. Intersubjective experience occurs when subjects unconsciously attribute intentions, viewpoints and perceptions to other 'similar' members of similar communities (Husserl 1935/1965).

Schütz's argument emphasizes the constructed nature of social reality:

"all our knowledge of the world, in common-sense as well as in scientific thinking, involves constructs, namely, a set of abstractions, generalizations, formalizations, idealizations specific to the respective level of thought organization. Strictly speaking, there are no such things as facts, pure and simple" (Schütz 1953, p. 2).

Such processes, he argues, happens primarily through language, "the typifying medium par excellence by which socially derived knowledge is transmitted", (Schütz 1953, p. 10) a concept later developed by Habermas (1984) who sees the life-world as a sedimentation of linguistic meaning and resources, both enabling and deriving from social communication

and collaboration. In this regard practices, with their complement of specialist language and their distinctive forms of expression, can be seen as an expression of specific life-worlds.

While the construct of life-world clearly has a striking similarity with the notion of discourse, the emphasis here is on the empowering function of this inter-subjective construction. In fact the existence of a life-world is what permits to overcome difference in individual perspectives through a “general thesis of reciprocal perspectives” (Schütz 1953, p. 8), which incorporate the idea that individual standpoints are interchangeable and that different observers will select and interpret perceptual data in the same way. Consequently social agents construct and socialize common ‘types’ that are used to interpret and catalogue experiences. These categories also include “types of the other's field of acquaintance and of the scope and texture of his knowledge” (Schütz 1953, p. 11) that are explicit precursors of the social construction of professional identity, enabling interaction within the field of a practice.

The construction of shared categories of meaning is achieved through the selection of elements of individual, idiosyncratic flows of consciousness through a system of interests or relevancies, which constitute a stock of knowledge (Schütz 1970). The consensus on types and forms of relevance does not have to be universal: these processes of tacit inter-subjective agreement generate a variety of “*finite provinces of meanings*” (Schütz 1945, p. 551, emphasis in the original), characterized by a cognitive style defined by a specific “attention to life”, a selection of relevant aspect of our stream of thought and perceptions; a specific suspension of doubt; a focus on purposive, goal oriented action; a specific temporal orientation of our attention, toward past, present or future (Schütz 1945, p. 552).

A consequence of the action oriented social organization of subjectivity is that we not only pigeonhole experiences but also other individuals. Especially, this happens when we do not have a direct relationship, a direct involvement with the other. We therefore tend to impute to these anonymous actors “a set of supposedly invariant motives which govern their actions” (Schütz 1953, p. 19); thus, we are enabled to produce practical social action based on “mutually interlocked behaviour patterns” (Schütz 1953, p. 20). For instance, when one leaves a piece of luggage at an airport check in one assumes that a number of other individuals will perform actions in accordance with typified courses of actions and motives, allowing us to trust that these predictable actions will ensure the delivery of one’s belongings on arrival. The process has a circular nature: “In defining the role of the other I am assuming a role myself. In typifying the other’s behaviour I am typifying my own” (Schütz 1953, p. 14).

The implications for identity and practice are evident: any practice is made possible by the fact that both practitioners and other stakeholders involved in the performance of praxis (for instance their customers and suppliers) are partaking in this ‘role-playing game’, based on tacit or explicit expectations. These roles clearly have an impact on the shaping and maintenance of professional identities and are performed within the discursive realm of specific provinces of meaning, which can be overlapping a field of practice or even a specific organization. Therefore, this typification is not accepted just because of its hegemonic, taken for granted nature but also because it enables the performance of the practice, the repetition of routines, in a predictable way.

The interdependence between practices and identities becomes essential, since we could not have practices without typified social identities and the idiosyncratic streams of consciousness from which identities originate are given meaning and consistence by their

orientation to deliberate social action. It is possible to keep on playing the game only by accepting the restrictions that it demands, a notion that can be bolstered by considering two concepts developed by an approach which is the offspring of the ideas proposed by Schütz: ethnomethodology.

## **The indexicality of practices, the reflexivity of identities**

Garfinkel's ethnomethodology reiterates Schütz's notion that coordinated action and mutual understanding require the maintenance of a shared method of ordering things and sets out to investigate "the patterned and instructable ways in which order properties of situated action are made public and mutually recognizable objects" (Rawls 2010, p. 112). Order is developed by the members of a social context and it is developed through practices founded on "mutual orientation and sustained trust" (Rawls 2010, p. 120).

In a real context, characterized by ambiguity and complexity, meaning cannot simply be carried by single utterances, because "words carry too much meaning" (Rawls 2010, p. 129): they need to be 'pinned' to a specific context, for instance by means of a conversational sequence. Meaning-making is made possible by a circular process, involving the concepts of indexicality and reflexivity (Garfinkel 1967). The former refers to the action of grounding an abstract idea by using a concrete example, its etymology clearly alluding to the act of pointing a finger at a thing to illustrate a concept with an actual object or event ('That's what I mean!'). The latter denotes the opposite, namely making a phenomenon meaningful by classifying it as case or an instance of a general category or pattern. It operates by showing that this unique experience is simply a reflection of a recurrent idea ("That's a good example of it!").



These notions can be used to explain the relationship between identity and practice. Practices are indexical both because they can provide an explicit, discernible illustration of professional identities and because their performance requires ordered patterns of action, thus anchoring individual 'signs' to a meaningful syntax. Examples of the first form of indexicality are the attires, utensils, workstations, accreditations, that are required to practice, as well as the material output of practicing. A nurse's uniform, a plumber's toolbox, a doctor's framed degree, a lawyer's chamber, an academic's published paper, an architect's building, all serve to substantiate 'professional identities'. They give practitioners social recognition and legitimation, which is essential not just for rewarding individual effort but also makes possible the execution of their tasks.

At the same time, differences in individual ability, expertise and knowledge base, different personalities, interests and attitudes that are unavoidably reflected in the praxis of different actors can be 'smoothed' by the reflexive attribute of social identities. An enormous variability of inputs is 'domesticated' by the order imposed by routines and institutional pressures, and by the role based typifications induced by professional identities. Codification also leaves traces in the language of the practitioners, in the form of membership categorization devices or MCDs (Sacks 1972), classificatory types typically used in their communications. It would be reductive, however, to consider these ordering devices as mere communicative instruments. Instead they assume a moral and political role, since different "classificatory systems struggle to determine which units, members, themes, strategies, decisions and values are to be granted status, resources and legitimacy" (Clegg & Baunsgaard 2013, p.7).

MCDs can therefore be seen as a crucial junction between power, rationality, identity and practices: "Dominant modes of rationality emerge from the interplay of professional

identity and power relations shaping social practice in organization through the inscription of specific members' categorization devices" (Clegg & Baunsgaard 2013, p.6). The specific way of interpreting experience by the use of a classificatory regime distinguishes a professional identity. It finds application and expression in the ordering technologies that 'power' the practice, constituting a 'correct' (but not politically neutral) model of the world that guides, supports and legitimizes members' actions. In other words they perform the role of organizational sensemaking devices (Weick 1993, 1995). As such they become "the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action" (Weick, Sutcliffe & Obstfeld 2005, p. 409).

Practices and professional identities do not just intersect and justify each other but also coalesce, forming a specific local "mode of rationality", the result an entanglement of relations of meaning, material conditions and requirements of the economic framework (Clegg 1975, p. 122). Therefore only by considering them contextually it is possible to make sense of their reciprocal constitution and of their impact on social interactions.

## **Looking at identities and practice: heuristic implications**

In a nutshell, my argument is that practice and identity are two distinct expressions of the same underlying phenomenon: the production of social order by means of ordering and categorization. Since order implies presence of power (both power over and power to), the interplay of practice and identity also has implication for the formation of rationalities and truths.

The idea is not to 'demonstrate' that identity and practice are two faces of the same medal (this is an interesting possibility but it goes beyond the scope and the interest of my research) but that the two concepts have a similar genealogy (they are expression of a

constitution of social order and product of structuration processes) and involve similar dimensions (social relations, performances, narratives, materiality). I can therefore use these similarities to design a conceptual device to orient and organize my observations, arranging them around the common dimensions characterizing identity and practice.

The method that I propose to employ is one that marshals three different sources: the analysis of the 'discursive background'; the thematic analysis of speech acts, and the observation of recurrent patterns of behaviour. By discursive background I mean that mesh of socio-material dynamics and linguistic representations, which includes statements, norms, institutions, modes of rationality, which constitute the meaning-making context in which the interactions of agents take place. It can be articulated on two level of 'scale' (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b): a big 'D' Discourse characterizing the world of academia in general and business education in particular, and a small 'd' discourse that characterizes the specific organization in which my ethnographic investigation took place. This discursive background is relevant because it supplies both the basic vocabulary and syntaxes for the 'conversations' of the members, modelling their categorization devices. In other words the material constraints, ideological categories and models of rationality present in that discursive background are the building blocks that are employed to assemble the specific sensemaking devices developed by the members of the observed community. It is necessary to understand the political tensions, the selection mechanisms and the explanatory models present in those discourses in order to situate and interpret the utterances of actors, to be sensitive to the connotations of their words, to understand their performances.

While it is essential to familiarize oneself with the language, the beliefs and the material issues affecting the lives of the 'natives', their individual voices must be heard and analysed

in order to appreciate their lived reality and understand how they cope with this context. Focusing on 'what is being said' is particularly relevant in the case of agents whose practices revolve around written (in the form of books, journal papers or grant applications) or oral (as in a lecture or a conference presentation) linguistic performances. In the case of my research, the primary data source on this aspect has been a series of semi-structured interviews, complemented with a number of informal conversations and observations of discussions. By identifying the recurrent ways in which my informants made sense of their situation, coping with constraints and opportunities presented by their immersion in their 'discursive background', I examined their identity work in the making.

In such investigation the researcher is not merely a neutral 'recording device', rather assuming a 'co-productive' role, since interviews, conversations, and interactions with colleagues are generative of identity because they become an occasion for those subjects to make explicit reflection on the strategies they adopt to 'be and become who they are'. Only in the reflexive mode generated by the interaction with a questioning 'other' is a coherent identity-narrative produced. "As long as I live in my acts, directed toward the objects of these acts, the acts do not have any meaning" (Schütz 1945, p. 535)<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, I examined some of the 'traces' of their practices, either by direct observation of their activities (especially in the context of research workshops), collecting survey information on the utilization of working time, as well as by considering some of their tangible outputs. I also included, as additional sources of reflections on practices, some self-ethnographic material, based on my direct work experience and a review of the literature investigating and debating some relevant aspects of academic practices, for instance the

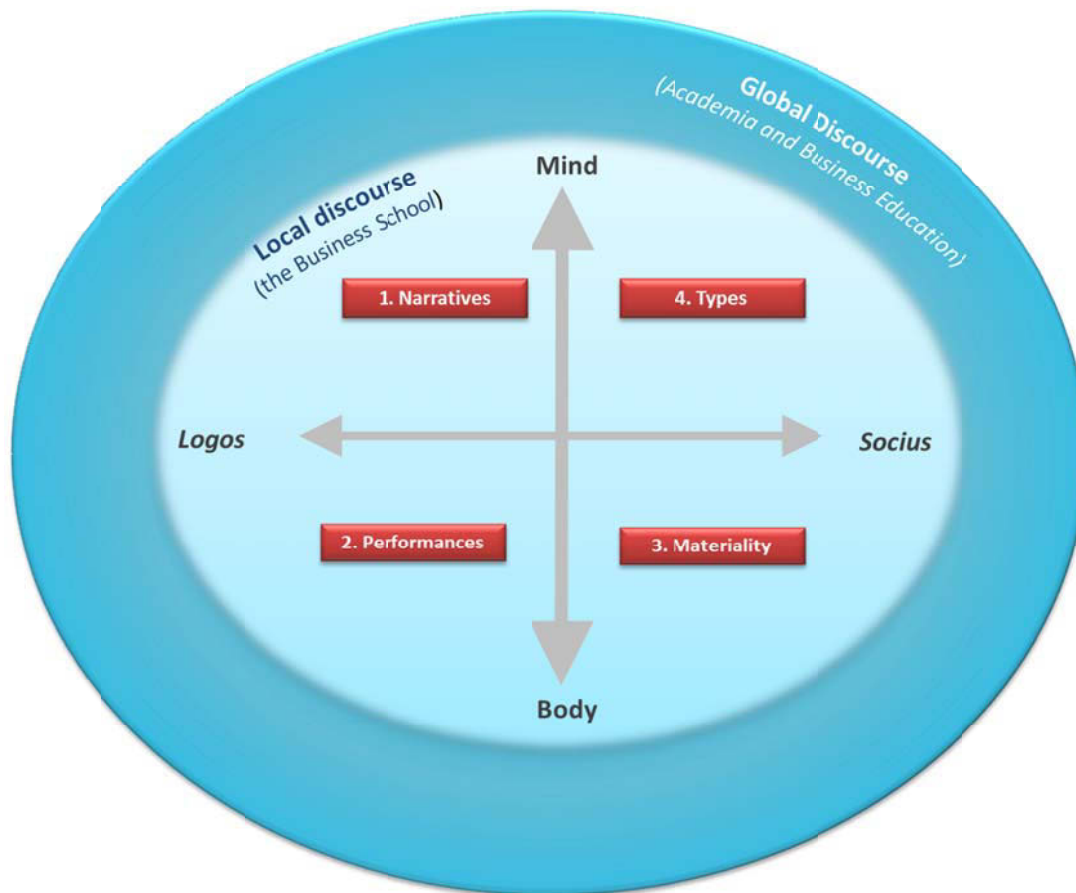
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<sup>10</sup> This fact has been explicitly acknowledged by some of my informants who thanked me for giving them the opportunity, through our conversation, to reflect on their work practices.

‘publishing game’ (Broad 1981). The rationale for incorporating primary and secondary data on routines and behaviours is the acknowledgement that both identity and practice are not merely cognitive or normative phenomena but are embodied in the action and the presence of both human actors and non-human actants. The objective: to identify ‘patterns of practicing’, that is recurrent modes of members’ action employed to enact jobs, assembling the abstract machine of practice.

To integrate these multiple sources of information I developed a simple tool, based on a common organizing device, a Cartesian coordinates system. The resulting diagram uses the same frame of reference that was introduced in Chapters 2 and 3 to situate the elements that form identities and practices (a *socius-logos* abscissa and a body-mind ordinate), identifying four ‘foci of observation’. In the first focus, at the intersection between mind and logos, are represented the narratives constructed by the subjects to account for their career and life trajectories. The second centre of attention, situated where logos interacts with the body, focuses on the dramaturgical performances enacted by actors that support and intertwine with self-narrations (Down & Reveley 2009). The third is the description of the role played, at the crossing between body and *socius* (the realm of interpersonal relationships), by material elements and constraints (workspaces, equipment, workloads etc.) that play an active role in shaping practices. The last focal point concentrates on the analysis of the discursive and institutional forces located at the intersection of *socius* and mind, which provide types and categories that the actors use both as meaning making devices and as repertoires for assembling their social identities. The diagram is inscribed in a double-layered circle, representing the two levels of the ‘discursive background’, which is illustrated in Figure 3.

**Figure 3- Observations organizing diagram**



A final clarification is opportune. As articulated in the previous chapters, neither identities nor practices are endowed with an essential nature: they are emergent accomplishments. Consequently it is useless to produce a taxonomic map of ‘management academic types’ by means of a sort of psychoanalytic inquiry, nor a catalogue of standardized strategies of action in form of ‘good’ (or ‘bad’) practices. The narrative themes, the pattern of actions, are expression of the organizing modes employed by actors to cope with the chaos of lived experience and, as such, they are the ultimate expression of power/knowledge. Understanding which forces shape these themes and patterns is the key to investigating the conjoined possibilities of being and becoming, of cooperation with or degrees of resistance to dominant rationalities.

In point of fact, not even the identification of specific aspects of the *habitus* and of the *illusio* driving observed academic practices is the primary target of my investigation. Rather I am interested in investigating how the material and the symbolic, represented in the dual form of practice and identity, body and mind, interplay. Bourdieu recommend that one accept

“social science has to take account of the two kinds of properties that are objectively attached to [individuals and groups]: on the one hand, material properties [...] and on the other hand, symbolic properties which are nothing other than material properties when perceived and appreciated in their mutual relationships” (Bourdieu 1990, p. 135).

As argued in this chapter, subjects literally construct and reconstruct themselves through identity work that is both practical and narrative. Material pressures (time constraints, tools being used, workspaces etc.) effect the resulting set of categories and performances as do the collective ‘games’ in which practitioners engage, the institutional context and dominant rhetoric. By looking at the way in which this construction occurs and at the consequences of this process, including its desirability from the perspective of different stakeholders (Flyvbjerg 2001), the dynamics governing the production of academic labour become more understandable, perhaps, even better ‘manageable’.

# Part 2.

## Methodology



# Chapter 5.

## A practice-based methodology

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*There's a way of playing safe, there's a way of using tricks and there's the way I like to play, which is dangerously, where you're going to take a chance on making mistakes in order to create something you haven't created before. (Dave Brubeck)*

### The implications of a practice-based study of identity

As argued in the theoretical section, practice theory provides a useful heuristic lens to investigate and make sense of identity work. Adopting a 'practice lens' has relevant epistemological implications that need to be examined, in order to justify the methodological approach that is described in this chapter.

It is essential to clarify that, in this perspective, 'practice' does not stand for a reified object of study but it represent a 'way of seeing' (Corradi et al. 2010), an epistemological standpoint which acknowledges the centrality of *knowing-in-practice* (Orlikowski 2002; Gherardi 2012a, 2012b). Doing so implies considering knowledge as something that is neither a mental abstraction nor an objectified commodity but it is embedded in action, and as such is a practical accomplishment rather than a transcendental account (Gherardi 2000). As a consequence of being an "enacted and provisional activity", knowledge is neither given, stable, nor ready- to-hand (Orlikowski 2002, p. 269).

Such a perspective clashes with a scientific rationality founded on a representational logic, according to which the purpose of research is to acquire, formalize and distribute unbiased

symbolic accounts of the features of a set of discrete entities, the objective existence of which is left undisputed (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011). The difficulty of doing academic research using a practice lens becomes evident: how is it possible to reconcile an activity that requires the production of a formal, conceptual, generalizable, narrative account of reality, with a perspective that treats knowledge as situated, emergent, practical, socio-material?

The production of a theoretical account of a lived reality is a form of translation, and as such an act of power, that disciplines the multiplicity of actants and the richness of their interrelationship by freezing them in a single valid (and therefore possible) arrangement. The problem is not simply to make this account more or less 'reliable' or 'trustworthy' but to acknowledge that any attempt to 'depict the true state of things' is irremediably devious. Deviousness is not due to the lack of veracity of a theoretical account of a social phenomenon but to its *excessive truthfulness*, in the sense that any sensemaking effort, any categorization of the flux of social reality will produce its own truths, thus implicitly excluding and delegitimizing alternate descriptions.

Knowledge-in-practice is not exempt from power/knowledge effects. However, one practice does not exclude others (there's more than one way to skin a cat...), or at least not as categorically as disembodied, 'universal' knowledge systems appear to do. In fact the more detached one system of knowledge is from sensible objects and actions, the more oppressive and self-referential it tends to become, making purely idealistic constructions, as Platonism, Theology, Scientific Socialism, or any other pseudo-sciences (Popper 1966) that are exemplary of a disembodied, a-contextual, all-encompassing, and therefore despotic conception of knowledge. Knowledge-in-practice is instead limited by its tangible effects, since it is validated by its capacity to produce these: in this sense it comes equipped

with a 'built-in' falsifiability test (Popper 1959). Moreover, while pre-reflexive in the moment of its application, knowledge-in-practice allows self-reflection, either in the event of a breakdown or in the moment of its transmission (Gherardi 2000).

Research collects and shares information on the world experienced and is, ultimately, "the receipt of news of difference" (Bateson 1979, p. 29). However, what we perceive as a relevant difference depends, in part, on the sensitivity of our senses or that of the instruments we are using to observe, on our interests and focus and on the duration of our observation. Utilizing a 'logic of practice' (Bourdieu 1990) in doing research leads one to notice and consider different forms of relevance. Instead of looking for measurability and regularities, a practice based theory of knowledge contemplates the holistic, interconnected, situated and temporal reality of practices (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011). Contextual information is not ignored, and individual factors are not artificially isolated; instead, it explicitly engages with their fuzziness and entwinement, attempting to develop concepts that are not end points but rather act "as indicators that guide the search for better understanding"(Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011, p. 353).

Consistent with this standpoint, my research questions (situated in the introductory chapter) must not be intended as an attempt to 'discover' universal rules conditioning the production of management academics' professional identities and practices. The purpose of answering these questions is to reflect on the effects and the consequences of the various social, symbolic, material forces to which management (and other) academics are subjected, raising awareness on the power dynamics involved and on their ethical implications, as well as considering the opportunities of alternative action on the part of interested stakeholders

My inquiry is inspired by an *epistemology of practice*, one “that transforms learning from the acquisition of the objective rules of wisdom to one that appreciates the wisdom of learning in the midst of action itself” (Raelin 2007, p. 513). Such epistemology aspires to be, at the same time, emic and etic (Headland, Pike & Harris 1990; Barley & Kunda 2001; Agar 2007). Emic, because it takes into account the situated and gestaltic experience of the observed practitioners, including local and global discursive forces, material and embodied factors, relationships and performances; etic, because it is partially divorced from the lived, embodied experience of practice, creating a breakdown that enables reflection and that enables considering consequences and implications of otherwise taken-for-granted actions and performances. As such it aims to produce an account that, rather than more or less ‘accurate’ is ‘*workable*’, that is capable of being recognized as useful to practitioners and other relevant stakeholders for re-examining, reconsidering and revising their actions, strategies, motivations, social arrangements. My heuristic approach is therefore based on five principles:

1. *Phenomenological view*: the focus is on interactions and becoming, rather than on the description of static objects, observing “the relationships and performances that produce outcomes in the world” (Feldman & Orlikowski 2011, p. 1249). As a consequence my account “prefers action verbs able to transmit the idea of an emergent reality, of knowing as a material activity” (Corradi et al. 2010, p. 274).
2. *A problematization (rather than gap filling) approach*: as I argued in the Introduction, this research does not specifically attempts to locate and ‘fill’ knowledge gaps in theory. Such an approach would be at odds with my interpretative and constructivist approach, which does not regard knowledge as an accumulation of evidence on an objectively discoverable reality. I am instead interested in understanding the implications and consequences of different reality constructions,

contrast and compare different 'truths' and show how they are produced, and especially question taken for granted assumptions

3. *Phronetic intent and approach*: the purpose of practical rationality theories is to "enable practitioners to better understand, engage, and, above all, improve their own practice" (Sandberg & Tsoukas 2011, p. 354). The concept of "improvement" needs to be problematized, however. Which (or whose) perspective should we consider to assess such enhancement? *Cui prodest* (who is benefiting from) the increase in performances that more reflexive practitioners can achieve? What are the consequences of the current (or of an alternative) arrangement of practices? To address these important queries a phronetic viewpoint is required. This involves assuming a practical wisdom perspective that seeks to expose power/knowledge processes, disclosing the existence of social problems and inquiring into how to act in relation to them (Flyvbjerg 2001).
4. *Distancing while de-distancing*: crucial for a practice based study is to "zoom in on the actual accomplishment of work practices" (Nicolini 2009, p. 124). This is because they exist in a phenomenological, 'de-distanced' space, where "de-distancing means making distance disappear, making the being at a distance of something disappear, bringing it near" (Heidegger 1927, p. 97). However, while this immersion in the *Dasein* enables one to apprehend the embodied and tacit aspects of a concrete activity it does not permit reflection, analytic consideration of implications and consideration of alternatives. For doing so, it is necessary to produce a breakdown through distancing, estrangement, de-familiarization and irony (Ybema & Kamsteeg 2009).
5. *Interconnectedness of practices*: practices are intrinsically incomplete and connected with broader fields of action that form the constantly emerging texture of society. As a consequence my observation moves from an "analysis of a social macro-

phenomenon [business education] and explore[s] how this is rooted in routine and situated ways of doing and relating” (Gherardi 2012b, p. 177).

The following sections address the methodological implications of the application of each of these principles, before moving on to describe and justify the choice of the case study and of data collection and analysis strategies that I have employed in my inquiry.

## **The necessity (and the scourges) of a phenomenological investigation**

The choice of focusing on organizational ‘becoming’, rather than ‘being’ derives both from the application of the ‘epistemology of practice’ described above but also from the characteristics of the organization that is the object of my study, UTS Business (UTSB).

As argued in Chapter 3, a business school is, as any other educational organization, distinguished by a loosely coupled structure. At the same time it has numerous post-bureaucratic characteristics (see Chapter 2), deriving from the presence of a highly educated, self-motivated and directed, entrepreneurial, creative employees who perform most of their duties in self-managed, often individual, projects. Moreover, UTSB is affected by a process of change that, despite a unifying rhetoric, is more akin to a narratively punctuated transformation of the relational fabric that connects human and non-human actants (Lancione & Clegg 2013). Finally, academia is becoming increasingly ‘porous’ with respect to its environment (Scott 2007, p. 214) and UTSB, in particular, is bent on increasing interconnectedness with its local and global milieu (Lancione & Clegg 2014) making its boundaries more permeable.

Studying such a loosely coupled, post-bureaucratic, transforming, and porous organization, increasingly inhabited by 'nomadic' researchers (Alvesson & Gabriel 2013) requires a scoping device that is attuned to transformation and fluidity. A critical reflection on this issue is necessary. Both movement and stillness are a matter of perspective, since they are determined by the temporal framing of an event. The 'observer' artificially sets boundaries, on the basis of the differences that s/he perceives. By doing so this witness separates a 'fact' as an 'occurrence' from the continuum of phenomena, from the spatial-temporal background, giving it identity and shape. When dealing with every-day, concrete issues this is an acceptable convention: for instance, I don't need to philosophize on the actual 'separation' between myself and my intestinal flora to enjoy a meal; similarly, when approaching a research object their ontological stability is scarcely affected by the observer's stance (the Universe, a geological feature, a chemical compound). However, when investigating a social construct in an ethnographic perspective, the conceptual categories employed by the investigator assume a dominant role. A phenomenologically oriented observer is more likely to notice change than stability, to make sense of events in a processual and connected fashion rather than in an essentialist and categorical one. A positivist oriented researcher, who fixes and translates the infinitude of differences that characterize an entity (Bateson 1972, p. 321) in a set of figures inscribed at a moment in time will see an organization as a distinct, discrete, measurable entity. Conversely a postmodern ethnographer, who studies the same object over a prolonged period of time, focusing on relations and interpretations, will more likely perceive it as a fluid, interconnected and borderless network of relations, exactly as an immobile landscape becomes animated when filmed with multiple viewpoints of time-lapse photography and then reviewed at high speed. By choosing a phenomenological approach I unavoidably set a kairotic (subjective) time unit (Czarniawska 2004c) that will skew my understanding in direction of a Heraclitean world view.

## Questioning the unquestioned: problematization

What is the purpose of management research? This deceitfully simple question seems to have an obvious answer: to produce relevant, interesting, influential and rigorous knowledge. However this matter of fact statement hides a multiplicity of tensions and contradictions, especially around the concepts of rigour and relevance that will be explored in Chapter 7. For now, it is sufficient to consider the other two attributes: interest and influence. According to Alvesson & Sandberg (2013, p. 131) the key requirement that a theory needs to have in order to attract interest and to be influential is its capacity to significantly challenge some of its audience assumptions. Unfortunately the vast majority of management students seem to privilege the “gap spotting” techniques as a method to construct research questions in management, the practice of formulating research goals in terms of clarifying confusions, looking into overlooked or under-researched area or applying existing theories and concepts in new domains (Sandberg & Alvesson 2011).

This attitude is sustained by a variety of ideal and political forces, which include the relative easiness and safety of spotting gaps, the positivist ideal of knowledge accumulation, the structure of academic metrics and incentives and the dominant publishing practices (Sandberg & Alvesson 2011). On the other hand problematizing involves identifying, articulating and evaluating assumptions underlying a specific literature and developing, evaluating and proposing an alternative assumption ground (Alvesson & Sandberg 2011).

What induced me to choose the ‘hard way’ was the desire to produce a work which could have an actual impact on the conversations and on the practices of my audience (management academics) by questioning “to what extent it might be possible to think differently, instead of what is already known (...) to explore what might be changed” (Foucault 1985, p. 9). This is particularly challenging because of the fact that assumptions



are often tacit and implicit and for this reason I chose to devote ample space to a critical analysis of the discourse on business education and on academic behaviour. The 'mapping' of differences and tensions in the field allows the hidden assumption of the discourse, those blind spots that hinder the actors' capacity to consider alternatives not for want of acumen but because bedazzled by the bright light of obviousness, to be surfaced.

## **A practical lens requires practical wisdom**

The idolization of theory seems to pervade much of the social sciences (Sorenson 2008) but theoretical constructions bring limited value to practitioners who live a phenomenological reality:

“in the study of human affairs, there appears to exist only context dependent knowledge, which, thus, presently rules out the possibility of epistemic theoretical construction” (...) If people were exclusively trained in context-independent knowledge and rules, that is, the kind of knowledge that forms the basis of textbooks and computers, they would remain at the beginner's level in the learning process”. (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 221-212)

It is not just a matter of acquiring 'mastery' in management. The purpose of management research must include developing a reflexive awareness of the games that all social actors (scholars included) play in their specific fields, as well as the dangers that different courses of action imply in their confrontation with power (Frank 2012). The epistemological viewpoint that appears better suited to a 'power sensitive' investigation is provided by phronesis, intended as a specific ethos and attitude (Lancione 2013), which “does enquire into the critical assessment of values, norms and structures of power and domination” (Clegg & Pitsis 2012, p. 73).

The term *phronesis* has been single-handedly introduced into the vocabulary of social science by Flyvbjerg who borrowed the concept of 'practical wisdom' from Aristotle. Suitably, this approach was developed in the context of a concrete, practical experience, the study of the botched implementation of urban and transport planning in the Danish city of Aalborg (Flyvbjerg 1998). This exemplary piece of research is one of the best empirical demonstrations of the ways in which power relationships shape truth and knowledge, unveiling a social world in which complex and disquieting power struggles are at play. His analysis demonstrates we cannot simply rely on the known and reassuring categories of oppressed and oppressors, because the dynamics of power create a cobweb of relations that entrap and damage even the powerbrokers who spun these relational action webs or nets.

In order to clarify what phronetic social science is, it is useful to cite Flyvbjerg:

"In Aristotle's words, *phronesis* is an intellectual virtue that is "reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man." *Phronesis* concerns values and goes beyond analytical, scientific knowledge (*episteme*) and technical knowledge or know-how (*techne*) and it involves judgments and decisions made in the manner of a virtuoso social actor. [...]

*Episteme* concerns universals and the production of knowledge that is invariable in time and space and achieved with the aid of analytical rationality. *Episteme* corresponds to the modern scientific ideal as expressed in natural science. [...]

*Techne* can be translated into English as 'art' in the sense of 'craft'; a craftsman is also an artisan. [...] *Techne* is thus craft and art, and as an activity it is concrete, variable, and context dependent. The objective of *techne* is application of technical knowledge and skills according to a pragmatic instrumental rationality. [...]

Whereas *episteme* concerns theoretical know why and *techne* denotes technical know-how, *phronesis* emphasizes practical knowledge and practical ethics. Phronesis is often translated as ‘prudence’ or ‘practical common sense.’[...] *Phronesis* is a sense or a tacit skill for doing the ethically practical rather than a kind of science”. (Flyvbjerg 2004, pp. 399-401; emphasis in the original)

Phronetic approach is therefore “problem-driven, not methodology driven [and aiming] to arrive at social and political sciences that effectively deal with deliberation, judgment and praxis ...” (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 196). It is a form of inquiry that is based on the key tenet that “social science cannot avoid context” (Flyvbjerg 2004, p. 397). In sum, a phronetic approach “privileges context as a means to illustrate normative values and power dimensions in social issues” (Jarvis 2009, p. 63). This is not meant to be an alternative to other methods (for instance of positivistic inquiry) but rather a complementary approach to knowledge (Flyvbjerg 2004) that, while renouncing grand theories, allows one to tackle practically and morally relevant social issues.

A practical wisdom perspective does not simply have an instrumental character, therefore it should not be assessed on the basis of its mere utility or appropriateness. Its choice involves the researcher in necessarily taking a specific political, moral and even emotional stance, one which does not need to be supported by considerations of methodological appropriateness. It is for this reason that this paragraph precedes the one listing research questions. However this ‘ethical nature’ does not put the method beyond verification or above other forms of knowledge: the method, much as “any other social science, is based on interpretation and is open for testing in relation to other interpretations and other research.” (Flyvbjerg 2004, p. 407).

Finally, whilst *phronesis* is specifically concerned with the context specific nature of knowledge (and morals) it also aims at the development of general knowledge by providing a critical input in the ongoing theoretical dialogue (Cairns & Śliwa 2008). While sceptical of a view where the choice of correct action follows the application of an *a priori* theory, a phronetic approach is not a-theoretical but links action and theory in a bottom up, contextual and action oriented manner (Flyvbjerg, Landman & Schram 2012a).

In conclusion, the implications of the use of such an approach are best exemplified by the type of key research questions that are asked by a phronetic researcher. Instead of being hypotheses on causal relationships or mere intellectual curiosities they have a strong political and ethical undertone:

- “ 1. Where are we going?
- 2. Who gains and who loses, and by which mechanisms of power?
- 3. Is this development desirable?
- 4. What, if anything, should we do about it?” (Flyvbjerg 2004, p. 405)

These questions, albeit stimulating and eye-opening, can be made sharper if the phronetic lens is reflexively trained on its own heuristic methods, revealing that even the shrewdest phronetic researcher is not immune to power/knowledge effects. As a consequence Lancione & Clegg (2013) wisely proposes to complement the previous list with some “reflexive questions” that explicitly consider the issue:

- ” 1. Am I conscious of the *illusio* of both the academic and the everyday research field?
- 2. What are my underlying pre-assumptions on the specific topic of my research?
- 3. How are my pre-assumptions going to affect the design of my research?

4. What are the consequences of the knowledge that I am going to produce?  
What is the political rationale of my work?" (Lancione 2013, p. 154)

## **Being a porcupine amongst porcupines: finding the right distance**

A fundamental challenge of doing organizational ethnography is to maintain the right balance between immersing and distancing from the studied context (Ybema & Kamsteeg 2009). This is particularly necessary when looking at work through a practice lens. On the one hand only by immersion is it possible to 'get close enough' to understand not only cognitively but also emotionally and physically the experience of practitioners, capturing the tacit elements of their knowledge, perceiving the taken-for-granted feelings and the embodied aspects of their activities. It is also essential for the researcher to bracket this phenomenological flow, in order to achieve that breakdown that Brecht aptly named *Verfremdungseffekt*, or *estrangement*, a distancing of the observer from the 'players' that enables critical reflection (Brecht 1936).

It is not just a matter of maintaining the 'right distance' though, since maintaining the *illusio*, "the fact of attributing importance to a social game" (Bourdieu 1998, p. 77) is essential both for understanding and performing a practice. Analyzing the bizarre behaviours of the 'natives', dispassionately observing their struggles might provide a neater narrative, a more formal description of their society yet this would not allow one to comprehend their motives and reactions, their embodiment of power relationships, the moral conundrums they experience. As a consequence immersion and distancing must be pursued at the same time, acting as the porcupines in Schopenhauer's parable, who desire to huddle together to share heat but whose sharp spines keep them apart from each other (Schopenhauer 1851).

In my case my professional identity as a management consultant with a 20-year experience played a key role in maintaining my detachment. Having a well-developed work identity acted as a point of reference that helped me in maintaining a higher level of self-awareness while I was socialized in a research community, a process involving “the internalization of appropriate orientations” (Alvesson 2009, p. 162). My pre-existent professional identity became therefore an element of constant disruption of the *illusio*, surfacing the arbitrary nature of the ‘game’ I am trained into, making me explicitly aware of the power effects exercised on my identity and work activities by a multiplicity of human and non-human actants that were re-disciplining and re-shaping my way of thinking, arguing, presenting evidence and writing.

At the same time, this new world was not an alien reality to be resisted. My experience as an adjunct faculty member, collaborating with several tertiary education institutions internationally had given me a sense of familiarity with these surroundings, a pre-understanding of the jargon and of the characteristics of the job, an appreciation of the specific challenges and opportunities. As a consequence, my position as a doctoral candidate first and as a casual academic later became an opportunity to transform my participant observation into an “observant participation”, giving me the opportunity to “see beyond the external front that informants present to strangers” (Moeran 2009). That way I was able to act at the same time as an insider and an outsider (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994), assuming an attitude of “extopia” (Sclavi 2003), the ability to listen actively to others by remaining an outsider who acknowledges and accepts difference, rather than looking for similarity.

## Studying interconnected practices through multiple methods

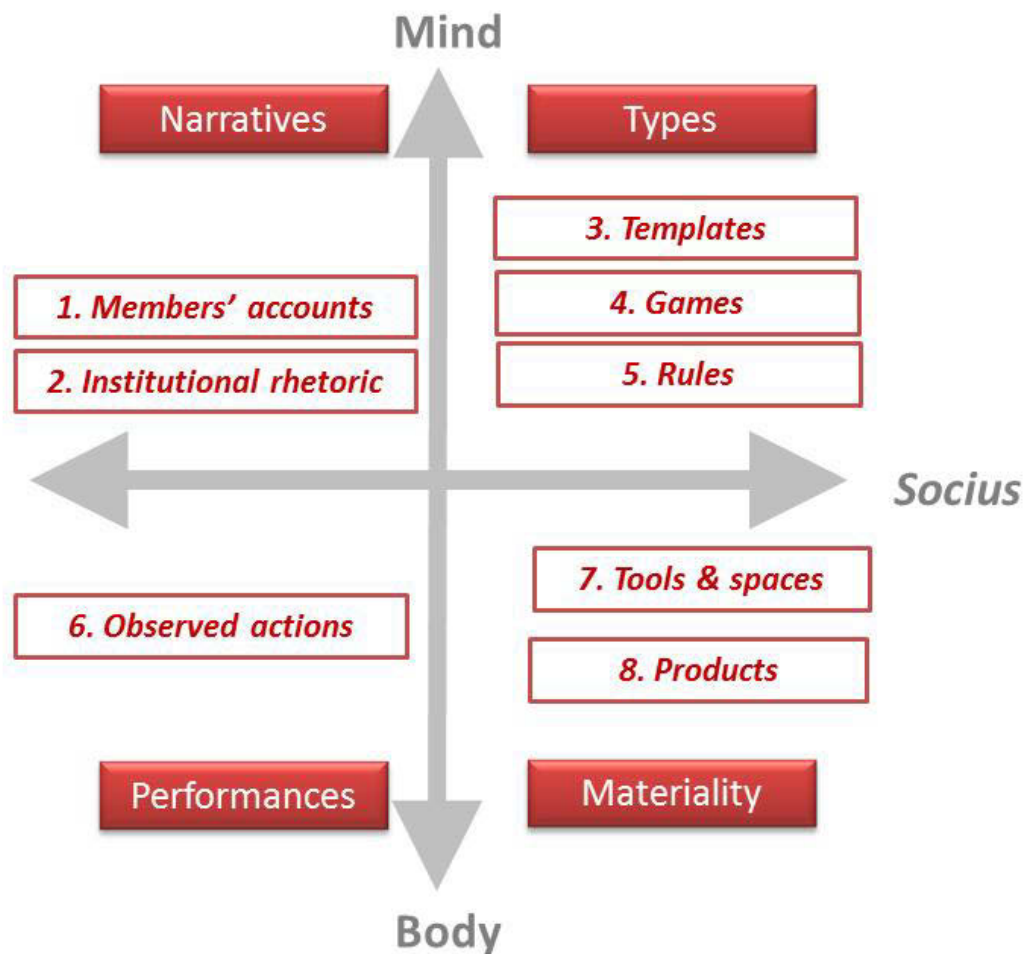
The ideal separation between knowing and doing, subject and object is abolished in the reality of practice and replaced by a *being-in-the-world* (Heidegger 1927, pp. 49-58), the recognition of the essential entwinement between individual identities, social relationships, and material elements. Sandberg & Tsoukas (2011, p. 346) offer a concrete strategy to study the interconnectedness of practice (or *entwinement*), based on five components: considering the interaction between practitioners and tools; focusing on patterns of action rather than on entities; looking at the use of the body in performing activities; scrutinizing the standards of success and failure, and examining the relationships between various practices.

One specific aspect of interconnectedness is the fact that practices incorporate both a material and a linguistic component, and that these components act in unexpected, counterintuitive ways. Work gear, equipment and office spaces are not just enablers or constraints: “the material world lives with us, around us and through us. It is neither inert nor passive” (Gherardi 2012b, p. 208). On the other hand even the most hands-on activities rely on symbolic representations, anchoring practices “in language in the form of technical vocabulary, classification systems and language-in-use” (Gherardi 2012b, p. 208).

Considering a work setting in a practice theory perspective requires therefore a rich set of data providing multiple entry points to this entanglement of immaterial concepts and tangible ‘stuff’ on which practices are based. I chose to gather data on eight different types of ‘objects’ or phenomena that contribute to the practices in the workplace that I investigated. With the purpose of outlining the differences among these entangled factors, highlighting the contexts in which they are more likely to be observed, I placed them on the

“Observation organizing diagram” introduced in the previous chapter, which contrasts body and mind, *logos* and *socius* as four ideal foci of observation (fig. 4).

**Figure 4 - A classification of the objects and phenomena examined in the study of the practices and identities of management academics**



It is important to stress that by using this device I do not wish to attribute to the coordinates an essential nature or to reify them, setting clear ontological boundaries. The chart that I adopted is uniquely a practical organizing device to direct observation towards different sources and types of data. In fact, such a Cartesian diagram, as well as the Cartesian separations that it suggests, can only exist on paper in an ‘out-of-the-world’ modality. When the practice, the being-in-the-world reality is considered, this sheet of



paper should be folded on itself, the four 'poles' becoming intertwined and interdependent. For instance, members' accounts could not be produced in absence of discursive 'types', while material elements shape performances.

1. *Members' accounts* are the narratives produced by the members of the observed organization to describe their practices and work identities, to justify their actions and to express their positions and motivations.
2. *Institutional rhetoric* includes the statements made by corporate officers of the observed organization (UTS Business and of its parent institution, University of Technology, Sydney) in their official capacity or represented in promotional and institutional publications.
3. *Templates* is a category that encompasses the most relevant ideas and debates that characterize the considered 'life-world', the industry of business and management education and the broader context of tertiary education. In this class can be considered historical developments, perceived challenges, open discussions and political tensions, buzz-words and fads that colour and frame the symbolic and practical actions of management academics and that provide a context, a lexicon and a grammar for their performances. They are 'templates' in the sense that they provide ready-made types and models that can be used by actors to organize and make sense of their experience.
4. *Games* refers to the goal directed activities in which the observed agents compete (for instance trying to get published or obtaining a research grant). I define these phenomena as 'games' in order to highlight how they depend on following arbitrary and often tacit rules, since what sets a game apart from other human activities is that it requires "using only means permitted by specific rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules"

(Suits 1967, p. 156). These games normalize practitioners' actions, both by defining stakes and by prescribing 'winning' strategies.

5. *Rules* include the set of bureaucratic policies and regulations, including reward and management control systems that the organization (UTS Business) puts in place in the attempt to supervise, control and orient the actions of its members. It is closer to the 'mind' than to the 'body' pole because organizational rules are not simply enforced/obeyed but require interpretation and translation in the context of a specific social system of action (Merton 1940; Gouldner 1955; Crozier & Friedberg 1980).
6. *Observed actions*: the performances, of the actors as observed during the research. Using the terminology introduced by Schütz (1945), I differentiate between behaviours, which comprise also 'non meaningful' acts, such as reflexes, conduct, which includes all "subjectively meaningful expressions of spontaneity" (Schütz 1945, p. 536), and actions, object oriented conduct. While many diverse behaviours have been object of my observations, I chose to focus my attention of those acts that appear to be meaningful and purposeful in the context of academic practice, that is traceable to one or more of the other observed phenomena (e.g. templates, games, rhetoric etc.).
7. *Tools, material constraints and spaces*: this group includes both the practitioners' working tools, the physical location where they perform their activities and the material assets and liabilities (for instance their workloads) that constrain and enable their activities.
8. *Products*: the practical accomplishments of practice, embodied in tangible artefacts, for instance a published paper or book. Not all practices produce physical outputs but when these are created they can have an enduring effects on the practitioner's identity and behaviour. Moreover their relative permanence makes possible to

compare and contrast the products of practices performed in different moment in time.

To explore these phenomena I used various sources of data and observation techniques. Table 2 relates each considered 'objects' to the source and type of data gathered in the research, also specifying in which chapter the observations are described. The specific data collection strategies adopted for acquiring data from the different 'sources of observation' are detailed in the next section.

**Table 2- Types of data and observations**

Object	Source of observation	Chapter
Accounts	Survey	Chapter 9
	Interviews	Chapter 10
	Auto-ethnography	
Rhetoric	Website	Chapter 8
	Promotional material	
Templates	Literature review	Chapter 6 & 7
Games	Literature review	Chapter 6 & 7
	Interviews	Chapter 10
Rules	Interviews	Chapter 10
Actions	Participant observation	Chapter 10
	Shadowing	
Tools	Survey	Chapter 9
Products	Published papers	Chapter 7 & 10

## Collecting data through a multiplicity of sources

If we need to “follow the actors” (Latour 2005, p. 30) in order to investigate a social that is always in a constant state of becoming, then ‘following the practices’ appears to be an effective way to look at the composite mix of institutional, material and embodied elements that shapes and sustains the protean contemporary identities.

In order to contemplate the profusion of socio-material elements that makes up the lifeworld of practitioners it is necessary to remember that practices do not come in discrete, well limited parcels but have a ‘rhizomatic’ characteristic, spreading out in different directions and connecting (or generating) other practices (Nicolini 2009). This is particularly evident in the case of academic work. The classification of activities proposed by Crabbe (2008, p. 11), although probably not exhaustive, gives a good idea of the array of different practices that academics perform:

- Scholarship: working on books, articles and archives; participating in conferences, learned societies, etc.
- Teaching: acquiring and passing on subject knowledge and skills to others.
- Research/contract research: the investigation of speculative questions posed by oneself, one's academic peers or by businesses, public agencies, and knowledge transfer collaborations.
- Consultancy: professional service or advice supplied for a fee.
- Staff development: development and acquisition of skills through training, conference attendance, self-managed exercises, or collaborations.

Each of these practices incorporates or connects to a variety of other practices. For instance teaching involves aspects such as assessing, mentoring, lecturing etcetera. It is not within

the scope of this research to map or describe each of these activities analytically; my inquiry aims instead at describing how these become integrated and absorbed in a coherent professional identity, elucidating the role played by various elements (managerial controls, institutional norms, material forces, social games), in shaping this assemblage of practical performances.

In order to answer these research questions I needed to collect and analyse data about actual actions and performances, interpretations and narrative reconstructions of experience, in local and global discursive fields. In order to compose the dilemma between the desire of a detailed and 'emic' account of the rich phenomenological reality experienced by my informants and the necessity of assessing the generalizability of my observations and analysis, thus producing a more 'etic' theorization (Headland et al. 1990) I opted for a two-pronged research strategy. The use of mixed methods, which is infrequent in identity studies (Canato & Ravasi 2013), was adopted in order to increase the scope of the inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln 2005), not in the hope of arriving at an overall positivist truth (Silverman 2010).

First, I critically reviewed a vast literature on the issues of management education (this analysis can be found in Chapters 6 and 7) with the intent of mapping the discursive background, the major institutional forces and the political-economic context that both frame and condition the 'local phenomenology' experienced by my informants and directly observed by me. This analysis, which was performed before conducting fieldwork, served in the first place to 'sensitize' my observations, directing my attention, and allowing me to capture some of the intimate, implicit knowledge on which interpretations and descriptions are based. It also helped me to place the observed phenomena in the context of a wider discourse and to integrate my limited (in time and space) observations with those of other

researchers. Finally, it provided a useful benchmark to test the limitations or transferability of my observations (this issue will be discussed in detail in the next section).

In order to describe the local context, the small 'd' discourse characterizing the organization in which my informants are embedded (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b), I used a 'hybrid', theoretical-empirical technique. On the one hand I built on a handful of high quality published studies that have recently investigated the same organization, UTS Business. On the other hand I have drawn on a variety of empirical data (interviews with the School Dean, promotional material published by the School, strategic and action plans) to identify key 'themes' and characteristics of this local discourse. The purpose of this analysis (included in Chapter 8) is to interpret and situate members' accounts and their observed behaviours better while also ascertaining some of the forces (both symbolic and material) that affect individual practices.

The second empirical 'pillar' of my investigation is the ethnographic observation that I conducted while being embedded in the discipline group as a PhD candidate. As such it is an example of the 'at-home' ethnography described by Alvesson (2009), based on natural access to a cultural setting in which the ethnographer is already an active participant, thus assuming a role of "observing participant" (Moeran 2009).

Ethnography uses fieldwork, participant observation, in-depth interviews as well as other techniques to provide a descriptive study of human behaviour in different cultures and societies. Its distinctive features are the collection of first-hand data on the social life of the studied organization, culture or society; the emphasis on the detailed examination of the nature of social phenomena, attained through an extended on-the-field study; the interaction between researcher and those who are studied and a style that interweaves

data collection and theory building (Locke 2001). The primary sources of observational data gathered in this phase are summarised in Table 3.

In relation to the semi-structured interviews, it is important to highlight that they were conducted in the form of 'natural conversations', where the prompts offered by me did not follow a specific, fixed sequence but were rather a list of interesting 'conversation topics'. My intent was not to compare individual views using a set of consistent stimuli but to obtain rich data on different understandings, experiences and modes of action. The themes that I consistently aimed to discuss with my informants included their life stories; the way in which they see their role in the organization; the ways in which they engage in the various functions that they have to perform in their academic role and how they cope with different challenges related to them; their relationship with the organization in which they are embedded and their perception of its change initiative.

**Table 3 - Primary data sources**

	Method description	Collected data
Ethnographic observations	‘Observant participation’ (Moeran 2009) of academic work during workshops, conferences, lectures and seminars during a 12 months period	Observation of 35 events (seminars, "clinics", lectures, conferences etc.): approx. 120 hours of observation.
	Shadowing (McDonald 2005; Czarniawska 2007, 2008b): I followed a senior academic during an entire day. The observation date was chosen in order to select a day where a diverse array of activities were scheduled.	Field notes and recollections in memory
	Other ethnographic observations in the form of participant observation (Atkinson & Hammersley 1994); auto-ethnographic observations	Field notes and recollections in memory of approximately 1200 hours of ‘informal observation, collected over 24 months
Interviews	Semi-structured interviews. (Duration of 1-2 hour) of management academics. Interviewees were selected using a stratified purposeful sampling approach (Patton 1990).	14 interviews (duration of 1-2 hour) to management academics (9 males and 5 females), plus two interviews with the Dean (fully transcribed, approx. 400 pages)
Survey	An invitation to fill in a self-administered questionnaire comprising 19 closed and open ended questions (plus 4 demographic ones) was sent to all academic faculty members of the business school (including full time, part time and adjunct faculty members)	72 respondents (31% of the universe). Responses were gathered during one month

The purpose of the questionnaire was dual: on the one hand to obtain additional data on ‘what academics actually do’ (and where, with whom, using which tools etc.); on the other



hand to obtain a first, crude test of the transferability of my qualitative observations. The survey was administered to all academics that were, at the time, either full time, part time or casual staff members of the Business School, while my interviews and ethnographic observations were almost exclusively focused on members of one Department (the 'Management Discipline Group'). The evidence of statistically relevant differences in the survey between the respondents belonging to this specific group and their colleagues from other disciplines would denote specific limits to the generalizability of my analysis, while their absence supports applicability beyond the specific context.

In addition to the 'recorded' field data the analysis incorporated another set of implicit, off-the-record and pre-conscious observations. While my formal 'fieldwork' lasted about one year, my reflections and analysis have been influenced by the impressions and experiences that I also accumulated in almost three years of 'participation' in the observed context, initially (in the first 18 months) on the basis of a regular attendance at events, workshops, courses, and then in an almost constant, daily 'immersion'. I unavoidably incorporated this *gestalt* of experiences in my analysis and theorization, in the form of reflexive auto-ethnographic observations. Only a small fraction of these observations have been recorded in the form of organized field notes; after all "not everything that is consciously and unconsciously experienced can be noted in a physical, written record (...) [and] that broader set of intuitive understandings of the field situation (...) remain hidden until the formulation of ideas in the process of creating a written account" (van der Waal 2009, p. 36).

The use of recollections in memory to complement field notes is therefore an explicit strategy employed to include the embodied component of knowledge and understanding, in coherence with a practice theory perspective. Memory is a form of embodied, social

action shaped by social processes and culture (Collins & Gallinat 2010, pp. 11-2) and as such can be a more sensitive (even if imprecise) recording device than fixed field notes.

The observational data that I used is certainly 'sullied' by my subjectivity but this does not imply that my account is idiosyncratic:

“One experience the indigenous environment and life ways for oneself, see with one's own eyes, even plays some roles, albeit contrived ones, in the daily life of the community. But the professional text to result from such an encounter is supposed to conform to the norms of a scientific discourse whose authority resides in the absolute effacement of the speaking and experiencing subject” (Pratt 1986, p.32)

In this case, my account has been purged of the subjective flavours that are considered distasteful by the canons of organizational ethnography by means of the incorporation of a wealth of other quantitative and secondary data. In this context I have used field notes to compare and contrast the more nuanced experiences that my memory has retained and constantly re-worked, stimulating a productive dialogue between textual records (which are reified, 'factual' and fixed in the past) and my recollections (which are inventive and informed by my constantly evolving understanding of the field).

## **Can a swallow make a summer? Case study limits and transferability**

Organizational ethnography's purpose is “to uncover and explicate the ways in which people in particular work settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situation” (van Maanen 1979, p. 540), which make this heuristic approach ideally suited to my inquiry. However, since “the ethnographer's method of collecting data is to live among those who are the data” (Rosen 1991, p. 5) this

method forces one to focus on a single case study. Such constraint is not necessarily problematic, since case study research is an appropriate research method for answering a number of 'how' questions on a contemporary set of non-controllable events (Yin 2009, p. 13). The research strategy in fact allows a detailed contextual analysis of a limited number of events or conditions and their relationships, focusing "on the dynamics present within a single setting" (Eisenhardt 1989, p. 534).

Such an 'idiographic' research approach permits one to identify both "the structures, the generative mechanisms and the contingent factors responsible for the observed patterns" (Tsoukas 1989, p. 556) and has a number of distinctive advantages: it allows the development of a nuanced view of reality; it takes into account complex context-influenced variables; allows focus on the process and on the way in which a complex social interaction unfolds rather than a simple measurement of correlation between phenomena (Flyvbjerg 2006).

Cases are often selected because of ease of access (Silverman 2010, p. 139) and this is no exception to the rule. In the introductory chapter I have already provided justification for the choice of this specific organizational unit as an empirical setting, arguing that what makes it ideal is the presence of a series of tensions that facilitate the surfacing of tacit elements of identity and practice. Nevertheless ease of observation does not guarantee generalizability; in fact the most problematic aspect of this heuristic approach is the problem of external validity of the finding, in other words their limited generalizability. As in Aristotle's famous remark that "one swallow does not make a summer" (Aristotle 2000, p. 7) my examined 'sample' could not be representative of management scholars, not to mention the broader universe of academics. There are a number of ways to address this issue.

In the first place case studies should not be considered a 'sample' since they rely on analytical (and not statistical) generalization. The purpose of such generalization is to generalize a set of results to a broader theory (Yin 2009, p. 43). In any case, it has been suggested that in the context of qualitative studies rather than of 'generalizability', it is more appropriate to talk of *transferability*, which entails providing rich and detailed information on the observed context in order to facilitate the application of acquired knowledge in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Shenton 2004; Shah & Corley 2006).

In particular, the comparison between the data collected and analysed in the ethnography with those emerging from my critical review of the literature on business education can provide a litmus test on the transferability of data. If the surveyed members of the organizational unit that I observed (a discipline group in an Australian business school) appear to be not atypical in regards to their behaviours and actions when compared with other academics investigated in different times and locations, then it is likely that my descriptions and conclusion can apply outside the idiosyncratic 'small world' that inspired them. This does not imply that my ultimate purpose is to reach categorical conclusions about academic identities or practices; it is rather to raise questions about which social practices and arrangements are *possible* (Silverman 2010, p. 209).

Finally, the selection of the case can also be a strategy to enhance external validity (Flyvbjerg 2006, 2011). A case can be selected because it represents an extreme or deviant example (and therefore be useful as a benchmark for the 'norm'). On the other hand a case can be 'critical' because it "permits logical deductions of the type, 'If this is (not) valid for this case, then it applies to all (no) cases'" (Flyvbjerg 2006, p. 230). Finally, a case can be 'paradigmatic' for its metaphoric and prototypical value. While it is not possible to predict in advance the paradigmatic value of UTS Business as a case study, it can safely be assessed

that it has the potential to be an extreme and critical case exemplar in relation to the issue of the management of academic practices. UTS Business and its parent institution, the University of Technology, Sydney have invested an enormous amount of material and symbolic resources in a project that explicitly aims at fostering change and integration in business academic practices, re-embodiment the identity of their organization in an iconic building. As it will be articulated in Chapter 8, this building and the strategy of which it is an expression incorporates both implicit and explicit statements about the 'appropriate' practices and identities of academics. Resistance (or compliance) to this powerful symbolic<sup>11</sup> attack can be revealing of the hardness, elasticity, malleability of academic identity and practice.

One last notation must be devoted to the selection of the subjects that I observed and interviewed. Ease of access entered into consideration also in this case: I was interested in collecting the voices of people that I could easily approach and observe in their everyday activities. I also chose to include the maximum possible variety of subjects in order to encompass those 'underlying tensions' that enhanced the possibility of practice and identity revealing breakdowns. For this reason I interviewed both male (10) and female (5) academics, members of the professoriate (7) and lecturers (8), members of the 'City' (11) and of the 'Country' (4) campus.

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<sup>11</sup> 'Symbolic' because, at the time of the study, the building was still under construction. It would be interesting to re-examine the case after the relocation of the faculty in the new premises, to investigate how the material deployment of this managerial strategy has affected practices and identities.

## **Making sense of the data: data analysis strategies and practices**

To some degree, my model for the analysis of the data has been unorthodox. For instance I have not tried to use my empirical data to ‘discover theory’, following the grounded theory canon (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Strauss & Corbin 1994). Those who believe that a ‘good’ ethnography needs to be analytic, systematic and structured (Werner & Schoepfle 1987), might find that this mixed approach does not allow a complete saturation of data categories and classifications, maybe even making some of the descriptions impressionistic and not sufficiently backed up with data. I need first to justify the reasons for my departure from the canon, before making explicit my heuristic approach. Finally, to appease possible concerns with the trustworthiness of my findings (Lincoln & Guba 1985), I illustrate how it is still possible to trace back my interpretations to recorded data.

In the first place my epistemological standpoint cannot be easily reconciled with any form of “positivist data fetishism” (Lancione & Clegg 2014, p. 175). In fact the clear-cut distinction between first and second order concepts (van Maanen 1979) that canonically guide organizational ethnographers is quite problematic when considered in an anti-positivist perspective, especially when considered from a practice theory viewpoint these ‘second order concepts’, as theories built by the researcher to explain the patterns of the observed social practice, become simply ‘first order’ concepts of academic practice. The problem is that a ‘second order’ theorization is not practically relevant from the practitioners’ perspective (which does not mean worthless, as I will explain shortly). What I mean is that social actors do not need to access the researcher’s theory to perform their work and conduct their activities. On the other hand researchers need to produce theory to justify their role and their salary.

Even the distinction between ‘observational’ (what people actually do) and ‘representational data’ (what they think/say they are doing) has a limited purchase in this context, not because of the presence of deceitful, ignorant, or un-reflexive informants, as suggested by van Maanen (1979). Rather, this is due to the fact that, since in social terms quantity is not equivalent with *relevance*, it is not the frequency of a behaviour or event that makes it central to the production of identity, but rather its perceived significance. What counts in practice is therefore not the chronological use of time but the *kairotic*, subjective time experience (Czarniawska 2004c) that can make a rarely performed but highly significant activity more prominent than a frequent, ‘unimportant’ one.

For instance a single heroic (or cowardly) act can and will outshine the myriad of run-of-the-mill daily activities that constitute the daily routine of a practitioner<sup>12</sup>. These latter acts disappear from consciousness; while consuming most of the time and energies of a person’s work they can be made invisible in the self-narrative because they are judged irrelevant, both in their identity and practice. Academics, for instance could, spend most of their time engaging in managerial or administrative tasks, while discursively discarding these activities as a lamentable nuisance, and not the central identity-defining component of their practice.

Another exemplification of this phenomenon is provided by the classic study by Mintzberg (1973) on managerial work. His field research exposed how actual managerial practices are made of fragmented, erratic, serendipitous, reactive actions. The social identity or the institutional norms for doing managerial work as re-produced by business education have

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<sup>12</sup> In fictional literature there are numberless example of this *topos*, the first prominent examples that spring to mind are Conrad’s *Lord Jim* or Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.

hardly been transformed by this effective description. To this day the work of managers is still imagined as analytic, purposeful, strategic, planned, and this *illusio* is maintained by a selective attention to those (rare) situations in which this ideal picture is actually enacted. The fact that practitioners do not require to know such theorization of their activities in order to operate does not subtract from the potential value of a theoretical reflection.

When the orientation to theory is approached from a phronetic perspective it requires renouncing the rigid separation between the two orders of explanation ('second order' academic theory versus 'first order' members' interpretation devices), considering instead their interplay. First, the existence of contradictions between what people mostly do and what they consider important in defining themselves can reveal the presence of struggles between requirements and desires, professional images and bureaucratic demands, individual aspirations and material constraints. Second, a critical theorization can allow practitioners to reflect on the desirability of the current arrangements and to suggest what could be done about them, by transforming practices.

Being more creative and abductive, considering a broad spectrum of influences and information rather than being analytic and deductive, painstakingly accumulating evidence for each of my statements, is an approach embedded in the peculiar conditions in which the ethnographic narrative is produced. I am faced with the necessity of telling a story derived from an audience that already has a strong familiarity, both practical and theorized, with the situation described. In this sense I find myself in the opposite situation to that depicted by Geertz (1988, pp. 4-5), who described that the real challenge for anthropologists is to convince a sceptical audience that they truly "have been there". My challenge is to capture the *zeitgeist* of what it means to be a business academic in a specific context in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I will do so by weaving a narrative that,



necessarily, will resonate with the realities experienced by some of my readers, allowing them both to recognize and to see something new in their practice. Empirical materials collected became engaged in a critical dialogue through which I reviewed and expanded theoretical frameworks (Alvesson & Kärreman 2007). The dialogic process produced had a *gestalt* quality, formed through an iterative development in which theory informed observation that, in turn, informed critical readings of theory. Only when an overall coherent narrative emerged did I go back to my coded material to identify 'quotable' citations and episodes that could exemplify my argument. This implies acknowledging that "ethnographic texts are unescapably allegorical (...) a representation that interprets itself" (Clifford 1986, p.99), stories that generate other stories in the mind of the reader.

Embarking on the daunting challenge of writing an ethnography targeted to an audience of highly reflexive and theoretically literate 'natives', any analysis must demonstrate that it offers an honest representation of their experiences and ideas (Lincoln & Guba 1985). Such representational validity will be achieved if the content of my description resonates with the lived experience of these native readers. I purposefully chose the word 'resonate', rather than 'mirror' to explicitly state that my objective is not to provide a purely descriptive picture of academic life. Such an effort might have its apologetic or critical uses, for instance to make known to a wider public the woes of tertiary education labourers or to debate the negative consequences of certain academic power games but it would fall short of my intent to create an account of the mutual constitution of power, knowledge, identity and practice. Instead of providing a more or less comfortable fit with the pre-existing understandings of various practitioners one's account should enable these actors to reflect on their practices and taken-for-granted sensemaking categories, perhaps enabling reflexive questioning of current practices, momentarily suspending the *illusio*, the tacit acceptance of the rules of the game and the relevance of its stakes (Bourdieu 1990). In a

phronetic perspective it is only by realizing that a state of things is not unavoidable or 'natural that it becomes possible to raise such questions.

The resulting narrative will produce a meaningful account rather than a scientific truth (Czarniawska 2004b; Rhodes & Brown 2005): the latter seems chimeric in a context of contested meanings, which is to say, in any social relational context. More than anything, I strive to be an "unpretentious intellectual craftsman" (Mills 1959, p. 224), equipped with the expressive canons of the trade while constrained by the demands of patrons; hence, I have to respond to some essential conditions of the 'academic game', providing, whenever possible, proof of the correspondence of interpretations to an objective external reality (Silverman 2010, p. 154), maintaining a "two way correspondence between an empirical reality and a symbol system" (Stablein 1996, p. 351). Doing so with the information extracted from the literature (Chapters 6, 7 and 8) or with the data obtained through my survey (Chapter 9) has been straightforward, due to the nature of the data. In the former case this was achieved by means of accurate bibliographic references, while in the latter by the use of established statistical techniques (detailed in the aforementioned chapter) with which one could collate and compare individual responses to close-ended questions.

Ethnographic data poses more problems for the craftsman. The semi-structured interviews were fully transcribed. In order to maintain the anonymity of the informants, they were categorized using the binary 'junior/senior' academic, labelling as senior those with a professorial title and/or in a senior executive position. An alphabet letter also distinguishes individual respondents. The 'de-identification' of data started from the transcriptions to guarantee informants full confidentiality. I used Nvivo as a tool for coding and structuring data, performing text searches and counting instances and intersections of codes. The coding emerged from an abductive process that incorporated some discursive themes

emergent from the literature, while patterns of interpretation transpired both from prior theoretical reflection as well as my informants' descriptions and from observation of their interactions.

An apt metaphor with which to describe the process of research in writing is offered by the concept of musical improvisation. van Maanen (2011) likened organizational ethnography to playing music rather than solving puzzles and Brown, Humphreys & Hatch (2003) have compared ethnographers to jazz musicians, for the reason that ethnography implies a dialogue with others, which involves creativity, intuition and spontaneity in the process of finding one's own voice, one's own timbre, style and authenticity.

Part 3.

The discursive  
landscape of  
management  
education and  
science

# Chapter 6.

## From the creation myth to everyday life: a brief history of business education

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### Why turning to history?

*I would like to write the history of this prison, with all the political investments of the body that it gathers together in its closed architecture. Why? Simply because I am interested in the past? No, if one means by that writing a history of the past in terms of the present. Yes, if one means writing the history of the present. (Foucault 1979, pp. 30-1)*

A business school is not a closed system, a self-contained universe. As any other organization, it belongs to an interorganizational network (Benson 1975), interacting with a field of institutions and practices in a process of mutual constitution (DiMaggio & Powell 1983; Powell & DiMaggio 1991). As a field it is also a locus in which different discourses are constantly produced and re-produced, offering a plurivocal (albeit finite) repository of legitimate modes to interpret and make sense of the reality (Fairclough 2001).

This part of my dissertation focuses on the big 'D' Discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman 2000b), the paradigmatic sets of statements that shapes ways of talking, thinking and acting in the field of business and management education. Its ambition is to provide a critical account, based on the critical discussion of the history, evolution, ambiguities and struggles that

characterize the industry and institutional field of management research and education. Metaphorically, this field can be represented through surveying the global discursive landscape inhabited by the research subject and subjects. As individuals' ways of thinking, feeling and expressing ideas are influenced by their location in a geographic and historical setting (Triandis 1989) so 'my' management academics' identities and practices are unavoidably affected by this landscape, sometimes in direct and explicit ways, other times in more subtle and oblique manners.

The present chapter is the starting point of this surveying exercise, whose purpose is to provide a brief account of the history of management education from its origins to modern days. The justification for this archaeological analysis is the fact that a confrontation with the past can reveal the contingent nature of the power structures in which we are embedded, a notion that is unfortunately overlooked in 'a-historical' organizational studies (Üsdiken & Kieser 2004). Looking at the past allows one to understand contemporary practice and institutional arrangements, showing how they reflect specific historical developments, demonstrating that the way in which issues are presented and framed in the current discussion is characterized by ideological fads and fashions (Kieser 1994). Describing the history of business education is not a simple task, especially considering Jacques' warning that "every story in the past tense is not history" (2006, p. 39): several pitfalls (being purely anecdotic, succumbing to anachronisms or looking for 'evolutionary' tales) can be anticipated for those who desire to embrace an historical turn in organization studies (Jacques 2006).

My aim is to trace transformations in conception(s) of business education rather than producing an authoritative chronicle of the birth and development of management education. In this regards what is offered is not a history of facts, people and deeds so

much as an archaeology of ideas and representations, one that seeks to describe the development of current discourses (Foucault 1972). As a consequence I am more interested in comparing and contrasting different accounts of this history than in retracing primary sources, accepting that narratives can be discursively more powerful than facts (Bruner 1991).

The chapter start by considering the orthodox account (the localized 'creation myth') of the rise and diffusion of business education. Epic narration will be criticized to show the existence of other interesting but subordinated stories underrepresented in mainstream narratives. In the first part of my account, I consider the geographical diffusion of the idea of management education, comparing and contrasting different 'local strains' of the life-form, 'Australian' models of management education. In the context of a globalized academia, with international faculty and hyper-mobile professors the most successful business schools have become similar to premier league soccer teams, having for instance Asian financiers, American management, and a multi-ethnic faculty (Altman & Laguecir 2012). However, there is a lineage to be found in the genealogy of the different local varieties of business school and even in a globalized world evidence of diversity survives.

In order to enrich my archaeological survey I will investigate one of the pivotal concepts empowering the political economy of business education, accreditation and ranking systems. In conclusion, after considering current criticisms of a 'morally-deaf' system that reproduces managerialist ideology, my archaeology turns to the 'imagined futures', outlining some of the proposals that have been put forward to reform business education, thus completing the representation of the ideological and discursive milieu in which the specific reform initiatives of UTS Business are situated.

## ***Once upon a time in America: a tale of business education:***

During the 20th century, American business schools transformed their identity and practices in an attempt to gain respectability and stature as well as in response to various market and political pressures. The chronicle of this historical process has been compiled by a number of different commentators who have depicted a remarkably similar plot.

‘Invented’ in 1881, when the University of Pennsylvania established the Wharton School, the first university based school of business (Khurana 2007, p. 88), they were initially trade and practice oriented. However in the 1950s they repudiated their origins as trade schools for apprentice managers, to embrace the more appealing character of academic institutions devoted to the scientific study of management (Bailey & Ford 1996, p. 8), responding to incentives and pressures from both large foundations and the federal government (Ghoshal 2005, p. 77; Khurana 2007, pp. 210-22). The ‘scientific turn’ in business education can be seen not only as an example of the spreading and consolidation of an ideology of modernity in the late 1950s in USA (Latham 2000) but also as a special case of “the progressive “rationalization” of society [that] is linked to the institutionalization of scientific and technical development” (Habermas 1987, p. 81). Emblematic of these changes was the introduction and dissemination of behavioural science theories into the business schools, notably articulated through the agency of Cyert and March’s (1992) text.

Two main ideas imprinted the pedagogy of these reformed business schools: first, teaching had to be informed by positivistic scientific research and second, it should be organized along disciplinary lines inspired by the functional areas of business administration (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003, p. 88). The rigid separation of knowledge in specialized disciplines reflected the positivistic belief in the possibility of codifying knowledge by breaking it into parts (Raelin 2007, p. 498), and as such was a key tactic in the professionalization strategy



aimed at legitimizing management as an academic discipline. It allowed rapid institutional legitimation, through mimesis of established behavioural sciences in recruitment patterns: psychology, political science and above all, economics, were sources of new graduate recruits.

According to Lorsch (2009), the transformation of disciplinary silos dominated by a positivistic epistemology was not immediate but happened in the decades following the structural changes initiated as a response to the reports from the Ford and Carnegie inquiries conducted in the late 1950s. The 'original' intent of producing novel knowledge about organizations that would improve the practice of management in general was to be achieved by generating a politically neutral account of organizations as systems. Conceiving of all organizations as systems meant that no attention needed to be paid to contentious issues of ownership, relations of production, and other issues raised by Marxist-influenced scholarship. Systems were either more or less efficient and were essentially impersonal and thus non-hierarchical in their relations. Relations occurred between sub-systems rather than between concrete entities such as capitalists and labourers. Academic careers ensued that were founded on the mass-production of mono-disciplinary pieces of academic research, of the type that Kuhn (1962, p. 35) would describe as "puzzle-solving" normal science, in which the basic notions of behavioural science and system theory were taken-for-granted.

Systems theory, while regarded as scientifically legitimate, was highly abstracted: it had to be, to apply to all organizations, anywhere (Parsons 1951). In part, its abstraction fed its legitimacy. The systems paradigm was high value cultural capital in the university but its abstractions were, in many respects, irrelevant to the everyday concerns of practical men – and almost all managers were. While the vested interests of academics pushed in the

direction of 'practically irrelevant' knowledge, growing institutional and market pressures were reorienting the strategic priorities of business schools: MBA programs progressively became 'cash cows' for universities (Zell 2001; Starkey, Hatchuel & Tempest 2004), a phenomenon that can be framed in the broader shift in the social function of education, to see it increasingly "as an industry, not as a mechanism for socializing and educating the Young" (Pfeffer & Fong 2004, p.1510). The falling public support for higher education (a process that started in the US and spread to other countries) has made business schools more dependent on revenues from student tuition fees and corporate contributions, further reducing autonomy (Trank & Rynes 2003). Business schools are major means for the conversion and translation of capital: initially, they were arenas in which the economic capital of established family businesses in static or declining branches of industry could be translated into the intellectual capital necessary for access to dynamic areas such as consulting as means for getting better jobs and salaries (Thomas, Whitley & Marceau 1981). The cultural capital that accrued to established wealth, such as yachts, country houses and ski lodges, was of importance in these translations. For these elites, attending business education isn't so much an opportunity to inject 'rationality' and scientific analysis skills into the toolbox of practicing managers, nor a vocational choice, so much as simply an investment of time and money aimed at career opportunities with higher salaries and bonuses (Pfeffer & Fong 2004).

More generally, as business school education spread out to encompass many more recruits than merely the sons and, increasingly, the daughters of established local elites, its intellectual production became part of the trend toward the 'commodification of knowledge' (Trank & Rynes 2003), which involved the "segmentation of knowledge in discrete packages or qualification which could be purchased (...) The MBA can be seen as one such package" (Sturdy & Gabriel 2000, p. 980). With a huge proliferation in the number

of institutions offering MBAs, new forms of stratification occurred in the marketplace, signalled largely through cost and status measures, which were directly related. Originally based on notions of embedded expertise, stratification claims were increasingly made on the basis of a reification of the offerings of business schools though the “the process of commensuration—or the transformation of qualities into quantities and the creation of common metrics” (Wedlin 2011, p. 203) represented by the introduction of MBA rankings in the 1990s.

All these trends are thought to be general; according to this account all business schools tend to display similar strategies and conducts. Institutional theory (Di Maggio & Powell, 1983) highlights the role played by mimetic isomorphic behaviours, a thesis accepted, amongst others, by Khurana (2007). The fact that demand for managerial skills has for a long time exceeded supply has also moderated the selection potential of the market (Wilson & McKiernan 2011) and probably reduced incentives for developing innovation and diversification in the offerings of business education. Also, since MBA students were universally treated as ‘paying customers’ (Zell 2001) their preferences and idiosyncrasies became a driving force. One consequence is that “business schools, under pressure to make their students happy, succeed in the ratings, and grow their enrolments, have begun to all follow essentially the same strategies and produce MBAs who look remarkably alike” (Pfeffer & Fong 2004, p. 1514).

The industry has thrived this past half century. Business schools based around the reformed and academically oriented American model that developed in the 1960s spread around the world, making the MBA the first authentically global degree (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003; Mintzberg 2004; Starkey et al. 2004). The number of graduate management programs around the world has risen exponentially in recent decades and the spread of more

condensed programs than the traditional US two years fulltime MBA degree is a demonstration of the commercial success of a business education derived but evolved from the American business school model.

MBA's are highly valued by employers: according to recent Corporate recruitment surveys an MBA "is the 'gold standard' and 'guarantee of quality' as well as a company's 'long-term investment'" (GMAC 2010, p. 14) and a full return on investment for graduates is guaranteed in just a couple of years, at least in the USA, where "the salary premium for an MBA compared with a bachelor's degree is an increase of \$40, 000" (GMAC 2012, p. 3).

But why is this apparently successful strategy now increasingly in question? What now troubles most business schools are increasing market pressures, caused by a combination of factors that include the excessive supply of business education, the reduction in demand due to the Global Financial Crisis and, above all, the emergence of alternative business education providers (Datar, Garvin & Cullen 2010). Even the sustained success that business education has had until this day is – paradoxically – a potential threat. Universities have come to depend on business schools as a vital source of funds (Starkey et al. 2004; Starkey & Tempest 2008), and a reduction in their profitability could spell disaster not only for the schools but for their parent Institutions as well.

An apparently complex plot can be reduced to a linear narrative: the attempt to legitimate management by taking a scientific turn in business education has – because of the combination of vested interests and a blind following of market logics – gone awry and the abandonment of the professionalization project has reduced legitimacy both with respect to the components of the managerial class and the practices of business education. Now, as it becomes more saturated by providers, the business education market is becoming highly

competitive such that the lack of diversification and relevance of offerings poses strategic threats.

## **How the West was won: beyond America**

While this tale of the rise and (possible) decline of business education is accorded credence by a large number of observers it seems too simple and linear to be entirely plausible. For instance, it appears unlikely that thousands of organizations operating in different countries, with different local market, cultural and institutional pressures, will all end up following the same models, under common mimesis. To start with, the model of business schools, while generally based on the American prototype, has a number of regional variations.

European business schools' reality is "more loosely configured, more heterogeneous, and, therefore, more open, in principle, to design innovations" (Starkey & Tempest 2008, p. 386). Europe in the post war period was not 'virgin terrain' ripe for colonization by American cutting edge ideas of business education. A conspicuous number of commercial schools had been founded across Europe in the 19th century, actually predating by many decades the 'first' American inspired European business schools (Antunes & Thomas 2007, p. 384) such as INSEAD and LBS. However, their development was slower and constrained by national (and linguistic) borders, and the diffusion of the American standard in the 1950s (also propelled by national interests) eclipsed – on a global scale – these alternative models.

Still important differences persist between European and American business schools. Some differences are 'institutional', given the high cultural and linguistic diversity of Europe versus the homogeneity of USA; the much heavier European regulatory environment, as

well as the smaller size of European business schools (Antunes & Thomas 2007). To this list relevant historically formed differences must also be added. In particular, a divorce between practice and theory in management studies together with the drive for disciplinary specialization never happened completely, thanks to the existence of strong nationally specific academic and intellectual traditions. For instance, in Germany management education remained anchored to a strong practical model (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003); a similar attitude had been present in the UK but was later displaced with the American model finally becoming embraced in the 1980s (Wilson & McKiernan 2011). On the other hand, in France the market niche of education in administration was already occupied by an old, highly reputed and successful group of elite institutions – the *Grandes Ecoles* – that, while providing their students a level of accreditation and networking comparable or superior to those of the top American schools (Bourdieu 1996), were traditionally informed by a high degree of interdisciplinarity (Kumar & Usunier 2001). Beneath these were the regional schools run by regional Chambers of Commerce. The majority of managers in continental Europe always possessed a strong ‘professional’ identity, often having graduated either in engineering or in economics (Kumar & Usunier 2001), degrees that signified a degree of status and prestige. As a consequence, in this context the symbolic value of a more ‘professionalizing’ MBA had less purchase.

Another set of factors setting American and European management education apart pertains to the ‘competitive differences’ between the two systems (Antunes & Thomas 2007), including different systems of governance and funding. In his recent work on the global state and perspectives of business education, Iñiguez de Onzoño identifies at least three different funding modes: Subsidized business schools, Endowment-funded business schools and Tuition-based business schools (Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011, pp. 64-6). The second type, a normal feature of the US university system, are generally not available to their

European counterparts outside of a few elite institutions such as Oxford and Cambridge. Consequently European schools that belong to public universities, together with those located in countries where education is largely state-funded (such as China), belong to the first category. However, the trend, especially in the UK, is toward a reduction of public funding (Starkey et al. 2004) and this is pushing a number of schools towards the third funding option. The top rated European business schools, which operate in an elite niche of the market for professional vocational education, do so largely through fee-based models where prestige and price are closely related.

Another types of competitive differences that set apart the Old and the New World is the fact that European management education appear to be more sensitive “to international business, languages, diversity and culture” (Antunes & Thomas 2007, p. 394). This higher flexibility is probably connected to their tendency to assume a more critical approach to the theories and models that they teach, compared to American practice (Pfeffer & Fong 2004). A salient factor in this differentiation are the biographical experiences of many of the European elites in having been educated in a cognate social science rather than explicitly in business education: for the generation that rose to prominence in the post war wave of growth the options of a highly developed undergraduate education in business were not available. One last difference noted by Antunes & Thomas (2007) concerns the type of media used to transmit knowledge: US business education traditionally relied more on discipline and research-based journals, while European institutions preferred books and practice oriented publication outlets. However, these trends are converging on the US model in all those systems in which state rankings of research efforts have become the norm. Access to the privileges afforded the best-ranked schools drives behaviour towards the metaphorical Eden in which additional resources to tuition fees are plentiful, distributed on the basis of research profiles.

## East of Eden

Looking beyond the 'Western axis' one of the most striking elements that differentiates Asian business schools is the striking difference in market conditions: while the competition seems to be stiffer in US and Europe, especially for lower ranked schools, there is a steady growth in demand in Asia, especially in the Far East (Datar et al. 2010). Expansion is due both to the rapid development of Asian economies but also to national government commitments to increasing the capacity of local business education, attracting students that previously went overseas, mainly to English speaking countries, to achieve their MBAs (Zammuto 2008).

The sheer number of institutions offering business education in Asia (by 2010 there were more than 1200 of these in China, Philippines and India alone) illustrates the potential impact for local and global economies and business education discourse, even if, at the moment, the contribution of these new players is under-recognized because of post-colonial complexes and the hegemonic role of American and European business school models (Yeung & Kulwant 2011). Analysing the case of Malaysia, Sturdy & Gabriel (2000, p. 989) attribute a significant part of the success of foreign-validated MBA 'products' to their reputation for integrity and fairness in awarding degrees, and to the symbolic resonance of a prestigious 'brand', such that "students engage in seemingly obsessive comparison between the prestige of different institutions".

As for Latin America, the hegemony of the 'American way' of business education is more apparent than real: Brazilian business schools, for instance, have adopted the acronym MBA, and some of the more prestigious ones, such as the Brazilian *Fundação Getulio Vargas*, were US-founded but the format, the content, and the methodology have diverged from North American programs, as they slowly built a global reputation and profile



developing their own educational model, adapting both local cultural, market and institutional conditions as well as building on traditions of critical thinking (Leme Fleury & Wood Jr 2011).

Another case altogether is that of developing countries, where the shortage of qualified managers can be a factor hindering development. However, rather than being educated to the same model and with the same methodologies used in mature economies, aspirant managers receive instruction more aligned with some of the specific challenges and opportunities that characterize developing countries (gender equity, difficult access to markets, need to preserve local culture, opportunity for technological leapfrogging etc.) aiming at the development of 'micro-business' models, that is designing and managing systems of transactions that require minimal infrastructure and investment (Wood 2004). Another example relates to the transferability of training methodologies in different cultural contexts: case study methods, a centrepiece of the American approach to business education, are at odds with the educational customs and role expectations of students and trainers in Middle Eastern and North African countries (Gillespie & Riddle 2004).

When addressing the role of Business Education in emerging markets we are not only faced with the moral imperative to overcome postcolonial supremacy. The issue at stake is the need to understand the role that business education can and must play in steering the growth of economies that are forecast to become the leading global players in the next few decades (Cheng et al. 2007). It has been argued, for instance, that in emerging markets the need for the quantitative functional business skills typically developed by the 'standard' model of management education need to be complemented by mental, interpersonal and cultural skill teaching to allow the graduated students to cope with the complex negotiating environments (Reeves-Ellington 2004). The diversity of experiences and perspectives is not

well represented in the critical literature on business education, probably because of the discursive predominance of North American research on management (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003, p. 89). Also, American schools, or schools inspired by their model, dominate present rankings (Antunes & Thomas 2007, p. 395), creating a hegemonic scenario according to which elite US business schools are an absolute benchmark of quality that less developed countries should aspire to.

## **“We’re doing fine in the Lucky Country”: Australia**

The teaching of management subjects in Australia had an early start: in 1916 a lecture in industrial psychology was delivered at Sydney University. The event, however, was an isolated instance such that before World War 2 vocational business education was almost absent in Australia (Pearse 2010, p. 128). It was only in the 1950s that the US model of business education, with its complement of case studies analysis and scientific management models was imported. By 1963 Melbourne, Sydney and Canberra had Universities offering American style MBAs (Pearse 2010, p. 162).

Before the 1970s, Australia academic production in the field of organizational sciences appeared to be marginal, even if the nation was a ‘net exporter’ of scientific talent. Eminent early authorities in the field of management sciences, such as Elton Mayo or Fred Emery, were born and trained in Australia but made their reputations and careers in the USA and UK (Pearse 2010, pp. 156-8). In the late 1970s an elite institution explicitly modelled on US models was founded as the Australian Graduate School of Management at the University of New South Wales which both imported academic personnel from elsewhere as well as recruiting and developing a locally sourced elite. At the time, policy saw no need for more than one national business school, designed and funded on an elite model.

The boom in the business education industry of Australia is a phenomenon that started in the 1990s after the end of the binary divide: the number of business students grew threefold between 1990 and 2007, often in what had been former Colleges of Advanced Education and Institutes of Technology that assumed university status. Between 2001 and 2005 the number of postgraduate business degrees doubled, with a dramatic increase (+126.7%) in master by coursework students (Pearse 2010, p. 223). As a result, according to an overseas observer, present day “Australia has 39 universities, of which two are private, and a further 70 business schools” (Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011, p. 83)<sup>13</sup>.

Expansion has been propelled both by domestic and international opportunities. Internally, apart from a constantly growing economy, driving forces have been the increased numbers of students enrolled in courses (engineering, information technology, accountancy and law) that put graduates on a managerial career path, as well as the proliferation of management education and training service providers, which came to include management consulting firms, recruitment firms, specialist training firms, professional and industry associations (Pearse 2010, p. 224).

The real catalyst for the development of the industry has been the international market. Since the 1990s Australian universities, with diminishing levels of public funding, have joined other private education providers in aggressively recruiting international students paying higher fees (Zammuto 2008). The number of overseas students enrolled in Australian higher education providers in 2010 has risen to 336,000 units for a total fee income of around \$3.7 billion (Norton 2012), while their total contribution to the Australian

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<sup>13</sup> This reported figure probably includes some replications (for instance when an undergraduate and a Graduate school of business refer to the same parent institution). Wikipedia (2014) presents a detailed list which allows the exclusion of duplications. The residual set includes 56 individual institutions, which for the most part are emanation of Australian universities.

economy was estimated to have reached \$10 billion in 2006 (Zammuto 2008). These numbers put Australia ahead of both the USA and UK as destination of choice for fee-paying international students (Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011, p. 87).

The growth in international demand has been a boon for the Australian education industry, since nearly half of international students are enrolled in management and commerce courses (Norton 2012). The other side of the coin is that the success in attracting foreign students has made the sector highly dependent on this source of revenues (up to 37% of the total), thus exposing Australian schools to the competition of a global market (Zammuto 2008). For instance a strong currency has recently altered the path of international student education demand, increasing the demand for short term (and lower quality) training (Ross 2012).

A more relevant consequence for the organization of academic institutions in Australia is that rich market opportunities provided by the growth in demand for managerial labour in a booming regional economy, together with the progressive disengagement of Government from education funding, created a very fertile environment for an increase in corporatization and commodification of business education. Market forces seem to have been the primary drivers of the business education transformation in Australia, as the story of the non-implementation of a landmark government report appears to indicate.

The federally funded *Enterprising Nation*, on the status of management education in Australia, better known as the 'Karpin report' (Karpin 1995), identified the need to focus on 'soft' management skills, such as leadership, innovation and creativity, people and diversity management, communication, formulating a number of recommendations aimed both at developing a national approach to entrepreneurial and management competences development, together with the implementation of specific improvements to local

management schools. A recent review of the Karpin report (Ibsa 2012) shows that implementation of the report's recommendations were patchy at best. The scattered reform initiatives, such as curricular innovations to promote leadership and entrepreneurialism, or the establishment of strong industry-academy linkages, have been put in place haphazardly by individual business schools. The coordinated strategic effort advocated by the original report is completely missing. The Karpin report has been accused of making some unsubstantiated claims and to have been hindered by its top-down approach (Schaafsma 1997). These shortcomings might have played a role in its limited impact. Other factors were also in play, however. The report, commissioned by the Keating Labor administration, had the misfortune to have been delivered shortly before Labor lost office to the Coalition. With a new government came new priorities and initiatives and a swing away from the directive, neo-corporatist model that Labor had favoured. The opposition, upon assuming government, was inclined to distance themselves from as many of their predecessors' initiatives as possible, especially those that seemed, in any way, corporatist. Regardless of the causes, the failure of the initiative demonstrates that transformations in the landscape of business education in Australia have been driven mostly by market forces, as the IBSA report (2012) explicitly acknowledges.

Stressing that market forces have mostly shaped the industry and that public policy initiatives have lagged behind these does not necessarily mean that the actions of business education stakeholders in Australia have been random or un-coordinated. On the contrary, the remarkable Australian success in attracting international business students has been attributed both to the role played by strategic public private partnership initiatives (like IDP Education, a consortium jointly owned by Australian universities and by SEEK Ltd, which promotes studying in Australia by providing international applicants with information and

services) and to an initially favourable government policy in regards to student visas (Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011, p. 84).

Despite commercial success the field of business education in Australia still seems to be a cause of dissatisfaction for various industry commentators and practitioners who accuse Australian business schools of being “out of touch with the real and practical needs of the management community”, also claiming that “the capability of Australian management and education business schools has declined in recent years” (Ibsa 2012, p. 30). The limited impact of university based business schools is also attested: according to a 2003 industry survey only one tenth of management education in Australian was conducted via ‘formal programs’ (Hall, Agarwal & Green 2013, p. 13). Apart from the diffusion of informal forms of apprenticeship and on-the-job learning the vigorous competition from the non-university higher education sector (that also includes professional associations) whose offer of business-related courses has the lion’s share of the market, is reducing the centrality of academic management education (Norton 2012, p.13).

In order to summarize this complex scenario, Hall et al. (2013) have listed a series of environmental factors that influence Australian business schools. These can be grouped under four major dimensions characterizing the contemporary context of management education in Australia (see Table 4).

**Table 4 - The context of Management education in Australia**

<b>Financial dimension</b>	The continued shift from government funding to student fees as major source of income has driven universities to aggressive pursuit of the patronage of international students. Increasingly, this put their economic stability at risk of market fluctuations, as demonstrated by the financial difficulties caused by the recent decline in international students' enrolments. For business schools, expected to generate a surplus to be redistributed across the university, this is particularly relevant.
<b>Normative dimension</b>	Being part of broader universities, business schools have to adhere to university wide goals, policies and practices. There are also subjected to the requirements of public regulatory and assessment bodies such as TEQSA (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency) or the Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) exercise, which drives academic behaviour in the direction of publication in academic journals. Moreover accreditation agencies such as AACSB, EQUIS, AMBA, together with a number of professional bodies, pressure business schools toward the adoption of certain offerings and practices
<b>Vocational education dimension</b>	The 2008 Bradley Review of Higher Education and the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) Review have stressed the need to improve the articulation between the VET sector and universities. Another aspect is the relationship (partnership or competition?) between business schools and other providers and stakeholders in the management education area, such as the Australian Institute of Management (AIM) and the Australian Institute of Company Directors (AICD)
<b>Technological dimension</b>	The push towards a stronger use of information and communications technology (ICT) for program delivery, driven also by the new opportunities offered by the implementation of the National Broadband Network

Adapted from Hall et al. (2013, p. 11)

If we divert our attention from the market and institutional forces and we direct our gaze to the internal environment of Australian business schools, the most salient factors to emerge are a progressive modernization that is reducing academic autonomy and causing tensions

between academic and administrative staff. Ryan & Guthrie (2009) identified three forces shaping the progressive corporatization of Australian Universities: 'hard managerialism', academic consumerism and fragmentation of work. The first is based on the principles of performance measurement, strong central management and cost-reduction. The second indicates student empowerment, given their status as paying customers, which allegedly causes conflicts of interests and biases in the assessment processes. The third refers to various practices disrupting traditional academic prerogatives, such as the efforts to diminish disciplinary boundaries by increasing centralized control or through the casualization of academic jobs. Focusing in particular on the Australian Graduate Schools of Business, the same authors list several common characteristics of these organizations:

- "they are a separate academic unit within a Faculty, or a Faculty in their right, considered as a profit centre within the university [...]"
- are multidisciplinary and generally smaller but better resourced than their undergraduate counterparts [...]"
- ...they are highly commercial in focus relying wholly on non-government sources of funds
- deans are appointed, not elected [...]"
- [they] do not follow the traditional academic calendar but work on a variety of semesters, trimesters, terms and blocks, holding classes twelve months a year and at various hours of the day and night. [...]"
- academics teach in a variety of modes across a number of different sites; individual academics receive salary loadings over and above the prescribed salary level for academics and/or have opportunities to supplement their incomes through additional teaching, training or consulting. "

(Ryan & Guthrie 2009, p.326)

Summing up, business education in Australia in the second decade of the 21st century appears to be a dynamic industry where commercially aggressive semi-corporate identities compete – in globalized market – to attract paying customers. Even their scientific output is



increasingly commoditized with academics being pushed to increase their productivity. Moreover, mimetic forces are pushing them in an “accreditation rush” in order to increase reputational capital that can be quickly converted into higher incomes for their graduates (Zammuto 2008). The effects of ranking and accreditation are discussed in detail in the next section.

## **“Top Ranking”**

Zooming back to a global perspective, it is necessary to consider another twist to the tale of the evolution of business education: the rise (with no fall in sight) of accreditation and ranking systems. While this development can be seen as an essential step towards the professionalization of management, the definition and application of a set of standards has important political implications and repercussions. Such a system, instead of promoting excellence, can indeed turn into a conservative force that maintains the status quo and preserves the prerogatives of the established elites (Lowrie & Willmott 2009).

Accreditation in business education is bestowed mainly by three bodies, which have the declared intent of regulating the quality of MBA programs: Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and the Association of MBAs (AMBA) (Wilson & McKiernan 2011).

The first body is the oldest, having been created in 1916 in the US (in fact the ‘AACSB’ acronym originally stood for ‘American Association of Collegiate Schools of Business’). While the AACSB “is typically viewed as the most prestigious accreditation” (Zammuto 2008, p.261) various concerns have been expressed about its neutrality, objectivity and leadership: colourfully, it has been compared to “a group of foxes guarding the MBA henhouses” (Navarro 2008, p. 120). According to Lowrie & Willmott (2009) the problem is

the absence, in AACSB accreditation, of requirements for a core curriculum paired with ambiguity concerning the definition of either the 'quality' of education or its 'utility'. The 'hollow core' offers the impression that the accreditation system is flexible and capable of including a diversity of approaches, a factor that helped diffusion of its accreditation beyond US borders. However, these authors argue, the peer-reviewed process that it uses is inherently conservative and only those institutions that comply with the traditional education (and ideological) model of elite US schools can hope to achieve accreditation. Even if each school can set its vision according to its sense of mission the criteria for establishing the quality of its achievement, such as number of active researchers, publications, PhDs etc., is largely US-inspired.

The other major global standard, EQUIS, can be seen as part of a broader strategy to promote and standardize the European field of higher education, enhancing European ways of management education (Wedlin 2011), similarly to AMBA, which originated in the UK. These two transatlantic newcomers are progressively conquering shares of the accreditation market around the world (Zammuto 2008).

What these accreditation systems have in common is their isomorphic drive: they tend to produce conformity within MBA programs (Grey 2002; Pfeffer & Fong 2004), and at the same fail to mandate the presence in the curricula of essential professional competences, such as business ethics (Trank & Rynes 2003). 'Accreditocracy' has even been accused of reducing the capacity of business schools to cope with a more turbulent environment, by focusing on incremental improvement, rather than innovation (Julian & Ofori-Dankwa 2006).

Zammuto (2008) is more optimistic about the value of accreditation as it provides legitimacy through quality certification and forces schools to formulate a clear mission and

strategy. While the legitimating value of accreditation is evident, rituals of strategy rather than realities of practice can develop an unwarranted faith in accreditation as a strategy (Clegg, Carter & Kornberger 2004) that underestimates the specific challenges linked to the loosely coupled character of education organizations (Weick 1976, 1982; Orton & Weick 1990). Since accreditation standards do not differentiate between elite and non-elite schools (Julian & Ofori-Dankwa 2006), the need to distinguish providers in an increasingly competitive market stimulated the diffusion of ranking systems. In the case of business education, it is the economic press that arrogated the role of arbiter and assessor of the quality of management education programs, focusing in particular on the MBA. These media rankings have been used now for more than three decades, the first one having been proposed by *Business Week* in 1988 (Devinney, Dowling & Perm-Ajchariyawong 2008). The system is highly selective, with no more than one fifth of the AACSB accredited schools making these rankings (Halperin, Hebert & Lusk 2009).

The metrics used to rank business schools are slightly different but the most influential ones (developed by the *Financial Times*, *The Economist*, *Business Week*, and *The Wall Street Journal*) share a common model, based on five criteria (Wedlin 2007): program features (curriculum, teaching), employability and career of graduates, school features (e. g. infrastructures, faculty), incoming class features, and research. The presence of different providers of ranking is not a demonstration of pluralism: a comparative study conducted by Halperin et al. (2009) shows that, regardless of apparent differences in methodology and metrics, all the major ranking systems appear to be measuring the same dimensions in the programs.

The proliferation of media rankings is not a phenomenon restricted to business education (Wedlin 2007) and their function is not simply to help consumers make an informed

decision. They can also “serve as rhetorical devices to construct and maintain legitimacy for organizations and their activities (...) [and] can be used to create, enhance or validate organizational reputation” (Wedlin 2011, p. 203). According to Gioia & Corley (2002) ranking systems can have a beneficial effect, by simulating a competition that forces schools to become more reactive to changes in the business environment, more relevant, more accountable, and more strategic in defining their positioning and focus (even if the same reservation that I have expressed before when discussing the claimed strategic benefits of accreditation systems apply here). They also make available useful information for applicants who have to decide where to study, simplifying the otherwise daunting task of acquiring and comparing data from different providers (Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011, pp. 118-9).

Both accreditation and ranking systems produce a powerful reputational effect that has a clear influence on competition in the business school market, creating a clear elite category, compounded by the high brand loyalty that develops among a school’s alumni, who have an interest in enhancing the symbolic value of their degree and therefore support and promote their alma mater, producing a virtuous circle (Antunes & Thomas 2007, p. 395). The reputational boost given by positive ranking has an immediate effect on the financial returns of a business schools, thanks to significant increases in student intake and fees (Peters 2007).

A number of concerns have been expressed about the impartiality of the system and the consequences of ‘ranking pressures’ on business education. While the independence of the referees administering the system (media outlets) is not questioned, it has been suggested that these business schools are being measured against objective criteria skewed by the unequal distribution of symbolic capital in the field.

First, in the absence of agreed upon standards as to what constitutes an 'ideal Business school' (Devinney et al. 2008), assessors need to legitimate their ranking system. Since their first goal is to attract their readers (Glick 2008) they are not overly concerned with preoccupations of epistemological rigor; their purpose is simply to provide a simple and credible (in the sense of convincing, plausible) source of information. The simplest way to do that is to make sure that the results "confirm, to some extent, previously held notions of the positions of leading business schools in the field" (Wedlin 2011, p. 212). Consequently each player is confronted with a benchmark of excellence that a-priori, in an uncritical fashion, has been attributed to a group of traditionally dominant American educational institutions. Such practice contributes to one negative outcome of rankings, which is their effect as a homogenizing force. As typically happens with accreditation systems, what was created to differentiate induces conformity as aspirant institutions seek to emulate the elites in a process of institutional isomorphism: thus, rankings induce business schools to become more alike (Wedlin 2007), thus conforming to a template dominated by US orthodoxy.

Apart from the prejudices embedded in the choice of metrics, doubts have been raised about the rigor and the quality of statistical methodologies used in these ranking. They are often based on simple aggregations of information: consequently, each of these can be expected to contain measurement errors (statistical 'noise') such that the overall ranking can be extremely 'noisy' (Dichev 2008). Moreover the metrics used have been shown not to be mutually independent (Safón 2009). In any case it is not even clear what is the underlying construct that these metrics are measuring: is it reputation, performances, customer satisfaction, market positioning or something else? (Devinney et al. 2008).

The limited focus of rankings that instead of assessing the overall offer of a business school are oriented primarily towards MBA program assessment adds to the problem of their scarce methodological validity. Since MBAs and E-MBAs are the most practice- and industry-oriented products of business education, the synecdochal use of 'MBA' in lieu of 'business school', risks returning these institutions to their former status as "glorified vocational schools, training people for jobs, rather than educating them as professional managers" (Gioia & Corley 2002, p. 108).

It would be insufficient to improve the indicators and the methodologies used continuously to measure the quality of management education, as some ranking organizations reportedly do (Bradshaw 2007), because these rankings tend to produce a series of unintended consequences. Some critics have, for instance, alerted the market to the de-professionalizing effects induced by 'ranking pressure'. Trank & Rynes (2003) argue that the influence of metrics unrelated to educational content can distract schools from improving their pedagogy and even induce biases. They note, for instance, that the starting salary of the alumni (a typical metric in ranking) is much more strongly influenced by the geographical location of the school than by its 'quality'; moreover, it can induce schools to prefer students willing to pursue more lucrative careers (e. g. finance) over those who want to work in areas such as human resources or non-profit organizations. The tendency can bring about other inequalities, such as discrimination of ethnic minorities (Gioia & Corley 2002, p. 113) whose cultural capital is widely perceived as deficient.

The fact that rankings are driven by structural factors that are difficult to change (Wilson & McKiernan 2011), together with the short tenure of deans and the frequent shift of criteria, induces a short term strategic outlook in business schools. As a consequence they tend to

focus on branding and image promotion, to create an impression of progress, at the expense of investments in substantive pedagogical improvements (Gioia & Corley 2002).

The fact that rhetoric is becoming a driving force for strategic choices is not a prerogative of business education. Alvesson (1990) argues that in the last few decades the emphasis of managerial action and control has increasingly been placed on images rather than substance. In fact, the three conditions identified by Alvesson as drivers of the phenomenon of the 'rise of corporate image' are all present in the case of contemporary business education: the loosening of traditional culture (in this case, the academic model focused on slow, deliberate research and educational activities); the tertiarization and increased complexity of organized society (business schools need at the same time to supply services in a global competitive market and produce research), as well as the increased significance of mass media (in particular easier access to information via the web which makes information on the reputation of business schools much easier to distribute and consume).

These reflections appear to be confirmed by empirical data: a quantitative study on the relationship between reputation and ranking (Safón 2009) has revealed how ranking and student quality are the two key factors influencing business schools' reputations, while research, placement success and the learning outcomes have no effect on it. In other words these data suggest that the promise of quality embedded in the ranking is more important than actual performances.

Even the positive effects of the competition induced by ranking systems can be stifled by the presence of virtuous circle which favours those American institutions on whose profile the ordering criteria have been created: being rated 'world best' allows them to attract top students and resources (in the form of alumni donations), while their alumni are sought by

high paying companies; consequently, elite business schools maintain their prominent rank, while it is extremely difficult for new players to enter among the chosen few (Corley & Gioia 2000). Clear demonstration of this is the fact that while operating in an apparently dynamic environment, “the majority of schools in the top 50 has tended to remain relatively stable over the years, with a small number of schools fighting each year over the bottom rungs” (Navarro 2008, p. 111).

This debate appears balanced in considering pros and cons of these practices of measuring the quality of business education but it is somewhat curtailed by the conceptual lenses employed by the observers. An institutional theory framework underlies most studies on the subject (among others Gioia & Corley 2002; Grey 2002; Pfeffer & Fong 2004; Zammuto 2008; Wilson & McKiernan 2011). Some employ a theoretical lens derived from Bourdieu (Vaara & Faÿ 2011; Wedlin 2011; Vaara & Faÿ 2012) while little attention has instead been given to perspectives that could help understanding how the power of rankings unfolds, such as discourse theory, theories of power, and actor-network theory.

It is not just a matter of theoretical standpoint but also one of focus; the literature that I reviewed above considers the issue of ranking and accreditations in the perspective of the competition among business schools. When the angle is broadened, considering the role of rankings and accreditations in the perspective of the diffusion of the ethic of performativity, in that of the centrality of measurement as “primary contributor to human knowledge” (Harzing & Adler 2009, p.73), and as part of a broader strategy of commodification and managerialization of academic activity (Parker & Jary 1995; Parker 2014), then the necessity of looking at the phenomenon through a ‘power-sensitive’ lens becomes evident.



## **“Political World”: reflecting on the effects of academic metrics**

The notion that “power and knowledge directly imply one another” (Foucault 1980a, p. 27) is not only reflected in the ‘publishing game’ but also in the ‘rational’ strategies developed by business schools’ management in coping with ranking systems. The recourse to ranking metrics to assess academic quality can be read as a *facilitative circuit of power* (Clegg 1989), a technological and discursive system that creates the conditions that shape practices, behaviours and structures of power in business schools, sometimes directly producing political struggles. For instance Gioia & Corley (2002) report the case of MBA students who effectively blackmail deans into providing them with extra resources by threatening to sabotage ranking by means of organized negative feedback campaigns. MBA students are therefore seen as more ‘powerful’, with the need to please and entertain them becoming an important concern for academics (Zell 2001). Also, the hegemonic effects of rankings are also illustrated by the almost universal display of ‘submissive’ behaviour by business schools’ deans when it comes to requests for information for ranking purposes (Glick 2008).

The power effects of ranking systems are subtle because “power blurs the dividing line between rationality and rationalization” (Flyvbjerg 1998, p. 97). Rational decisions and strategies are made according to spurious criteria that do not differentiate quality nor provide guide for action: ranking an educational institution on the basis of the salaries of its alumni means, at best, rewarding its geographical location, past reputation, and selection criteria. Instead of promoting innovativeness and learning, most metrics recompense timidity and conservation. Nonetheless these criteria are ‘made rational’ by their widespread application and discursive power.

Actor-Network Theory (Callon 1986; Latour 2005; Law 2009) enables the analysis of “the mechanics of power as the actors develop them as they construct and maintain actor networks” (Clegg et al, 2006: 238). Its application can therefore be useful to describe the development of the social and power structures connected with the introduction and diffusion of these measurement systems, also moderating the tendency to seek for a single agent responsible for the current state of things, considering instead that the social reality of business education is shaped by the interaction of human-actors and non-human actants. In fact ranking systems are actants that exert a clear effect on human agents, multiplying and altering the intents of their creators (i.e. the publishers and editors who originally developed them). Even if the ranking exercise is absorbing an extraordinary amount of resources, both from the controlled and the controllers, bloating bureaucracy, nevertheless, the patent absurdity of every institution ‘envisioning’ in order to outrank others, being in the ‘best 10%’ (King 2009), demonstrates the power effects of these rankings.

The development of an actor network around the accreditation and ranking systems can be described following Callon’s (1986) four moments of ‘translation’. *Problematization* encompasses the process through which both media outlets and elite American schools have manipulated, seduced and coerced other stakeholders in order to become an obligatory passage point in the network. *Interessement* represent the silencing of alternative models, not based on ordering and assimilation; rather than by explicit censure it is by means of *non-decision-making power* (Bachrach & Baratz 1962, 1970) that this has been achieved, marginalizing innovation (Mingers & Willmott 2013). *Enrolment* describes the phase in which most institutions have, enthusiastically or begrudgingly started to play the accreditation ranking game. Finally, *mobilization* has been achieved when AACSB and

some of the most prestigious financial newspapers assume the role of spokespersons for business education.

A phronetic reflection on ranking and accreditation systems as applied in academia in general and in business education in particular is needed to integrate this 'political' analysis. Above and beyond the issues of reliability and validity of the metrics it is necessary to contemplate the practical and moral consequences of this "ranking frenzy" (Policano 2005, p. 26). There are a number of critical flaws in the idea of a simple, concise indicator that can be used as the main source of information on which to base the decision of which school is best.

To start with, business education (not to mention Academia in general) has a number of social functions and responsibilities that cannot be reduced to that of guaranteeing high entry salaries or successful careers for their alumni. Moreover it is futile to try and define an archetypical model for a 'perfect' business school because that would mean assuming a completely outmoded and rejected Tayloristic conception of the 'one best way'. Similarly it is not possible to define the ideal recipe in terms of research versus teaching vocation; different institutions can excel in one field but not in another. Finally, attending a good school means that students are exposed both to multiple learning outcomes (know how, but also linguistic skills, critical thinking, personal and emotional development) and social gains (networking, symbolic capital) and the complexity of these educational outcomes cannot be reduced to a standard curriculum.

Metrics can be useful to stimulate competition and promote accountability but rather than become the dominant driver for strategy they should be considered as one of the different factors that can influence strategies and behaviours in business schools, alongside

pluralistic knowledge development, social and environmental sustainability, social innovation, and ethical commitment.

The most important aspect of ranking as a phenomenon is that it is here to stay, and that it constitutes an essential feature of the discursive landscape in which management academics, together with their colleagues from other disciplines, operate. “Despite their failings, their ambiguity and their imprecision, business school rankings have become reified” (Wilson & McKiernan 2011, p. 462) and whether they like it or not business schools have to play the game (Corley & Gioia 2000; Peters 2007). As Gioia and Corley effectively summarize, “all the things wrong with the rankings matter considerably less than the plain fact that the rankings matter” (2002, p. 112). What is left is to reflect on the implication of the ‘irresistibility’ of this power/knowledge configuration, in particular the fact that, above all the rest, these measures of performativity seem to ignore (or contrast) the development of ethical and social responsibility in management.

## **Long live managerialism! Business schools between moral deafness and overt propaganda**

*“However much you twist,  
or whatever lies that you tell  
Food is the first thing, morals follow on”  
Berthold Brecht , The Threepenny Opera*

While the business model driving the industry still seems to be viable, many observers have expressed serious concerns about the loss of legitimation of business education. After the numerous scandals that rocked the corporate world in the early years of the 21st century, and especially in the aftermath of the economic meltdown that followed the 2007/2008

global financial crisis, it is unsurprising that business schools have been accused of propagating a morality based on a principle that – to paraphrase Brecht – could be summed in the line ‘stock options are the first thing, morality follows’.

The list of authors who have either questioned the legitimacy of the discourse of business schools or stigmatized the apparent lack of ethics in their teachings is vast (Wilson & Thomas 2012). Khurana (2007) argues that during the past few decades the original professional ideals have been replaced by an ideology of market capitalism, one which students internalize. Grey (2002) agrees, critiquing MBA programs which socialize students into ‘managerialism’ and ‘turbo capitalism’, reproducing one-sided thinking and problematic practices. Equally, according to Pfeffer and Fong, business schools seems to be concerned only with teaching how to maximize monetary returns for shareholders, “offering a value proposition that primarily emphasizes the career-enhancing, salary-increasing aspects of business education” (Pfeffer & Fong 2004, p. 1501). Such an attitude has harmful effects on the ethos of managers: “by propagating ideologically inspired amoral theories, business schools have actively freed their students from any sense of moral responsibility” (Ghoshal 2005, p. 76). As a negative trend this has been attributed to competitive pressure among business schools (Pfeffer & Fong 2004), to deficiencies in the theoretical apparatus supporting business education (Ghoshal 2005), or to a lack of professionalism in management practice (Bennis & O'Toole 2005).

The blind belief in the ‘free market’ ideologies that crept into the business schools’ curricula has all but displaced ethical concerns during the last decades. Managers turned from the Parsonian ideal of being agents of stability whose mission was to build stronger and larger corporations (Khurana 2007, p. 363) to servants of the short term interests of largely

institutional shareholders who have no attachment either to the company or to the wider community.

In fact, research shows that people attending business education tend to display selfish attitudes, even showing an inclination towards outright unethical and devious behaviours (Carter & Irons 1991; Cadsby & Maynes 1998; Schulze & Frank 2000; McCabe, Butterfield & Trevino 2006; Malhotra & Wang 2011). Moreover people tend to replicate in the workplace the 'bad habits' (such as cheating) in which they were inculcated during their college years (Nonis & Swift 2001). However it would be simplistic, if not outright paranoid, to assume that all MBA students are actively selected on the basis of their greed or that business schools have been capable of disarming their moral sense. It is more plausible to search for the causes of this moral deficit in the unintended side effects of business discourse and of the ideologies that are promoted by contemporary business education.

A specific interest in the ideological role of business education and in its (lack of) commitment to ethics has animated critical studies of the topic, usually grouped under the 'Critical Management Education' (CME) label (see Contu 2009, for a review). It is an approach that sits squarely within the Critical Management Studies (CMS) tradition (Alvesson & Willmott 1992), embracing the same preoccupation with the political implications of organizational life and management. CME, for instance, acknowledges that far from being a 'neutral' set of techniques, management is imbued with values (Grey 2002). Its ideology, managerialism is based on "performativity (work until you drop), efficiency (people defined as expendable resources), and commitment to short term, bottom line decision criteria" (Boje & Al Arkoubi 2009, p. 104).

On top of the naturalized status of performativity and efficiency, the very idea of 'rational division of labour' and specialization can produce perverse effect on the ethics of

management. An excessive disciplinary specialization, for instance, risks producing moral desensitization, decoupling task from organizational outcomes, transforming managers into 'willing executioners' (Bauman 1989). The bureaucratic rationalization offers an alternative, petty morality, which appeases the sense of duty of the corporate golems, where, in Weber's words "The 'objective' discharge of business primarily means a discharge of business according to calculable rules and 'without regard for persons'" (cited in Bauman 1989, p. 14). It is likely that the collapse of companies such as Lehman Brothers is both a consequence of unbridled greed of testosterone fuelled young executives (Currie, Knights & Starkey 2010) as well as "a product of routine bureaucratic procedures" (Bauman 1989, p. 17).

The sin of business education is not simply one of omission. If on the one hand business schools are not doing enough to counteract the perverse effects of the extension of managerialism throughout society, on the other hand they are also actively reproducing and perpetuating ideologies that are serving the interests of international business elites. Vaara & Fay (2012) have attempted to analyse this system of ideological reproduction by applying Bourdieu's perspective to conceptualize business schools as part of a global 'field' where the influence of ranking and accreditation systems combined with competition and the desire of the student to acquire symbolic capital drives them towards convergence and conformity. The set of values and discourses, *nomos* and *doxa* (Bourdieu 1977), underlying this field, summed up by the labels of managerialism, neoliberalism and instrumentalism, serve the interests of an elite as well as being ethically flawed and unsustainable, as the current financial and environmental crises demonstrate. The problem is that servile, uncritical acquiescence in such principles on the part of business schools, combined with pedagogical practices that reinforce problematic dispositions, such as short-term orientation, attitude to exploitation and elitism tend to reproduce and strengthen this

*nomos* and *doxa* (Vaara & Faÿ 2012, p. 1036). Such reflections are in stark contrast with the “admiration of the scientific method, analytical tools, and precise testable models among business educators” (Steiner & Watson 2006, p. 423). The problem is that most studies tend to objectify managerial work, leading to a technicist, purportedly value free understanding of management (Grey 2002). Any technique is always a value-laden activity; furthermore, the practice of management has particular ethical implications because it is necessarily based on the exercise of power (Grey 2002).

In fact this use of power over other individual is often uncritically accepted and taken for granted by most commentators, especially when is cloaked in the noble idea of ‘leadership’. As such the power of managers is not only legitimized but even advocated by many as a solution to integrate the teachings of business schools, overcoming the ‘banes’ of functional silos-thinking and analytic rigidity (Bailey & Ford 1996; Datar et al. 2010; Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011). But as Khurana (2007, p. 362) wisely noted, the notion of leadership is far less ethically constraining than that of professionalism. By emphasizing an ethos of ‘power to’ versus ‘power over’ (Clegg et al. 2006) and in idealizing the picture of the manager as the rational leader guiding and inspiring the troops we fail to recognize the foibles and to treat the pathologies that are frequently associated with organizational kingpins (Kets de Vries 2006) and we ignore the oppressive, conformist and marginalizing nature that the concept can assume when treated within a bureaucratic setting (Calás 1993).

Such concerns with the ethics of power and leadership have no little or no visibility in mainstream business education discourse. The model of manager that management education reproduces is that of a technocrat, an agent who acquires methodologies helpful to solve narrowly defined problems but without any deontological concern. This breed of managers is not oriented “toward the realization of practical goals but toward the solution



of technical problems” (Habermas 1987, p. 103). The traditional ‘hands-on’, practice-based model of management despised by the reformers of business education in the 1950s is now replaced by a technocratic conscience built on “the elimination of the distinction between the practical and the technical” (Habermas 1987, p. 113). Business students are socialized through the routine application of discursive techniques, such as the use of case study analysis, that privilege a technical rationality over critical reflection on goals, which fails to contemplate the political and relational character of practice (Roberts 1996).

The paradoxical consequence for managers is that the same technocratic paradigm that was supposed to enhance their status can become an oppressing force, reducing them to mere executors. In other terms, the rationalization of business education effectively de-professionalizes management, whose “hired hands” (Khurana 2007) can cause harm to organizations not only because they are driven by their self-interest (Jensen & Meckling 1976) but also because they are not sufficiently self-empowered to tackle the complexity, uncertainties and moral ambiguities of managerial actions. The process can be seen as part of a systematic strategy towards “the commodification of professional knowledge that makes individual employees more expendable” (Trank & Rynes 2003, p. 193). It is quite ironic that managers are rewarded for making their peers, and ultimately themselves, disposable objects.

Nonetheless “modern management education has all but ignored the idea of a moral education” (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003, p. 96). In fact, even today only about one quarter of AACSB-accredited schools in the United States include in their curriculum a stand-alone business ethics course (Rutherford et al. 2012, p. 183). While the preoccupation about the role that business education should play in developing ethical behaviours in management is

shared also by most AACBS deans, it is evident that their capacity (or willingness) to walk the talk is limited (Evans & Marcal 2005).

The decision to include business ethics course does not seem to be a strategic choice motivated by an agenda of professionalization of management or informed by a belief in Critical Management ideals. On the contrary its primary drivers appear to be the values and institutional setting of the organization (e. g. business schools with religious affiliation will frequently include some form of moral education) and the characteristics of their leadership (gender and professional background), while the financial wealth of the institution appears to make them more conservative and unyielding to external entreaties, thus resisting the introduction of ethical courses (Rutherford et al. 2012).

On the other hand it would not be sufficient simply to include in the program of study a tokenistic course on ethics (Ghoshal 2005). What most commentators advocate is to make ethical training an essential part of the curriculum, as happens for other professions (Grey 2002; Trank & Rynes 2003) but with a caveat: “the process of socialization consists in the manipulation of moral capacity – not in its production” (Bauman 1989, p. 178). A major issue is that “academic attention to public accountability has focused on the legal aspects of compliance and regulation” instead of “cultivating reflective judgment on matters of moral accountability” (Jarvis 2009, p. viii). Future or present managers cannot be ‘made moral’ by feeding them normative ethics training; their moral standards can (and should) instead be probed, discussed, critically examined and nurtured all through the course of their training.

A concrete way to help students to engage with moral issues is to adopt action learning approaches, such as ‘service learning’, that is the application of professional skills to community based projects (Steiner & Watson 2006). CME thinkers propose a different

approach. Acknowledging that critical reflection (and not rule following) is at the basis of any ethical behaviour, rather than teaching ethics or doing things with ethical purpose, the most important moral teaching that should be imparted to business students is about the development of critical thinking. Boje & Al Arkoubi (2009) identify six dimensions to being critical: scepticism towards rhetoric, tradition, power, objectivity, plus the capacity to be critical towards oneself (reflexivity) and towards the reality where education takes place.

Questioning rhetorical statements, traditionally accepted common-sense wisdom, ingrained power structures and the possibility of an objective and unbiased description of reality as well as seeing the context in which we learn and act as being, in turn, subject to a number of historical, political, economic and cultural pressures, is all part of the capacity “to engage in a critical (de)construction of knowledge and reality” (Boje & Al Arkoubi 2009, p. 10). The capacity for self-reflection not only involves students but also their teachers, since self-reflection on part of the academic staff (about their own motivations, limits, biases) is essential in inculcating an authentic critical spirit (Ford, Harding & Learmonth 2010). Such critical reflection should also address the role of management research and education, their goals and outcomes, understanding the hegemonic conditions that can drive and influence these (Syed, Mingers & Murray 2010).

Being trained in critical thinking or receiving ethical education does not guarantee that these capacities will be developed (Grey 2002), since what is actually learnt by students is not determined by the content of the teachings, even less than it will determine what is actually able to be implemented in the workplace (Ford et al. 2010). The greatest challenge for academics is not to develop ‘effective ethical training’ but to “develop knowledge about how others can arrive at their own new knowledge through practice” (Syed et al. 2010, p. 81).

It would be worthwhile to consider a solution which is exactly opposite to that advocated by Donaldson (2002) when he suggests that theories that doubt the centrality of management or the rationality and candour of managerial behaviours should have no space in business education. Aspirant managers should be more exposed to ideas and theories that make them aware of their limited rationality, of the political and ideological value of their decisions and even of the limitations of their command and control capacities. Perhaps even this solution is too timid, because still falls into the trap set by the dominant Discourse, which equates business and management. A truly revolutionary reform of business education would require creating, instead of schools for managers, “schools for organizing, and for organizers” (Parker 2008, p. 214), where people could learn from a multiplicity of viewpoint that take into account the plethora of different ways to organize and produce collective behaviours, instead of focusing only on the limited discourse of corporate management.

At any rate, what is crucial in the perspective of my archaeological investigation is the fact that these concerns for the amorality of management and business education have become in recent times one of the factors inspiring the current debate on the ‘future of business education’.

## **A way forward: disparate reform agendas**

It would be ungenerous to accuse management scholars of being entirely ethically insensitive. A vigorous debate on the social role and functions of business education and on the quality of the MBA curriculum has indeed flourished since the turn of the century. Its emergence has been attributed to a crisis of credibility faced by the industry (Dunne & Martin 2006; Navarro 2008), caused by a lack of empirical evidence of the return on the

investment in executive education (Pfeffer & Fong 2004; Dunne & Martin 2006). A widespread mistrust concerning the social contribution of the (new middle) class fraction occupied by managerial elites is mounted, in face of the scandals that rocked the corporate world at the beginning of the 21st century (Enron, WorldCom, Parmalat, to name a few).

The Global Financial Crisis has exacerbated this anti-managerial re-emergence and business schools have been accused of being complicit in its cause (Podolny 2009; Currie et al. 2010), even if empirical research shows that there is no evidence supporting such a statement (Gottesman & Morey 2010; Lindorff & Jonson 2013).

Academics have been described as 'knowledge brokers', acting as a conduit between knowledge production and knowledge use (Wren, Halbesleben & Buckley 2007, p. 485). Business schools "were founded on the premise that there is a positive relationship between research and practice" (Tushman et al. 2007, p. 345) but many commentators have observed difficulties with respect to this relationship between theories and their applications in research and practice. Some researchers articulated the concerns of executives in relation to the declining ability of business schools to provide newly graduated MBAs with cutting edge knowledge relevant for their companies (Datar et al. 2010, pp. 78-80); Ghoshal (2005) even accused the 'bad' theories taught in business schools of undermining good managerial practices.

Management education was built on the modernistic idea of management as rational organisation and manipulation of known quantities, where standardization of behaviours, formal description of responsibilities, and disciplined application of proven methods. These managers, corresponding to a Weberian ideal-type of legal-rational bureaucrats, were supposed to engage in decision making activities dealing with well-defined problems that could always be solved by applying pre-set rules such that even when faced with ill-defined

problems efficient managers could always restructure and transform them into well-structured problems (Simon 1973). The idealized description has always been at odd with a reality in which managers have to deal with entities, human beings, whose whimsical psychologies, political issues, cultural differences, make them scarcely predictable. What really strains this conception is the fact that the complexity of the managerial task has skyrocketed in the last few decades, because of unstable markets, borderless and networked organizations, globalization, a pervasive use of 'quasi organic' technologies (because of their complexity, fuzziness, plasticity) and increased financial turbulence.

The rate and frequency of structural change, the decisional pace, the number of actors and actants involved have increased exponentially and – as a consequence – managers are required to become more entrepreneurial, flexible, innovative and to do so they need to mobilize new resources. On top of their technical skills and reason they are required to make use of sophisticated rhetorical and social abilities, and even to use emotions strategically.

Contemporary managers usually face 'design' decisions where, instead of a clear problem and set of constraints they have to handle a project, which original concept can unexpectedly be expanded, and constraints and opportunities will be considered but "their composition and impact on the design in a non-deterministic way" (Hatchuel 2001, p.265). Solutions are explored as they emerge from the interplay between what is known and possible ideas whose correctness cannot (yet) be decided, and that will "follows cycles of mutual adjustment between specifications and solutions until a final 'solution' is reached" (Hatchuel & Weil 2008, p. 183).

It is not a surprise that the traditional model of business education, based on the transmission of formal heuristic methods to 'discover' the right solution to a management

problem, is in crisis. From this viewpoint the transformation that business schools underwent in the 1950s and 1960s, from vocational education institutions to theoretical research driven 'clinical schools', was not truly a revolution but an almost seamless evolution, since it did not require a rebuttal of the tenet of the manager as a sort of sophisticated 'general problem solver' (Simon 1973) an embodiment of an advanced computer software. Old business schools were teaching decisional routines in form of 'war stories' while modern one were basing their imparted wisdom on peer-reviewed empirical studies, sharing a central paradigm of management as a rational, rule based activity which did not change markedly.

Most of the criticisms raised of contemporary managerial education address one of two interrelated subjects: the lack of relevance of the education imparted to aspirant managers and the limited attention given to ethical issues (Roca 2008). These issues are an unavoidable consequence of the refusal to acknowledge the irreducible complexity of the managerial task, as well as the ensuing necessity for practicing or aspirant managers to build the capacity to deal with impossible situations, wicked problems, moral dilemmas, unpredictable events. Developing such a capacity will require a pedagogy that, instead of focusing on reassuring but myopic quantitative reductionisms and analytical illusions, overtly engages with political issues, emotions, morality, and practical wisdom. The opposition between the ideal world of theory and the messiness of practice is reflected in the literature, to the point that it is possible to discern in the managerial education discourse two 'narratives', the social science narrative, that aims at generating predictive knowledge, and the professional one, which emphasizes the importance of practice (Starkey & Tempest 2008). Even if the solutions to the 'crisis of business education' proposed by the majority of commentators are compatible and coherent with these needs there are two issues that weaken reform potential.

To start with, most writers suggest that is crucial to restore the original project of professionalization of management (Khurana 2007; Lorsch 2009), by making business schools more similar to medical clinics or law schools (Bennis & O'Toole 2005) and some authors have even proposed specific methodologies and curricular adjustments aimed to pursue this objective (Holtham, Melville & Sodhi 2006). Others support the idea that Business should be reoriented as a subject matter and not just as a way of getting a job, in order to attract students who are intrinsically interested in the subjects instead of people only motivated by extrinsic rewards, such as salaries and career opportunities (Pfeffer & Fong 2004). The problem with this position is that it seems to advance the idea that 'professionalism' is a value in itself and that it can be employed as a method to ensure that managers are held to higher moral standards. It draws on a 'romantic' idea of a professional as a disinterested servant of abstract deontological principles, a missionary at the service of humanism and of the advancement of the discipline.

On the one hand, in the case of established professions such as medicine or law, professionalism has demonstrated that is not a failsafe protection against abuses, dishonesty and opportunism. Moreover we have to acknowledge that becoming a profession is first and foremost a strategy that an occupational group puts in place to protect its esoteric knowledge, market position, economic and social status advantage by entering in a regulative bargain with the state (MacDonald 2007). Consequently professions are, since their inception, imbued with partisan interests, domination issues and class conflict, and professionalization is more likely to perpetuate inequalities than to guarantee ethical behaviour.

On his part Mintzberg (2004) suggests a more radical solution to the problem of bridging the distance between the rarefied and ordered models of academic knowledge and the



complex and ‘fuzzy’ realities of management practice: business schools should teach only to practicing managers. Entailed in this would be a de-construction of self-referential disciplinary silos, attained by reducing their decisional power, promoting ‘eclectic’ researchers and teachers, bringing in practitioners and redesigning the work space (Mintzberg 2004, p. 412). While Mintzberg’s argument is convincing, his approach has two practical limitations: first most business schools could certainly not contemplate the idea of renouncing the revenue coming from young taught postgraduate students; second, the issue of how to prepare aspirant future managers to enter the workplace would simply be delegated to individual organizations’ internal training systems, that could end up either reproducing the same defects as business schools or fall into the opposite trap, that of providing exclusively technical and hands-on instructions.

It is also important to consider the need to reform the structure of the organizations involved in delivering managerial education. As we have seen, powerful drivers of the silo-mentality are the academic career paths and the rewarding systems used in universities, which passively absorb, rather than pro-actively filter the narrow minded performative accountability demands of new public management inspired public policies. Navarro (2008) lists, among the structural reforms needs, a review of the system of incentives (rewarding integrated curricula creation and a continual improvement of pedagogy), a more active role of AACSB, who should tightly link accreditation to the possession of standards of integration and relevance, and the presence of a strong dean to “overcome the institutional resistance of an entrenched faculty” (Navarro 2008, p. 119).

The issue of the role of business schools deans is raised also by Ghoshal, who solicits “leadership (...) in adapting the recruitment and promotion processes in their schools (...) but also for supporting a broader range of scholarship in the traditional fields of strategy,

organization behaviour, marketing, and others” (Ghoshal 2005, p. 88). The allegedly excessive power of tenured academics should also be balanced by the board of governors, as well as interested companies and managers (Ghoshal 2005).

Once again the limit of these otherwise sensible solutions is the lack of a clear redefinition of the purpose and mission of the business school in order to align their offer to the need of a social environment that needs entrepreneurs with a social and environmental conscience, rather than career oriented technocrats. Starkey et al. (2004) help fill this gap proposing a new open paradigm for business schools, conceptualizing them as an *agora* in action, a public space where different stakeholders can interact and learn from each other, where the strategic capacity is that of allowing interaction among multiple forms of knowledge and expertise, pursuing at the same time “knowledge for management, knowledge for society, knowledge about management and knowledge about society” (Starkey et al. 2004, p. 1529). Grey (2002) calls for a management education that builds on practical experience, allowing us to acknowledge the messiness and irrationality that characterizes managerial reality. An even more ‘lateral thinking’ version of this approach has been proposed by Michels & Beyes (2011) who, inspired by a large scale pedagogic experiment conducted in a European business university, which involved creative hybridization of design and management, have proposed applying the Foucauldian idea of “heterotopic space” in the context of management education. Heterotopias are the opposite of ideal and comforting utopias: they are “real, disquieting spaces that violate coherence” (Michels & Beyes 2011, p. 523). The idea is that universities and business schools should be “reservoirs of imagination” where the contradictions and tensions of different dimensions of the social production of space (Lefebvre 1991) are examined and discussed, for example, by using experiential activities where students can contrast the way in which organizations are designed, perceived by their members and actually ‘lived’ by them.

Embracing such a position entails a prominent role for two key concepts already encountered. First, the application of methods inspired by the concept of 'practical wisdom', or phronetic approach, in business education, in order to combine rich practice generated knowledge with the awareness of ethical implication of decisions (Roca 2008; Jarvis 2009; Antonacopoulou 2010). Linked to this there is the opportunity to temper the excessive technicism and false political neutrality of the managerial discourse with the introduction of critical management concepts and methodologies, with the objective of stimulating a reflective critique in people whose decisions can oppress other individuals or cause negative consequences and suffering. Boje & Al Arkoubi (2009) list five tenets of Critical Management Education: an ethics of answerability, commitment to emancipation, promotion of multiculturalism, challenge of dichotomies and dialogism and decentred power. It is possible to see this as an attempt to inject politically partisan ideas in business education but in reality the intent would be quite the opposite.

Without an attempt to denaturalize the logic of management, to challenge commonsensical assumptions on the role and functions of managers, to engage with the intrinsically political nature of managerial labour, business schools students (and many faculty members) will remain within the metaphorical folds of the veil of Maya, seeing only dichotomies and individual phenomena, and failing to understand and deal with the complex nature of the organizations that they are supposed to lead. Only by understanding the relativity and contextual nature of 'truth' is possible to avoid being blinded by absolute certainties: "truth is a thing of this world; it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint" (Foucault 1980a, p. 131).

While this chapter has used historical and diachronic comparisons to reveal the transient and relative quality of the assumptions that support 'naturalized' views of management

issues, the next will investigate Discourse synchronically, by looking at the dualisms, the 'contrasted truths' that characterize the debate on business education.

# Chapter 7.

## A rugged scene; mapping a flat landscape

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This chapter reviews some of the most salient debates that animate the Discourse of management education and that, as such, are likely to affect practices and identities of management academics. Instead of trying to ‘uncover’ the presence of these themes ‘from the ground up’, examining interviewees’ responses and other ethnographic data, I decided to look for them in the literature initially. This choice is motivated in the first place by the desire to expand my view, by including aspects that might not have emerged from my ethnographic data, not because of their non-existence or irrelevance but simply because my observations were constrained in time and space. In the second place, what makes for implicit, taken-for-granted elements of practice is often their invisibility due to their tacit nature: therefore, the basic features of the life-world of the ‘natives’ as already chronicled, needs to be known in order to entertain intelligible conversation, just as an anthropologist learns the language of the studied culture and reads prior works from the field to acquire some basic survival skills in the environment in which one is to be located. Finally, the very fact that management education practitioners must, by virtue of their trade, keep abreast of debates in their disciplinary field, exposes them to double hermeneutic effects (Giddens 1984) that increase the probability that ideas published on their work practices and workplaces have an impact on their behaviour.

The literature on business schools, their evolution, role, and issues is enormous. A Google scholar search of the term ‘Business education’ reveals that in the last decade only more than 70,000 published works have touched upon the subject. There are several academic journals dedicated to the topic (*Academy of Management Learning and Education; Issues in*

*Accounting Education; Journal of Management Education and Management Learning* among others). In addition to these sources one has to include at least a fraction of the debate on two crucial issues affecting the lives of academic: the 'publishing game' and the corporatization of university.

In addition to this immense production one could find it reasonable to include other important contributions, such as the debate on the construction of scientific facts (Latour & Woolgar 1979; Knorr-Cetina 1981; Jasanoff et al. 1995; Bauchspies, Restivo & Croissant 2006) developed in the fields of Sociology of Scientific Knowledge (SSK) and Science and Technology Studies (STS), or even the vast literature on the characteristics of academic life outside the context of business education. However, most of these other sources have been sidelined for reasons of economy and relevancy.

I approached this voluminous data using two explicit principles. First, counting on the abovementioned double-hermeneutic effects, I chose to focus on themes that resonated with empirical observations gathered in fieldwork. Second, I tried to include in my study all the most cited works on the subjects, following the rationale that ideas featuring prominently in literature are also likely to be, by virtue of their visibility, influential element of the Discourse. Either functioning as 'templates', 'games' or 'rules' (see chapter 5), these topics and their representations are both resources and constraints in the (re)production of management academics' practices and identities.

The common thread linking the different aspects treated in this chapter is the issue of power. Discussion starts from critical examination of the power dynamics that shape the process of scientific publication and their impact on academic careers, which introduces broader reflection on the political implications of the reliance on quantitative metrics for measuring the quality of education and research. A discussion of the rigour and relevance

dichotomy follows, highlighting the limitations of this debate, arguing that this debate is best framed as an issue of integration among conflicting stakeholders' interests rather than as a philosophical argument. In order to shed light on the issue of power relations within business schools the 'wicked problem' of interdisciplinarity and the uneasy relationship between teaching and research are taken into account. The results of this review are summarized in the form of a map of the contrasting life worlds that, potentially, can emerge from different configuration of ideological and social forces characterizing the field of management studies and education. Since it represents 'possible worlds' this map is not a faithful representation of a territory. The actual local landscape that is experienced by the management academics is far flatter and evenier; this is because one of these alternative arrangements of ideas and practices often becomes dominant and by exercising a powerful normalizing influence much opposition becomes eroded.

## **Power in numbers: the case of academic publications**

The apparently simple issue of providing publicity for research generates an intricate political jungle. To be influential, to have an impact, a study has to appear in a reputed journal. This requires following linguistic standards and templates that tend to be idiosyncratic to the discipline, the study stream, and the publication outlet. These conventions have an impact on the knowledge that is generated and transferred (Rhodes 2001).

To start with, the editorial review system is not perfect. It can reject useful papers that do not conform to the idiosyncrasies of the local interpretive community or the dominant paradigmatic views (Pfeffer 2007; Raelin 2008). Reviewing has been compared to a playground game, where actors interact on the basis of formal and informal rules,

sometimes unfairly (Graue 2006). Institutional pressures to publish have produced veritable inflationary processes, especially in 'hard' sciences, with the emergence of the idea of the 'LPU', or 'least publishable unit', a euphemism with which to describe the practice of publishing to fragment the description in order to generate a higher number of peer-reviewed publications (Broad 1981).

Empirical research has shown that in the field of management studies the best predictor of the number of citations that a work may receive is the prestige of the journal in which it was published (Judge et al. 2007). A self-supporting loop is created, since the number of citations and journal ranking reinforce each other (Starbuck 2005). Moreover, articles do not contribute evenly to the reputation of a journal, as measured by citations, since a few highly cited articles ('big hitters') can propel a journal to the top-tier (Mingers & Willmott 2013).

Editorial selection involves considerable randomness, because reviewers' assessment of the quality of a specific manuscript can differ, even if they agree on the ideal properties of 'good paper', an issue that becomes more serious as the number of reviewers-gatekeepers increases (Starbuck 2005). The presence of bias and randomness in reviews is a consequence of the fact that the audience to a communication is never passive and researchers can maximize their chances of publication by knowing the audience and adapting their style accordingly (Starbuck 2003). Despite the attention received, the dimensions of the problem of the inadequacy of peer-reviewed journal practices are undetermined. A comparative examination of hundreds of studies on the subject (Weller 2001) poses important questions (Is the best science published? Does the peer review process help authors to improve their work?) yet most of these questions are left unanswered because of widely different findings. Consequently academics, despite the



rhetoric on rigour, resort also to anecdotal evidence, personal experience or 'gut feeling' to 'win the publishing game'. Data on publication success show that, "in the case of non-empirical work, an article's impact was almost completely dependent on astute topic selection and adroit argumentation" (Judge et al. 2007, p. 503). In the presence of a multiplicity of political, aesthetical, historical, technical factors influencing the outcomes of the game, success requires the exercise of a set of practical skills embodied in particular researchers' capabilities.

One tangible example of how senior academics maintain a head start in the competition by virtue of their 'practical mastery' is seen in co-authorship. The increased number of competitors in the publishing arena, together with the unpredictable outcomes of the peer review process, makes focusing on the production of a single authored work a very risky investment. Authors 'hedge their bets' by contemporarily undertaking several team projects, as demonstrated by empirical studies showing a trend towards multiple authorships in business literature (English & Manton 2007). Such a phenomenon highlights the importance of the social and symbolic capital accumulated in the course of a successful career. The network of relationship developed by academics and their membership in a distinct 'tribe' are essential assets, determining the possibility of a sustained success.

As a consequence an author who skilfully complies with the conventions and the editorial policy of top-journals, builds a good collaboration network and who sticks to 'safe' and fashionable topics can have a successful career even without providing any significant contribution to scholarship or practice. The unfairness and whimsicality of the game affect not only individual academics but also universities and society at large. The ranking system is based on a series of purely arbitrary and arguable rules, including the focus on English written articles published in a small number of 'prestigious' journals. This situation has a

number of negative consequences, such as delayed, culturally biased and often practically irrelevant knowledge (Harzing & Adler 2009).

The crisp clarity of a ranking based on a numerical rank ordering produces a strong disciplinary effect, driven by a *habitus* awed by quantification, which any modern, educated individual is trained to recognize as a mark of veracity and undisputed authority. However, this exactitude, this reification and extreme reduction of a complex phenomenon to a single cipher, is achieved by means of a practice made up of multiple power effects constituting the production of academic prestige. An example of these is the choice of how to weight contributions in the case of multi-authored papers, or of papers published by scholars with multiple affiliations (Harzing & Adler 2009). The choices of institutional bodies producing ranking systems shape the rule of the game, both at the level of facilitative and dispositional circuits of power (Clegg 1989), producing various pragmatic consequences:

- They reproduce domination and inequalities, especially at the cost of researchers that do not belong to the ‘white Anglo-Saxon male’ dominant group. This is due to the fact that the panels of academic reviewers gatekeeping journals’ ranking exercises are too homogenous, displaying no ethnic and very little gender diversity (Özbilgin 2009).
- They induce individual academics to adopt strategies that can be detrimental for the originality, relevance or innovativeness of contributions (Harzing & Adler 2009; Gabriel 2010).
- They create damaging forms of insecurity and anxiety in individual academics, impairing their potential contributions. This is because academics, while “by no means exceptional in being monitored and measured” are subjected to “a myriad of different constituencies [who] legitimately stand in judgement” of their work (Clarke & Knights 2014, p. 350) including students, managers, colleagues, reviewers etcetera.

Regardless of the objectivity and equity of the adopted measuring system, the emphasis on performativity and quantifiable outputs supports the reification and commodification of knowledge (Sturdy & Gabriel 2000; Radder 2010), producing it as an object with an exchange value: thus, its ability to understand, question and transform social reality is diminished or increased according to the extent that its exchange value is lower or higher. Moreover, it conspicuously alters the practices of academics, an important point from the perspective of my inquiry.

In his very insightful and incisive analysis, Gabriel (2010), identifies a number of ways in which the publication game affects scholarly practices:

“Instead of writing or reading books, there are now more academics each seeking to publish more papers in a larger number of journals. Not surprisingly, this poses new challenges for the researcher as reader, who is confronted with huge numbers of articles from which to choose (...) The electronic availability of most academic articles means that researchers rarely visit their libraries (...) Most academics, it seems to me, pick up articles that they see cited by others or that surface in electronic searches. Conversations with colleagues indicate that the majority of them read mostly the abstracts and spend relatively little time carefully assimilating detailed arguments, which suggests to me that, for many, reading (with the notable exception of reading for the purpose of writing a peer review) has become a less important activity than writing. Academics often tell one another about what they are writing and relatively seldom about what they have read.” (Gabriel, 2010, p. 762)

The way in which information and knowledge is acquired, the manner in which findings and ideas are articulated, even the places where the work is performed (and, consequently, the opportunities for meeting, exchange and socialization), are all transformed. Furthermore, the fierce competition for accessing the limited space offered by high-ranking publication outlets has relevant consequences on work practices:

“with prestigious journals rejecting 95% or more of submitted articles (...) submitting to a ‘quality’ journal these days appears to have become virtually a trial by ordeal (...) Publishing is now a long process, involving numerous revisions, citing authors one does not care for, engaging with arguments one is not interested in and seeking to satisfy different harsh masters, often with conflicting or incompatible demands, while staying within a strict word limit.” (Gabriel 2010, pp. 763-4).

Researchers have to submit themselves to this ‘ordeal’ because their careers depend on it (Starbuck 2005) as a consequence of the trend towards managerialism and ‘McDonaldization’ of universities (Parker & Jary 1995) there is increased emphasis on standards, measures, rankings.

In order to maintain their position in what is an increasingly causal and precarious labour market academics have to increase their publication output. However, their challenge is closer to that of a salesperson who is only paid on commission than to that of a piecework labourer. There is no way for the researcher who is producing a research paper to predict if, when, and where it will be able to be published, thus becoming able to ‘cash in their bets’. Also, the proliferation of journals, which could at least provide more opportunities to find a stage for academic works, paradoxically becomes another source of pressure and exploitation for individual researchers, since the growth of publication is fuelled by a huge amount of unpaid academic labour (Gabriel 2010).

Critical management students tend to attribute the responsibility of this state of things to corporatized universities, represented as arenas of class warfare, in which neoliberal politicians and managerialist administrators are set against freethinking and collegial academics. The defeat of the latter by the hand of the former determines a commodification of academic labour, replacing production of use value with that of exchange value (Willmott 1995). In addition, the Tayloristic reliance on monothematic

performance measures, based on journal metrics, causes a reduction of heterogeneity and a marginalization of innovation in management research (Mingers & Willmott 2013). The power landscape underlying this dynamic is more complex, though, than this analysis suggests. Academics are not just victims of an imposition of computable performativity, but they are engaged in the mutual reproduction of this managerialist discourse (Keenoy 2005), as they try to “make out” colleagues, not dissimilarly to the shop-floor blue collar workers described by Burawoy (1979). While the corporate university is probably exploiting academics’ passion for their job (Clarke, Knights & Jarvis 2012), also ‘unwholesome’ emotions such as narcissism play an important role in supporting the replacement of scientific publication use value (‘Does this work contribute to knowledge and practice?’) with their exchange value (‘Will it improve my reputation and career?’) (Fellman 1995). As a consequence administrators and researchers find themselves allied, and this association is particularly amenable to the interests of the elites of both groups, whereas the “aspirations to publish in highly ranked journals ensure a harmony with the demands of the institution” (Clarke & Knights 2014, p. 350). The two groups simply use different ‘legal tenders’ to represent the exchange value of their work output. What university administrators’ compute in financial terms is calculated, in academic terms, in publication credits, citations, and H-indices.

Not only are ‘perpetrators’ and ‘victims’ roles’ blurred in these processes, as described, but non-human elements also play a critical role in shaping this scenario. While measurement has been considered a cornerstone of scientific inquiry since the Enlightenment (Harzing & Adler 2009), the digital revolution has made possible extraordinarily sophisticated systems of metrics, ease of access to an unprecedented abundance of sources to organize, use and re-use a wealth of information efficiently, thus enabling the ‘game’ (Weller 2011). Non-human actants (search engines, digital databases, citation and indexing software, word

processors et cetera) are as important as the decision of any human actor in shaping the practices of researchers attempting to produce 'publishable material'. Such a representation of the determinants of the publishing game provides a vivid illustration of how the phenomenon of power transcends any trivialization as a mere form of domination of the strong over the weak and that it is better understood as a process of the mutual constitution of meaning and social disparities, whereas "power produces rationality and truth; rationality and truth produces power" (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 124). The fact that this unfair system is justified by the need for "fairness in universities' hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions, and accountability and value-for-research-dollars in the grant-awarding processes" is demonstrative of this mutual implication (Harzing & Adler 2009, p.74)

There are problematic consequences for business school management from the state of affairs in publishing and research since they induce in individual academics a self-centred entrepreneurial drive, an anxious concern for their individual 'production', at the expense of integration and team spirit. The disciplinary structures discharge their panoptical effects so effectively that the 'inmates', being obsessed by the desire to comply with the surveillance requirements (the ranking metrics), become uncontrollable. Using the terminology introduced by Clegg (1989) this conflict can be represented as a clash between a 'facilitative' circuit of social integration (represented by the publishing system) that pushes individual researchers in centrifugal directions, towards the development of 'personal' collaboration networks, disciplinary specialization and cosmopolitan attitudes (Gouldner 1957, 1958), and a 'dispositional' circuit of system integration (embodied by the

‘bureaucratic governmentality’ of business schools) that requires collaboration, local focus, and performance as measured by a range of different metrics<sup>14</sup>.

## **Towards a complex notion of relevance**

Business schools have been frequently accused of producing and dispensing irrelevant knowledge. Their research is too abstract or circumscribed such as to be of little consequence for practitioners (Bennis & O'Toole 2005); management researchers carry out prevalently descriptive, rather than prescriptive, studies (Bazerman 2005), producing theories that have little connection to practice (Peters & Bogner 2002), cladding their findings in a specialist language which, although rigorous, is often so obscure and esoteric as to defy the efforts of the most open minded and educated practitioner (Kieser & Leiner 2011). Despite the plea for research to “focus on persistent problems that real-world executives and leaders need to solve” (Lorsch 2009, p. 113) empirical evidence suggests a constant decline in the last half century of the number of publications containing actionable and practically relevant knowledge (Pearce & Huang 2012).

The lack of practical grounding led Mintzberg (2004, p. 5) to state that “pretending to create managers out of people who have never managed is a sham”. The need to develop practice-based programs has been strongly advocated by various scholars (Starkey et al. 2004; Raelin 2007; Tushman et al. 2007). Even the attempt to simulate reality with the use of business games and case studies falls short of expectations, because these methods oversimplify reality, producing overconfident but fundamentally incompetent wannabe managers (Mintzberg 2004). The problem, therefore, is not the reliability of the data or the

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<sup>14</sup> Aspects of this conflict are also discussed below, in the section that treats the ‘wicked problem’ of interdisciplinarity.

validity of research findings but the nature of managerial decisions. Despite the presence of calls to the contrary (Donaldson 1996, 2010), “statistical and methodological wizardry can blind rather than illuminate” (Bennis & O'Toole 2005, p. 99), since management operates in rapidly transforming contexts dominated by uncertainty, where decisions must be sometimes made with incomplete data.

Decision makers who have to deal with condition of bounded rationality (Simon 1957) or, worse with ‘garbage can’ decisional situations (Cohen et al. 1972; Olsen & March 1976) are unlikely to find elegant models or theories useful. Moreover, practicing managers have little exposure to the evidence gathered by management scientists, often because it fails to find its way to the business schools classrooms (Rousseau 2006). However, the concept of relevance is not easy to pin down. Trying to find a minimum common denominator between relevance and rigour based on concepts such as interestingness and justification of research findings (Baldrige, Floyd & Markóczy 2004) does not seem to be very useful, since it attributes too much importance to the perception of novelty and importance: “perceived usefulness is not tantamount to factual usefulness” (Kieser & Leiner 2011, p. 893).

Practitioners have, indeed, a limited, situated and idiosyncratic understanding of the nature of the managerial tasks: “the much lamented ‘relevance gap’ is as much a product of practitioners wedded to gurus and fads as it is of academics wedded to abstractions and fundamentals. (...) Practitioners forget that ‘the’ real world is actually ‘a’ world that is idiosyncratic, egocentric and unique to each person complaining about relevance.” (Weick 2001, p. 571). Augier & March (2007, p. 138) agree, stressing that the definition of relevance is ambiguous, its measurement imprecise, and its meaning complex” and that “the pursuit of relevance is often myopic in practice”. The real issue is that “judgements



about the relevance of something learnt are subjective, time-bound and context dependent; relevance and irrelevance depend very much on our intellectual 'readiness' to see possible connection" (Paton, Chia & Burt 2013, p. 2).

The 'applicability of knowledge' conundrum is further aggravated by the fact that practitioners do not simply face problem solving but also problem-setting issues (Nicolai & Seidl 2010, p. 1261), which reveals the inescapably political nature of knowledge applied to social systems. Practitioners are not always seeking knowledge for making better-informed choices but use it as a political device to legitimize their decisions and to reinforce their identities (Knights & Willmott 1997). Even the motivations that drive academic interest in relevance have been questioned, since the declared noble intent (producing useful knowledge) could in reality conceal more mundane desires for recognition and rewards, with the risk of becoming enslaved to the interests of business (Knights 2008).

Given that the idea of relevance is context and observer dependent, any decision about what is 'relevant' assumes strong political undertones. It entails discarding other elements as non-significant, removing viewpoints as not pertinent: it is a form of "mobilization of bias" (Bachrach & Baratz 1962, p. 952) that exercises power by blocking issues and silencing voices. Various forces attempt to drive research agendas instrumentally, usually putting them at the service of managerialism (Mitev 2009). While many different ideas of relevance can be congenial to particular interests, it is not possible neutrally and impartially to determine which idea of relevance has a superior status (Wensley 2010).

A critical approach to the issue requires assuming a complex, composite idea of relevance, one that can encompass differences in viewpoint, interests and ideological stances. Moving in this direction, Nicolai & Seidl (2010) have proposed to distinguish, in practical terms, between *Instrumental* relevance (comprising schemes, technological rules and forecasts

that can be used by practitioners to make better decisions), *Conceptual* relevance (concerning conceptual tools to reinterpret reality) and *Legitimative* (the capacity of academic research to provide practitioners with credentials and with rhetorical devices to justify and gain support for their decisions). Such an approach points to the fact that a given set of information conveyed by management education can assume a different form of relevance for different audiences and in different contexts. Hence, relevance is not linked uniquely to the capacity of a work to state something correct about an ontologically fixed world. However, even this laudable attempt to build an empirically based and ‘pluralist’ definition of relevance is hindered by an ideological flaw. It is based on a taken for granted assumption about the role and nature of management education, the idea that its social function is uniquely that of enhancing economic growth and production. Such a ‘performative teleology’ of management research should be recognized as a social construction, not as a natural, unavoidable essence. This Tayloristic-inspired ideology, one that considers the increase of productivity or the maximization of profit as the only legitimate task for managers, is an implicit tenet of the offering of any Business School. The recent debate on the need to address the ethical aspect of business (Grey 2002; Ghoshal 2005; Khurana 2007; Wilson & Thomas 2012) seems to have developed as an afterthought, in an attempt to create a buffer to protect against an excessive focus on greed.

The hegemonic view is perfectly portrayed in the words of the ‘neoliberal prophet’ Friedman: “there is one and only one social responsibility of business – to use its resources and engage in activities designed to increase its profits so long as it stays within the rules of the game” (1962, p. 133). According to this received wisdom, making business education more relevant is ‘simply’ a matter of establishing which knowledge can support more effective decision-making and implementation on the part of the managers. But what if we actually ask “the hoary question: what is the primary goal of business education?” (Bennis

2010, p. 23). Questioning the precept that the only function is to provide knowledge that helps to improve performances would lead us to ask *which kind of relevance is actually relevant* for business schools.

If we want to consider the whole range of the potential aims of business education we should start by taking into account the fact that their offering can serve the needs of many different stakeholders. Accepting that “stakeholders in business schools have differing views of what business schools should be doing.” (Starkey & Tempest 2008, p. 379) would allow embracing a richer and more plural conception of relevance. This multiple paradigm of relevance is needed not just for the love of difference and complexity but because of a practical consideration. The needs and expectations of each of the different beneficiaries of business school offerings is for them significant, since they are sources both of material resources and of legitimation.

Identifying all the stakeholders that are significant for business education is a difficult exercise and if we choose a fine-grained level of analysis we risk ending up with a taxonomy that is too vast to be of any practical utility. Iñiguez de Onzoño (2011) identifies 14 different types of stakeholders of some relevance for business schools, both internal (as faculty members, students, corporate partners etc.) and external (accreditation bodies, publishing industry, government etc.). In order to simplify this complex network, it is possible to borrow the concept of ‘scale’ introduced by Spicer (2006) as a spatial level factor influencing organizational logic. From this perspective it is possible to identify three spatial perspective of relevance that can be of consequence for business schools, ranging from a ‘micro’ scale (that of the individual students-consumers of management education), to a meso-scale (the organizations that employ managers), and then up to a macro level (that of the system-nation in which individual organizations are embedded or based).

A first group is that of the paying customers of business education, students and executives attending courses in order to be instructed how better to perform their managerial task but also to get better job positions (Pfeffer & Fong 2004; Khurana 2007, p.348) or to maintain their status in society (Thomas et al. 1981). Even without entering into the debate between agency and stewardship theory in management (Donaldson & Davis 1991), we can safely assume that the interests of the non-executive students (those who are not currently occupying a management position) will be different from the interests of their potential employers. Moreover, executives who are drawn to business school by the desire to learn techniques that maximize their efficacy as managers will also be interested in acquiring a useful cachet in terms of symbolic, intellectual or social capital (Vaara & Fay 2011). The opportunity to improve their market value as 'managerial labour supplier', that is increasing their career opportunities by acquiring relevant skills, will certainly be considered an important source of relevance. These skills are usually conceived in the form of practical know-how rather than complex intellectual, ethical and relational skills: "Students expect a 'turnkey' education when they major in business. They want prescriptions" (Guterk 1997, p. 35).

One should not assume that business school students' idea of relevance is oriented uniquely to performative concerns. For instance, students will deem the maximization of relational and political capabilities an important feature of a 'relevant' business education course. This outcome is produced by business schools via the supply of networking opportunities, for instance by promoting and supporting alumni networks (Crainer & Dearlove 1999; Vaara & Fay 2011), and also by setting high access standards and barriers that help in "establishing that you're one of the very smart folks" (March, cited in Khurana 2007, p. 348). The fact that these networks can also have negative side effects, such as corruption and conflicts of interests (Mintzberg 2004), is a further demonstration that one

cannot assume an overlapping between students' of management and companies' interests and ideas of relevance.

Finally, one should not discard the possibility that some of the students will be sensitive to the allure of management as a profession (Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011). This implies acknowledging that professionalization involves not only expert knowledge and societal accreditation but also entails a complement of values, responsibilities and conduct standards. In this case the provision of ethical instruction and the discussion of ethical issues and dilemmas pertaining to managerial practice would be highly relevant, helping to build an ethos and a sense of identity in the graduated managers (Jarvis 2009; Clegg, Jarvis & Pitsis 2013). Just taking into consideration one of the possible stakeholders illustrates how the notion of what is relevant knowledge of business and management can vary depending on the 'functional' focus of attention (or main value proposition), be it performativity, relation building and politics, or ethical issues.

Considering a different viewpoint, that of organizations that employ managers, another set of criteria for relevance will be contingent on the functional focus. The capacity to solve problems pertaining to increases in productivity, profitability or shareholders' returns is frequently taken for granted as the paradigmatic function of managers (Mintzberg 2004), and consequently becomes a key metric for the relevance of the knowledge developed and imparted by business schools (Syed et al. 2010). However, they also have a social role in inculcating practices and values (*habitus*) and in reproducing legitimated and thus dominant Discourses (*doxa*) on the social organization of labour and the desirable outcomes of managerial and corporate work (Vaara & Fäy 2011, 2012). The capacity to discipline aspirant managers into prescribed role expectations is certainly useful to maintain the current structures of domination and can therefore constitute, from the

perspective of a conservative organization, another relevant function of business education while, conversely, the decision to impart a critical perspective and to develop critical analysis in the management could be seen not only as irrelevant but even harmful to corporate harmony and integration.

The capacity to impart ethical education can be valuable also in the firm's perspective, since it can contribute to enhancing the reputational value of the company (Jackson 2006), a concept that includes considering and balancing the interests of all groups affected by the organization, building long term trust and relationships. Even if this does not seem to be a concern in most business schools (Pfeffer & Fong 2004), there are strong institutional pressures to incorporate business ethics courses in MBA curricula (Wilson & McKiernan 2011).

Another perspective that can enrich our collection of alternative models of relevance is that of the broader political-economic system in which both business schools and companies are embedded. If we assume the perspective of the nation state, then we must acknowledge that – in order to be performatively relevant – business education needs to help improve the productivity and competitiveness of the industrial system, fostering growth and promoting the discourse of the 'knowledge-based economy'. In this sense it is possible to conceptualize "business education as part of an ecology of learning, knowledge production and circulation involving both the spaces of business education and the spaces of corporate practice within business service firms" (Hall 2009, p. 600). History shows how this 'ecology of learning' has been actively promoted and steered by private institutions (such as Foundations) and governments which have exerted various pressures on business education providers to enhance the perceived quality of their output in order to preserve the economic and national welfare (Khurana 2007, pp. 232-5).

Nation states also can have an interest in exporting their ideological models and projecting soft power by means of educational colonization: the implementation in Europe of the American model of business education based on the MBA after Second World War has been described as an example of this discursive hegemony (Djelic 2001; Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003, p. 88). Many business schools have also been accused of ethnocentrism and neo-colonialism because of the cultural hegemony of the North American business model in their curricula and approaches (Vaara & Fay 2011). The capacity to contribute to the spread and upholding of this dominant discourse (or of an alternative one) is certainly a factor of relevance in a national perspective. Ethics concerns are also relevant from this standpoint, since business education can help developing professional standards and codes for management (Pfeffer & Fong 2004), which could reduce the risk of corporate scandals and malpractices, limiting the occurrence of corruption, all phenomena that hinder economic growth and national welfare (Mo 2001; Méon & Sekkat 2005). Doing this requires assuming a 'critical' approach to business education, adopting a pluralist and dialectical approach that is akin to the study of politics rather than that of techniques (French & Grey 1996).

One does not aspire to a comprehensive view of all possible ideas about the 'relevance' of management sciences contributions but simply to highlight a number of relevance constructs (summarized in Table 5).

**Table 5 - Alternate relevance constructs**

		Stakeholder Focus (Scale)		
		Individual	Organization	Nation
Value proposition	Enhance Performance	Career; higher salary through accreditation (Khurana 2007)	Improve shareholders revenues (Mintzberg 2004)	Improve productivity and competitiveness (Hall 2009)
	Build relations; Political effectiveness	Building network; increase influence (Crainer & Dearlove 1999)	Reinforce disciplinary control over staff (Vaara & Fay 2011)	Spread ideology across borders (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003)
	Promote Ethical behaviour	Professionalism (Bennis & O'Toole 2005)	Improve reputational capital (Jackson 2006)	Develop professional standards and codes (Pfeffer & Fong 2004)

An example of the limit of this simplified taxonomy is the fact that it considers business school students as a single stakeholder, sharing the same needs and desires, thus misrepresenting an increasingly more heterogeneous student population (Hodgkinson & Rousseau 2009). However, this only confirms the central thesis that the crux of the matter is the multiplicity of possible views on what constitute relevant knowledge for business practitioners.

The important strategic choice for any business school – beyond paying lip service to a simplistic view of relevance – is to decide explicitly which of the different criteria should be put at the centre of its research and teaching agenda, and to manage the trade-offs between incompatible views of practical relevance. Doing so means openly and transparently engaging with the fact that “relevance issues are masks for issues of political power and that the obscuring of interests and their importance is not innocent in a struggle among interests” (Augier & March 2007, p. 136).



On a more practical and implementation oriented note, business school can embrace this pluralistic approach by turning the noun 'relevance' in a verb, 'to *relevate*' in an approach proposed by Paton et al. (2013), who suggest that business school could provide an ideal ground to help practitioners, in collaboration with academics, to reflect critically on their deeply held assumptions, thus discovering what is really relevant in the specific context in which they are operating. Assuming this view also reduces the risk of management studies becoming purely instrumental to the pursuit of performance enhancement. It might be true that business school have not been particularly successful in influencing business practices (Pfeffer & Fong 2004; Pfeffer 2007) but devoting all their intellectual potential to the service of managerialist performativity would mean sacrificing the critical, moral and social responsibility of the academia to the altar of surplus value production. However, the relative significance of different views on 'what is relevant for management' is determined by the dominance of the constituency supporting them and by the pervasiveness of the discursive spaces in which they emerged. Again, power/knowledge is at play, making managerialism, and its specific discourse on relevance, 'normal' and natural, so that it is a-critically taken for granted by most that the goal of management theory is to maximize performances. Yet, also these 'minority ideas' about ethics, social and environmental sustainability, improving employees' well-being are present and are kept alive by dedicated and active groups. Consequently all these different notions of 'what is relevant' become salient features of the conceptual landscape in which management academic identities and practices emerge.

## **Rigour: a slippery concept**

If different practitioners and stakeholders have in mind very different things when they are lamenting the 'lack of relevance' of business education, even the definition of rigour in

business research is more problematic than it appears. The nature of the knowledge that is produced by management and organisational studies needs to be questioned: what constitutes valid, meaningful and usable knowledge in terms of managerial labour? In order to answer this question we need to start by examining what constitutes 'rigour' in the discourse of management studies. If we assume a 'basic' definition, rigour equates to intellectual honesty paired with a commitment to follow an empirical, evidence-based approach in making knowledge claims. Berggren & Söderlund (2011, p. 394), for instance, define rigour as "the requirements to clearly state purpose and research questions, to search and build on previous studies, to design and carry out a transparent empirical investigation and be aware of its limitations, and finally, to limit conclusions and recommendations to aspects supported by the investigation".

The idea that being rigorous equates to ticking a number of boxes in an ideal checklist is frequent in methodological literature. A typical example is the list of principles that characterize research according to Ormrod & Leedy (2010, pp. 2-8): research must be derived and guided by a clearly stated question or problem; it requires organization (both in the form of planning and breaking down of complex problems) and formulation of explicit assumptions; it is funded on a knowledge producing helical process of data collection and interpretation, since the 'solution' of the previous problem provides new insights that will be used to ask new questions.

While these definitions sound robust and reasonable, their limits reside in being founded on a taken for granted, ideological assumption, according to which knowledge produced by the application of this method is – in itself – more valid and 'truthful' than any other form of knowledge, since researchers are neutral and objective observers who base their statements on 'hard' evidence. However, in a social constructivist perspective of science

the explanation of data is a social process of 'truth-making' where the multiplicity of possible hypotheses that explain the data are artificially reduced and the meaning of what constitutes evidence is continuously negotiated and renegotiated (Eriksson 2007). In other words knowledge cannot be freed by its context: intelligibility, methodological, dialectical, and economic factors define our possibility of producing and transmitting knowledge (Williams 2001).

While the application of the scientific method can – with some success – neutralize tacit assumptions that bias observations and interpretation by making them explicit, little can be done to contrast the intrinsically political nature of knowledge, as there is no “knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations” (Foucault 1979, p. 28). Consequently the statements produced by scientific discourse are not absolute truths but rather, symbolic media which construction depend on the ontological and epistemological premises of the researcher and even the relative power of different groups. For instance, “in positivist approaches, ‘truth’ is ascertained differently than in constructivist approaches. Within a field, the dominant consensus on what constitutes rigorous and ‘true’ findings evolves over time.” (Kieser & Leiner 2011, p. 520).

Historically, research in management has been founded on a positivist approach (Syed et al. 2010). Trying to remove the reek of empiricism dating from the time when “most [Business] professors were good ole boys dispensing war stories, cracker-barrel wisdom, and the occasional practical pointer” (Bennis & O'Toole 2005, p. 98), practice might have overcompensated (Kieser & Leiner 2011), being driven by “physics’ envy” (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003) and ending up blindly embracing a positivistic paradigm, one that is ill-suited to describe the complex social nature of the phenomenon studied.

The dominant positivistic paradigm implies a vision of science as the search for universal objective laws. It is founded on a Kantian vision of rationality, whereas acquisition of knowledge involves a reification of subjectivity, its transformation from individual experience into validated objects through abstraction and categorization (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003). In a modernist context, such as that of business schools, the model is often naturalized as the only valid and acceptable way to produce knowledge. A Cartesian division between mind and matter leads to a reified view of the world as a mechanical system which, in order to be understood properly, needs to be reduced to its elemental components (Capra 1982). The reductionist drive is also at the roots of the disciplinary fragmentation that characterizes scientific research. Other key tenets of a positivist approach to knowledge are the assumption of an objectivist epistemology, according to which reality is objective and separate from human consciousness and the assumption that language mirrors objective reality (Sandberg 2005).

Ghoshal (2005), using the epistemological framework introduced by Elster (1983), argues against any automatic translation of the heuristic and ontological perspectives assumed by the natural sciences in the field of humanities, and in particular in the field of management, where causal or functional explanations scarcely apply. Ghoshal also accuses management-related theories of having an ideologically conservative bias that leads them to build analysis on the empirically unfounded belief that humans are always self-interested and greedy (2005, pp. 82-3). Such reflections introduce the need to consider the political and power effects of a 'disinterested' and neutral activity such as scientific research. Knights (2008), drawing from a Foucauldian perspective, shows how the process of production of representational knowledge has oppressive effects, by forcing subjects to secure their identities using the categories that the process itself has created. For instance, the economics discourse objectifies concepts such as that of the market, artificially separating it

from those whose interactions are actually creating it, convincing them that the ongoing product of their relations has an ontological substance separate from their subjectivity.

Organizations, once described, studied and categorized by management and organizational science, become akin to 'natural objects', governed by 'laws' that can be analysed and taught by academics and not fundamentally changed by practitioners. In fact management sciences seem to be governed by this logic, which, according to Chia & Holt (2008) is also propagated and reproduced by business schools' educational practices that are focused only on theoretical content and on detached explanations ("knowledge-by-representation") instead of being practical, experiential and role-model based ("knowledge by exemplification"). As a consequence valuable intelligence is lost by refusing to consider knowledge that is insufficiently supported by approved data and rhetoric and in the pursuit of an ideal of detached objectivity management science ends up reproducing a knowledge regime (Foucault 1980a) which serves the current economic establishment.

The truth-making effects of positivistic scientific discourse have been compounded by other, more tangible, institutional forces. What originated as a philosophical and conceptual stance (the idea that scientific knowledge must be aimed at unveiling the principles that govern a world of objects) has congealed through social practices and political dynamics into an institutional structure, a political economy, including means of production, distribution and consumption of knowledge. As such it is not static but dynamic, influenced by globalization, socio-economic transformations, and technological developments. Therefore, alongside the traditional, discipline based, theoretical model of research ('mode 1') a new practical, trans-disciplinary approach ('mode 2') is emerging (Gibbons et al. 1994). While universities (and university based business schools) are seen as bastions of the mode 1 of knowledge production, with their hierarchical and disciplinary

division of labour (Gibbons et al. 1994), there are a number of pressures for change: public and private stakeholders' demand for the production of more relevant knowledge, competition among universities; critical reflection among academics, and innovation in information and communication technologies (Starkey & Madan 2001). Instead of being driven by the interests of the academic community (produce theory that sits within an accepted paradigm), the second mode is concerned with the applicability of knowledge, and therefore requires collaboration between academics and practitioners (Gibbons et al. 1994). Such collaboration though is not un-problematic. Kieser & Leiner (2011) are particularly sceptical about the possibility of collaborative research involving both academics and practitioners. Their main argument is that science and management are two distinct specialized systems, whose self-referential nature makes inter-system communication impossible or only causes tensions and irritation.

The idea that academy and business might belong to different, unbridgeable thought worlds and communication systems has another important implication: what constitutes valid knowledge in an academic perspective can be unusable in a practical setting not just because it is too cryptic or irrelevant but because of the different needs inherent in the rationality of the two practice fields. Contemporary research on decision-making (de Jonge 2011; Kahneman 2011) has acknowledged the existence in the human brain of two co-existing but different reasoning systems, an emotional/affective one, and a deliberative/cognitive one. Usually our decisions are affected by both systems, since "intuitions/emotions are not free of thought and that thought is not free of emotions" (de Jonge 2011, p. 132). In certain contexts, it is the emotional/affective system that can guide more appropriate, rational decisions. If we have to make a rapid decision to face a challenge or a threat, we cannot engage in lengthy analysis of the situation and in a slow deliberate computational process; we need instead to act immediately, relying on our

'intuition', learnt reflexes and practical experience. To managers "experience and intuition (...) are at least as important for good results as are analysis, rationality and rules" (Flyvbjerg 2001, p. 24).

The absolute and a-contextual knowledge produced by mode 1 research is meant to inform decision-makers who have access to unlimited information, time to analyse and process it, and a clear definition of a problem. According to this scientific paradigm, information is objective and rational decision-makers must collect and analyse data in order to reduce uncertainty. To do so they must consider past experience, gathering data comprehensively and using feedback to correct deviations from plans (Bailey & Ford 1996). However, most managerial action is characterized by situations of bounded rationality (Simon 1957): choices are influenced by spurious factors, such as "the knowledge that decision makers do and don't have of the world, their ability or inability to evoke that knowledge when it is relevant, to work out the consequences of their actions, to conjure up possible courses of action, to cope with uncertainty [...], and to adjudicate among their many competing wants" (Simon 2000, p. 25).

In real life situations "management is bounded by the great depths of uncertainty and ignorance within which it is constituted" (Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003, p. 86): managers often have to face 'wicked' problems (Rittel & Webber 1973) for which it is impossible to provide a definitive formulation, since their interpretation can be disputed and their solutions cannot be tested, and must therefore develop, in addition to data collection and analytic skills, also political sensitivity, flexibility and creativity (Bailey & Ford 1996).

A further paradox will haunt any strictly positivistic approach to management science. Not only interpretation and social construction of meaning make scientific predictions of social behaviours unreliable, but any real success in disseminating managerial theories could also

alter the 'nature' of the studied phenomena, since agents can use such theories to make sense of their world and to shape their practices. Social sciences need therefore to engage in a "double hermeneutics" (Giddens 1984), where their translation of the discursive nature of society will be in turn translated back by social agents, who will weave this new concepts in their practices, thus altering the discourse, particularly in a field such as management studies, where a theory, once popularized and applied by practitioners, can effectively change business practices: probably the best exemplification is given by the ripple effects of Taylorism on labour and social relationships (Braverman 1975), distribution of wealth (Prechel 2007), even architecture (Guillén 1997)

Adopting a discourse of technical rationality also has important ethical implications: it entails the idea that "the manager is no more than a morally neutral technician" (Roberts 1996, p. 55). Such a postulation is certainly reassuring for managers because the centrality of efficiency and effectiveness absolves them from the ethical responsibilities of the outcomes of their choices. It also provides comfort, reassuring managers of their ability to control behaviours, effect changes and to shape events by using the correct techniques, while hiding the upsetting possibility that "Our social order is in a very literal sense out of our, or indeed anyone's, control. No one is or could be in charge" (MacIntyre, cited in Roberts 1996, p. 58).

Despite its limitations, a positivistic and theory-construction based epistemology is still the prevalent mode of research in the prototypical business schools, those inspired by, and emulating, North American norms. This dominant paradigm, however, co-exists with a growing body of research that privileges interpretive approaches to management studies. Knowledge produced with these methodologies does not aim to be truth in the sense of corresponding with an objective reality but rather strives to be coherent with the



ontological and epistemological assumptions of interpretive research: the fact that social 'facts' are produced by inter-subjective agreement and that meaning is produced by the interaction of subjects and objects (Sandberg 2005).

This requires overcoming the view according to which the hallmark of any truly scientific theory is the ability to formulate theories that allow prediction of novel facts (Lakatos 1978) accepting that social sciences in general and management sciences in particular should not strive to be similar to 'hard' or 'normal' science. because of the highly contextual and situated nature of human activity (Flyvbjerg 2001). Human behaviour is not based on universal rules and historical, discursive, contextual contingencies cannot be transcended. The complexity and variability of contexts is such that it becomes impossible to reliably predict social facts. Moreover, embracing an interpretative paradigm implies acknowledging the phenomenological nature of the social world, a world that is a network of assumptions, practices, emergent from the interaction of social actors, a process in constant becoming rather than an ontologically stable object (Morgan & Burrell 1994, p. 24). Even the status of 'narrative knowledge' (as opposed to scientific, analytic one) as a valid form of representation of reality in organization studies has been rehabilitated (Czarniawska 1995b).

Even interpretive researchers endeavour to be rigorous and as a consequence they need to establish different benchmarks of rigour, factoring in their different objectives, assumptions and methods. Since their purpose is to understand social phenomena through the interpretations of the actors who are experiencing it (Shah & Corley 2006), their problem is credibility: "how can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to" (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 290). Following the influential lesson of Lincoln and Guba the answer to the question is to

establish trustworthiness through Credibility, Transferability, Dependability and Confirmability. Credibility requires demonstrating that biases have been minimized in the observation of the phenomenon, thanks to the adoption of well-established methods, triangulation, extended engagement in the field, familiarity of the researcher with the observed culture, rich descriptions of the phenomena, and peer scrutiny of the research project. Transferability, which replaces generalizability, is about the possibility of applying the acquired knowledge in other contexts and requires providing rich and detailed information on the observed context. Dependability addresses the issue of the impossibility of attaining the positivistic ideal of study replicability in interpretative research, because of the emergent nature of the observed phenomena. On the other hand it must be possible to demonstrate the consistency of the finding and to give the possibility to another researcher to use the same methods: this is usually attained with the use of external data audits. Confirmability entails demonstrating that the findings are not the result of the preferences and biases of the researcher, but are rather an honest representation of the experiences and ideas of the informants. It requires meticulous data management and accurate recording of data collection activities (observations, interviews, contacts), plus explicit separation of first and second order findings and clear notes of theoretical and methodological decisions (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Shenton 2004; Shah & Corley 2006).

While compliance to these requirements can be more difficult to demonstrate than the observance of the rigour principles of experimental and quantitative studies, the phenomenological immersion that characterizes interpretive inquiries increases their relevance potential (Lincoln & Guba 1985, p. 191), making the knowledge they produce extremely valuable for practitioners. Actively engaging with the problem of ambiguity, the interpretative, symbolic and political nature of social action can provide useful insight to managers who need fresh ways to understand and make sense of their own experiences,

rather than inapplicable recipes. The challenge for this methodological paradigm is less one of relevance and more of one of translation: these ideas and results are usually communicated using an exoteric language and a style that takes for granted that the audience is well acquainted with a specialist corpus of theoretical knowledge.

Different disciplines that dwell under the same business school's roof have developed widely different ontological and epistemological approaches (for instance quantitative finance studies versus critical management studies), to the point that it is virtually impossible to develop a shared set of requirements to assess the rigour of a study. Some common features must be acknowledged though, in order to achieve a modicum of reciprocal acceptance, granting peaceful coexistence, if not active collaboration.

Some broad definitions can help to define the discursive framework characterizing contemporary social sciences: an interdisciplinary view of rigour implies "a critical evaluation of the underlying theory, evidence base and inferential links." (Wensley 2007, p. 17). Accurate statements are the result of "an iterative process of correcting by comparing alternative knowledge claims within a certain research perspective as well as between specific research perspectives." (Sandberg 2005, p. 52). "Good" data are representations that maintain a two way correspondence between an empirical reality and a symbol system (Stablein 1996). In the end, "the main purpose of social science is to produce beliefs with which nearly everyone can agree" (Starbuck 2005, p. 183).

A concrete effort in this direction is suggested by Sandberg (2005), who proposes a 'constellation' of validity criteria, including communicative validity (developing common and coherent interpretation of the phenomenon), pragmatic validity (comparing interpretation and description with practical experience), and transgressive validity (actively looking for contradiction and gaps in the interpretation). Clearly a polyphonic

understanding of rigour is required in management studies, to make allowances for the widely different validity requirements of quantitative (positivistic) and qualitative (interpretive) approaches used in the field. While this pluralism can produce internal diatribes, and might reduce the suasion ability of management scholars towards an audience of practitioners looking for certitudes, it is blessing for fostering the production of rich, honest and stimulating scientific knowledge and reflection on such a complex, multifaceted and intertwined object of study.

The contraposition between rigour and relevance is therefore an excessive simplification of the dynamic relationship between two very complex fields, agitated by political undercurrents and by deep cultural differences. Rather than being “either a ‘knowledge transfer problem’ (what they term ‘lost in translation’) or a ‘knowledge production problem’ (what they ‘lost before translation’)” (Fincham & Clark 2009, p. 510), the presence of multiple paradigms, each founded on a different worldview and supporting different interests, make the determination of an unequivocal definition of ‘rigorous scientific knowledge’ or ‘relevant practical expertise’ impossible. Science and practice can be seen as inhabiting two different life worlds, characterized by separate ‘language games’ (Astley & Zammuto 1992), but even this is an excessive simplification of a reality which appears to be characterized by a plurality of discourses that fragment both academia and civil society. These different worlds manage to communicate (albeit imperfectly) and support each other (albeit begrudgingly): universities in general and business schools in particular require the material and symbolic support of a variety of stakeholders; industry demands academic qualifications, expects knowledge and ideas, and sometimes beseeches legitimation and prestige through association with the university brands. Similarly, despite disciplinary divides, business schools manage to maintain integrity and identity. Rather than a utopian

goal to be pursued, the cooperation between these difficult to reconcile life worlds is a problem that needs to be explained.

Just as any other complex organization, business schools do not work as 'strategy machines' (Clegg et al. 2004). What is actually researched, divulged and taught, and even more so what is effectively learnt and practiced, are not the automatic consequence of a strategic positioning of a business school in relation to issues of 'rigour' and 'relevance'.

Social action emerges from the dialectic relationship between agency and structure, individuals and material constraints, human and non-human actors (Giddens 1984; Bourdieu 1990; Latour 2005): the existence of a degree of communication, transaction and collaboration among the multiple 'language games' (Wittgenstein 1958) that differentiate business schools' staff, patrons and sponsors, must be explained by looking at institutional arrangements, distribution of bodies and material influences, and not just at the intellectual blueprints that 'guide' strategic action. Considering the framework set by my research questions, I intend to limit inquiry to collaboration among academics. In this perspective the rigour-relevance issue can be more productively re-conceptualized as the problem of bridging the disciplinary divide that historically emerged as a consequence of the social division of labour in academia (Knights & Willmott 1997). Coherently with the socio-material perspective I am assuming, this issue can be seen, rather than as a philosophical or epistemological dilemma, as an integration-differentiation problem (Lawrence & Lorsch 1967), which also has political implications since "divisions of labour are both the object and the outcome of struggle" (Hardy & Clegg 1996, p. 633). In order to understand how the current educational practices of business schools emerge, it is necessary to take a look at their organizational structures and dynamics, investigating the political, cultural and institutional forces that mould the reality of these social systems.

## **The Wicked Problem of Interdisciplinarity**

One of the critical hurdles to more relevant business education appears to be the separation of the academic field into a series of intellectual silos. Numerous commentators (Hamilton, McFarland & Mirchandani 2000; Latham, Latham & Whyte 2004; Mintzberg 2004; Athavale, Davis & Myring 2008) have argued that the lack of integration and the excessive focus on specialized knowledge are to blame for the disconnection between academic theorizing and concrete challenges encountered by practicing managers. The problem of interdisciplinarity in science is a complex one and its historical origins, current connotations, and future trends are more comprehensively treated in the specialized literature on the subject (see for a review Jacobs & Frickel 2009; Frodeman, Klein & Mitcham 2010); however, this section has a more narrow and focused intent, that is to reflect on the organizational implications of interdisciplinarity in the context of business schools.

Curricula that are based on functional areas rather than on a holistic perspective (Weber & Englehart 2011) and especially the silo-mentality that results from excessive departmentalization of disciplines and subjects (Latham et al. 2004), are reputed to damage the potential of education in Management. Business schools' "lack of a synthetic/integrative analysis of the cross-functional and interdisciplinary nature of management leaves little room for engaging with the variety of social and political facets of managing in the context of organizational life" (Antonacopoulou 2010, p. s8).

While serving a reductionist research agenda, focused on the heuristic fascination of identifying an Aristotelian 'efficient cause' capable of producing and explaining the current state of affairs, artificial divisions of business studies into separate branches of learning

produces a cacophony of epistemological standpoints, interests, methodologies and disciplinary jargons that renders management studies confusing and less than transparent to the uninitiated practitioner. The problem is both one of knowledge application and of knowledge production. On the application side the new managerial challenges brought by globalization, ICT diffusion, 'glocalization' of knowledge (Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011) require a flexible, multidisciplinary approach. But also the "new institutional landscape of knowledge production is marked by academic disciplines showing increasing fuzziness at their boundaries" (Gibbons et al. 1994, p. 138). To help consolidate the contribution of different disciplines most business education programs rely on 'capstone experiences', requiring students to combine learning from different disciplines (Athavale et al. 2008), while others recur to more specific pedagogies, such as the use of service learning projects (Godfrey, Illes & Berry 2005). The most 'revolutionary' approach is the one proposed in a small number of business schools, led by the Rotman School of Management, which are advocating the adoption of 'Design thinking', which involves approaching managerial problems as designers (Boland & Collopy 2004; Dunne & Martin 2006; Boland et al. 2008; Martin 2009; Cross 2011), and 'Integrated thinking', "the capacity to take a cross-functional, multidisciplinary approach to the solution of unstructured business problems" (Latham 2000, p. 4).

The agenda of integration has a great rhetoric potential and an obvious market appeal. The attractiveness of general management, the fact that most business school students aim (at least ideally) to become not mere technical specialists but top executives, bolster an educational approach tailored to the need of a prospective CEO (Starkey & Tempest 2008). Moreover since the 1990s management discourse has become dominated by ideas of flexibility, horizontal integration and knowledge management capabilities (Knights & Willmott 1997; ten Bos 2000). Consequently the push towards integrated, interdisciplinary

business schools appears to be irresistible but interdisciplinary integration is easier preached than practiced. First, the declared drive towards interdisciplinary is hindered by the division of labour in the academia: “Our espoused values declare our open-mindedness and commitment to being self-critical. In reality, the culture and career ladders of academia endorse a defensive kind of disciplinary closure that inhibits critical self-reflection.” (Knights & Willmott 1997, p. 10).

Such division of labour in business schools emerged also as part of the strategy to confer scientific respectability to a discipline that was tainted by its ‘humble’ origins as a technical and trade related field (Knights & Willmott 1997; Clegg & Ross-Smith 2003; Khurana 2007). But, paradoxically, the pedagogical consequences of this division are that it ends up reinforcing the same ‘trade-driven’ outlook that business schools have shunned for a long time. This effect is also compounded by the practice of re-labelling – within business schools – established academic disciplines with functional names (such as ‘accounting’, ‘marketing’, ‘human-resource management’) that are supposed to sound more relevant to the potential customers (Knights & Willmott 1997). As a consequence a strategy that is supposed to overcome academic silos ends up replacing them with functional ones: these might sound more ‘relevant’ but they do little to integrate the field and they are probably even less useful in educating reflexive managers.

The fact that Management and Organizational Studies researchers have been typically rewarded for producing original, distinctive and provocative approaches (Hodgkinson & Rousseau 2009) has further driven fragmentation. Faculty members appear to be subject to two divergent directives: as researchers they are disciplined into sticking to their narrowly defined epistemological universe, while as educators they are required to provide a big picture outlook, in order to train impartial general managers. Beyond the espoused values



and integration rhetoric, a political wedge is driven between research and educational practices.

Business schools, as any other organization, face the problem of balancing differentiation, required for the development of specialized subsystems, and integration, necessary to guarantee coordination of activities and unity of effort (Lawrence & Lorsch 1967). There are basically two types of strategies that can be employed to achieve organizational cross-functional integration (Clegg & Baunsgaard 2013). First it is possible to formally structure interaction by using formal roles, standard policies and procedures, planned meetings, and technologies; alternatively it is possible to develop collaboration, the informal set of social and affective relationships among individuals and groups. Business schools, as service organizations devoted to research, innovation and didactic, tend to operate in a scarcely predictable environment, requiring an organic structure (Burns & Stalker 1966) characterized by fuzzy roles and limited scope for formal and hierarchical integration. In these conditions the role of horizontal, informal collaboration becomes crucial and such collaboration, because of its relational, communicative and affective nature is founded on individual thought worlds and organizational ideologies.

Baunsgaard and Clegg argue that differentiation has discursive and political implications, and that meaning is constantly produced and reproduced in the form of local 'truths' emerging from power relations and professional identities, and inscribed in members' categorization devices (MCDs), those linguistic practices and codes that are used by individuals and groups to organize meaning and produce sense. Such a conceptualization is well suited to illustrate the political and ideological nature of disciplines in Academia, which can be described "as different constellations of professional identity communities constituting diverse ideological arenas of struggle" (Clegg & Baunsgaard 2013, p.41). Each

discipline plays its own 'language game', whereas word meanings are not simply derived by the actions or objects that they denote but from the historical discursive context in which they have developed (Wittgenstein 1958). Therefore communication and collaboration between disciplines is problematic, since any real attempt to cross disciplinary boundaries risks being regarded as a form of defection (Knights & Willmott 1997). Starkey & Madan (2001) highlight how both the organizational structure and the primary institutional function (training specialist in established research areas) of the majority of higher education organizations favour a monodisciplinary research culture.

These reflections show how to cross the disciplinary barriers is not simply difficult but constitutes a 'wicked problem' (Rittel & Webber 1973). This means that it is an issue that is not just ambiguous or inadequately described but for which it is impossible to provide a definitive formulation, since its interpretation can be disputed. In fact, if we approach the concept of interdisciplinarity in epistemological terms, as a statement of the necessity to bridge and connect the knowledge domains of different branches of learning in order to produce a more comprehensive understanding of the universe, we are paradoxically reinforcing the same silo mentality that we are ostensibly opposing. By talking of *interdisciplinarity* we are implicitly acknowledging the ontological validity of what is in reality just a historically produced, contingent social construction, the 'discipline'. Those scientific disciplines that we tend to regard as natural fields of study, logical subdivision of the constantly swelling sphere of scientific knowledge, only emerged in the nineteenth century as a consequence of the 'scientification' of knowledge, of a general trend towards specialization propelled by industrial revolution and by the development of sophisticated and expensive research instrumentation (Klein 1990, p. 21). The rise of disciplines was consolidated in particular by the emergence of communities of specialized scientists, by the remodelling of the communication system on which these knowledge communities were

based, with the introduction of modern scientific publications and an overall reorganization of the scientific production process aligned to the new imperative of the search for novelties (Stichweh 2001). Transformation of the knowledge production processes and practices was inescapably accompanied by a restructuring of the labour organization and of the institutional field. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, career patterns of academics completely changed, from a traditional hierarchical succession, whereas the progression of positions (chairs) happened within the same organization, so that “one could, for example, rise from a chair in the philosophical faculty to an (intellectually unrelated) chair in the medical faculty” (Stichweh 2001, p. 13729), to a modern ‘disciplinary’ scientific career, a progression of position inside a discipline and across different Universities.

Because of the genealogy of disciplines, scientific researchers, unlike other members of the workforce who are uniquely assessed by the organizations that employ them, are primarily assessed by other members of their disciplinary community, while their employers are merely adopting performance metrics and that have been externally determined. A consequence of this arrangement is the limited appeal of efforts aimed at integrating disciplinary work put in place by single institutions: in fact if a tertiary education organization decided to promote strongly an agenda of integration by explicitly assessing the level of interdisciplinary research output of its faculty members, this would be tantamount to forcing researchers into a ‘double bind’ situation (Bateson 1972).

Asking academics to be ‘valuable interdisciplinary researchers’ is a paradoxical injunction, since they know they can only attain recognition as ‘proper’ researchers within the strict boundaries of a discipline, a community which has a conservative and disciplining nature (Syed et al. 2010, p. 75) In the specific case of business education, Bennis & O'Toole (2005) highlight the influence of recruiting and promotion systems rewarding specialization and

academic accomplishments such as the number of publications in peer reviewed journals. They also provide some anecdotal evidence that this trend is penalizing those who pursue an agenda of interdisciplinarity in research and teaching. Likewise, Knights & Willmott (1997) stress how organizational and resourcing arrangements can constitute a barrier to any form of interdisciplinarity, alongside institutional arrangements linked to the publishing industry and research funding.

Yet, disciplines themselves are not frozen, nor with impermeable boundaries; These supposedly static disciplinary silos are in fact agitated by an internal competition that makes them dynamic and are connected by a network of intellectual and material exchanges (Jacobs 2014). New specialties are constantly emerging, propelled by technological advances that offer new means of perceiving, translating and inscribing phenomena (Latour & Woolgar 1979), or as a result of institutional pressures, as in the case of a reallocation of public funding along different priorities. In addition, disciplinary boundaries constantly change also because of “an expansionary strategy in which the discipline attacks and takes over parts of the domain of other disciplines” (Stichweh 2001, p. 13730). In the specific field of management studies it has been noted that the typical responses to the appeal for interdisciplinary research involve either fabricating “an appearance of interdisciplinarity through the selective borrowing of concepts or ideas from another discipline (...) [or] a single discipline extending the sphere over which it claims some expertise” (Knights & Willmott 1997, p. 10). Cooperation among the different competing “tribes” is discouraged because it threatens their sense of identity, since belonging to a discipline provides academics with a sense of security and a ‘script’ (Knights & Willmott 1997).

Jacobs & Frickel (2009) sum up the barrier to interdisciplinary collaboration in three categories: epistemic (different thought styles, methods and languages), structural (specialized journals, departmental organization, funding arrangements) and administrative (bureaucratic arrangements keeping disciplines separated); however, it is quite evident that all these differences are not just typical of academia but are similar to the cultural and pragmatic separations that emerge as the physiological consequences of any organizational differentiation process.

As any other organization, universities have developed solutions to cope with their problems of internal integration, : in the specific context of graduate schools of business the limited size of the organization and the need to cater for mature, experienced practitioners requiring conceptual tools to deal with a complex, intertwined reality constituted other strong inducements for an interdisciplinary approach (Ryan & Neumann 2011). Faced with the problem of corralling recalcitrant specialists and the need to educate managers who have to develop sophisticated integration skills, most business schools rely on capstone strategy courses to integrate their MBA curricula (Athavale et al. 2008). The purpose of a capstone course is to consolidate the knowledge that has been learnt through a course, integrating the core disciplines in a holistic manner (Bailey et al. 2012). They can take the form of a case study, simulation or the more practical form of an industry project (Weber & Englehart 2011), showing students how the different specialized teaching they receive can fit together. Kachra & Schnietz (2008) argue that this methodology, at least in the current structure based on internal-external analysis and on a formulation-implementation sequence, has serious limitations, since it emphasizes an approach that is simplistic, reductionist and over analytic but seriously lacking in practical wisdom and integration. They suggest instead that it would be better to redesign capstone strategy courses focusing on the decision-making aspects.

An alternative solution is the use of service learning, which involves engaging students in a community or not-for profit organization project, with the purpose of providing them with hands on, curriculum relevant experience, fostering at the same time civic spirit, reflexivity and community participation (Steiner & Watson 2006). While the potential of this approach is remarkable, its impact is often limited by the amateurish nature and poor design of the projects, which would instead require the establishment of formal partnerships between business schools and interested communities (Weber & Englehart 2011).

A third integration strategy exerting pressures on faculty members, either asking instructors to send common and consistent messages across the curriculum, using common case studies or adopting forms of team teaching. Such strategies were for instance frequently employed in the undergraduate courses by the business schools surveyed by Athavale et al. (2008). The limits of a team teaching policy reside in the fact that interdisciplinary integration cannot be achieved by simply pooling together academics with different backgrounds, since these will defend their distinctive identities (Knights & Willmott 1997).

Navarro (2008) suggests that a better way to develop a functionally integrated faculty would be to act on individual faculty members, training them to become more integrative in their thinking, for instance by making sure that tenure track instructors who have not obtained an MBA, take classes in the schools' curriculum and that the presence of a strong leadership (UTSB Dean), incentivizing genuine integration effort, is paramount.

One last pedagogical integration strategy that is gaining ground in recent years is the redesign of MBA curricula around the concepts of 'integrative thinking' and 'design thinking' (Dunne & Martin 2006). 'Integrative thinking' in particular refers to "the capacity to take a cross-functional, multidisciplinary approach to the solution of unstructured

business problems” (Latham et al. 2004, p. 4). This model, pioneered by Toronto’s Rotman School of Management and now considered or adopted by a number of business schools including UTS, involves a combination of the previous strategies, plus teaching the foundation of model based decision making since the beginning of the course. Similar approaches are being used by other leading business schools, such as Stanford, who decided to combine different disciplinary courses with the cement of modules on critical thinking and team management, or Yale, who overhauled traditional subjects by reframing them in the perspective of a company’s key stakeholders and adding an ‘Integrated Business Perspective’ module (Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011, p. 131).

All these integration efforts are, however, hindered by institutional forces that spring from a neoliberal and managerialist political agenda (which often goes under the label of NPM, ‘new public management’). A pivotal feature of this dominant rhetoric is the idea of instrumentality of research, a concept encapsulated in a recent statement by an Australian right wing politician, member of the current cabinet: "The Coalition would look to targeting those ridiculous research grants that leave taxpayers scratching their heads wondering just what the Government was thinking. Taxpayer dollars have been wasted on projects that do little, if anything, to advance Australians' research needs" (Lane 2013). This emphasis on ‘practical’ research seems destined to break down those disciplinary silos but this intent is completely undermined by two other central tenets of NPM: accountability and performativity (Clarke et al. 2012). The distrust in individual work ethics, the assumed centrality of market relationships, and an aversion for anything ‘public’ leads to an obsession with measuring individual outputs. This focus on demonstrating achievements ends becomes translated into the widespread adoption of centrally administered ‘performance-based research funding systems’ (Hicks 2012) which oblige academics to concentrate on demonstrating research achievements through publication in high ranked

journals (Ryan & Neumann 2011) and to devote considerable energies to the acquisition and administration of research funds (Herbert, Barnett & Graves 2013). Journal based metrics have been identified as factors inhibiting interdisciplinarity in research (Rafols et al. 2012) and performance-based research funding can restrict autonomy by enhancing the control capacity of disciplinary elites (Hicks 2012). In addition to this, the exclusive emphasis on research outputs reduces the relevance, and therefore the disciplinary integration potential of teaching.

These reflections highlight, once again, that the practices of business academics are not the result of the performance of an ideal script but emerge from the interplay of individual coping tactics, institutional pressures, organizational policies and that the various stakeholders' strategies are often shaped by powerful actants, in this case the set of metrics underlying performance-based research funding systems.

Despite its sophistication and extent this debate has an important limitation: it only looks for a single determinant to academic behaviour, be it the NPM metrics, the quest for methodological purity or the desire to engage with industry and society. It tends to forget that academics perform multiple roles, across different sites, interfacing different stakeholders. It is necessary to move on and to consider another facet of this multiplicity.

## **The politics of business education**

Reflecting on the difficulties encountered in business education (and in academia in general) when attempting to balance rigour and relevance and to integrate different disciplines, we have often stumbled upon the issue of power, both in terms of struggles between different stakeholders and from the perspective of the influence that ideologies, structures of domination and disciplinary systems have on the behaviour of involved



agencies. In fact “the teaching and learning that takes place in business schools is never divorced from the complexities of self/other relations, business school power relations and power relations more broadly within society” (Vince 2010, p. S27). However, the political issues surrounding organizational behaviour in business schools are rarely empirically examined in the literature. One exception is a study by Thompson & Purdy (2009) who, with the intent of investigating the reasons why certain effective curricular innovations are not always implemented and sustained, describe the longitudinal case study of curricular reforms in an American business school. Their research reveals that “how good an idea is not enough to sustain a curricular innovation... [but] contextual factors such as the faculty composition and deep structural assumptions about curricular goals and academic freedom [...] played a role” (Thompson & Purdy 2009, p. 205). These authors highlight the importance of disciplinary aspects of power and of hegemonic systems of domination, and the interplay of these ‘deep structures’ with strategies put in place by individual actors to advance their interests and resist control. In point of fact, any discussion about the political aspects of business education needs to commence by acknowledging that the term ‘power’ describes an array of phenomena, different aspects of a complex and multifaceted social dynamic.

While power has been recognized by many students of organizations as a central aspect of organizational behaviour, often it has been considered in a simplistic, restricted, and static manner (Clegg et al. 2006). The complexity of the phenomenon has been described as an opposition between idealist and pragmatic perspectives of power (Gordon 2007), episodic and systemic power (Clegg 1989), power to and power over (Clegg et al. 2006). Once again, the application of the analytic framework devised by Clegg (1989) to the dynamics in business education allows one to organize a series of observations made by a number of

different commentators on factors that influence behaviours and performances of business schools.

Examples of episodic power games are frequently reported in the literature on Business education. For instance Augier & March (2007) stress how the debate between relevance and rigour reflects a struggle between different interest groups in business schools, while Knights & Willmott (1997) describe the way in which different disciplinary groups conspire to expand their influence within education institutions. Such descriptions highlight the interplay between episodic struggles and deeper regulatory, ideological and institutional structures of domination. Gioia & Corley (2002), for instance, have observed an emerging power play between students and institutions fuelled by the newfound opportunity by students to influence a business school's economic success and survival through ranking manipulation.

The short tenancy of deans is an example of an 'obligatory passage point' (Callon 1986; Clegg 1989) that limits the strategies that business schools leadership can utilize. Such tenure regimes consequently stabilize and regulate behaviours of business schools, perpetuating systems that are often accused of being dysfunctional: "deans typically are not around for the long term, so there is little incentive for them to invest resources in anything other than playing the rankings game on a 2-year cycle under the guise of 'staying current'." (Gioia & Corley 2002, p. 112). Similar effects are attributed to career path and promotion criteria: since "business schools adopted appointment practices and criteria which were acceptable to their peers in other parts of their universities" (Lorsch 2009, p. 111) such academically oriented career paths have constrained the pedagogic options and the teaching behaviours of tenured faculty members. Analogous politics are highlighted, on a more macro level, by Trank & Rynes (2003) who discuss how the effect of a shift in the

power balance of different stakeholders for business schools (Government agencies, corporate sponsors, alumni etc.) has transformed objectives and ethos.

The disciplinary effects of different organizational imperatives sometime expose individuals to contradictory requests. In order to demonstrate to their paying customers that they provide effective and relevant know how, and in order to manage the shortage of faculty with doctoral degrees (Clinebell & Clinebell 2008) business schools 'enrich' their faculty with practitioners. But tenured faculty members, who have to play the scientific research game before the executive training one, can feel challenged by the fact that adjunct professors, thanks to their real-world experience and their freedom from other research commitments, can raise the bar of teaching standards and customer care, putting them in a negative light (Zell 2001, p. 329). The role of adjunct faculty (or in AACSB's definition, 'clinical faculty members') is often ambiguous: an example of this ambiguity is provided by a study of innovation in a business school where the issue of the level of 'academic freedom' to be granted to executive professors (i.e. autonomy in deciding their syllabus) was often left undecided (Thompson & Purdy 2009). The absence of a political debate on the role of adjunct faculties can be interpreted as a refusal to acknowledge them as proper 'strangers', almost hoping that they were only an expedient solution, as pied pipers who, once their task was completed would wander off, hopefully without taking the village children along.

By failing to engage these 'clinical' members as relevant stakeholders and capable contributors to the decision making process (for instance the in the development of the curriculum), a business school can lose an important opportunity, that of recruiting the unprejudiced intelligence that only a stranger can bring to an organization, thanks to the fact of not being "radically committed to the unique ingredients and peculiar tendencies of

the group, and therefore approaches them with the specific attitude of "objectivity."  
(Simmel 1950, p. 404).

By examining the issue of the perception of adjunct faculty members we have come across an example of the effect of ideological and discursive factors shaping the political field of management education. Several authors have discussed the influence of such factors in determining practices in management education. First, the way in which students are seen and conceptualized plays a role in defining behaviours and attitudes of the faculty (Azaddin Salem 2009). Knights & Willmott (1997) have argued that the desire to maintain social distance between student and academic, combined with the idea that teaching is secondary to research or consulting, explains some didactic choices that are then rationalized in term of the necessity of maintaining scientific rigour. Such decisions are compounded by the fact that the choices and behaviours of management academics are – despite their best efforts to declare the opposite – often driven by ideological and political forces that have little to do with the uninterested desire to advance human knowledge. Research fund allocation, for instance plays a major role (Clegg & Dunkerley 1980), with the fact that research patterns are subject to fads and fashions being empirically demonstrated (Barley, Gordon & Gash 1988). Even the translation of the theoretical knowledge acquired by research into praxis through the pedagogical intermediation of management educators is problematic since complex theories are often trivialized and misrepresented in the process of being transformed into recipes for managerial action (Weatherbee, Dye & Mills 2008).

Finally, we need to consider emotions, whose role in organizational decision making is crucial but often under-acknowledged. Contemporary business education puts much emphasis on concepts such as flexibility, capacity to adapt to turbulence, the need to adopt

post bureaucratic structures and practices. While the Weberian model of rational authority was based on de-personalization, logic and subtraction of passions and emotions, in the new flexible capitalism, the emotional side of workers has to be recruited in order to harness their creativity and adaptability to turbulent conditions. "The organizational discourse of entrepreneurialism has created an idealized productive subject who reflects the interest of the organization (...) employees are supposed to be transformed into entrepreneurial selves who are personally responsible for innovation, economic growth and the safeguarding of their own employability" (Baumeler 2010, p. 280).

Not all emotions are given right of citizenship in contemporary organizations with only those that can be used productively in the pursuit of organizational aims, such as enthusiasm or stress management. The use of concepts such as 'emotional intelligence' can be seen as the application of a disciplinary regime of emotional conduct (Baumeler 2010), a situation reflected in business education's growing interest in the application of models of emotional intelligence (Boyatzis, Stubbs & Taylor 2002; Myers & Tucker 2005) despite other 'pre-rational' aspects being suppressed or ignored, such as anxiety linked to learning and teaching, even if such emotion is physiological and can have a productive dimension (Vince 2010). Indeed the decision to engage or not with emotional aspects appears not to be determined by an epistemological bias towards rationalism but is rather driven by an implicit political agenda.

These cursory reflections on the complex topic of the effects of power, domination and disciplinary systems on the behaviour and evolution of management education can help to appreciate the relevance and the need of a thorough investigation of the 'political life' of any business school if we aspire to understand the way in which actual learning and teaching practices evolve and transform.

## Summing up: a map of the most relevant discursive elements

This broad review of the principal issues, concepts and dynamics that affect the world of management research and education can be summarised in the form of a map of the discursive ‘terrain’ in which the observed academic practices and identities operate. The presence of dialectically opposed ‘imagined life-worlds’, alternative conceptions of the purpose, essence, nature, of management research and education, should make this discursive territory very rugged.

The unevenness of the landscape is not always manifest; each thesis and antithesis represents a configuration of power/knowledge relationships more than an abstract idea. These dialectic alternatives, often presented as alternative philosophies that agents are free to choose depending on their inclinations and desires, are enacted as more or less powerful arrangements of ideas, bodies, resources, institutions. In a specific spatial-temporal site a thesis (and its complement of power relations) can become hegemonic, completely erasing the possibility of its antithesis, through processes of power-driven rationalization and normalization. As a consequence dialectic relationships are not easily ‘resolved’ by actors in a synthesis. Sometimes one thesis will become congealed in their *habitus*, veiled by the *illusio* that they stolidly accept as the only conceivable form of the life-world, becoming an element of stability in practices and identity but also forcing individual differences in a dystopian homogeneity (ten Bos 2000). In other cases the less-powerful alternative will remain visible, haunting the tranquillity of the actors, sometimes stimulating their active resistance and stirring conflicts. The principal dialectic contrasts, presented as opposed ‘force fields’, are presented in the Table 6.

**Table 6 - Alternative force-fields shaping the discursive landscape**

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>PERFORMATIVITY</b></p> <p>The function of management education and research is to increase profits and production. Relevant interlocutors are managers and shareholders. The model is aligned with neoliberal ideologies, NPM inspired models of research funding, and with the current accreditation and ranking metrics.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>REFLEXIVITY</b></p> <p>The purpose of management science is to reflect critically on organization phenomena that are characteristic of modernity, making practitioners aware of their ethical, social and environmental responsibility. Management scholarship should engage with all stakeholders affected by production systems.</p>
<i>Associated contrasts:</i>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Training</b></p> <p>Management is a technical skill: students are customers that invest their time and money to receive usable knowledge and expertise that they will be able to sell on the market recouping their investment.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Educating</b></p> <p>Management implies ethical responsibilities: students must be made critically aware of the consequences of their acts and decisions. The ultimate purpose of education is to improve society and reduce inequities</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Know that / know how</b></p> <p>The focus of research and education is on improving operational capabilities in individuals, organizations, industries and economies through the development of theoretical (know that) and applied (know how) knowledge</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Know why</b></p> <p>The focus of research and education is to increase public awareness of the moral and material consequences of action. The focus is on questioning the current and 'normalized' views.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Quantitative / financial metrics</b></p> <p>All performances must be quantified and tested for their 'utility', measured in financial terms (return on investment). Metrics are used to rank contributions and distribute rewards. Success is equivalent to career advance.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Social Impact</b></p> <p>The value of academic contribution is the capacity to produce debate and discussion in the field, produce new ways to interpret the social world, even bring about a positive change in practices (that is one that reduces inequities and improve well-being)</p>

**Table 6** (continued from previous page)

<p><b>STANDARDIZATION</b></p> <p>Strong drive toward a globalized and uniform set of ‘best’ practices in teaching, researching, managing. The focus is on control and supervision of individual efforts. Academic activity requires a relevant amount of ‘tick boxing’ aimed at demonstrating conformity. This approach produces, feeds and is championed by a strong academic bureaucracy and management.</p>	<p><b>PLURALITY</b></p> <p>Drive towards variety and pluralism, adapting to and being inspired by local conditions and issues. The focus is on learning, innovation and diversity of interests, approaches and interpretations, catering for the needs of a variety of stakeholders. Non-academic functions should operate as internal services in support of academic enterprises.</p>
<p><i>Associated contrasts:</i></p>	
<p><b>Accreditation / ranking</b></p> <p>The achievement of accreditation and of a high standard in rankings is considered as unavoidable, or even considered an end in itself. A strong identity comes from complying with institutional isomorphism.</p>	<p><b>Innovation</b></p> <p>The capacity to produce truly original and unique results, and be acknowledged for the capacity to create an impact in a specific context. Novelty of contribution and originality are the basis for a strong identity.</p>
<p><b>Publishing</b></p> <p>Acknowledgment through publication is, more than a means to ensure publicity to ideas, an end in itself. Success, motivation, self-efficacy are function of the literary output. This generates and it is reproduced by complex industry, based on a ‘non-monetary’ economy based on conspicuous contributions of unpaid labour. Activities that do not lead to publication outputs are shunned.</p>	<p><b>Influencing</b></p> <p>Motivation and drive come from the capacity to ‘leave a mark’ through teaching, social activism, researching and writing. Teaching, mentoring, engaging with industry and other stakeholders are as relevant as publishing. The choice of the communication medium (e.g. a book, a journal’s article, a blog) is motivated by the desire to reach different audiences or by the type of method or findings.</p>
<p><b>USA model hegemony</b></p> <p>US model of business education represented by the top-ranked business schools is considered a benchmark of quality and an ideal to be emulated. The approaches of these ‘sacred cows’ are always looked at with awe and considered a source of inspiration</p>	<p><b>Pedagogic and Heuristic Pluralism</b></p> <p>Different models of management education, born of different academic and cultural traditions are to be included in a dialogue aiming at the development of a plurality of approaches in research and teaching. The creation of an international non-hegemonic network of collaboration is envisioned.</p>



**Table 6** (continued from previous pages)

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>REDUCTIONISM</b></p> <p>Model that privileges the production of strong, clear and linear narratives that reduce complexity by excluding elements that do not fit a specific, actor network made of specific methods, languages, viewpoints, interests. Since cogency, consistency and accuracy are trumpeted as ultimate measures of truthfulness this approach tend to produce, and to be reproduced by, a strong <i>disciplinary arrangement</i>, both in the sense of a systematic set of instruction on correct behaviour and as a well delimited field of scholarship.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>HOLISM</b></p> <p>Based on the acknowledgement of the complex, interconnected and constructed nature of the social world, this field accepts that it is necessary to employ a vast array of conceptual lenses and forms of knowledge to make sense and operate on it. It privileges cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary collaborations and considers ‘contamination’ essential to produce useful knowledge. Epistemological differences are considered opportunities for learning rather than causes for contraposition.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Associated contrasts:</i></p>	
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Disciplinary differentiation</i></b></p> <p>The only possible form of organization of academic work is based on the differentiation along disciplinary lines, with each discipline striving to achieve orthodoxy and correctness.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Cross-disciplinary Integration</i></b></p> <p>Integration across disciplines is considered – despite difficulties in communication – essential to produce valuable and actionable knowledge</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Normal science</i></b></p> <p>The production and distribution of knowledge happens mostly within the boundaries of ‘normal science’ (Kuhn 1962)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b><i>Science that matters</i></b></p> <p>Aim of researchers is to conduct inquiries that, through cross-disciplinary integration and collaboration with practitioners can produce practical wisdom.</p>

These contrasts can be more or less visible in a specific context, such as in a particular department of a business school at a given moment in time: the next chapter will look at the characteristic of one of these local discourses, outlining how these dialectic currents manifest.

However, before moving on, it is important to fully exploit the problematizing potential of this map. The presence of these differences is relevant in itself, since it exposes that

Universities, usually regarded as extremely stable, durable and solid institutions (Berti 2014), characterized by strong traditions and centuries old practices, and dominated by intellect and rigour, are in fact agitated by strong currents. This is not just the consequence of human weaknesses (captured in witty quips such as ‘academic politics are so vicious precisely because the stakes are so small’<sup>15</sup>). It appears instead to be a physiological characteristic of a field where the multiplicity of stakeholders and the presence of multiple objectives tend to generate deep paradigmatic divisions. These rifts transcend theoretical diatribes and denote the presence of alternative teleologies and the persistence of different power/knowledge structures. Consequently, individual academics are subject to multiple discourses, a factor that can allow a great variance in behaviours and attitudes.

This map is also interesting for what it does not show, for the remarkable absence of an expected fact. It is extraordinary that scholars who are devoted to the study of management methods devote so little of their immense scholarly production to the consideration of the forms of management most fitting to organize their own activities. There is a deafening silence on ‘positive’ recommendations on this topic. The literature seems to offer plenty of ideas on what should be taught or researched in business school but little discussion goes on how to coordinate, direct, systematise the efforts of individual academics. The only stream of studies that consistently address the issue of academic management is Critical Management Studies. However the stance taken most authors who engage in this discussion is distinctively anti-managerialist (notable examples include Parker & Jary 1995; Willmott 1995; Clarke et al. 2012; Knights & Clarke 2013; Parker 2014). An otherwise well informed and argued critique of the way in which business schools and

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<sup>15</sup> This sentence, apparently coined by Wallace S. Sayre, has become a trope and has been used in various forms by a number of commentators, and it is routinely attributed to Henry Kissinger (Clegg 1979/2013)

universities are currently managed risks losing its transformative potential by jettisoning the very possibility of management.

In the literature (or talking to senior academics) is often possible to come across an undisguised nostalgia for a lost golden age of collegiate management. This lost utopia was certainly not free of contradictions and oppression (Tounson 2012); however this nostalgia probably represents the projection of current fears and problems (Ylijoki 2005). Nostalgia or resistance are not necessarily negative and could provide narratives that help designing alternative futures. Nonetheless there is the need for an open discussion of how to provide a form of accountability that is neither bureaucratic compliance nor the self-regulation performed by an incontestable elite; on how to guarantee the return on the social investment on education and research and protect the rights of the 'consumers' of business education; on how to represent the voices and the interests of the myriad of stakeholders who are affected by 'bad' management theories and practices.

The rare attempts to propose models of management that could replace the despised New Public Management ones (an example is Ryan & Guthrie 2009) suffer of another limit, the fact that they focus uniquely on the academic personnel. In contemporary corporate universities the size and influence of the non-academic staff is such that this personnel outnumbers faculty members and account for more than half of the institutions' staffing cost (UTS 2013d). Given these figures it would be foolish to consider these actors mere sidekicks. In this regard universities increasingly resemble major League soccer clubs: the footballers are those who score the goals, determine the results and get the press attention but they represent only a fraction of the staff (and they are hardly the ones who determine the governance of their Clubs).

It becomes necessary to consider forms of management that, while considering the central role of the 'players/academics', allowing them to shine and compete at the best of their abilities, take also in account the activities of the entire set of professionals that contribute to run these institutions. Moreover, it is important to reflect on the unsavory aspects of management, the fact that coordination entails a reduction of individual freedom, collaboration implies working for others' benefit, and team results can require individual sacrifices.

In order to assess the possibilities of alternate ways of managing academic work is important to take a close look at how the present modes of organization operate, considering all the array of forces that can shape behaviors, decisions and narratives in a specific setting. This is the purpose of the following chapters.

Part 4.

Zooming in on the  
worksite

## Chapter 8.

# UTS Business school: between challenging reality and imagined futures

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*You would have me, when I describe horse-thieves, say: 'Stealing horse thieves is an evil.' But that has been known for ages without my saying so. Let the jury judge them; it's my job simply to show what sort of people they are. Anton Chekhov, from a letter to A.S. Souvorin*

### Increasing the map scale: surveying the locale of UTS Business

It is necessary to zoom in on the specific site (metaphorically increasing the scale of our discursive map) to understand how ideas, institutional norms and ideal selves become embodied in specific practices and identities, and to describe how power/knowledge effects are deployed in a particular circuitry of episodic, dispositional and facilitative power. Local arrangement of forces, material, institutional, agency-driven characterize the local contexts in which work practices and identities emerge and are situated. These arrangements can become stabilized to become 'commonsensical' and hegemonic (Laclau & Mouffe 1985), as happened in the hyper-managerialist business school described by Parker (2014). In other cases the discursive field is more fluid and plural, allowing a more contested and fractured organizational 'life-scapes'. Considering the interplay between the global discursive repertoires and their local translations means acknowledging that local

and global are not separate realms but are “linked by complex processes of co-formation” (Lancione & Clegg 2014, p. 2).

Analogously to what was done in the previous section, this investigation of the small ‘d’ discourse commences by employing an historical lens, outlining a brief history of UTS Business and of its parent institution, the University of Technology Sydney (UTS). This archaeological study is performed both by examining documentary evidence produced by the two organizations and incorporating the results of other published works that have researched the same setting. The climax of this narrative is represented by a focal event, a transformation initiative deployed as part of the UTS Strategic plan 2009-2018 (UTS 2013c) and articulated in a specific action plan for the business school (UTSB 2012a). These change plans are substantiated by an ambitious construction plan, self-described as a “once-in-a-generation vision to deliver a vibrant and engaging education precinct [through] a \$1 billion investment that will fundamentally change the way we deliver teaching, learning and research” (UTS 2014a). In the case of UTS Business this involves the relocation, between 2014 and 2015, in the newly erected DCCW Building’, initially conceived as a “tree house” (UTS 2010b) that should bring about connection, “excite people and encourage them to engage with the Business School” (UTS 2014c).

While happening in the context of a general revamping of the city campus, the ‘strategic move’ involving UTS Business assumes a particular rhetorical and discursive connotation, connected to the choice of the designer, the famed ‘starchitect’ (Klimek 2013), Frank Gehry. Both the selection of the designer and the explicit rationale behind the design he produced, are based on a ‘fashionable idea’ in management education, that of integrative and design thinking. As a consequence a succinct critical review of these interrelated concepts is included, with the intent of assessing how this ideological repertoire can contribute shaping

practices and identities of management academics but also showing the possible limitation of its related repertoire of change.

The purpose of this chapter is not to 'judge' the morality or appropriateness of this change strategy but rather to understand the effects it is performing on the landscape inhabited by the studied management academics, showing how it creates a discursive territory privileging, to use the dialectic oppositions introduced in the previous chapter, performativity over reflexivity, standardization over plurality and holism over reductionism.

## **The anatomy of a transforming Business School**

UTSB has come a long way since 1967 when its first incarnation, the NSW Institute of Business Studies, was established (UTSB 2013). In 1969 a further merger with the Institute of Technology created The New South Wales Institute of Technology (NSWIT), which started offering its first Bachelor of Business in 1974 and its first MBA in 1980 (UTSB 2013). Two years after the reconstitution (1988) of NSWIT as the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS), the renamed UTS Business School was launched, and in 1991 its Postgraduate programs established. In 2006 UTSB attains AACSB accreditation and since 2007 has been ranked in Band A1 of the Australian Government Learning and Teaching Fund (UTSB 2013).

Currently "the Bachelor of Business is the largest degree program at UTS in terms of student numbers and is among the biggest business programs in Australia" (Bajada & Trayler 2013, p. 5): data released by the university show that in 2012 more than one out of three UTS students were enrolled in business degrees, adding up to a total of 7294 equivalent full time students (UTS 2013e). This vast population is highly diverse: international students at UTSB were 4706 in 2012, almost equally distributed between undergraduate and postgraduate. In order to deliver its educational and research functions



UTSB employs 382 full time equivalent staff members, including 87 who are engaged in teaching, 45 in research only, 152 both in teaching and research and 98 in other administrative and ancillary activities (UTS 2013e). The faculty is organized in 5 Discipline Groups (Accounting, Economics, Finance, Management, and Marketing). The Management Discipline Group (MDG), the focus of this research, comprises 54 academics plus 12 administrative and support staff members. In addition to the discipline groups, the school operates through eight cross-disciplinary research centres.

The physical setting in which the school currently operates is a refurbished 19th century fruit and vegetable market situated in Sydney's Central Business District, in an area (Haymarket) that is also Sydney's Chinatown. A small number of faculties from the MDG (those specialized in Events, Sports and Leisure management) are instead located in a 'country' campus (Kuring-Gai). While still well within the urban sprawl of metropolitan Sydney, the geographic location of this secondary campus, at the border of a National Park, gives it a distinct 'Australian flavour', exemplified by the presence of tall Gum trees, abundant wildlife and predominantly Caucasian individuals. Until recently the two groups forming the MDG were managed as separate entities and the combination of history, management styles and setting produced two distinctive group identities. The first one (the 'City people') is a discipline oriented, theory and publication driven and internationally focused group of academics. The second (the 'Kuring-Gai people') is instead more trans-disciplinary, practice-oriented, industry and locally focused group. The historical separation is being superseded by the two entities having been merged in the MDG and they will soon share the same roof. As part of the above-mentioned University Campus Master Plan all operations will be moved to the City by 2016 with UTS Business relocating from October 2014 into the new building.

The creation of this new building and its implications are without doubt the most salient event in the history of the Business School, an extraordinarily powerful discursive device, reinterpreting past, present and future through the light of a new destiny, that of becoming a world leading school, in the words of UTSB Dean “by linking creativity, technology and innovation” (Lancione & Clegg 2013, p. 131). While this change initiative has been analytically chronicled and examined in other works (Lancione & Clegg 2013, 2014), it is useful to recapitulate some of its crucial passages.

In late 2008, with the instalment of the first externally appointed dean in its history, UTSB launched a bold strategy aiming to “reposition itself as a ‘leading Business School in a world leading University of Technology’ through a process that includes, but is not limited to, the building of a new facility designed by the Canadian architect Frank Gehry, as well as a major revision of teaching programs, ethos, and branding.” (Lancione & Clegg 2013, p. 118). The rationale of the investment is stated by the University Vice Chancellor: “the UTS Business School is transforming itself with an emphasis on integrative thinking – producing students with boundary crossing skills as well as specialised knowledge” (UTS 2010b). The Dean of UTSB has been an essential catalyst for the process, first by introducing and championing the idea of design thinking in the local discourse, then for advocating the investment on the new building, and finally, through serendipitous circumstances, bringing on board Frank Gehry and the symbolic and social capital that his figure carries (Lancione & Clegg 2014). Another relevant ‘move’, which both has a rhetoric and material valence is the involvement of a rich and politically well-connected Chinese-Australian businessman, Chau Chak Wing (Garnaut, Snow & Christensen 2009) who has donated 20 million dollars to UTS, a significant portion of the total construction cost of 210 million (O'Reilly 2014), to have his name immortalized in the building. It would be easy to dismiss this as another case of a wealthy ‘philanthropist’ buying social distinction. ‘Doctor’ Chau Chak Wing is a very

successful entrepreneur, yet he is not neither a scholar nor a school alumnus, since he obtained his title as an honorary recognition from a small American undergraduate private college (Garnaut et al. 2009). Nevertheless, what this partnership brings to the table is not a mere financial contribution: it seals an important connection with China, Australia's largest trading partner (DFAT 2014); it bolsters the University's connection with the world of business, enhances the Business School international orientation, and reinforces the relationship with the neighbouring ethnic community. In other words it is pivotal to the process through which UTSB establishes a network and a set of local-global connections which are vital to its sustenance (Lancione & Clegg 2014).

## **Managing change in a loosely coupled organization**

The creation of the new building is stated as an opportunity to make the Business School and the University more internationally visible, a practical solution to lack of space, as well as, especially, the strategy of choice to promote organizational change. Using a change of premises to turnaround an organization is not unheard of. A remarkable example of this is the (in)famous Wapping dispute, when Rupert Murdoch, at the rudder of News International, used an abrupt relocation of the printing plant as a political tactic to crush printers' union resistance (Littleton 1992). The role of the DCCW Building is so pivotal in the rhetoric of the Business School that, for instance, 4 pages out of 40 both in the 2012 MBA and EBMA brochures are devoted to celebrating the project with images and texts. This is part of a wider re-branding strategy of the School, started with the achievement of AACSB accreditation and including a range of events, publicity investments and ad-hoc publications, all pivoting on the new design-inspired ethos (Lancione & Clegg 2014).

Before starting to assess the rationale, rationality and rationalization of this strategic change initiative, it is necessary to understand the organizational context in which it takes place, which requires considering, in addition to the *morphology* of organization, its *physiology*. As an educational and research institution, UTSB is a prototypical example of a “loosely coupled” organization (Weick 1976; Orton & Weick 1990). *Loose coupling* refers to organized systems in which constitutive elements interact in an occasional, sometimes non-significant, and indirect manner, and effects of such interaction are felt only “eventually (rather than immediately)” (Weick 1982, p. 380). In such systems individuals, units, activities are reactive to each other but “attachment may be circumscribed, infrequent, weak in its mutual affects, unimportant, and/or slow to respond (Weick 1976, p. 3). Weak interaction is however still present, such that loose coupling must not be mistaken for ‘decoupled’ systems, which are not systems anymore (Czarniawska 2005b). Being loosely coupled can be an asset for a system, providing flexibility and capacity to survive and to manage environmental jolts and crisis situations, while tight coupling can expose to error accumulation (Weick 1990).

Numerous studies have highlighted the fact that organizations in the education sector tend to display characters of loose coupling (Weick 1976; Wilson & Corbett 1983), even if the trend in tertiary education is towards a tightening of managerial control (Olssen & Peters 2005). What is emerging in contemporary academic institutions is a hybrid model that combines both tight and loose coupling features (Boyd & Crowson 2002; Meyer 2002). Regardless of the increase in managerial control, top executives of educational and research institutions are often aware of the partially anarchic nature of these organizations, sometimes describing their role as ‘herding cats’ (Garrett & Davies 2010). Yet a loosely coupled system “is not a flawed system. It is a social and cognitive solution to constant environmental change” (Weick 1982, p. 405).

Empirical research into loosely coupled organizations has shown that loose coupling leads to “persistence”, that is resistance to intentional or planned change (Orton & Weick 1990). The relation between change and loose coupling is a complex one: not only are change initiatives in loosely coupled organizations more resource intensive and difficult to succeed (Wilson & Corbett 1983) but it is also the case that exposure to constant change pressure can weaken the system’s coupling (Marriott, Mellett & Macniven 2011). At the same time, customers of loosely coupled organizations can play a role in ‘tightening them up’, helping to integrate the activities of otherwise weakly connected units (Brunton & Matheny 2009). Tightening cannot be complete because its looseness does not depend on a deficit of the system integration mechanism but derives from the nature of the task and of the context.

The central issue for change management in loosely coupled systems is that, as a consequence of their physiology, “structure is not what higher education institutions have, it is rather something that they do” (Godemann et al. 2014, p. 226). Adopting such a process concepts leads to the necessity to adopt a “postmodern” philosophy of change, one “insisting that change is a function of socially constructed views of reality contributed by multiple players” (Graetz & Smith 2010, p. 147), and therefore consideration of it as an “ongoing performance” (Feldman & Pentland 2003, p. 94). In fact such an approach has been used by Lancione & Clegg (2013) to map the process of change by employing Actor Network Theory to identify a number of “chronotopes of change”, a “particular spatio-temporal moment by which the actor-networks of the DCCW project, and of the wider revision of the School, became territorialized, assuming a more or less defined form.” (Lancione & Clegg 2013, p. 126). The analysis highlights two major “repertoires of change” that characterize the local discourse, holding together the various translations and maintaining the change effort on a coherent path: the representation of an imagined ideal future and the persistent reference to powerful external narratives on the need to reform

business education by means of curricular and research practice innovation and the adoption of design thinking.

The loosely coupled, socially constructed and 'precarious' character of UTSB presented also a specific challenge for the new Dean. As someone who "brought with him international expertise in managing business schools on the verge of change" (Lancione & Clegg 2013, p. 131), it is easy to imagine that his employment implied 'new broom' expectations (Palmer, Akin & Dunford 2008, pp. 67-9): as a transformational leader he was required to leave a tangible, transformative mark on the organization, fulfilling the dream of becoming a 'world leading' institution. Soon after its appointment, he conveyed his ideal of change through a video-message, with which he introduces the idea of the new building:

"The World has changed and the way we do business must change, too. And the best place to start is not in a Boardroom or even in a Lecture Theatre. It's inside our heads. We need to think differently [...] UTS Business is transforming itself from a University Faculty to a world-leading centre of Business Thought. We're changing the way we think, and the way we teach our students to think. It's why we are creating a new space for learning and for knowledge exchange. A space where risk is encouraged and all ideas are welcomed. And it's why we are integrating our thinking across business disciplines and other Faculties [...] At UTS Business we are not just interested adapting to the future, we're creating it" (UTSB 2009)

The central elements of the strategy are encapsulated in this narrative: the externally driven compulsion to change ("the World has changed"); the implicit admission that academic activities are refractory to managerialist control; the need to transform identities ("the way we think") and practices ("the way we teach"); the means of effecting such change ("creating a new space"). This message also contains, despite the rhetorical deftness of its text and the use of alluring images to reinforce its contents, all the potential contradictions and complexities of the project. It talks of freedom ("risk is encouraged and

all ideas are welcomed”) but it starts with a stern admonishment that we have to change our way of thinking: that means that – to paraphrase Orwell – of all the ideas that are welcomed, some are more welcome than others. In this sense it de-legitimizes (at least rhetorically) disciplinary, reductionist tendencies, promoting instead a model of integration and creativity.

Ambitions for enhanced integration risk being undermined by the loosely coupled nature of the organization, which has a character of indeterminacy, responding to orders in an haphazard manner (Weick 1982, pp. 380-1). Even the laudable aspiration of becoming a “world-leading centre of Business Thought” has problematic implications. What does being “world-leading” mean? It is likely that this does not correspond to *being* original, innovative, visionary, useful but, more prosaically, to being *recognized* as a leader. In the current discursive scenario this process of becoming world leading corresponds, as seen in the previous chapters, to complying with a set of accounting criteria that can bring about conformity, bureaucracy, disciplinary closure. In fact, these processes share with other managerialist ‘reforms’ the same paradoxical character: on the one hand they claim to focus on performances, guaranteeing taxpayers more accountability and return on investment; on the other hand they bring about an increase in unproductive processes, rules, and rituals.

The diffusion of NPM reform agendas appear to be purely guided by isomorphic and ideological tendencies, causing a “*malade imaginaire*” syndrome: they are implemented first in countries in which public sectors already had a reputation for relative honesty and effectiveness, not in those marred by corruption (Hood 2000), constituting a textbook example of “garbage can” decision-making system (Cohen et al. 1972) where the solution not only precedes the problem but it creates it. The paradoxical result, for business schools,

is that in the attempt to become a leader in the industry, organizations end up adopting behaviours typical of followers, striving to obtain recognition by mimicking the established frontrunners.

The reform agenda of UTSB does not appear to be overtly inspired by NPM approaches: its focus is much more on influence (through redesigning of workspaces, curriculum, appointments) rather than on direct supervision and control<sup>16</sup>. Nonetheless, NPM is pervasive and has many effects, not least in the sacrifices that are required to feed the Moloch of the ranking game:

*My opinion on rankings is irrelevant because my opinion doesn't count: rankings are there and we have to adapt to them and I think accreditation is probably more important than rankings (...) but rankings count, rankings are used by universities and business schools in particular to promote their programs and institutions and we can't get away from that (UTSB Dean, interview, March 2013)*

Another problem is that, beyond the limited, biased and paradox-inducing NPM auditing model, the assessment of the success of the transformation initiative is problematic. In fact, when asked about the ways in which the organization plans to assess its achievements in terms of 'integrative thinking' (the ideological pillar of the model) the Dean becomes vague:

*[we considered monitoring] changes in behaviour, whether they use people's mobile phones to track their behaviour around this building and when they move into the new one. I'm not quite sure how that's gonna work but there'll be some observation made and then we will see what changes emerge at the other end. In terms of collaboration in academic terms I don't know, I'm not sure how we would*

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<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that NPM practices are absent in the context of UTSB; on the contrary, as discussed in chapter 10, they have a strong impact on the observed practices. However their creeping increase does not seem to be a central strategic feature of the change management initiative, as it happens in other similar contexts but rather the consequence of the participation to the global 'games' of business education.



*necessarily measure that, I suppose we could look at the collaboration level of journal publication [...] we're already starting to do that. We've made a number of appointments here which are interdisciplinary [...] [however] that might be a weak point because the career path is still driven by the disciplines* (UTSB Dean, interview, March 2013).

In a context where change is represented as the result of an intended process, a desired achievement in which key stakeholders have confident expectations but where the leadership is aware that outcomes and behaviours are conditioned by an array of scarcely controllable forces, it is no surprise that Gehry's building became a physical change totem (Lancione & Clegg 2013). If one wants to adhere more strictly to the anthropological lexicon, it would be more appropriate to designate it as a *fetish*, rather than a *totem*. In fact, while the latter is an emblem of clan solidarity based on kinship, symbolizing a common ancestor or guide-spirit (Durkheim 1915/1976), the former refers to "an object imbued with ritual potency, often surrounded with taboos and conferring material benefits upon its keeper" (Barfield 2000, p. 185). The new building incarnates the promise of a more internally and externally integrated, more global, more prestigious, more creative, more productive organization. However, this is not just a case of "*postalgia*", the longing for an idealized future that characterizes most of the managerialist discourse, especially the rhetoric of change management (Ybema 2004).

The conception of the building undoubtedly has a symbolic power, one 'gifted' under the auspices of the protective deity of design thinking, Frank Gehry while it also offers the leadership of UTSB relatively malleable material for the change initiative. Trying to modify entrenched behaviours, supported by tradition and by institutional norms (the discipline-centric career patterns; the rules of the publishing game), implies the risk of getting in the "swampy lowlands" of change, where the opposition does not come from explicit resistance but rather from the co-presence of contradictory and ambiguous elements

shaping social identity and practice (Beech et al. 2011). Moreover, the results of change programs is often ambiguous, since “how organizations respond is endogenously conditioned, and it cannot be fully anticipated” (Tsoukas & Chia 2002, p. 577) which makes demonstrating the success or failure of a change initiative highly problematic (Hughes 2011). The creation of a brick and mortar edifice can guarantee the persistence of a substantial and tangible trace of the achievements, immortalizing the effort of the current leading coalition. While even the most resounding successes of business leaders are often forgotten, in this case the protagonists of the change will be able to borrow the words of one of the bricklayers who are working at the façade of the building: “Mate, this will be the highlight of my career. I can bring my grandchildren here and say, “Look, I done this 20 years ago!” (7.30 report 2014).

This reference to the emotional impact of such a unique artefact points to another element that might have a powerful impact on the building dwellers: the aesthetic aspects of the transformation of the workplace. However this effect was – at the time of data collection – yet unfathomable, since the building was still encased in a shroud of scaffolds. The observed actors had only been exposed to ‘artists’ impressions’, blueprints, and 3D models, simulacra that cannot substitute the lived experience of the building.

## **Disciplining space**

The new building appears to be an effective solution to the problem of ‘claiming change’, both in terms of embodying a vision and demonstrating concrete achievement. It is at the same time a fetish that connects the school to the Empyrean Heaven of world-class educational institutions that can boast a Gehry edifice (Weatherhead, Princeton, M.I.T.), and a totemic landmark that will provide communion to a new breed of UTS Business

academics, alumni and industry partners. Nevertheless, it would be myopic to belittle this act as a mere rhetoric move. The re-organization of working spaces explicitly aims to affect behaviours, altering space and equipment in order to discipline academic bodies and minds that are scarcely responsive to changes mandated via policy, regulations or direct managerial orders. Such a strategy is explicitly affirmed in the corporate texts, as demonstrated by the following extract from the University corporate website:

“Office areas will feature a variety of open-plan workstations and academic offices, with extensive shared meeting areas and common spaces for formal and informal meetings.

Academic offices will be to the new UTS standard of 9-10 square metres. The smaller office size will allow more shared, collaborative spaces, which facilitates more interaction between academics and between academics and students.

Schools and administrative areas will be spread across multiple floors, connected by stairs, to encourage people to move between floors and meet colleagues from other areas of the faculty” (UTS 2013b; underlining added)

Despite the use of a mellifluous vocabulary (“will allow”; “facilitates”, “encourage”) the content of these statements show a strong disciplinary intent: the internal design of the new building is aimed at bringing about ‘desired’ changes in the behaviour of academics making them more collaborative and bringing down interdisciplinary barriers. A critic inspired by Foucault, such as Boje (1996), would probably accuse the project of trying to leverage the panoptical potential of the shared spaces of the DCCW building. Academics forced out of their cramped offices will become more subject to gazes that are not those of their choosing. They will be seen and heard not just by their students or by the member of their disciplinary “tribe” but also by practitioners and apprentices of different branches of learning in the new building. Again, it is the UTSB Dean himself who, in an interview to a newspaper, explicitly states this ‘panoptical’ objective:

"Our aim is to make this a porous building," he says, "both internally and externally. Internally, there will be public and collaborative spaces where interactions can happen between colleagues, students and business-school partners. Academics will have their private 'think spaces' but we hope to make the collaborative spaces so inviting that they will choose to use them." (Dennis 2012)

Architecture is in effect "a powerful means of directing and redirecting our attention, feelings, and thoughts" (Kornberger & Clegg 2004, p. 1104). Space materializes power relations, and the idea of creating a space that produces interdisciplinary integration can be interpreted as the latest manifestation of a process of constitution of the appropriate employee started in the 19th century, when architects started to design workplaces aimed at rationalizing and standardizing activities (Taylor & Spicer 2007).

In the case of the DCCW Building, however, the process is professedly one that takes into account employees' wellbeing and needs:

*I've never taken the view that open plan will work for academics. I think we're a special breed. We require private think spaces. That's the nature of long-term research and those universities that have tried open plan, where I've seen it, for example, another Norman Foster building in [mentions a UK based University] (...) so we went up to this area, which is really like a battery hen farm and there were all these academics looking very disgruntled in their public service partitions. They've brought pictures of their family to put on the partition, which they'd have to take down, because they were hot-desking and they'd come home again and someone else would replace them. [...] I just said to one of them, if this was in Australia, there'd be open revolt here. They said, don't forget, we've had 18 years of Thatcherism. We don't protest about anything anymore. But anyway, they did protest in the end and the whole place is being reconstructed (UTSB Dean, interview, June 2011).*

The tale of the Norman Foster building is used both to demonstrate that in this case the initiative is neither driven by the aesthetic ideals of another 'starchitect' nor by greedy

corporate imperatives. It is rather a considerate pursuit of a common need and that a 'natural' blossoming of cooperation will be induced by cleverly designed collaborative work environments. Its 'moral' value is also increased by the fact that the setting of a story is a high ranked 'modern' University that is a functional equivalent to UTS. In effect, despite the disciplinary connotation of the operation, encouraging a higher degree of internal and external integration could mean empowering academics, especially if one concurs with Boje (1996, pp. 188-9) that one of the key tactics traditionally used by business schools for maintaining control over the professoriate has been to isolate them both from the external world and from one another. However, the story implies another moral: the fact that overarching discourses and power relationships define the possibility that spaces are accepted or resisted, reinterpreted or suffered. Despite the porous façade, rationally constructed architectural spaces are "intimately tied to relations of production and to the 'order' those relations impose" (Lefebvre 1991, p. 33). Only those spaces that are discursively acceptable become plausible alternative:

*One guy, one of our young academics got up in one of the meetings and in a memorable speech, which people thought was most amusing at the time, said, 'I'd like to come to work every day and not know from one day to the next where I'll be sitting. In fact, some days, I might be sitting right next to you, Dean.' I thought, God forbid, let's find another approach immediately (UTSB Dean, Interview, June 2011).*

The final disposition of bodies in the new space will be the result of a more or less explicit political struggle. Internal strife commenced when the building was still only a set of blueprints and its anecdotes immediately assumed an Aesopian significance as rhetorical resources in an allegoric dance of supremacy and defiance. An emblematic example of this skirmish is the wrestle between the Dean and one of the most senior academics in the business school on the issue of the new office size. One of the precepts of the new design is that all academic offices will have the same, very limited, dimensions, justified as an issue

of fairness and opportunity: smaller offices will allow housing a larger faculty, providing to everyone a private 'thinking' space, without compromising the extensive, shared collaborative spaces and interactive lecture theatres that must remain the centrepiece of the building. At the same time this one-fits-all approach is supposed to bring forward a more open, less hierarchical culture. This powerful rationalization appeared compelling since any opposition could easily be discarded as symptomatic of particularism, self-regard and attachment to the old, unsustainable, disciplinary ethos. The counteroffensive mounted by one of the top research professors, however, amounted to the equivalent of rhetorical judo throw, where one fighter uses the opponent's own momentum against them. The case made by the academic centred on the existence of a large specialized research library, accumulated through a long and successful career, which is currently housed in an office that is almost three times the size of the future standard 'cubicle'. If a solution were not to be found, the professor threatened to organize a public bonfire of the books, clearly evoking images of a Nazi book burning. In order to avert this 'doomsday scenario' a compromise was found: an entire office space, adjoining the new office of the research professor, will be dedicated to the library, that will be open to use by members of the School. What is interesting is that the narrative is frequently evoked by both the former contenders and equally presented as a success story: in one case as a demonstration of the capacity to elaborate creative and integrative solutions; in the other as a proof that it is possible effectively to resist an autocratic regime which, under the guise of a rationalization project, is restricting freedom.

In effect technical and logistical explanations are constantly produced to rationalize choices that are actually likely to reproduce the current balance of power. For instance disciplinary groups will maintain a strong physical contiguity and the initial plan of having a Dean's Unit on the ground floor, to signify integration, openness to the external world, an inverted

pyramid, has been scrapped (because of alleged budgetary implication) in favour of a more traditional top floor location. Location is more than a symbolic issue, since “power through buildings is exercised through the way people are defined as different kinds of members and strangers” (Kornberger & Clegg 2004, p. 1104). Instead of ‘rebooting’ practices and relational networks, the new workspace risks having innovation potential limited by the current power play.

Despite the clear intent, the ‘disciplinary’ outcomes of workspace redesign on academic practices are ambiguous. Space does not determine behaviour, since its inhabitants develop strategies to resist, colonize and re-structure it in unexpected manners (Taylor & Spicer 2007, p. 333). In fact change strategists at UTSB are aware that the capacity of the building to shape the local action network is limited, constrained as it is by the discursive landscape in which the school operates:

*The building shouldn’t stand in the way of collaboration, where it becomes a possibility. It won’t force people to collaborate. No one could ever do that and the way in which we allocate the offices and the spaces in the building will be very instrumental in how much we can achieve* (UTSB Dean interview, June 2011).

These limitations could be better addressed if factors were not considered in isolation. Instead, the massive investment (of resources, time, and image) absorbed by the construction project might have detracted attention being paid to other aspects. For instance, activities in organisations are not always confined in specific locations and can occur across multiple sites (Czarniawska 2004c) and academics, much as other contemporary knowledge workers, do not operate exclusively in one fixed location. Their activities are carried out in various places: in addition to their allocated office and official spaces such as meeting rooms, they also work from home and their work often ‘leaks out’ in a variety of public spaces, ranging from cafes to trains, thanks to the diffusion of portable

IT devices, electronic networking, and cloud computing. Scholarly activities, such as writing a paper, are frequently performed in unorthodox places (Bartunek 2008) and as a consequence it is possible to assimilate academics to the category of *multi-location workers*, which requires considering how they reproduce, through micro-practices, their temporary workspaces (Hislop & Axtell 2009).

Apparently this notion does not fit well in the rhetoric of the 'brave new workspace', since acknowledging their nomadic practice limits the integration power of the new premises, leaving the only possibility of influence to the aesthetic seduction of the new environment. Consequently there is a concrete risk that, instead of getting out of their offices to engage in collaborative activities in the collaborative workspaces, they will simply end up moving most of their research work off the premises of the Business School. Yet, there is no mention in the current faculty action plans of specific policies or procedures aimed at tackling the issue of the spatial mobility of academic workers, for instance by facilitating the seamless integration of the activities performed in the new spaces with teleworking.

The problem is to acknowledge that "space is both the medium and outcome of the actions it recursively organizes" (Kornberger & Clegg 2004, p. 1096): it is simply one of the factors of the constellation of socio-material elements that shape practices. One of these aspects is constituted by the curricula.

## **Designing the new curricula**

Despite the fact that, as discussed in chapter 7, successfully bidding for research funding and achieving publication are essential in determining individual success in the academic 'rat race', teaching is still high on the organizational priorities of business schools. This is because education can provide an important source of income, either through student fees



or alumni donations. Moreover, it is primarily through teaching postgraduate students and offering executive training that a business school can maintain a vital (and influential) relationship with industry.

As a consequence of the importance of teaching relations, the revision of curricula is an important exercise to guarantee the alignment between an institution and some of its key stakeholders, demonstrating the ability to ‘walk the talk’, offering the kind of relevant, engaging and innovative teaching that the market demands. Yet there seem to be an important gap between what most commentators agree is needed and what is actually delivered, at least in US schools’ MBA curricula (Navarro 2008). The origin of this lag between pedagogical theory and curricular practice probably lies in the political nature of the curricular innovation process, whereas “a good idea is not enough to sustain a curricular innovation” (Thompson & Purdy 2009, p. 205) that needs to be supported by a set of elements, including faculty composition, disciplinary integration, as well as a view on student development that is coherent with the new curriculum.

In the context of UTSB, Bajada & Trayler (2013) provide a detailed description of the curricular reform of the undergraduate program currently being undertaken. The new integrated undergraduate business students curriculum has been developed, in a top-down fashion, inspired by the need to align with the new vision of the Business School while maintaining its “reputation for providing business education that produces work-ready graduates” (Bajada & Trayler 2013, p. 4). In this new program integration is embedded all through the program, rather than being delegated to a single final experience or subject:

- Integration is promoted starting from the first year when students are introduced with a “cornerstone” subject to the business landscape and to the key business functions (stage one), leaving most of the development of ‘specialized knowledge in the second and third year (stage two), followed by a capstone module where student have to tackle

a 'real world' business problem applying all the knowledge acquired during their degree (stage three)

- All majors and individual subjects include a focus on four intersecting themes: creativity, innovation and critical thinking; technology; global perspective; ethics and social responsibility
- The curriculum re-design is put in practice through a mix of actions: the introduction of normative standards (graduate attribute framework; teaching and learning framework), the support of coordination roles (First year coordinators, Capstone coordinators) and collaborative design involving faculty members (design workshops, meetings, working parties). These 'bottom up' design activities have produced, among other things, a completely new cornerstone subject for the first year, including a customized textbook (Bajada & Trayler 2013).

At the same time, as part of its effort to innovate the postgraduate business program, UTSB is developing an Integrated Business Consulting subject that will use real consulting projects (instead of case studies) as teaching methodology, further advancing the agenda of multidisciplinary and strong engagement with business and other stakeholders (Hall et al. 2013). All these curricular innovations appear to be meaningful efforts to integrate in the local practices the powerful narratives borrowed by the global business education reform Discourse and to offer a form of 'procedural incarnation' to principles that should pave the road towards the desired future of 'World-leading Business School'. However a number of issues remain un-discussed in this treatment: how to guarantee that – after the initial redesign effort – the integration ethos will be maintained in the presence of a number of centrifugal forces (rewarding systems, institutional norms, professional cultures etcetera) that push academic towards disciplinary worldviews? Is a set of policies and standards sufficient to transmit a truly integrated approach? How will educators be instructed in multi-disciplinarity when they themselves have in many cases been exposed only to their discipline? How to tackle the intrinsic contradiction that underlies the desire to keep on providing 'business ready' graduates (that is aligned with current management standards)

and that of being a truly innovative force, capable of shaping the business practices of the future? How to combine the 'training' role of the Business School, focused on the provision of industry relevant skills and know-how with its 'educational' function, that requires acquisition of cognitive capabilities such as critical spirit, reflectivity, analysis and synthesis (Thomas & Anthony 1996). Could the germane ideas of 'integrative thinking' and 'design thinking' be key to the problem, helping UTSB to become "interconnected with the new global space of business education" (Lancione & Clegg 2014, p. 2)?

## **Re-thinking the business: the ideology of *design-thinking***

The pragmatic awareness of the difficulty and unpredictability of effecting planned behavioural change in a loosely coupled system is not the only rationale of the 'architecturally driven' strategy. The rhetorical ploy actually runs deeper and involves the ingress of another component of the local discourse: design and integrated thinking. The idea of Design Thinking as "the study of the cognitive processes that are manifested in design action" (Cross et al 1992; cited in Bousbaci 2008, p. 38) has been proposed as a paradigm with the potential to revolutionize organizational studies and in particular to transform management education (Dunne & Martin 2006; Martin 2007, 2009). Design thinking has been described as an approach where "innovation is powered by a thorough understanding, through direct observation, of what people want and need" (Brown 2008, p. 86).

While the idea that there are "designerly" ways of thinking (Archer 1984) is not new, the recent interest in the idea in organizational sciences discourse draws extensively on a metaphorical transposition of concepts from the domain of design (architecture, engineering design etc.) to the domain of management. The key notion is to apply to

traditional firms the same thinking and work patterns that characterize successful and innovative design shops (Dunne & Martin 2006).

The proponents of this approach argue that successful companies and business leaders have already started implementing this approach, hinged on an alternative mode of thinking and operating (Dunne & Martin 2006). Designers are seen as using a distinctive approach to problem solving, based on considering problems and constraints not as a given but rather as elements that should be deconstructed and reframed, with systemic view and a 'holistic' approach. Design thinking is also hailed as a solution to the problem of reforming Business Schools since it would help in overcoming the lack of focus on ethical values, the presence of a relevance gap between practitioners and academic, and the use of inadequate teaching methodologies and learning tools (Dunne & Martin 2006, p. 520).

In order to understand the value and the limitations of this approach and to assess the problems (and the desirability) of its application to business education it is useful to investigate both the genealogy of design thinking discourse and its metaphorical and rhetoric applications, in order to appraise its potential critically as a paradigm to inspire business education reform in general and UTSB transformation in particular.

There is a long standing tradition of studies on the specific approaches used by designers to produce ideas, solve problems, organize activities and coordinate efforts, even if there is still no single, generally agreed upon description of design thinking (Kimbell 2009). According to Bousbaci (2008) different type of discourses have evolved in successive epochs. While the classic discourse on design was centred on the idea of designers as artists and focused on intuition and creativity, the first generation of modern design thinking, in the late 1950s, shifted towards a model of logical, rationalist and systematic operator, who applies rigorous problem solving methods (the logic designer). This hyper rationalistic

approach was first tempered by Simon's ideas, who expanded the notion of design beyond the applied field of the production of architectural forms, engineering devices or artworks, recognizing that "everyone designs who devises courses of actions aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones" (Simon 1996, p. 111). Finally, a 'post-rationalist' paradigmatic shift is characterized by ideas of reflectivity, iteration, and expanded rationality (Bousbaci 2008).

Simon's conception of design has also been expanded by introducing the idea of the designer as a "reflective practitioner" (Schön 1983). Designers, faced with a situation of complexity, cannot simply apply a purely technical rationality, because they know that their moves will also produce unintended consequences and it would be impossible – a priori – to consider all the possible consequences. They manage their bounded rationality by appraising the situation, making tentative moves, then considering how these have re-shaped the situation, making new moves etcetera, in an iterative and exploratory process:

"The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomena and the change in the situation" (Schön, 1983: 68).

What is described is a process of knowing and reflecting in action, where knowing can be intuitive, improvised and implicit, and reflecting is the combining and recombining of ideas and solutions that give coherence to the design or the performance. This is a qualitatively different heuristics that is remarkably reminiscent of the approach described by practice theory. In effect looking at design in a phenomenological perspective, accepting the constructed nature of meanings, institutional structures and modes of thinking, allows one

to move the attention from the puzzle-solving approach suggested by Simon to understanding instead how different discourses impact on problem formulation and framing (Coyne 2005).

A design-thinking approach to knowledge that truly embraces the idea of problem wickedness may appear wasteful and inefficient, in contrast with modernist ideals of efficacy and efficiency. In fact, it seems to refuse standardization, since each situation is considered unique and it never settles for the first satisfactory alternative but always looks for a truly great solution. An emblematic example is an episode recounted by Boland and Collopy, who report how one of the architects on Gehry's team, after spending two days revising the arrangement of space, tore up the plans just agreed on and suggests they start again, since now they know the problem it is solvable (Boland & Collopy 2004, p. 5). The managerial imperative not to reinvent the wheel sometimes hinders innovation and provides an alibi for tolerating unethical behaviours as necessary evils (Boland et al. 2008) but the alternative provided by design often seems to be too radical and energy consuming even to be considered.

Advocates of the approach argue that the inefficient nature of design thinking is tempered by the ability of designers, while tinkering and experimenting, to accumulate a reusable set of solutions, practices and design objects. They "built up a repertoire of examples, images, understandings, and actions [...] When a practitioner makes sense of a situation he perceives to be unique, he sees it as something already present in his repertoire" (Schön 1983, p. 138). An exemplification of the capacity of a designer to reuse previously developed solutions is provided by the documentary *A constructive madness* (Kipnis, Ball & Neff 2003), which shows how much of Gehry's successive work is based on ideas developed in a decade of unrestrained creative frenzy aimed at designing a house that was never built.

The creation of a repertoire has the added value of making individual designers or designer workshops' works distinctive and recognizable, defining their unique aesthetic signature. Therefore, it goes beyond the simple accumulation of praxis that characterized the pre-industrial artisan because it suggests the possibility of infinite recombination and expansion of these items of tangible knowledge, which assume new meanings and develop new uses as they are used to approach new designing challenges. Past solutions define a continuously evolving canon that constitutes at the same time the designer's trademark and (part of) his toolbox. In this informal but essential practice is constituted an element of the designer's implicit knowledge and while all knowledge involves a tacit dimension (Polanyi 1966), designers' knowledge appears to be strongly rooted in a 'secret' repository built over years of designing practice.

While on the one hand acknowledging this can undermine the image of designers' as inventive geniuses and disrupt the illusion of the absolute originality of their creative output, on the other hand it shows how, in the field of design, apparently ground-breaking management ideas such as the concept of technology brokering (Hargadon & Sutton 1997; Hargadon 2005) have been around, albeit implicitly, for a very long time. These theoretical contributions on the theory of design have been consolidated and integrated with empirical inquiries into designers' practices. Cross (2011) identified a number of common features among innovative and successful designers, developing an inventory of designers' practices and characteristics, as summarized in Table 7.

Another key element that seems to characterize design thinking is the production and use of concrete objects as tools for thinking (Boland et al. 2008; Cross 2011). The designer is a tinkerer who explores possibilities and ideas using sketches, such as Gehry's "shreks"

(Boland et al. 2008), partial drawings, mock-ups, models and computer simulations as heuristic tools.

**Table 7 - Characteristics of successful designers**

- Personality characteristics, such as strong personal motivation, and courage to take risks;
- Problem solving approaches based on the capacity to identify simple, clear and high level objectives which might seem unrealistic or simplistic but that help reframing the problems and taking a system view;
- Designers rely on 'first principles' to guide their inquiry (for instance the laws of physics, or a philosophic principle like the modernist design principle that 'form follows function');
- A work methodology that combines moments of sudden inspiration and effortless creativity bursts, with intense work developing, refining and evaluating solution details through prolonged and deep immersion in the problem. This requires a style of work that alternates moments of intense, concentrated effort and period of relaxation;
- Working methods are not systematic, based on parallel working, and a iterative methodology based on interactive 'talk-back'
- Even when a solution is discarded a record of it will be maintained, maybe to be included in a future project or in a successive phase
- Simultaneous and non-hierarchical participation of co-workers is stimulated.

Adapted from Cross (2011, pp. 73-4)

Finally, another essential aspect of design thinking is the use of a designer approach to decision making. Design thinking is proposed as a valid aid in situations where the problem to solve is not a given but requires being defined and represented (Newell, Shaw & Simon 1959). The designer must first define and describe the state to be changed and corrected (Simon 1996), and the solution will then be delivered through generative processes that involve the use of creativity and the application of bounded decision-making heuristics.



A problem with this paradigm is the concept of “ill-structured problem”. Unlike well-structured problems, solvable with the application of pre-set rules, ill-structured ones are not manageable by a “general problem solver” (i.e. a computer program) and they need restructuring to become treatable (Simon 1973). A recent critique of this idea comes from Dorst (2006), who refutes the idea that it is always possible to convert ill-structured design problem into well-defined ones – no matter what procedure or heuristic is used – because of their often paradoxical nature, produced by clashes of conflicting discourses.

The argument about the irreducible complexity of certain categories of problems, like some of those that both design and management need to face, was indeed first advanced by two of Simon’s contemporaries, an architect and a city planner. In their seminal paper, Rittel & Webber (1973), introduced the concept of *wicked problems* as central to a particular area of design, social planning. These are problems that are not just ambiguous or inadequately described but for which a definitive formulation is impossible, since their interpretation can be disputed and their solutions cannot be tested: there is no ‘stopping rule’ allowing to decide that the problem has been ‘solved’ (Coyne 2005). Examples range from dealing with crime in the streets to fighting poverty, from deciding the features of a new product to deciding a transport policy. Even the quality of the solution is undecidable, because they cannot be assessed with empirically logical categories of ‘true’ or ‘false’; they rather need to be considered according to ethically normative categorisation devices, such as ‘bad’ or ‘good’. Moreover, it is not possible to determine when the ideal solution has been found, nor when enough information has been gathered to tackle the problem. To complicate the matter further, wicked problems are unique and they are often the symptoms or manifestation of other problems (Rittel & Webber 1973).

Unfortunately, Simon's cybernetic view of decision-making seems to inform most of the contemporary conceptualizations of design thinking, which usually represent ill-defined rather than wicked problems. The reality of designers and business "is only very poorly explained in terms of goal setting, constraints, rules and state-space search" (Coyne 2005, p. 6). Hatchuel (2001) extends this critique, arguing that Simon's paradigmatic view is blighted by an essential mistake, considering design as a special case of problem-solving, while the opposite is more accurate: decision-making and problem-solving are restricted forms of design. Using the example of a group of friends that want to organize a 'nice' party shows that sometimes "There is nothing one can call 'the problem' or 'the set of constraints'. There is a project (...) to handle" (Hatchuel 2001, p. 265). Unexpected expansions of the initial concepts are possible and constraints and opportunities will be considered but their impact is difficult to predict. There is an uncountable set of solutions that can be infinitely expanded (the number of possible parameters defining a 'party', or the number of possible forms for a building) that the designer needs to redefine iteratively to expand the initial concept, using learning devices as a model or a prototype, including stakeholders and clients in the process. Solutions that emerge from the interplay between what is known and other possible ideas, the correctness of which cannot (yet) be decided are explored.

Despite the fact that a designer's approach to problem solving seems to be still quite ill-defined, the idea of a creative and abductive approach to decision making is very appealing, and it has played a crucial role in fostering the translation of the concept of design thinking in apparently non-related fields, those of business education and practice.

## **Design thinking in business education: between metaphor and fashion**

In the last two decades the discussion of design thinking has started to consider it as an intellectual approach that can (and should) be translated into disciplines other than architecture and industrial design; in particular, in the field of management. The pioneer of this new approach was Buchanan (1992) who, inspired by the tradition of pragmatist philosophy, regarded design thinking as the ideal approach to cope with wicked problems. The potential of design thinking as a heuristic tool has been acknowledged by Romme (2003) who, building on the distinction made by Simon between design as a means to produce new objects of knowledge and other means of scientific inquiry aimed at developing knowledge on existing objects, has proposed employing design thinking as a new mode for management research to complement the positivist and post-modernist approaches to organizational research, enriching the field by proposing the idea that knowledge is in the service of action, organizations are artificial and (by nature) ill-defined objects, with the key questions being whether a set of design propositions work in a unique situation. An ideal combination of the three approaches would see the use the positivist science mode validating claims developed by designers as they identify actionable solutions to ill-defined problems, while the qualitative, post-modern approach would help to better understand existing organizational system, appreciating the complexity of a discourse and at producing reflexive thinking on categories of human experience (Romme 2003).

These shift of meaning and broadening of the application of the concept of design thinking outside its original space has legitimized a new strain in the discourse, the idea of 'managing as design'. The formation of this subject in the discourse of business education can be traced back to the rhetorical account of the events surrounding the interaction of

faculty members of the Weatherhead School of Business with Frank Gehry. Gehry had been commissioned to design a new house for the Business School, the Peter B. Lewis Building. According to the official narrative (Boland & Collopy 2004) it was the observation and first hand experiencing of the unorthodox work and decision-making methods involved in the designing of the building that inspired the school to organize, in June 2002, the *Managing as Designing* workshop that publicized the idea that business leaders should learn from architects how to “innovate substantially and successfully” (Boland et al. 2008, p. 22).

The second major voice promoting the idea of design as a redeemer of a stifled management world and as the panacea for business education reform, is the Rotman school of Business (Martin & Clive 2005; Dunne & Martin 2006; Martin 2007; Leavy 2011). For almost a decade this institution has been heralding the need for a new didactic based on the principles of design thinking, to respond to the crisis of credibility that, as described in chapter 6 and 7, this industry is facing.

Another mover behind the introduction of design thinking to the business world was David Kelley, the founder of IDEO, a design consulting company, who, helped by his association with Steve Jobs, persuaded Stanford University to establish an institute to promote design thinking (Dodd 2014). In fact this new ethos is now spreading globally in the sector of business education and has been espoused to some degree in a number of business schools, including Chicago, Harvard, Stanford and Yale.

In Australia the approach is still in its infancy and only UTS and Swinburne University are offering courses on this topic (Sobel & Groeger 2012). In fact UTS Business has pioneered the introduction of design thinking in Oceania, a process that started back in 2009 (Lancione & Clegg 2013). A key initiative in this regard has been the launch of an innovation projects framework, u.lab, involving researchers and students from different specializations

who collaborate in programs using design thinking to tackle business and social problems (Hall et al. 2013) as well as the appointment of an interdisciplinary professor of design and innovation, whose activities connect the Faculty of Design, the Business School and the Law Faculty. On the other hand, the competition seems to be brewing, since the more established University of NSW business school is following in its steps, launching its own version of a design thinking inspired research centre, the Crouch Innovation Centre (Dodd 2014).

The translation of a specific set of professional modes and techniques in a new general paradigm to be applied to management practices and to business education constitutes a typical example of a frequently employed rhetorical strategy in the management studies discourse: the use of metaphors to make sense of organized behaviour. As introduced in Chapter 3 metaphors can be useful heuristic tools, generating new insight on the studied phenomenon. They act as a catalyst for imagination, allowing researchers to generate new interpretation but they also provide a useful rhetoric device for practitioners, enabling them to manage the contradictory nature of organisational dynamics thanks to their ambiguity (Jarzabkowski & Sillince 2010).

Tropes such as metaphors and allegories play a central role in storytelling, “the preferred sensemaking currency of human relationships” (Boje 1991, p. 106), by constructing simplified description of ‘reality’. What makes these tropes powerful and successful as vehicles of meaning and knowledge is not their robustness (Wimsatt 1994) but their ability to ‘ring true’ and to resonate with some of the experiences of the audience, or with story templates they are familiar with (Wilkins 1983; Kitzinger 2000). Their success can also be linked to their capacity to entertain and lighten up organizational life (Czarniawska 2004a, p. 46).

Metaphors can also be used to dramatize events, providing distorted images of phenomena that serve certain vested interest, artificially creating conflicts and manipulating public opinion. When used to devise and propose recipes and models on how to run, control, and design organizations, metaphors become the centrepieces of management fashions and fads (Abrahamson 1991; Kieser 1997; Czarniawska 2005a; Rossem & Veen 2011). The very idea of considering the way in which ideas spread in management science discourse as 'fashions' is quite allegorical. While 'management fashion' is used as a label for a specific social phenomenon, the choice of the name has a distinctive tropological connotation. The word fashion immediately conjures an idea of frivolity and fickleness, implying a number of negative ethical connotations when juxtaposed to a discipline which strives to assert its scientificity, even if fashions, by offering diversity and variety of perspectives, are not necessarily a scourge (ten Bos 2000).

An alternative allegory proposed to explain the spreading of ideas among practitioners and management researchers is that of the 'viral infection' (Røvik 2011), which confirms the feeling that the diffusion of some ideas, driven by bandwagon effects and social networks, is somehow inevitable, as demonstrated by the fact that debating management fashions has become quite fashionable (Newell et al. 2001). Finally, it is interesting to reflect how the use of metaphors betrays the permanence of pre-modern elements in the organizational discourse (Boje 1995). The idea that playing with signifiers and discovering the 'real' name of an object allows one to dominate the material world is a modern translation of a discredited pre-modern thought: the magical powers of the logos (Rhodes & Pitsis 2008).

Summing up, metaphorical/allegorical permutation of concepts can generate innovation but can also restrict variety and complexity, pigeonholing radical ideas in conventional

categories, serving sectarian interests. As a consequence, the transposition of the modus operandi of designers into management discourse is not a simple operation of interdisciplinary hybridization and knowledge brokering. Ideological and political implications need to be taken in consideration. Looking at the 'metaphorical' use of design thinking from a critical viewpoint, there seems to be a strong discursive juncture between the field of architecture and organizational studies. The idea of organizations as structures, the use of building metaphors for organizations and more specifically the preoccupation of organization designers with the uses of space had been widespread well before the start of the 'managing as design' fashion (Kornberger & Clegg 2004). This relationship is mutually constitutive: organizational discourse also influenced architecture. As Guillén (1997) argued, Taylorism extended its hegemonic reach outside the shop floor to influence the aesthetics and the practices of modernist architecture. However, the architectural allegory, rather than stimulating change and creativity can be a limiting factor in innovating organizations (Czarniawska 2008a). Advocates of design thinking in management education stress the 'performative' aspects of design, highlighting that is the act of designing, rather than the product of design activity that should be emphasized (Boland et al. 2008, p. 11). Such a focus on performance can hide the human cost of production; in fact, Boland et al. (2008, p. 15) seem mesmerized by the use of the term "functional" made by Gehry to describe the essence of a building.

The issue is that, if not counterbalanced by a strong moral consciousness, design thinking risks becoming a conduit for a conception of organization in which human beings are enslaved to the 'greater good' of corporate goals. Managers and academics, haunted by fears of impotency and by the frustration caused by the Sisyphean nature of most of their tasks, are easy preys to a "desire for mimesis" (Rhodes & Pitsis 2008, p. 75). They want to be as successful architects, who can admire the result of their toil immortalized in

immutable brick and mortar edifices. Instead, they should use the potential of design thinking to overcome institutional normalcy (Coyne 2005), using this subversive potential to tackle the inherent wickedness of social issues, which requires not only borrowing the jargon and the rituals of design but rather celebrating, instead of suppressing, the conflicts that the new way of talking generate, harnessing the destabilizing potential of the new discourse to generate new possibilities of organizing (McClellan 2011).

## **Integrating the business**

The other password (or buzzword) that rhetorically propels the change project is the concept of 'integrative thinking' a virtue that is considered essential for future business leaders, overcoming functionalism (Latham et al. 2004). Integrative thinking, defined as "the capacity to take a cross-functional, multidisciplinary approach to the solution of unstructured business problems" (Latham et al. 2004, p. 4), is proposed as the solution that can break the silo mentality that plagues business schools. The concept is linked to the application of abductive logic, "the logic of what might be" (Dunne & Martin 2006, p. 513), a perspective which should complement established analytical techniques and provide a much needed injection of innovativeness and creativity to the otherwise conservative and dull world of business. As a consequence, conflicts and trade-offs are seen not as an enemy but as an opportunity to stimulate creativity and generate excitement.

One key element of integration, according to Latham, is the integration of teaching and applied research, which have a multiplicative interaction, since "great teachers alone do not provide business schools with competitive advantage because the competitors can hire equally able teachers" (Latham et al. 2004, p. 12). While this argument appears sensible, it fails to address several important issues. In the first place the exclusive focus on 'applied'



research can inhibit both the critical and the innovative potential of inquiry. Second, it does not suggest practical ways to make individual research initiatives more integrated and aligned with the business school's intent and interests. Third, it does not explain how to balance the different workloads, avoiding one activity, seen as more prestigious and rewarding than the other, becoming dominant. Finally, it does not consider the co-presence of a range of stakeholders influencing and making requests to the business school (students, the state, professional associations etc.), simplistically reducing a complex field to a dialogue between business schools and 'industry'.

It seems that in the context of UTSB a comprehensive strategy for integrating individual work, group efforts (either at disciplinary or research group level), and 'functional' practices (research, teaching, industry partnering) have not yet been fully developed. While remarkable efforts have been invested in integrating the teaching curricula (Bajada & Trayler 2013; Hall et al. 2013) and in the creation of cross-disciplinary senior academic roles (such as Professor of Sustainable Enterprise or the Professor of Design and Innovation), it appears that most of the integration 'eggs' are put in the basket of the Gehry building, in the hope that architecture will induce a different ethos.

One problem of the contemporary discourse of integrative thinking is that it does not include the idea of dialectic opposition inherent to the classic managerial reflection on the issue, that proposed by Lawrence & Lorsch (1967). In the 'old-fashioned' contingency theory discourse the need for integration was not a value in itself but the search for a provisional equilibrium, balancing the necessity for specialization and division of labour. Instead the newfangled integrative thinking movement appears to be inspired by a quasi-mystical drive towards a transcendental singularity, suggesting a utopian desire for absence of alterity that evokes totalitarian fears (ten Bos 2000).

The current iteration of the idea of integrative thinking appear to have a character of 'lightness', in the sense of translucence and weightlessness that can betray a lack of reflexivity (Lancione & Clegg 2014). The challenge that the UTSB is facing however requires instead a different type of lightness, the one that the great novelist Italo Calvino defined as "lightness of thoughtfulness" (Calvino 1988, p. 10), the quality that allows the narrator to leap over the inertia and opacity of the world. Calvino's last words are both evocative and significant when considered in the context of integrative change at UTSB: "we shall face the new millennium, without hoping to find anything more in it than what we ourselves are able to bring to it" (Calvino 1988, p. 29).

## **Beyond brick facades<sup>17</sup>**

In the local discourse of UTS Business the alignment of different forms of power appears to create an irresistible thrust forward, inhibiting any resistance. In the first place, from the perspective of the agency of human actors involved in the process, the 'building project' represents an effective way to achieve a series of practical objectives. For the Dean (and the University Vice Chancellor) it offers a 'rational' strategy to cope with the necessity to deliver a tangible change initiative. The new building(s) will leave a visible legacy that is certainly going to last more than any, usually short lived, initiative based on re-engineering of work processes, structures and reward systems.

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<sup>17</sup> These critical reflections might seem instigated by an a-priori negative attitude towards the project and the idea of an architectural driven change. On the contrary, I have been immediately captivated by the possibilities offered by this strategy, and personally fascinated by the aesthetic values of the new building. The emphasis on the problematic consequences and on the limitations of this design-led transformation is mostly due to the necessity to address an unbalance in the discourse on Design Thinking, which has been represented, both in literature and in the local rhetoric as an intrinsically positive and unproblematic model.

In a broader, systemic perspective, it serves the need to performatively deploy a plausible 'winning strategy', one that demonstrate a heliotropic drive of the School (and the University) towards becoming 'world leading' institutions. It offers to a large number of actors the possibility of focusing their energies in an external direction, thus avoiding 'stuckedness' (Vignehsa 2014) in internal squabbles that would undermine the reputation and alienate important sponsors. The doctrine of design and integrative thinking is in this sense flawless: young and innovative enough to be represented as 'ground-breaking' and 'cutting-edge' and therefore apt as a strategy to attain success in the local market, while at the same time sufficiently established and sponsored by opinion leaders and reputable institutions to reassure even the most conservative stakeholder. UTSB leaders can certainly claim to be 'institutional entrepreneurs' (Hardy & McGuire 2008) successfully innovating the institutional field of business education in Australia, as competitors' mimetic actions demonstrate. However they have been prudent, rather than radical entrepreneurs, exploitative rather than exploratory (March 1991; Gupta, Smith & Shalley 2006).

Finally, in the perspective of the broader life-world of business education (the 'facilitative power circuit' level) UTSB strategy is astutely ambiguous: on the one hand it is rhetorically presented as a solution to the crisis of business education, a breath of fresh air in a stale world of doctrinarian isolation and of technocratic amorality, offering the promise of a creative, open minded, cooperative heuristic effort. On the other it is substantially aligned with the key elements of the dominant paradigm: search for novelty, globalization, and constant growth.

From a different angle, it is possible to argue that the sense of inevitability and inexorability that empowers the change initiative inhibiting the development of organized resistance is a combination of four factors: effective rationalization, cultural alignment, political

opportunism, and facility of translation. First, it rationalizes choice as a solution to a common problem, that of riding the wave of an inexorable environmental transformation: coming on board with the project means being given the opportunity to be protagonists rather than victims of the change. In the second place, as a young technological university, UTS brands itself as a place for 'doers' (its motto is "Think. Change. Do."). Therefore, this transformation founded on a 'brick and mortar' concreteness that fits well with the organization's traditional lore and ethos. Third, because of widespread "cynicism that the whole process is more a ritual of representation" since "it does not require traumatic restructuring" (Lancione & Clegg 2014, p. 12), the change initiative is not perceived as truly threatening the status quo: consequently forces are not mobilized against it. Another form in which this political opportunism is manifest is the fact that most academics prefer to limit their active involvement with the management of their institutions, either because they are focused on their publishing efforts or to protect their precarious position (Lancione & Clegg 2014). Finally, as shown above, the translation between the local and the global discourse is facilitated by the congruence and affinity between their essential principles. These do not contrast two of the hegemonic discourses (Laclau & Mouffe 1985) present in business education, performativity and standardization, which can creep under the espoused frontage of 'flexible, porous innovation'. On the other hand the potentially anti-mainstream embracing of a 'holistic' ethos could be only skin-deep, if not supported by an adequate implementation of active integration practices.

The alignment of forces has certainly meant a relatively smooth journey, promising a 'successful' management of change. However, the lack of a constructive dialectic can be problematic, especially considering the 'wickedness' of the challenge for UTSB. Resistance to change is not only a scourge for organizations. First, resistance, instead of being demonized or celebrated, should be considered for its constitutive potential, and

considered as an expression of a negotiation of meanings, that can contribute to navigating the messiness and complexity of change (Thomas & Hardy 2011; Courpasson, Dany & Clegg 2012). Moreover, resistance emerges as work identities become threatened by change (van Dijk & van Dick 2009): as a consequence the lack of resistance can also mean that the project is not (yet) considered by the inhabitants of the organization as capable of bringing about a real challenge to their professional identities but how can change bring real innovation if work identities are not altered? Change and resistance are mutually constitutive and both are immanent to the process of organizing: in this sense resistance is a form of 'bottom-up change management', or at least an attempt to maintain predictability and organization (Pina e Cunha et al. 2013). Without the active collaboration/resistance of all the staff it would be practically impossible to truly re-organize the practices of a loosely coupled organization.

It is the facility of the metonymic translation that replaces the container (the building) for the content (the Business School) that can limit the potential of the initiative. Even if it is likely that the organization of spaces will play a role in shaping practices, it would be reductive to consider only the functional dimension of rooms, furniture and objects. Knowledge processes are defined by a relationship of agents with material objects, a relationship that is charged with emotional connotations and contributes to the construction of the self (Knorr-Cetina 1997). An office space, a bookshelf, a desk, a computer, these are more than passive instruments but become foci of sociality and knowledge processes. Assuming a deterministic view of the effect of 'architectural' constraints and opportunities on the practices of the Business School would be as misleading as assuming the opposite view that form follows function and that the 'architectural body' must reflect the organizational 'mind' (Kornberger & Clegg 2004).

As a living city is not a 'tree', in the sense of a simple, symmetrical, logically connected structure (Alexander 1965), neither can a business school building be represented or managed as a 'tree house'. Despite the organic analogy, the metaphor suggested by Gehry is too artificial and linear. It is too 'heavy', to borrow Calvino's terminology, because it does not include the plethora of intangible vines and shoots that characterize the organization that will be housed in the building and that link, connect, and bind it to distant people and institutions. It omits all those rhizomes that support what can be seen, the networks, nurture and entanglements beneath the surface that make the tree healthy, nourish it and fuel its growth. In this sense a business school, rather than being a single well defined organism, is a rhizome made of emerging, multilocal practices that connect different times, sites, bodies, ideas, materials. The array of multiform and strangely curved bricks that make the new building façade will certainly provoke awe and convey an image of dynamism and innovativeness to those who will behold them. Nevertheless, they are but a pale reflection of the real entanglement of rhizomatic connections and fluid becoming that powers the activities of the school in the practices and actions of its members. In order to describe and understand this world it is necessary to move outside the crisp narrative of design to become immersed in the cluttered experience of lived academic practice.

# Chapter 9.

## Time, space and practices in UTSB

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### **Surveying the organization of time and space: the rationale of using a quantitative instrument in an interpretive investigation**

The narrative, which has hitherto been concerned with the intangible realm of discourses and ideas, will now enter the lived reality of the organization. In this chapter the factual ways in which academics employ their time, how (and where) they perform different tasks will be explored. The analysis of the local discourse commenced in the previous chapter will be amplified, by ascertaining to what extent UTSB academics have introjected the rhetoric of 'organizing by design' and of 'integrative thinking'.

This part of the investigation is based on a typical device of quantitative research, a questionnaire distributed to the entire academic staff of UTSB. The use of such a tool may look out of place in an ethnographic investigation inspired by phenomenological epistemology and constructivist ontology. Surveys are supposed to belong to a different life-world: that of positivistic inspired research. Instead of embracing a methodologically sectarian position I have chosen to employ a mixed research approach, a model "where the researcher mixes or combines quantitative and qualitative research techniques, methods, approaches, concepts or language into a single study" (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004, p. 17). Doing this enables one "to address broader or more complicated research questions" (Yin 2009, p. 64). Examining a context in which theory, rhetoric, narrative, practices, norms and tangible features influence each other meant I could not simply select from a fixed menu of 'pure' research methods but needed to choose a design capable of addressing this

complex problem, approaching the question in a pragmatic way (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie 2004) .

In particular the use of a quantitative tool has allowed study of an essential feature of practice, its formal subdivision into discrete tasks. These can be conceptualised as managerialist *chronotopes* (Bakhtin 1990, p. 84), sites where time and space become interdependent and, as typified discursive construction, organize meaning and action. Examples of these are the corporate meeting, the time spent working in the office, the lecture or seminar, etc. Certainly, the lived experience of social practices is not amenable to formal, schematic simplistic categorization of time and place of work; however, the ways in which time is measured according to inter-subjective standards, performances are assessed in relation to accepted yardsticks and the chaotic flow of behaviours is given coherence through categorization in 'normal' activities characteristic of modernity (Beck 1992, pp. 130-2). As a consequence, the stipulated way in which practices are segmented is significant, because this mapping of the continuum becomes an object of managerial action, an area for disciplinary practices, a locus of discursive production of normalised subjects. In this regard the use of a survey constituted an economical way to collect information on this typified use of time and space. A caveat is necessary here: the survey does not attempt to gauge the work performances of academics, providing an exact measure of how much, where, and with whom they work. The application of a Methods-Time Measurement approach to knowledge workers would be ethically unsavoury and practically pointless (how many 'moves' does it take to write an influential paper?). However, collecting information on the *perception* of how academics spend working time is extremely relevant, independently of the reliability of such self-assessment because, as discussed above, *kariotic* (subjective) time can be more relevant for shaping practices and identities than objectively measured chronological time.



One should not assume that subjective interpretation is all that counts: another reason for collecting some quantitative data derives from the need to identify those areas of shared understanding and of similarly codified experience that constitute what becomes the bedrock of what is commonly acknowledged as truth. The responses of a large number of surveyed individuals to factual questions will reveal what they perceive as an objective reality. The notion that this is the product of a social construction is less relevant than the fact that these conditions are experienced by actors as objectively real.

Registering the consensus or the divergence of opinions becomes a way to probe the solidity of the narrative reconstructions of different actors or the pervasiveness of power/knowledge effects. While rhetoric and narrative have a powerful effect on behaviours and perceptions, effectively constructing 'real' consequences, critically examining these discourses demands also probing the extent to which these descriptions are based on elements of what is taken-for granted as a factual (i.e. inter-subjectively consensual) reality that colours and highlights certain features or are instead a total construct of an imagined world. For instance, as shown in the previous chapter, the current building is represented in the dominant narrative as being the major impediment to collaborative work. In the words of the Dean:

*We want to meet each other. We want to know who works here. There's about 250 people working here. In fact, if you ask people, how many people are working here? They wouldn't even know. It's, I think, a great impediment to being a truly integrated school* (UTSB Dean, interview, June 2011)

Looking at when, where, with whom, UTSB academics are *actually* working, is not meant to be a test of the veracity of this statement, since – to all effect and purpose – it has been *made true* by the powerful alignment of interests, desires and serendipity described in the previous chapter. However, collecting data on the actual practices can reveal other

powerful influences that have been silenced (but not necessarily quelled) in the process that has led to the construction of the new building. These forces, constituted by the assemblage of socio-material elements that produce academic identities and practices, produce concrete consequences, for instance in the form of actual bodily presence of an academic in a specific time and place. Not including this information would make it difficult to predict the practical consequences of the transformation effort in which the Business school has engaged.

A final justification for employing this means of data collection is that it allows one to acquire data from a larger sample of subjects, including faculties that do not belong to the discipline group at the centre of my ethnographic investigation. The demographic data gathered through the questionnaire enabled me to identify to which department the respondent belonged, making possible verification of the existence of differences in the responses of members of different units. They also provide a crude but useful assessment of the typicality of the work practices and experiences of the disciplinary group that I studied, thus providing an indication about how my observations reflect a general (rather than local) consensus, which translates as the social strength of the 'truths' professed by my informants.

## **The survey and the sampling**

The survey was administered by means of a web survey tool (Survey Monkey). All faculty members were invited to take part in this voluntary survey. All invitees received an

invitation via a personalized email message, which included a link to the web based survey, with full confidentiality of individuals' responses being guaranteed<sup>18</sup>.

The questionnaire included 21 close ended questions (see Attachment 1). Several queries included an open ended 'Comment' field, enabling respondents to clarify their answer or to provide additional information. The questions were organized in five thematic sections (use of time, place of work and work-tools, routines, influence, interdisciplinarity) plus one final demographic information section.

The UTS Business academic staff directory published on the UTS website (UTS 2013a) was used to identify the population for the study. This directory includes, in addition to the name and university email contact of all faculty members (including visiting scholars and some casual academics) their position and organizational unit.

In total, 232 individuals received an invitation to take part in the survey and 72 questionnaires were collected (19 partially completed and 53 completed). The questionnaire remained available on line for 40 days and all questionnaires were received between May and June 2013. This means that almost one third (31%) of the academic population of the school filled in the online questionnaire. This is a substantial response rate, considering the voluntary nature of the survey, the fact that it was administered online and the small but not insignificant investment of time required to fully answer its

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<sup>18</sup> I explicitly use the term 'confidentiality' instead of 'anonymity' because the use of any web-based survey tool effectively allows the pollster to identify the respondent thanks to the IP of the computer used to respond to the survey and/or the use of a link attached to a personalised invitation message. In order to stay true to my promise of ensuring that responses would have remained anonymous, after using the information on who responded for the sole purpose of assessing the degree of representativeness of the sample, I have purged the respondents' identifiers from the data file generated by the survey tool. Moreover, no cross tabulations of demographic responses that could have identified specific individuals have been performed. Finally, the survey tool that I used is a commercial one, not supplied nor controlled by the University (which is also the employer of the respondents), which guaranteed that no one but the researcher could access the raw data at any moment.

question (estimated between 10 and 20 minutes). A sample this size should provide a good level of precision (Potter 2008). However, because the voluntary nature of participation in the survey can be a source of self-selection bias (Sterba & Foster 2008) one cannot take for granted that this group mirrors the universe of the study. A fundamental way to judge the representativeness of a sample is to compare its characteristics with those of the population (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe & Jackson 2012, p. 223). In Table 7 the demographic characteristics of survey sample are juxtaposed with those of the population of UTSB at the time of the survey.

This data demonstrate that, despite self-selection, the final sample reflects closely the characteristics of the observed universe in regards to gender and disciplinary distribution. The only group that is underrepresented is the 'attached' staff, including casual and visiting academics. This does not come as a surprise because of the 'peripheral' status of these individuals. In the case of casually employed academics their sense of belonging (both to the organization and to the professional category) is more tenuous, either because they are practitioners who only engage occasionally in teaching, or because of the sense of detachment felt by casual workers because of job insecurity and low quality of working life (Kimber 2003). While it would be worthwhile to explore the specific identities and practices of this group, especially considering its increasing relevance in the Australian landscape of tertiary education (Norton 2012), the focus of my inquiry is on the 'tenured' academics, and therefore the limited participation of 'attached' academics does not affect the representativeness of the sample<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> More to this point, it was not possible to easily obtain a list of all the casual academic who are involved in the School activities (especially in Teaching) since the name of many causals are not listed in the UTSB website. This means that, regardless of the response rate, this category has not been adequately represented in the survey.

**Table 7 - Demographic characteristics of the sample compared to the studied population**

Variable	Category	Survey final sample	All UTSB academics
<b>Gender</b>	Males	46 (64%)	152 (66%)
	Females	26 (36%)	80 (34%)
<b>Rank<sup>20</sup></b>	A	4 (6%)	13 (6%)
	B	23 (32%)	79 (34%)
	C	21 (29%)	56 (24%)
	D	9 (13%)	16 (7%)
	E	10 (14%)	26 (11%)
	Executive	2 (3%)	8 (3%)
	Attached	2 (4%)	27 (15%)
<b>Unit</b>	Accounting	10 (14%)	33 (14%)
	Economics	11 (8%)	26 (9%)
	Finance	16 (21%)	45 (19%)
	Marketing	18 (25%)	55 (24%)
	Management	9 (13%)	27 (12%)
	Dean's Unit	4 (6%)	12 (5%)
	Unattached/Research centres	4 (14%)	34 (17%)
<b>Total</b>		<b>72</b>	<b>232</b>

Even if there are no apparent relevant biases due to self-selection, the limited size of the sample could induce errors due to natural variability. For instance, when considering differences in reported time allocation across different discipline groups, results could be biased by the fact that in the sample the number of high ranked academics working in that unit is over (or under) represented. In this case apparent differences in working time allocation between disciplinary groups would instead be caused by role seniority. In order to exclude the possibility of this type of bias in the sample, Table 8 compares the distribution of rank seniority across disciplinary groups in the studied population (entire UTSB staff) and in the survey sample.

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<sup>20</sup> *Rank* refers to the Academic Appointment level (from the most junior 'A' for Associate Lecturer/Research fellows to the most senior 'E' for full Professors). In addition to the 5 standard rank levels two more categories are included: 'Executives' for the Dean, Associate Deans and for the Heads of School and 'Attached', for Adjuncts, Casual lecturers and Visiting scholars.

**Table 8 - Comparison of rank distribution across discipline groups**

*(sample versus total population)*

Business School		Discipline Groups				
		Accounting	Economics	Finance	Management	Marketing
Rank	A/B	14 (42%)	9 (43%)	25 (57%)	18 (33%)	12 (44%)
	C	10 (30%)	4 (19%)	7 (16%)	20 (36%)	8 (30%)
	D	1 (3%)	4 (19%)	5 (11%)	4 (7%)	0 (0%)
	E	4 (12%)	3 (14%)	5 (11%)	5 (9%)	3 (11%)
Sample		Discipline Groups				
		Accounting	Economics	Finance	Management	Marketing
Rank	A/B	4 (40%)	2 (33%)	8 (53%)	<b>3 (17%)</b>	5 (56%)
	C	4 (40%)	2 (33%)	2 (13%)	<b>10 (56%)</b>	<b>1 (11%)</b>
	D	1 (10%)	1 (17%)	3 (20%)	<b>3 (17%)</b>	0 (0%)
	E	1 (10%)	1 (17%)	2 (13%)	2 (11%)	<b>2 (22%)</b>

While in a few cases (highlighted in bold), mostly concentrated in the Management and Marketing discipline groups, the stratified categories of the respondents do not mirror precisely those of the population these small differences are not likely to introduce major biases in a sample that can therefore be considered representative of the Business School's academic staff.

## Busy people

The surveyed academics declare to work long hours. The average (self-assessed) number of weekly hours worked by the 56 respondent who are employed full time is 49, while the 12 'part timers' work an average of 25 hours per week. When compared with the seniority level, it seems that, as seniority increases so does the workload, even if (as shown by high standard deviation values) there is a marked variability among different individuals in the actual number of reported working hours (see Table 9). Those academic who have managerial responsibilities appear to be the ones who put in more hours.

This declared workload is significantly higher than the one that is contractually stipulated: according to the UTS Academic Staff Agreement 2010 “Staff will not be required to work more than 1610 hours per year” (clause 36.10). Even assuming if the surveyed academics take long breaks their annual workload must be in most cases in excess of 2000 hours.

**Table 9 - Reported working hours, by academic rank**

*(only F.T. internal staff, n=56)*

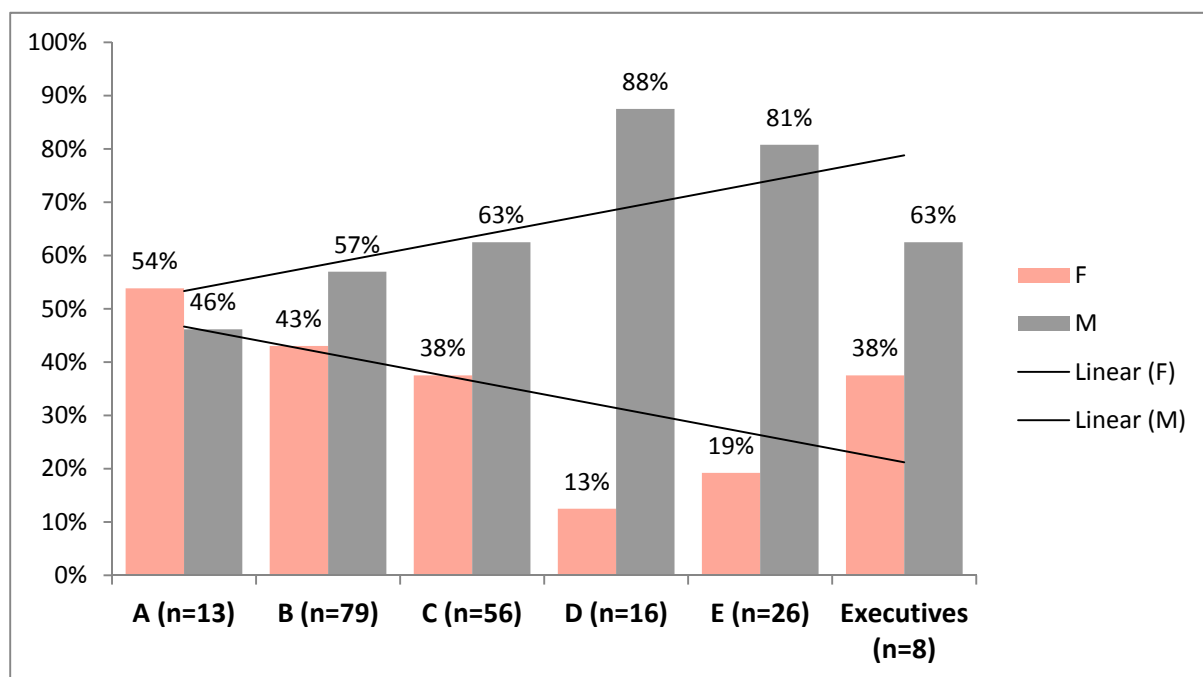
Rank	N.	Average weekly hours	Standard Deviation
A	3	44.3	6.0
B	19	46.8	10.6
C	18	46.1	12.1
D	8	50.6	9.4
E	6	59.2	16.3
Executives	2	65.0	21.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>49.0</b>	<b>12.4</b>

These data seem to partially contradict the results of other studies on the allocation of academic time, which showed that tenured staff tend to invest less time on the job compared to more junior, non-tenured colleagues (Link, Swann & Bozeman 2008). On average, professors at UTSB appear, at least according to this self-reported estimate, to work longer hours than lecturers. This might be due to UTS’ push to confirm its status as a ‘rising star’ rapidly climbing international rankings among the ‘under 50’ universities (UTS 2014d). Such effort involves an exceptional pressure on senior academic staff to perform both in terms of research output, mentoring of new talents, and development of social capital in the form of the creation of academic and industry networks. Previous studies have shown that, despite the fact that this very high workload seems completely self-imposed, there are strong institutional and professional pressures that force academic to put in so many hours, since this appear to be a necessary sacrifice to ensure success in publishing (Jacobs & Winslow 2004)

It is also worthwhile to observe the influence of gender on the workload. First, it is worth noting that, as shown by Figure 5, UTSB is affected by the same gender inequality that characterizes the entire academic sector in Australia (Robinson 2006). Female academics are not just a minority (they only represent one third of the faculty) but they tend to have more junior positions as the trend lines indicating how female presence varies by academic rank clearly demonstrate.

**Figure 5 - Gender distribution by academic rank**

*(all faculty members with ongoing contracts, n=198)*



Gender differences appear to affect working hours also independently of the intervening factor of rank seniority. Table 10 highlights differences among male and female faculties in reported working hours; here data are compared by clusters of rank seniority, in order to control the effect of gender inequality.



**Table 10 - Gender differences in worked hours**

*(only F.T. internal staff, n=56)*

	Females			Males		
	N.	AVE weekly hours	STD DEV	N.	AVE weekly hours	STD DEV
<b>Lecturers (A-B-C)</b>	15	50.7	12.4	25	43.7	10.8
<b>Professors (D-E-Executives)</b>	4	52.5	9.6	12	56.7	15.1

It is remarkable that among the less senior faculties, female lecturers declare that they put in a significantly higher number of work hours compared to their male colleagues, despite the fact that women often tend to have a heavier additional domestic workload, an aspect that research has linked to the low female presence in the professoriate (Probert 2005). Among the most senior faculty members the effort is much more even across genders and male professors seem to be even more stakhanovite than their female colleagues.

Interestingly, there appear to be significant variations among different discipline groups: when the reported weekly work hours of full time academics are compared (Table 11). In first place Management and Marketing academics declare working more hours than their colleagues in Finance, Accounting and, especially Economics (the maximum difference is a staggering 12 hours between Management and Economics). On the other hand the workloads seem more homogeneously distributed in certain disciplines, Marketing being the least uniform, and Economics the most homogenous: this could be interpreted as an indicator of the presence, in the latter department, of more standardized work practices.

**Table 11 – Reported working hours by Discipline Group**

*(only F.T. staff attached to a discipline group, n= 52)*

Rank	Responses	Average weekly hours	Standard Deviation
Accounting	9	47.2	12.5
Economics	8	42.5	5.3
Finance	12	45.7	9.6
Management	14	54.3	11.9
Marketing	8	53.8	15.1

## **Busy researching, teaching, or doing what?**

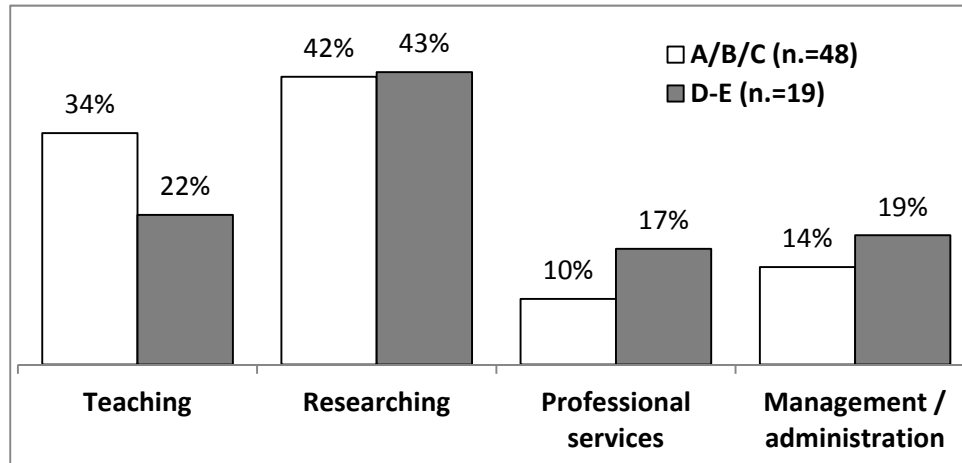
A number of questions were devoted to investigating how this work effort was invested, first by offering a basic classification of academic activities, then providing a more detailed typology of tasks. The categorization into four main activities used to collect data was obtained by expanding the classic conceptual triad of academic activities: teaching, research, and service (Rosser & Tabata 2010). This implied splitting the catchall label ‘service’ in two sets of tasks, which have different purposes and implications. The first, ‘School management and administration’ incorporates all the practices that are performed to satisfy administrative requirements imposed by the School, the University, or by institutional bodies (for instance the preparation of grant applications). It also includes those activities that are implicit in the participation in an organization, such as attendance at meetings and functions. Finally, it comprises proper ‘managerial’ activities, such as those performed by directors of research centres. The second category, ‘Professional service activities’, refers instead to activities that are delivered to serve external customers, including tasks that are connected with participation in global research enterprise, for instance editorships and reviewing tasks, which are usually performed as an unpaid, voluntary activity. It also comprises consulting and advisory services that are offered to external corporate, government and ‘third sector’ organizations, either as form of paid

professional service or as a community service. In order to account for seasonal differences in academic activities (the fact, for instance, that most teaching activities are concentrated in spring and autumn), respondents were invited to provide a self-estimate of their yearly work time allocation.

The aggregate response data show that research activities take, overall, the lion's share of academic time investment, at least in the observed population. When all respondents are considered, on average about 42% of their time is taken up by research, followed by a 30% of teaching, while administration tasks require a little less than 17% of the time and the remaining 11-12% is dedicated to professional service activities. When analysed by Rank seniority (Figure 6), data show that, quite unremarkably, junior academics have a higher teaching load. More interestingly though, not being burdened by teaching does not translate directly in more time invested in research, since all this 'free time' is absorbed, for many in the professoriate, by a higher load of professional services (possibly due to the fact they are in high demand as editors and reviewers), and of managerial and administrative tasks.

Once again, it is useful to compare this distribution of work effort with the formal contractual demands, that prescribes that the normal pattern of academic workload is 40% teaching, 40% research and 20% other activities (UTS 2010a): in this case there seems to be a substantial overlapping between behaviours and contractual provisos.

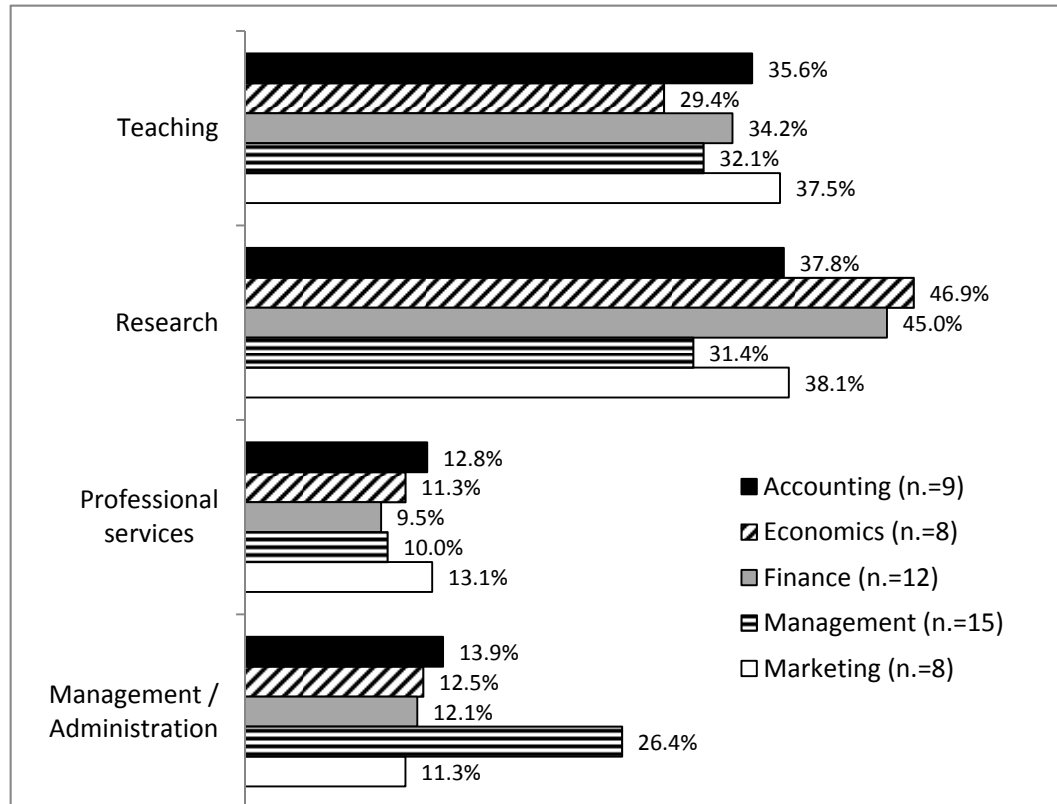
**Figure 6 - Activities by rank seniority**  
*(only internal staff n=67)*



The distribution of academic activities across disciplinary groups appears to be remarkably skewed (Figure 7). While there are not major differences in the proportion of time absorbed by teaching or professional services, the amount of time that Economics and Finance academics can devote to research is remarkably higher than that at disposal of Management academics, and this seems due to a much heavier managerial and administrative workload.

**Figure 7 - Activities by discipline group**

*(only F.T. internal staff attached to a discipline group, n=52)*



As noted by Schuster & Finkelstein (2006, pp. 77-8), measuring academic work is a problematic task because of the unclear boundaries between different activities. For instance, is the bureaucratic work required in preparing a research grant application an administrative or a research activity? In order to standardize responses the questionnaire included, as previously noted, some questions that offered a more analytic subdivision of the macro-activities investigated with the previous question. In order to avoid overburdening the respondents with question items, the four macro-categories have been re-assembled in the tripartition 'Teaching', 'Research' and 'Administration'. The sub-activities are detailed in Tables 12, 13 and 14 which also summarize the responses.

**Table 12 - Teaching activities breakdown***(all respondents, n=58)*

Entire sample	Average
Lecturing undergraduates	30%
Lecturing postgraduates	27%
Marking assignments	15%
Supervising research students	11%
Running workshops, seminars etc. (not specifically aimed to students)	7%
Other	11%

Data by rank	Lecturing undergrads	Lecturing postgrads	Marking	Supervising	Workshops etc.	Other
Lecturers (A,B,C) (n=37)	32%	31%	16%	5%	3%	13%
Professors (D,E) (n=17)	17%	30%	16%	15%	22%	9%
Data by discipline group	Lecturing undergrads	Lecturing postgrads	Marking	Supervising	Workshops etc.	Other
Accounting (n=9)	36%	32%	14%	8%	1%	11%
Economics (n=8)	30%	14%	17%	13%	4%	22%
Finance (n=15)	42%	26%	14%	8%	2%	8%
Management (n=14)	29%	22%	26%	11%	6%	6%
Marketing (n=7)	19%	44%	4%	8%	3%	22%

Reading Table 12 data by rank shows how senior academics devote a larger quota of their lecturing to postgraduate students, confirming that even in this context “teaching graduate courses carries more status than teaching undergraduate courses” (Rosser & Tabata 2010, p. 450). The higher prestige of the professoriate makes them much more likely to engage in seminars and workshop for non-students audiences and their superior research experience is also reflected by the much larger portion of time they dedicate to supervising research students.

Comparing responses across discipline groups reveal that the ‘pure’ teaching load (that is, lecturing and marking students) is higher for Accounting and Finance and lower for

Economics and Marketing. Management academics appear to have a particularly onerous marking load, especially when compared to Marketing.

**Table 13 - Research activities breakdown**

(all respondents, n=60)

Entire sample	Average
Research planning and coordination (e.g. team meeting; coordination)	12.4%
Data collection and analysis	21.0%
Reading literature	20.7%
Writing papers; reviewing; editing	31.2%
Research communication (e.g. participating in seminars)	10.8%
Other	4.1%

Data by rank	Research planning	Data collection	Reading	Writing	Seminar/Conference	Other
Lecturers (A,B,C) (n=38)	10.1%	23.2%	23.7%	29.3%	8.9%	5.0%
Professors (D,E) (n=18)	16.1%	16.7%	15.6%	35.6%	13.3%	2.9%
Data by discipline group	Research planning	Data collection	Reading	Writing	Seminar/Conference	Other
Accounting (n=8)	7.5%	17.5%	40.6%	25.0%	6.9%	2.5%
Economics (n=9)	16.7%	27.8%	15.0%	19.1%	8.6%	12.9%
Finance (n=13)	11.9%	20.8%	19.6%	35.4%	10.8%	1.7%
Management (n=14)	14.3%	19.3%	19.6%	29.6%	14.3%	2.9%
Marketing (n=8)	7.5%	18.8%	17.5%	43.1%	10.6%	2.9%

Data on the breakdown of research activities (Table 13) reveal that writing is the main component of research, especially for professors, while more junior researchers have to invest more time in data collection and analysis, a task that more senior colleagues can clearly delegate to them or to research assistants. Also the time reserved for reading is higher for lower-rank academics, while members of the professoriate are probably relying more on their accumulated stock of knowledge.

Among Disciplinary groups there are significative differences in research time allocation: planning and coordination requires more energies in Economics or Management than in Accounting or Marketing; Accounting academics are by far the most avid readers, investing in this activity more than double the amount of time than their colleagues from other disciplines; Marketing researchers seem to dedicate more than double the time to writing than do their colleagues from Economics; Management researchers are the most active in communicating the results of their research.

**Table 14 - Administration activities breakdown**

(all respondents, n=54)

Entire sample	Average
Governance (e.g. managing Research Centers)	11.6%
Attending meeting (e.g. Discipline Group Board, Faculty Board etc.)	33.3%
Curricular design	18.2%
Research funding: preparing application for grants; managing grants, reporting	28.4%
Other administrative tasks	37.0%

Data by rank	Governance	Meetings	Curricula	Grants	Other
Lecturers (A,B,C) (n=33)	7.1%	39.1%	20.9%	25.7%	33.9%
Professors (D,E) (n=18)	17.2%	24.2%	9.5%	35.0%	44.2%
Data by discipline group	Governance	Meetings	Curricula	Grants	Other
Accounting (n=5)	7.0%	16.0%	18.8%	25.0%	60.0%
Economics (n=7)	20.0%	38.6%	15.0%	24.0%	16.0%
Finance (n=14)	6.4%	32.5%	28.5%	27.3%	37.8%
Management (n=13)	16.9%	33.1%	12.1%	25.0%	33.2%
Marketing (n=7)	8.6%	43.6%	8.3%	29.0%	35.0%

The first significant aspect that emerges from the data in Table 14 is the high proportion of time that is taken up by internal meetings, especially for less senior faculties and for members of the Marketing Discipline Group (by contrast Accounting academic have managed to limit the time invested in this activity). Another interesting element is that lecturers are much more engaged in teaching curricula design than more senior staff members, which confirms that the professoriate tends to minimize involvement in any teaching-related activity, probably because of the need to focus their attention to more 'productive' activities in terms of external ranking (Harzing & Adler 2009). In fact professors



invest a good part of their ‘management time’ to tasks aimed at obtaining or administering research funds. Finally, the very large proportion of time devoted to activities which fall in the residual ‘Other administrative tasks’ category reveal both a limit in the list of alternative activities proposed in the questionnaire and the existence of a vast array of bureaucratic chores that are not necessarily connected with teaching or research.

Another aspect related to time allocation that was investigated by the questionnaire concerned the respondents’ satisfaction with the current time allocation. These responses are summarized in Table 15:

**Table 15 - Assessment of time allocation**

*(all respondents, n=69)*

<b><i>Do you think that the way in which your time is split among these activities is...</i></b>	<b><i>% of Respondents<sup>21</sup></i></b>	<b><i>Response Count</i></b>
<b>Right as it is</b>	<b>47.8%</b>	<b>33</b>
I would like to be able to spend MORE time doing research	43.5%	30
I would like to be able to spend MORE time teaching	1.4%	1
I would like to be able to spend MORE time in managerial/administrative activities	1.4%	1
I would like to be able to spend LESS time doing research	0.0%	0
I would like to be able to spend LESS time teaching	11.6%	8
I would like to be able to spend LESS time in managerial/administrative activities	17.4%	12

Half the respondents are content with the current time allocation, and some of the open ended comments point to the fact that a number of informers feel a certain degree of autonomy in deciding their task time allocation. Overall, however, these data reflect the presence of a powerful discourse privileging research over teaching, a discourse which is substantiated not just by ideas and talk but also by the design of incentives and careers. In

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<sup>21</sup> A respondent who did not choose the “Right as it is” option was given the opportunity to select more than one of the other options (with the exception of self-contradictory combinations). For this reason the total exceeds 100%.

fact, while teaching activities occupy on average less than one third of the surveyed academics working time, only one respondent out of 69 affirmed a desire to devote more time to teaching. By contrast a significant response of 43.5% would like to be able to spend more time doing research, with no respondents considering reducing the time dedicated to this activity. In any case the least preferred occupations appear to be the managerial/administrative ones, with 17% of the respondents wishing to be able to reduce their commitment to these tasks.

## **The influence of work environment**

Another set of questions were aimed at investigating the site of work and its impact on practices, the solitary or collaborative nature of tasks and the perceived influence of information technology on academic work. In first place, the responses to the question on the site of work (Table 16) confirm the notion (Bartunek 2008; Ryan & Guthrie 2009) that academic work is not carried out exclusively in a single site but is performed in multiple locations (sometimes even across different countries and institutions), making some academics *nomadic workers* (Czarniawska 2011b; Büscher 2013).

**Table 16 – Site(s) of work**  
(all respondents, n=65)

<i>In a typical year, which percentage of your working time is spent working...</i>					Average
On the School premises					70.7%
From home					18.9%
In other universities (e.g. as a visiting scholar, attending Conferences)					5.3%
On other corporate premises (e.g. consulting, doing field research)					4.0%
Elsewhere					1.0%

Data by rank (n=60)	School	Home	Other universities	Other corporate	Elsewhere
Lecturers (A,B,C) (n=42)	72%	19%	4%	5%	1%
Professors (D,E) (n=18)	68%	19%	10%	1%	1%

Data by discipline group (n=57)	School	Home	Other universities	Other corporate	Elsewhere
Accounting (n=9)	71%	22%	4%	2%	1%
Economics (n=10)	77%	13%	4%	3%	4%
Finance (n=16)	69%	23%	7%	1%	0%
Management (n=14)	69%	21%	4%	5%	0%
Marketing (n=8)	76%	12%	8%	2%	3%

Data by age group (internal staff only, n=54)	School	Home	Other universities	Other corporate	Elsewhere
under 40 (n=20)	74%	17%	5%	3%	2%
40-59 (n=23)	67%	19%	6%	7%	1%
60 and over (n=11)	65%	24%	7%	2%	2%

The emerging picture is quite homogenous: when considered collectively the surveyed academics appear to have similar habits, regardless of their role seniority or discipline. They tend to spend around 70% of their working time on the business school premises with a little less than 20% working from home, while the rest is spent in other locations, such as other universities, ‘on the field’, or on the move. Professors tend to spend a little less time on the school premises, which probably reflect the effect of other variables: their older age<sup>22</sup>, and the fact that professors have less teaching commitments and that they are more

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<sup>22</sup> The Pearson coefficient between age group and rank seniority show, for the members of the sample, a significant positive correlation between rank and age:  $r=0.394$  ( $n=54$ ). However this value does not indicate a very high correlation, which means that age is not a perfect predictor of rank seniority. This can be caused by two factors: the presence of a number of individuals who started their academic career late in life and by the fact that career progression is not linked only to years of experience.

in demand for delivering conference presentations and seminars outside their institution. On their part less senior academics spend more time doing ‘on the field’ research or consulting activities. As for the influence of disciplinary belonging, Marketing and Economics academics are the ones who spend more time on the school premises and less working from home. Age seems to have a small but appreciable influence on the choice of the worksite: the tendency to work from home increases with age. This make them much less mobile than other knowledge workers, such as the consultants described by Hislop & Axtell (2009). The surveyed academics seem rather quite similar to the Canadian public sector worker studied by Towers et al. (2006) in their work on the impact of mobile technologies on the dissolution of spatial-temporal boundaries between work and private life. Although quite mobile, the observed academics do not appear to be remarkable when compared to other contemporary office workers. However, the complex relationship between space and academic work practices is probably not captured by this crude measurement. Before drawing any conclusions it is useful to consider the answer to a related question, investigating with whom the surveyed academics spend their working time (Table 17).

**Table 17 – With whom working time is spent**

*(all respondents, n=65)*

<b><i>On average, which percentage of your time is spent:</i></b>	<b>Average</b>
Working alone (in front of computer, books etc.)	61%
Working with colleagues (meeting in person)	14%
Working with colleagues (virtually, e.g. via email, phone, teleconference, online forum, wikis etc.)	10%
Working with students	11%
Working with other stakeholders (e.g. research informants, etc.)	4%

<b>Data by discipline group (n=57)</b>	<b>Alone</b>	<b>Colleagues (in person)</b>	<b>Colleagues (virtually)</b>	<b>Students</b>	<b>Others</b>
Accounting (n=9)	67%	12%	8%	13%	0%
Economics (n=10)	57%	18%	8%	13%	5%
Finance (n=16)	63%	13%	11%	11%	1%
Management (n=14)	57%	13%	11%	12%	6%
Marketing (n=8)	70%	9%	9%	8%	4%

The first element that emerges from reading this data is that being a business academic is overall, despite the many interactions, quite a solitary job. On average 61% of the time is spent working alone, and in fact many of the activities previously detailed in Tables 6, 7 and

8 are performed alone. This includes marking, reading, writing, analysing data, preparing grant applications, doing administrative tasks: research activities appear to be the ones that take up most of this lone work. This situation is common to different disciplinary groups, even if Marketing scholars tend to be more solitary than Management or Economic colleagues, and the Economics academics are the ones who spend more time working in person with colleagues. The surveyed business researchers seem to be less 'cosmopolitan', that is, less engaged in internal and especially external research collaborations than most of their colleagues from other 'hard' scientific disciplines (Lee & Bozeman 2005). This is certainly influenced by different disciplinary research practices: business research does not require the large teams or complex equipment needed for physics, astronomy, or medicine, for instance. The issue of the effects of collaboration on academic performance is explored in the next chapter but for the moment it suffices to note that, based on the survey data, the actual amount of time invested collaborating with others does not represent a large portion of the work-time. While on the one hand this seems to confirm the preoccupation with the limited level of interaction among academics that is currently experienced within the business school, it raises doubts about the influence played by physical space on these practices: is it reasonable to think that these individuals spend less than 15% of their time working together simply because they do not meet in corridors?

It is also possible to use these combined data to reflect on the issue of the actual work location. A superficial look at the data presented in Table 16 and 17 might lead the reader to picture these academics as spending most of their time in their office, alone, in front of a computer. Considering for instance the sample of Management academics, they self-assess that on average they spend 69% of their 54 weekly working hours on the School premises; they also pass more than two thirds of their total time alone, either writing, reading, marking, or remotely communicating and collaborating with other colleagues, according to

the data. Nevertheless looking at these data more closely shows that only a limited portion of the time that they spend in the Business School is actually spent in their individual offices.

While it is difficult to define precisely whether an activity is ‘individual’ (performed alone) or ‘social’ (requiring interpersonal interaction), it can be safely assumed that certain activities demand direct interaction (e.g. lecturing or attending a meeting or a seminar), while others are predominantly individual (e.g. reading, marking or writing)<sup>23</sup>. In Table 18 the self-assessed weekly workload of Management academics is broken down according to this principle, between ‘social’ and ‘solitary’ activities. The second aspect that needs to be considered is that, while in a worksite such as the Business School work activities can be performed either alone or interacting with others, when working from home academics can almost exclusively execute ‘individual’ tasks and, conversely, when they are on the premises of other universities or corporate organisations they will mostly do ‘social’ activities. This allows an estimation of both the amount of time that individual academics are likely to spend in their offices and that in which they are engaging in ‘social’ tasks within the school premises (Table 18).

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<sup>23</sup> Virtual social activities, such as corresponding with a co-author or talking on the phone with a colleague are here considered, for simplicity, as ‘individual’ activities.

**Table 18 - Estimate of the amount of time spent on average working from the office**

(Management academics, n=14)

Social/ individual tasks breakdown	Total		Social tasks		Individual tasks	
	% per activity <sup>24</sup>	hours/ week	% per task <sup>25</sup>	hours/ week	% per task <sup>26</sup>	hours/ week
<b>Total time</b>	100%	54	37%	20.2	63%	33.8
<b>Teaching</b>	32%	17.3	60%	10.4	40%	6.9
<b>Researching</b>	31%	16.7	25%	4.2	75%	12.6
<b>Professional services</b>	10%	5.4	0%	-	100%	5.4
<b>Administration</b>	26%	14.0	40%	5.6	60%	8.4

Site of activity	% per work site <sup>27</sup>	hours/ week	Predominant tasks
<b>Total</b>	100%	54	Mixed
<b>UTSB premises</b>	69%	37.3	Mixed
<b>Home</b>	21%	11.3	Individual
<b>Other universities</b>	4%	2.2	Social
<b>Corporate premises</b>	5%	2.7	Social

Expected time spent on UTSB premises		
Site	Formula	Hrs/week
UTSB in Office	Total Individual time minus time worked from home	= 22.5
UTSB out of office	Total Social time minus time worked from other universities and corporate premises	= 15.3
UTSB in Collaborative spaces	Time spent in UTSB out of office minus lecture time and administrative meetings	= 5.6

Based on this estimate management academics should spend on average each week 22.5 hours in their offices. Even this lower figure is probably slightly overestimated, though. In the 18 months period during which I regularly visited the school's premises, spending 3/4 days per week in a part of the building where about 20 full time academics have their

<sup>24</sup> Data from Figure7

<sup>25</sup> The percentage of 'social task' represent an estimate calculated using the data presented in Tables 12, 13 and 14, and including among these activities: lecturing and seminars; conference attendances; meetings attendance; and a small proportion of management tasks, supervisory activities, and data collection/analysis tasks.

<sup>26</sup> Calculated by subtraction

<sup>27</sup> Data from Table 16

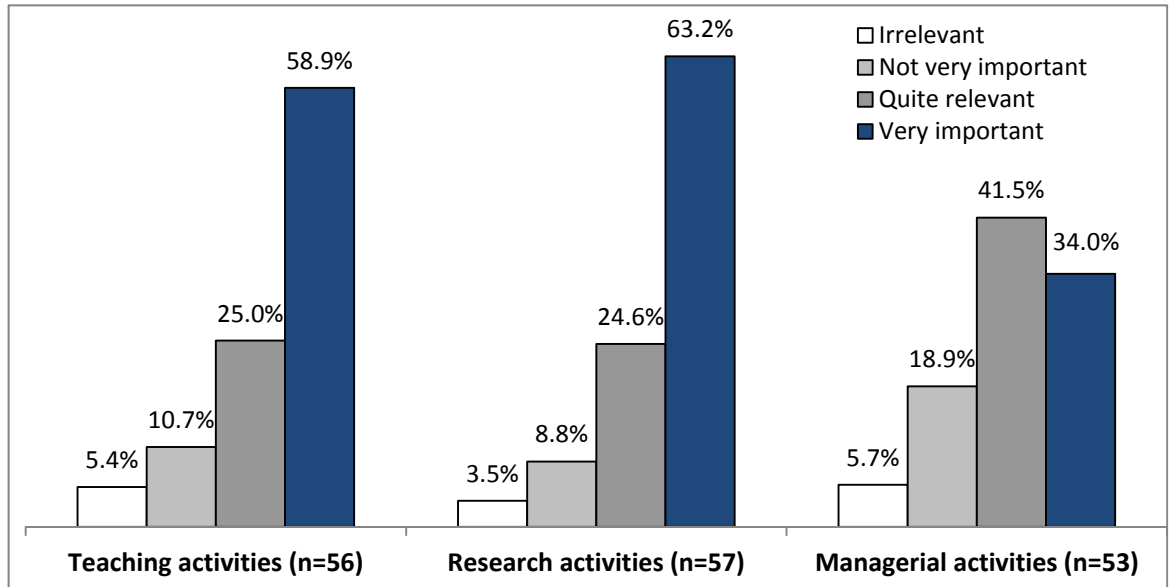
offices, I have had the chance to notice their coming and going. Based on these non-systematic but frequent observations, my estimate is that most offices were occupied less than 50% of time. An interpretation of this discrepancy is that the time spent in informal conversations, on the move between lecture rooms, meeting rooms and office creates a significant 'temporal attrition'. This is an amount of time difficult to allocate and to incorporate in a coherent self-narration if not as 'time lost'. Yet, in these interstitial, not formally labelled, times and places, connections can be made, ideas developed and problems solved.

Another relevant figure emerging from the estimates presented in Table 18 is the one regarding the actual quantity of time that is, at the moment, apparently invested in collaborative 'social tasks' on the School premises, a mere 5.6 hours per week, a little more than 10% of the management academics working time, which cast a further shadow on the relevance of the role played by the conformation of the workplace. The task of making this collaboration a central fixture of academic practice seems so arduous that it would be disingenuous to think that a better-designed space can force such behaviour.

Despite the fact that academics spend only a limited amount of their time in their offices or in common collaborative spaces for research purpose, there is a diffuse conviction that workplace configuration matters, that it is particularly important for research activities, as shown by the answers to a question on this topic, which data are summarised in Figure 8. Is this as a sign of the dominating presence of a powerful rationalizing narrative? It is difficult to tell, because the type of 'ideal spaces' that encapsulate different activities could be different, and this question could be read in different ways. Any lecturer will find it preferable to teach in a nice, airy, well equipped room rather than in a stuffy, dark, cramped space but some might think that too much emphasis is put on aesthetic or design aspects, hence the percentage of respondent that judge it less than important. Equally, the overwhelming importance attributed to the importance of place of work could be read as a heartfelt approval of the new building but it could hide some strong resistances to it (i.e. 'I best do research at home').

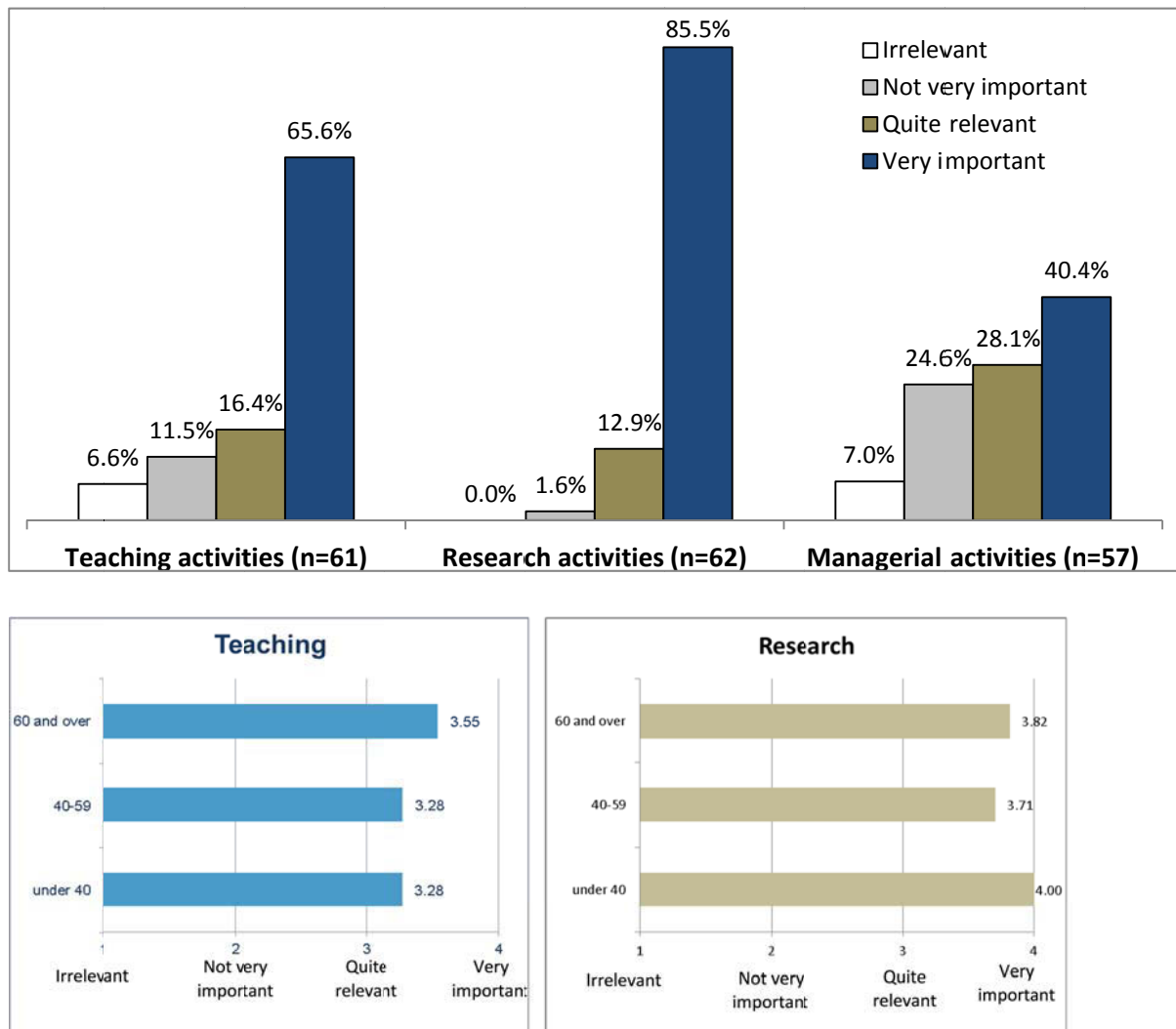


**Figure 8 – Importance of place of work characteristics on activities**  
(all respondents)



The respondents consider another set of non-human actants as crucial : IT equipment. In fact the perceived importance of hardware and software is fundamental, especially for research activities but also for teaching (Figure 9). While it is not surprising that younger academics are those who append more importance to the use of IT tools for research purposes, quite interestingly, the age group that consider that IT support is most essential for teaching activities is the over 60s.

**Figure 9 – Importance of IT tools on activities**  
(all respondents)



## Has the ‘workspace rhetoric’ permeated practices?

The fact that a narrative is so dominant to become commonsensical for a large proportion of a community, as demonstrated by the large consensus on the importance of workspace and IT in shaping research and teaching, does not imply that this belief will be immediately incorporated in the behavioural repertoire of actors, as an un-reflexive element of their practices. It takes time and application to convert explicit knowledge into that which is

tacit. A process of power/knowledge rationalization can be accomplished only when a further loop of rationalization is completed, that is, when actors incorporate new discursive statements in their behaviours and when asked to justify them will present an account that seamlessly incorporate this new notion into their description of the practice.

The next set of questions was explicitly aimed at probing this aspect, testing the degree to which the dominant rhetoric had permeated discourse and practice. It did so by asking respondents to rank a list of factors according to their influence on teaching practices<sup>28</sup>. In order to facilitate data comparison, the ranking has been transformed into a score (factor ranked first gets 9 points, while the one ranked as least important gets 1 point). Table 19 presents the aggregate results, listing factors in order of their average score.

**Table 19 – Impact of different factors on teaching practices**

*(All respondents, n=60 / min score =1 max = 9)*

<b>Factors</b>	<b>Average</b>	<b>Median</b>	<b>StdDev</b>	<b>Skewness</b>
Students attitudes and desires	6.78	7	1.91	-0.80
What I believe is best practice	6.58	8	3.07	-0.99
Curriculum requirements	6.20	7	2.13	-0.86
Role models (e.g. great teachers you met in the past)	5.98	7	2.60	-0.57
School policies requirements	5.20	5	1.74	-0.24
Space arrangements (lecture rooms' characteristics)	4.00	4	1.97	0.34
IT equipment	3.65	3	1.82	0.56
The practices of my colleagues at UTS	3.38	3	2.12	1.07
External norms (e.g. accreditation systems)	3.22	2.5	2.19	0.75

Students and professional judgments are perceived as stronger influences than curricular requirements or school policies, even if overall no single factor is particularly dominant. The relevance of material elements such as space arrangements and IT equipment (considered

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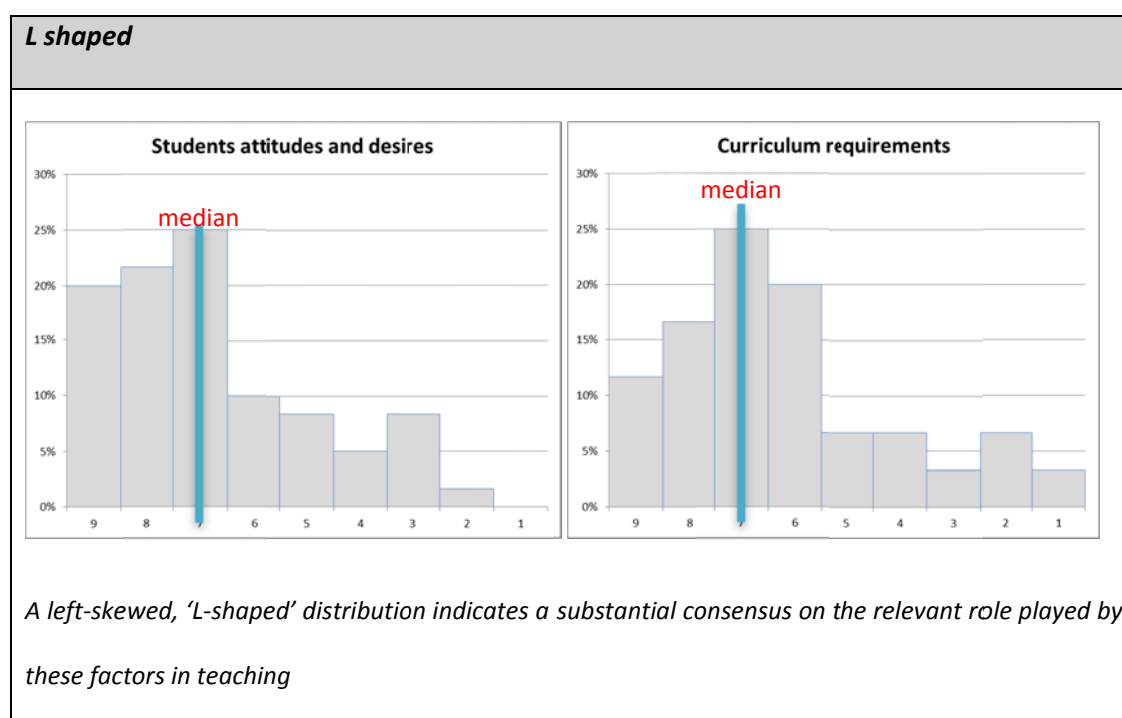
<sup>28</sup> Since the purpose of this exercise was not to fully describe the way in which different factors shape practices, an aspect that is discussed in the next chapters, I chose to focus only on one type of practice in order to limit the length of the questionnaire.

‘very important’ by the majority of the respondents in the previous questions) is on the other hand much diminished. The least influential factors are external norms and colleagues’ practices: there appear to be a limited drive towards standardization of teaching practices or even experience-sharing among members of the community.

It is worthwhile to observe that standard deviation and skewness values show how opinions on some of these factors vary significantly producing distribution curves of different shapes (Figure 10):

**Figure 10 - Factors influencing teaching practices – Distribution of responses**

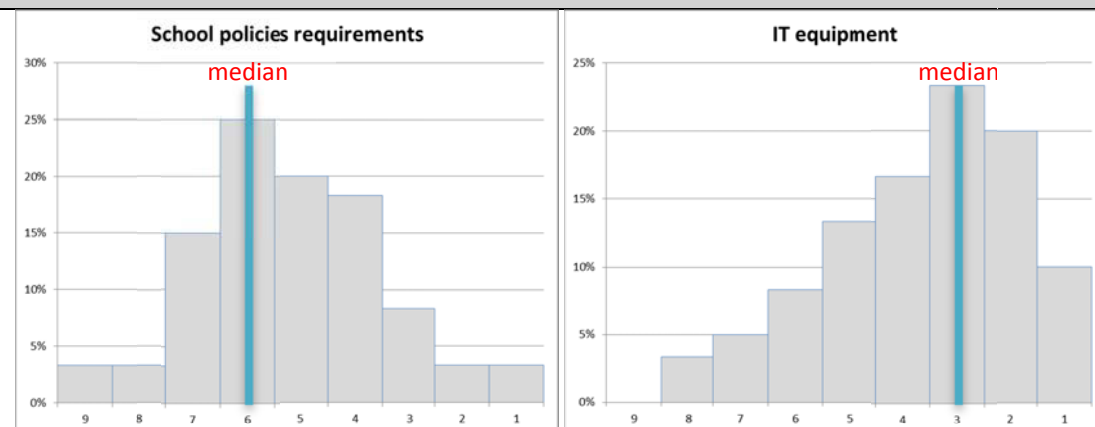
(all respondents, n=60 / min score =1 max = 9)



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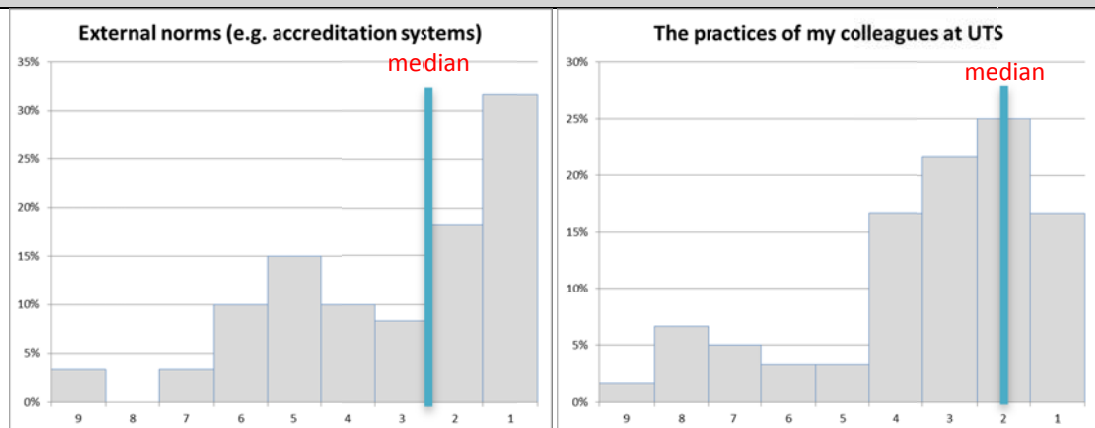
**Figure 10 (continues from previous page)**

**Bell shaped**



A normal, 'bell shaped' distribution signifies that most respondents, with the exception of a few outliers, agree that the factor has an intermediate impact (which can be mid-high, as in the case of school policies, or mid-low in that of IT equipment)

**J shaped**

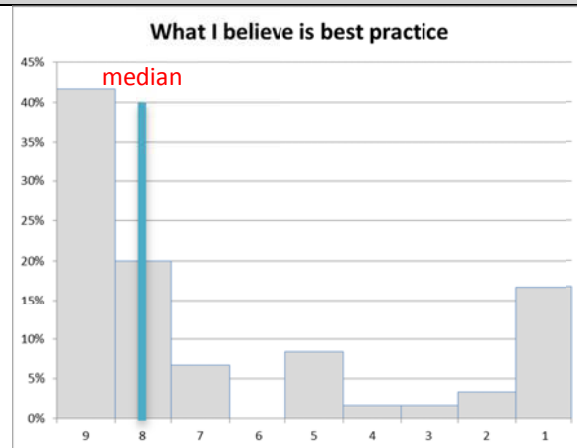


A right skewed, 'J-shaped' distribution suggests that there is a general consensus on the low influence of the factor on teaching

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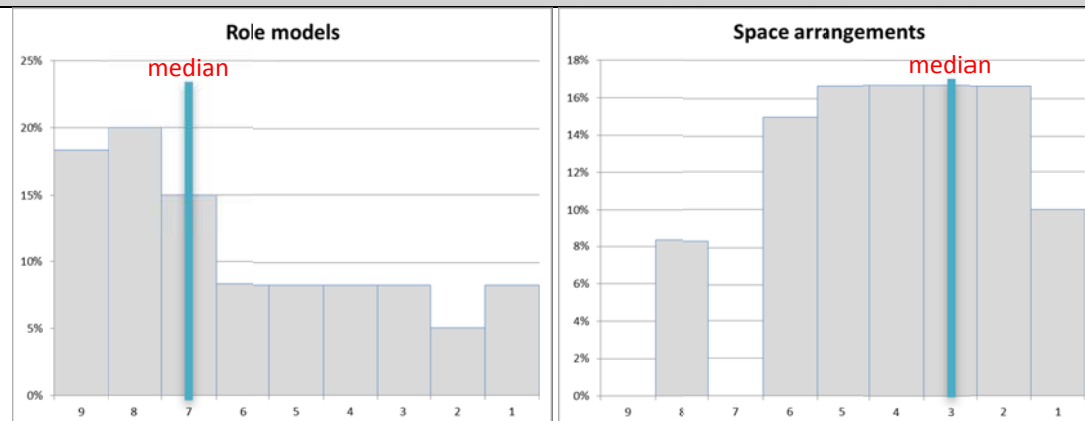
**Figure 10 (continues from previous page)**

**U shaped**



A bimodal, 'U shaped' distribution implies the presence of polarized opinions: this is the case of the influence of individual opinion of what constitutes best teaching practice, that is crucial for most but totally irrelevant for a significant number of respondents

**Flat**



A flat (platykurtic) and left skewed distribution means that, while opinions are spread on the impact of the factor, there is a general consensus in considering it scarcely relevant, as in the case of the importance of teaching spaces, while in the case of a flat and right skewed distribution opinions are still varied but that there is a majority of people who consider the factor to be highly relevant, as it happens for role models

Looking at the influence of individual variables, such as gender, rank and discipline group (Table 20), several aspects stand out:

- Female academics appear to be far less self-assured (or self-possessed) than their male colleagues in regards to their teaching practices; in fact they put far less importance on their personal views on what constitutes best practice and they look up to their colleagues more often than males do.
- Quite surprisingly, professors appear to be more influenced by role models than their more junior colleagues who instead rely more on their own personal views. This can be interpreted as a consequence of the fact that in the past academics were more exposed, both as students and as apprentices, to the readings of illustrious dons. In more recent years instead, because of the diminished cache of teaching and the increased casualization of the activity, the possibility of coming across a memorable role model as teacher have decreased.
- There are remarkable differences between discipline groups in opinions about factors influencing teaching: Accounting and Finance lecturers are much more student-oriented than Marketing ones, who are instead more influenced by external norms and especially by the curriculum. These two latter factors are instead considered far less relevant by Management academics. Finally, Marketing lecturers are the ones who trust their own judgment on what constitutes best practice the most, contrary to Economics lecturers, the group that express the least consensual opinions on the factors affecting teaching.

**Table 20 – Impact of different factors on teaching practices**

*(data by gender, rank and discipline group)*

	Role models	Students	Curriculum	External norms	School policies	Space arrangements	IT equipment	Personal view on best practices	Colleagues' practices
<b>Gender</b>									
Female (n=20)	5.55	6.75	5.95	3.35	5.55	4.45	3.65	5.75	4.00
Male (n=40)	6.20	6.80	6.33	3.15	5.03	3.78	3.65	7.00	3.08
<b>Rank</b>									
Lecturers (A,B,C) (n=40)	5.53	6.73	6.35	3.30	5.08	4.00	3.70	6.90	3.43
Professors (D,E) (n=16)	7.00	6.94	5.50	3.06	5.38	4.06	3.63	6.00	3.44
<b>Unit</b>									
Accounting (n=9 )	6.11	7.33	6.56	2.22	4.33	4.56	4.78	6.00	3.11
Economics (n=9 )	6.22	6.33	6.44	2.89	5.44	5.11	4.00	5.44	3.11
Finance (n=14 )	5.43	7.36	5.86	3.93	6.07	3.29	3.64	6.00	3.43
Management (n=14 )	6.00	6.93	5.43	2.36	5.00	4.86	3.64	7.21	3.57
Marketing (n=7 )	5.86	5.14	7.00	5.29	4.71	2.43	3.00	8.57	3.00

Overall these data suggest that the development of a distinctive UTSB teaching approach will be highly problematic, and for the moment the integration of practices is mostly delegated to curricular design. Moreover, the rhetoric regarding the centrality of the importance of architecture and working space does not seem to have permeated the local discourse beyond a superficial, 'narrative' level: UTSB academic might have started to 'talk the talk' but they are probably still not 'walking the talk' and certainly not 'talking about how they walk' in a manner which is aligned with the espoused corporate strategies of the School.

## **Soloists or orchestral players? Autonomy and improvisation**

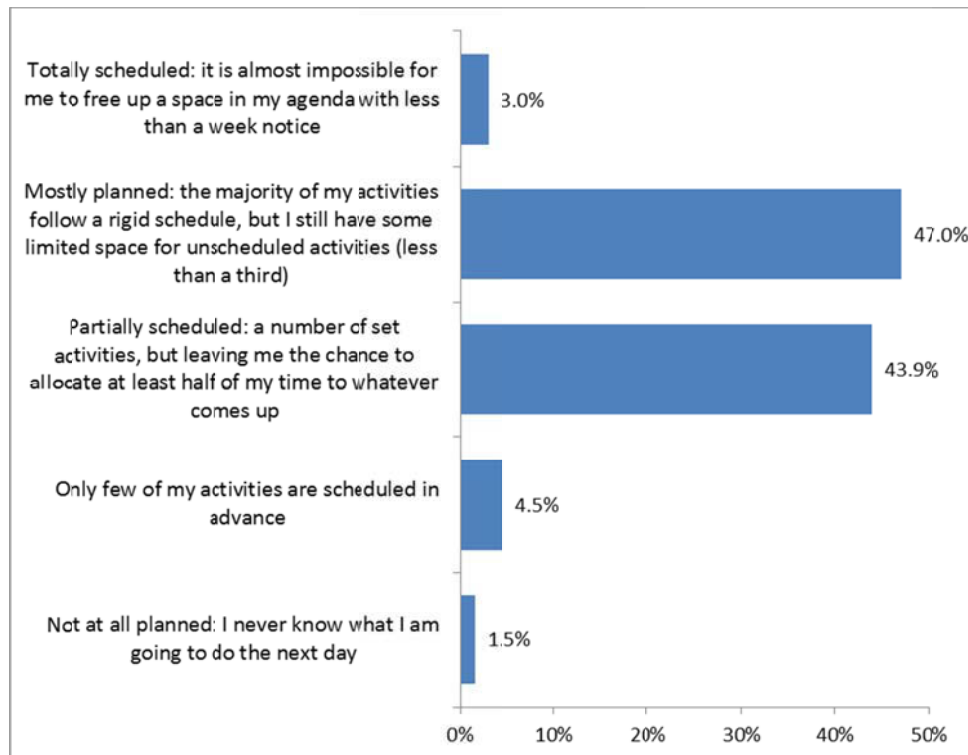
Another set of questions was devoted to assess to what degree the activities of the respondents are routine. Fig. 11 displays the distribution of responses on the general level of predictability. The general picture is that of a job that, while structured along general



lines, leaves a certain degree of flexibility to practitioners on how to organize their activities.

**Figure 11 – How predictable are your activities?**

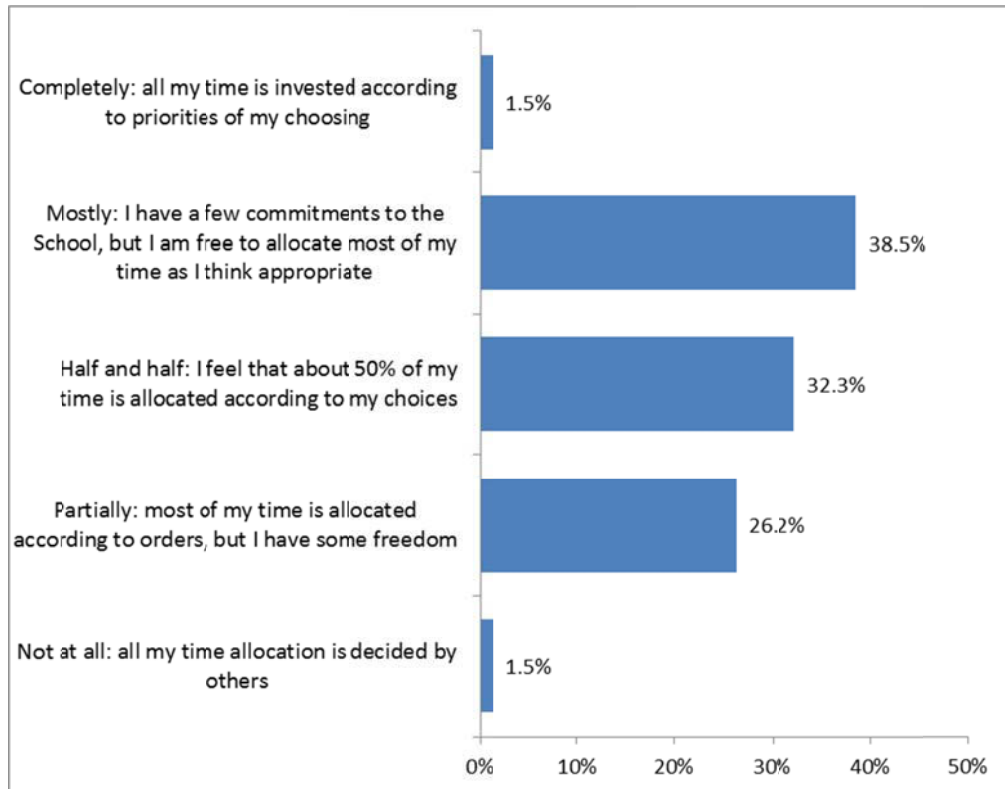
*(all respondents, n=66)*



This is confirmed by the responses to another probe, investigating the level of freedom that the respondents have in determining their time allocation (Figure 12).

**Figure 12 – How free are you to decide your working time allocation?**

*(all respondents, n=65)*



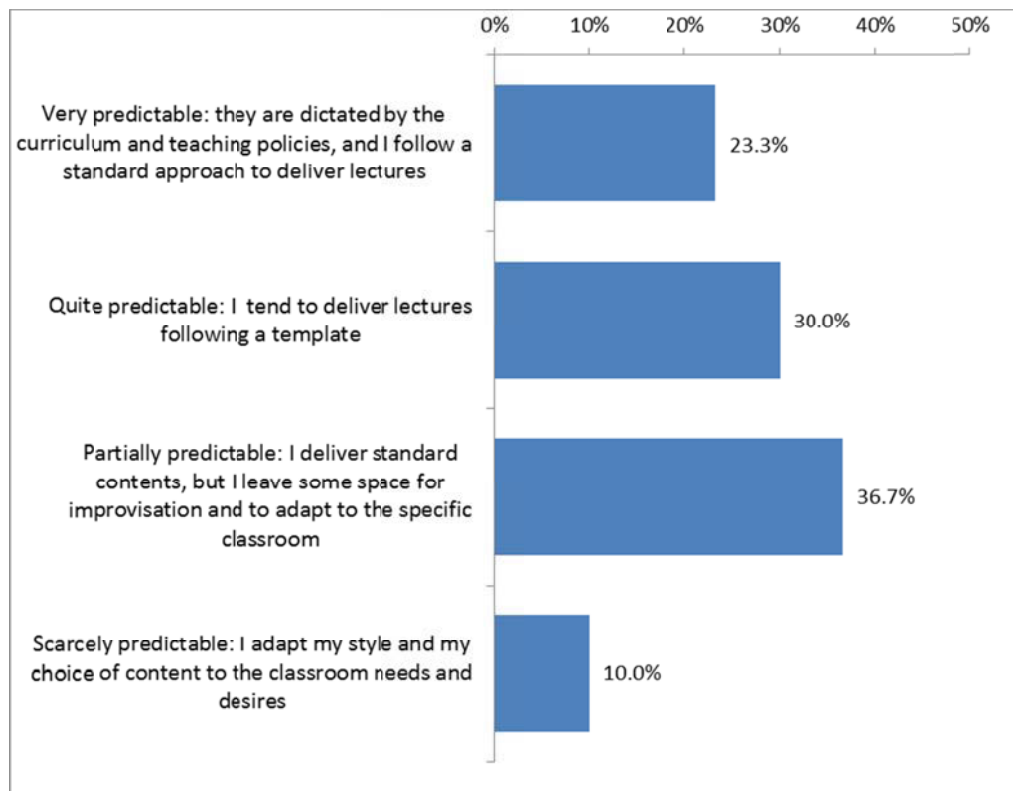
The fact that tasks are only partially scheduled and that there is considerable autonomy in deciding time allocation is congruent with the fact that these activities are performed in a variety of sites, and certainly this factor is an enabler (if not a driver) of the possibility to decide to work from the office or elsewhere. Even when the focus is on teaching practices in particular, by their nature more predictable and structured than research activities (Figure 13), the surveyed academics maintain a relevant degree of autonomy and flexibility.

When asked to identify who are the ‘others’ who determine how time is allocated, most respondents list (this was an open question) two categories of actors: academic supervisors and students and, to a lesser degree, colleagues. Corporate instruments, such as members of the executive management, policies and work plans are very rarely mentioned as determinants. Again this data aligns with the opinion the respondents expressed about the

factors influencing their teaching: the formal curricula are seriously considered but other factors (such as standard policies and practices) have a minor impact.

**Figure 13 – How predictable are your Teaching activities?**

(all respondents, n=60)

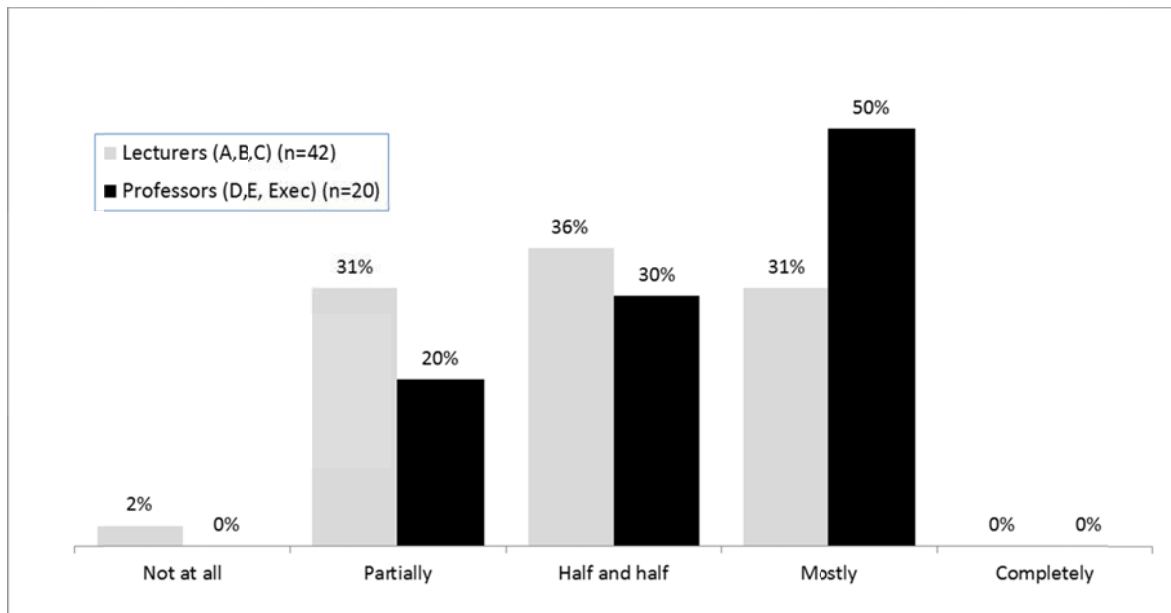


Unsurprisingly, freedom, both from hierarchical impositions and from rigid schedules tends to increase with rank seniority: professors believe they have a higher degree of autonomy in organizing their time when compared to their more junior colleagues (Figures 14 and 15).

It is however necessary to remember that, as found in other studies (Jacobs & Winslow 2004), the level of freedom that academic enjoy can seem fallaciously high: they are less exposed than most to direct supervision and role discipline but they are subject to a variety of normative pressures and expectations that covertly compel them.

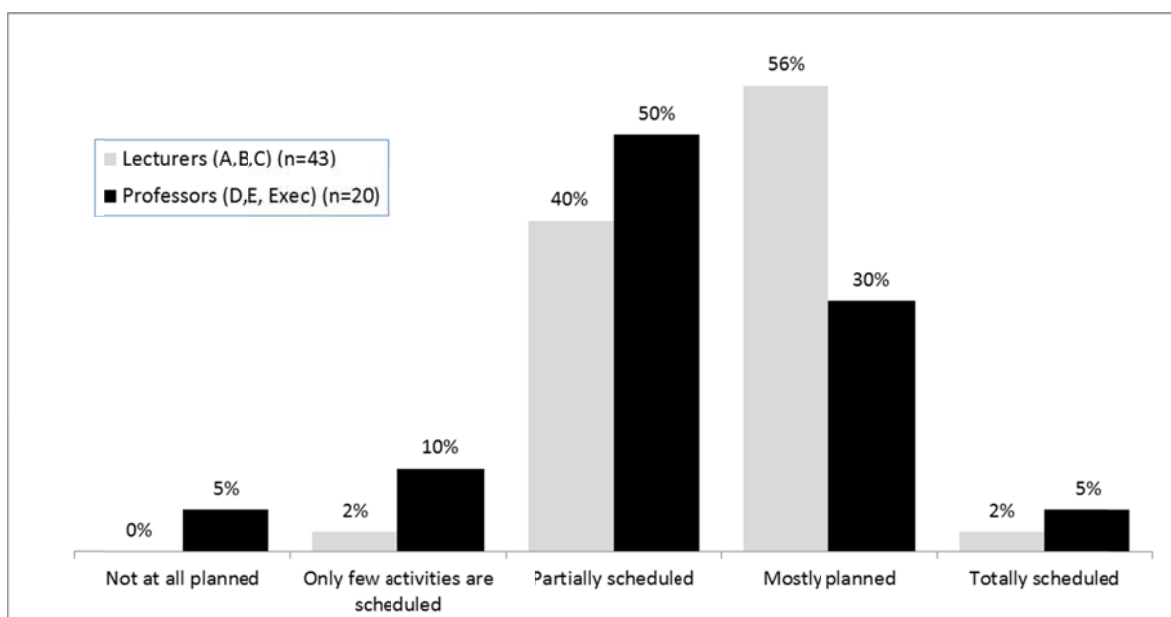
**Figure 14 – How free are you to decide your working time allocation?**

*(by rank)*



**Figure 15 – How predictable are your activities?**

*(by rank)*



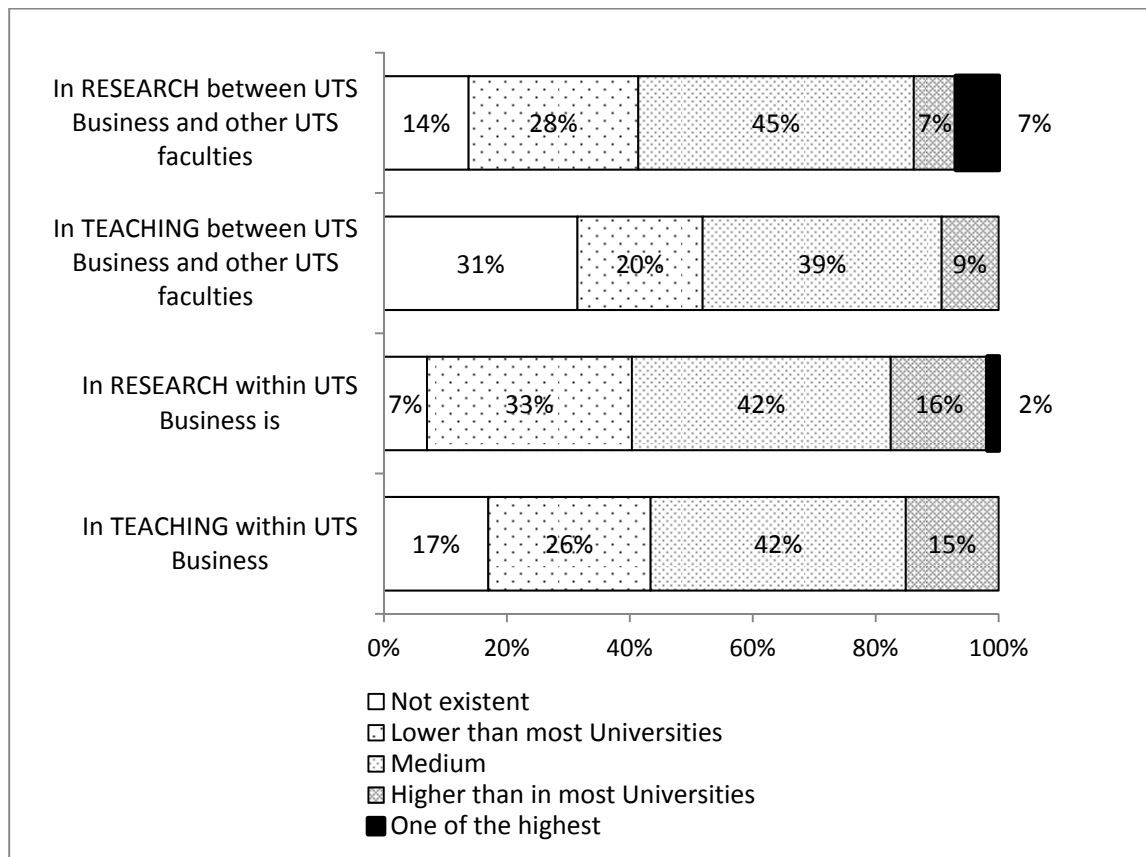
## Is interdisciplinarity a dirty word?

The last aspect that the questionnaire tried to investigate was the perception among faculty members of another key feature of the rhetorical arsenal deployed as part of the design thinking driven transformation strategy of the Business School: the importance of interdisciplinarity. As discussed in Chapter 7, the academic debate on the topic of the relevance, utility and opportunity of disciplinary divisions is very animated and contentious, so it is particularly interesting to sound how the buzzwords ‘integrative thinking’ and the mantra of the necessity to overcome disciplinary silos has been received.

The answers to the probing questions do not show a strong drive to interdisciplinarity and are not particularly reassuring for those who consider the push towards a new integrated Business School a *fait accompli*: the new ‘integrative building’ is nearing completion but the journey towards interdisciplinarity appears only to be at its beginning. The starting point does not seem to be very advanced: when asked to assess the level of interdisciplinarity already attained by UTS in comparison to other universities (Figure 16) respondents find that their institution does not excel.

**Figure 16 – To what extent do you consider there is a level of Interdisciplinarity in UTS**

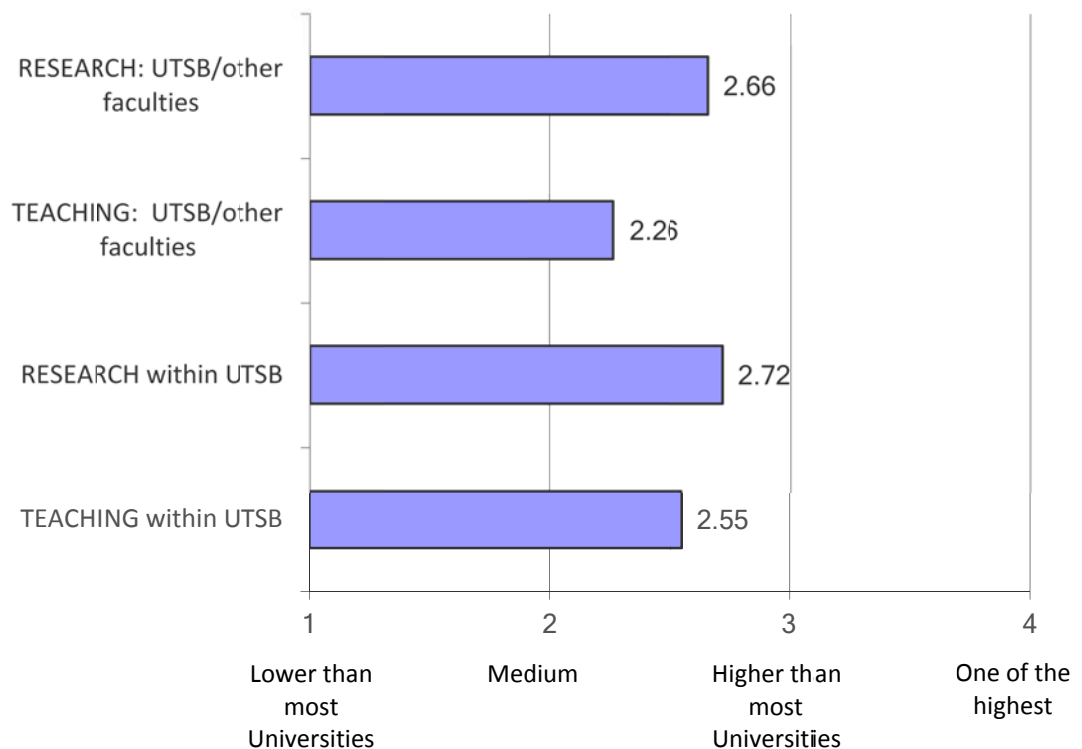
*(use your experience with other Universities as a benchmark - (all respondents, n=58)*



The fact that in general the respondents are not impressed by the level of multidisciplinary of their Business School and of its parent institution can be represented more vividly by condensing these data in a rating index, obtained by transforming each statement in a numeric value (where 1 corresponds to 'Non-existent' and 5 to 'One of the highest') and then calculating the average score (Figure 17). Both teaching and research interdisciplinarity level are judged slightly inferior to those of other institutions. It is not just a matter of distance or very different foci of interests and paradigms, since the level of interdisciplinarity within the Business School is thought to be just marginally higher than that between UTSB and other faculties. The level of interdisciplinarity is believed to be slightly higher in research activities, possibly because of the presence of a number of

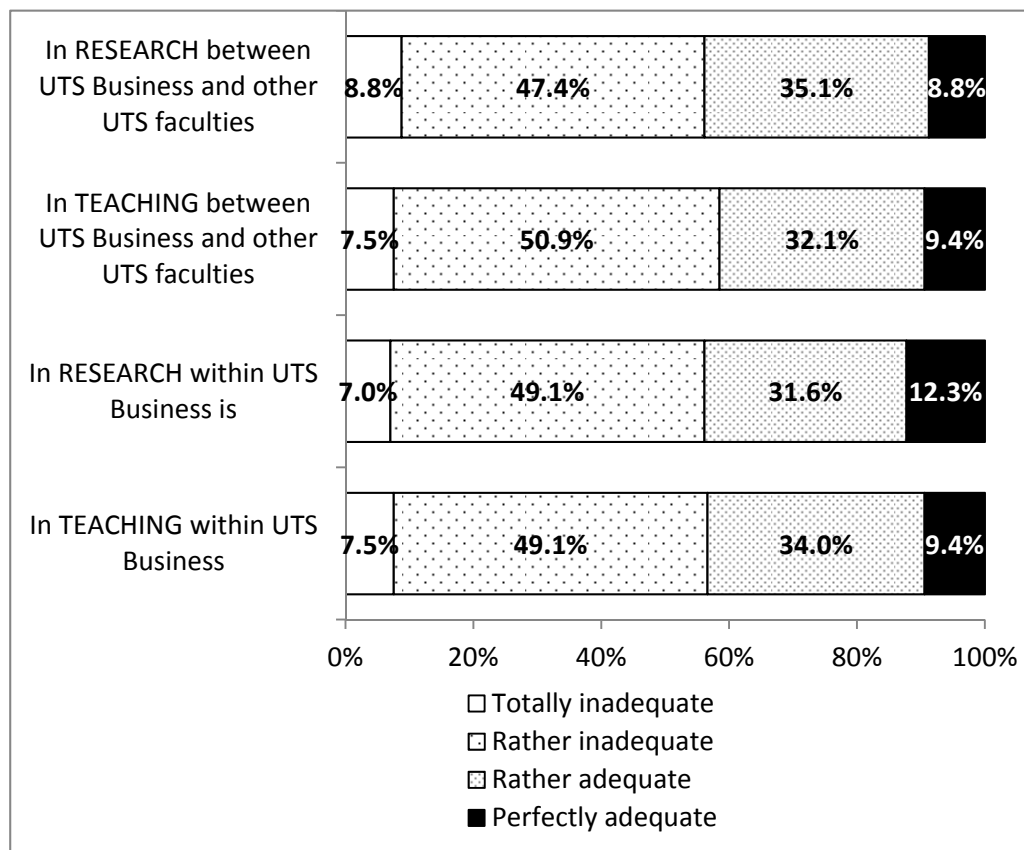
explicitly cross-disciplinary research centres already operating within UTSB, while it is considered to be low in teaching, especially in terms of inter-faculty collaboration.

**Figure 17 – Perceived level of Interdisciplinarity – rating index averages**  
(all respondents, n=58)



While this situation is a cause of concern for a portion of the academic staff faculty members, many others do not seem to be troubled by it. As responses to another question show (Figure 18) the faculties' opinions on the matter are almost equally split between those who judge the current level of interdisciplinarity inadequate (a slight majority) and those who consider this situation acceptable.

**Figure 18 – How appropriate do you think are the current levels of interdisciplinarity**  
(all respondents, n=58)



Considering how individual views on the estimated level of multidisciplinary and the adequacy of such levels are associated permits one to reveal a richer patterning of opinion, one that reflects the contrasted discourse on disciplinarity found in the literature. By cross-tabulating the answers given to the two previous questions it is possible to identify five different stances on the issue (Table 21).

The analysis indicates that the integration across disciplines is not only a ‘technical’ problem, related to removing physical obstacles to collaboration but also a cultural and political one. There is for instance a small but not insignificant number of people who are likely to oppose attempts to remove disciplinary boundaries (the ones displaying a “Who wants it?” attitude), and a much larger group content with maintaining an unremarkable



record in terms of interdisciplinary collaboration (the ones believing in the golden mean, ‘*Aurea mediocritas*’), and that are likely to resist any significant investment of resources towards a transformation of current practices.

**Table 21 – Different stances on the issue of multidisciplinary**  
(all respondents, n=55)

		Appropriateness of current levels of interdisciplinary			
		Perfectly adequate	Rather adequate	Rather inadequate	Totally inadequate
Current level of interdisciplinary	Not existent	‘WHO WANTS IT?’		“IT MUST BE FIXED!”	
	Lower than most Universities				
	Medium	“AUREA MEDIOCRITAS”			
	Higher than most Universities	“HAPPY CAMPERS”		“NEVER TOO MUCH”	
	One of the highest				

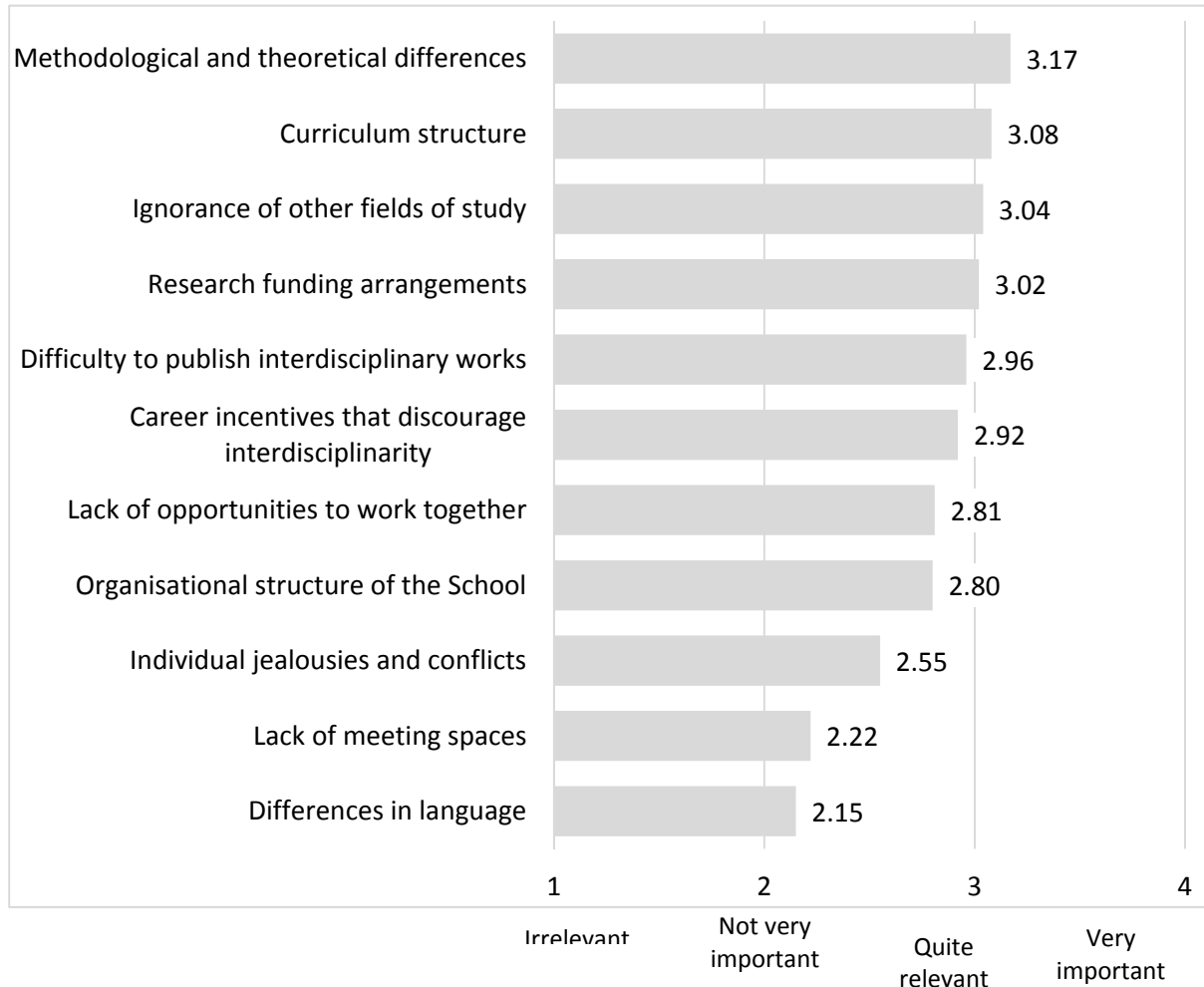
  

	TEACHING: within UTSB (n=51)	RESEARCH: within UTSB (n=55)	TEACHING: UTSB/UTS (n=51)	RESEARCH: UTSB/UTS (n=55)
“Who wants it?”	14%	9%	14%	5%
“Aurea mediocritas”	20%	24%	22%	29%
“Happy campers”	10%	13%	8%	11%
“It must be fixed”	55%	51%	55%	51%
“Never too much”	2%	4%	2%	4%

Finally, one question was aimed at collecting opinions on the factors that – in the current situation – are limiting interdisciplinary integration: respondents were asked to judge a set of possible factors inducing disciplinary separations according to a four level scale (“Irrelevant”, “Not very important”, “Quite Relevant”, “Very Important”). Results are presented in Figure 19 which summarize responses in the form of a Rating index, obtained by transforming each statement in a numeric value (where 1 corresponds to ‘Irrelevant’ and 4 to ‘Very important’) and then calculating the average score.

**Figure 19 –Factors creating a disciplinary framing within UTSB**

(all respondents, n=56)



Two significant aspects surface from these answers. First, no single element is emerging as a major acknowledged determinant of disciplinarian divisions; there are rather a number of factors that are seen as contributors. Second, almost all the factors that are regarded as the most relevant (different paradigms, ignorance of other fields, research funding and difficulty to publish) are strongly influenced by structural, institutional forces that the organization appears powerless to oppose. In fact, as shown in Chapter 6 and 7, powerful discursive and material forces (e.g. career paths, ranking systems etc.) sustain the emphasis on disciplinary, individualistic approaches. The only important aspect which seems to be manageable locally is 'Curriculum structure', even if in this case curricular choices cannot

set aside normative and coercive institutional forces, such as the requirements of regulatory bodies, professional associations and accreditation organizations.

In conclusion, it is useful to remember once more that this survey did not intend to test any hypotheses on the elements shaping academic practices or to gather representative views on factors influencing integration. Its purpose was rather to contribute to the exploration of the local discourse, mapping some of the ideological patterns, alignments of material forces and stratifications of habits that characterize the site of my observation. In order to complete and make sense of the observations gathered until this point, first by reviewing literature and rhetorical statements, then by means of the quantitative survey, it is now necessary to move one step closer to the lived reality of management academics, engaging with them on a one to one basis and ethnographically plunging into their lived experience.

## Chapter 10.

# Practical identities: looking at work practices to understand academic identities

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*We are the hollow men  
We are the stuffed men  
Leaning together  
Headpiece filled with straw. Alas!  
Our dried voices, when  
We whisper together  
Are quiet and meaningless  
As wind in dry grass  
Or rats' feet over broken glass  
In our dry cellar*

*Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion.*

T.S. Eliot, *The Hollow Men*

### What can ethnography reveal about identities?

As argued in Chapter 4, identities and practices have much in common: they both conflate the social and individual, while being conceptually and narratively situated in different loci. For this reason they complete and imply each other: professional identity is performed through practices that give it meaning and continuity, embodying it in actions (for instance a lecture) and objects (for instance a published paper). At the same time, professional identity becomes the 'mind-locus' of practice, incorporating the tacit knowledge and institutional norms that are its essential constituents. As social phenomena, they are

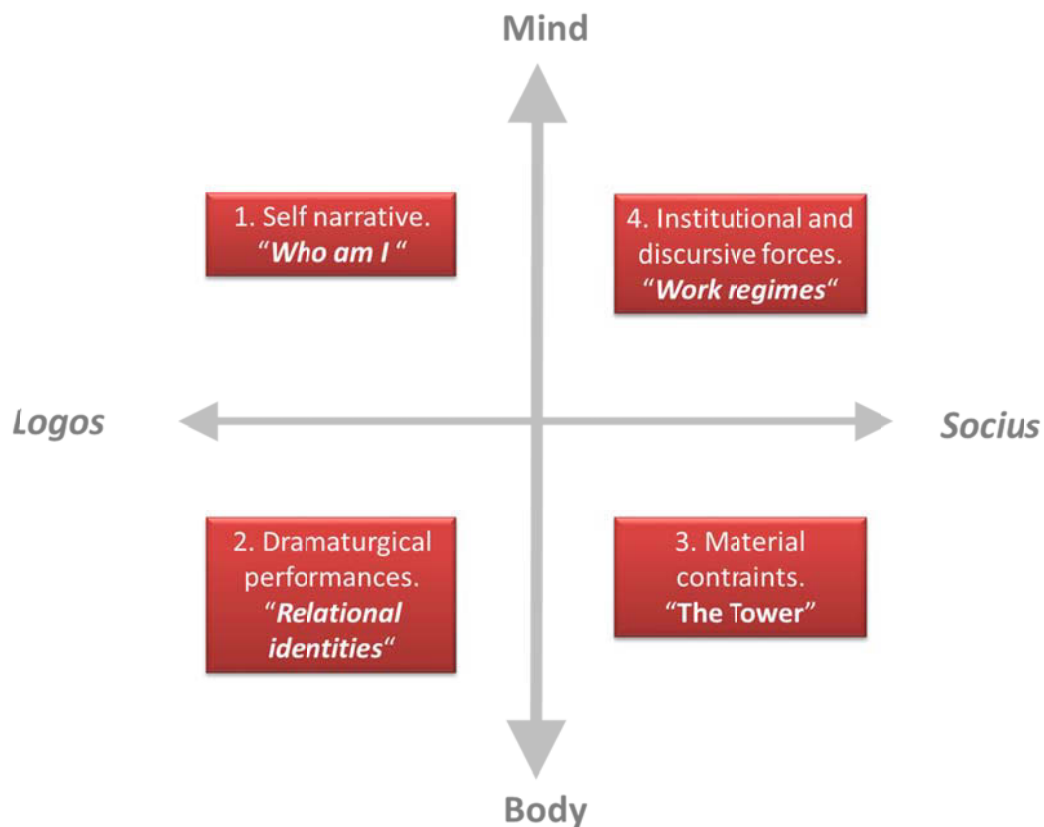
intrinsically permeated by power relationships, which they contribute to (re)producing, shaping the societal continuum as gravity is shaping space-time. Moreover I suggest that their empirical manifestations are bundled together, becoming one single *gestalt*. They can only be analytically 'disentangled' by means of a narrative that treats them as ideal-types, convenient labels to describe different aspects of a phenomenological whole.

In the previous chapters I have analysed some of the forces that are producing the academic practice-identity bundle: ideal templates, formal use of space and time, and institutionally sanctioned 'games' (publishing, ranking, accreditation etc.). This chapter completes this exploration by reporting the result of a two-year ethnographic immersion in the lived reality of a business school. This experience enabled me to investigate how concrete actions are deployed, what are the effects of formal norms and hierarchies, and how these experiences are narratively accounted for by different management academics.

The results of the observations have been organised in four 'focal areas', using the same frame of reference that was introduced above to situate the elements that combine to form identities and practices. The first focus, at the intersection between 'mind' (the practitioners' explicit knowledge and narrative reconstruction of their selves) and 'logos' (the social space of discourse and ideologies), is represented by the self-narrative constructed by the subjects to account for their career and life trajectories. The second centre of attention, situated where '*logos*' interacts with practitioners' embodied experiences and tacit knowledge ('body'), are the dramaturgical performances enacted by actors that support and intertwine with self-narrations (Down and Reveley, 2009). The third is the description of the role played, at the crossing between 'body' and the realm of interpersonal relationships ('*socius*'), by material constraints (workspaces, workloads etc.). The last focal point concentrates on the analysis of the discursive and institutional forces

that, where ‘*socius*’ meets ‘mind’, shape the imagined selves and the individual systems of meaning making. Figure 20 illustrates the four observation foci.

**Figure 20 - Ethnographic observation foci**



### **Self-narratives: ‘Who am I?’**

I start by looking at the rhetorical reconstruction of work identity produced by academics to account for themselves and make sense of their actions as a ‘self-narrative’. Since these narratives are performed in front of an audience, they require a negotiation of meaning with interacting spectators who directly influence “the coherence and legitimacy of a self-narrative” (Barbulescu & Ibarra 2010, p. 143). In the interviews I performed the role of the active spectator, providing both voluntary and involuntary cues to the informant; however,

an external, ideal typical audience was also constantly evoked, for instance by asking them to revive a chance encounter with strangers enquiring about their occupation. When asked to describe 'what do they do for a living' the interviewed academics often had to recur to stereotypical, simplified roles that were both meaningful and capable to attract social legitimization:

*I would say I am an academic and that usually is met with a blank stare... but if I say I lecture this or that people would categorise me as only a teacher. So I would immediately add that I also do research (A, Junior academic).*

Answers reveal the inherent ambiguity connected to the academic role, the paradoxical tension between what is socially acknowledged (being a teacher) which is increasingly considered a less prestigious and less rewarded (Knights & Willmott 1997; Harris 2005) side of their professional identity. In any case the projected social image is flexible, adapted to the audience:

*To some people I'd say I'm an academic, to some people I'd say I'm university lecturer, and I guess it's a bit of a scanning in terms of what you think people would understand (B, Senior academic).*

Despite this adaptive re-creation of the self, continuity and coherence are needed in order to maintain a meaningful plot that secures identity claims and rationalises behaviours (Barbulescu & Ibarra 2010). When asked to account for the life trajectory that led them to their present position, recurrent themes emerge, sometimes overlapping:

1. 'Accidental academics'. The protagonist entered Academia after a previous career stalled because of some external incident:

*The stock market crashed [...] so where I'd been getting a nice steady amount of work I wasn't, and a position came out as a tutor (C, senior academic).*

In the research context such a plot template is frequently invoked: about one third of the informants mentioned similar circumstances. While coherent with a disciplinary setting, management, that values experienced as a non-academic practitioner (one is certainly less likely to encounter an ‘accidental theoretical physicist!’), it is also indicative of the cultural milieu in which the Business School is located. In fact, in the light of the idea that the privileged self-narratives in career transitions towards more accepted social roles are those which emphasise protagonist agency (Barbulescu & Ibarra 2010, p. 142), the frequency of tales of an academic career as a fall-back option might suggest that in the Australian context being an academic is less status-rich than it is in other contexts (for instance continental Europe). However, the continuation of the tale of accidental business academic involves discovering a talent for or the pleasure of academic work:

*I was pretty successful with what I was doing [...] I was really happy in what I was doing, I had fantastic students, a very good course but the more I saw, the more I became involved (D, senior academic).*

2. ‘*It runs in the family*’. Not all academics are the result of accidents that were waiting to happen, however, for some academia is the ‘family trade’. In another frequently encountered story plot, the protagonists follow in one of their parents’ footsteps:

*I’m from a family of teachers [...] and I guess the dream in both my families was to have a university professor [...] there was this idea of being an academic as an achievement (E, senior academic).*

This account does not generally imply that the individual felt some obligation to follow into their precursors’ steps but rather that they were exposed to an environment that valued higher education. In fact, using this template denotes a stronger confidence in individual agency, which is coherent with a positive social image of the academic role.



However, as in the previous case, this identity tale reflects an external locus of control (Rotter 1966), the implicit belief that events that affect the individual are essentially shaped by external powerful forces, such as change or environment.

3. *'The vocation'*. This is the tale of the discovery of a passion, a talent for academic work (sometimes for research, other times for teaching):

*The thing I was most interested into was knowledge [...] all I did when I was younger was connected to excavating the social world* (F, junior academic).

In this plot all the emphasis is on agency: the protagonist felt a mission, a desire to engage with intellectual and educational challenges.

4. *'The utilitarian'*: being an academic is a convenient occupation in a story narrated by individuals comfortable in a role of their choosing but not necessarily considering this an intellectual mission to educate or discover:

*I decided I'd come back to do my PhD, hopefully to become an academic so that I could do what I love in a way that I could still sustain my family* (G, junior academic).

In this perspective academia seems like 'just another job', with its perks and drawbacks. It is also an occupation which incorporates elements of *distinction* (Callon 1998):

*The prospect of becoming a university academic looked like a really good thing, (...), it looked like social mobility, it looked like progress, it looked like a career* (L, senior academic).

5. *'The activist'*: the emphasis is on the moral mission as an intellectual who wants to use the opportunities and the social legitimization provided by the role to 'make a difference'

in society. This is not a ‘standalone’ plot but one that in the interviews emerged as intertwined with others:

*I feel that [my job is] socially useful [...] if it can contribute to some discussion at a policy level, some discussion at a stakeholder level (G, junior academic).*

As the common source of the two previous quotes demonstrates, narrative themes sometimes overlap in the informants’ stories. For instance, one ‘accidental academic’ finds a ‘vocation’ and engages with topics with an ‘activist’ intent; in another case a vocation is reinforced by a family heritage. A common feature is that those who used templates characterized by an ‘external locus of control’ orientation typically included in their biographical descriptions supplementary themes emphasizing agency, as if they were trying to retake control of their life-choices. Another interesting aspect is the fact that these clearly distinct ideal trajectories emerge from a relatively small number of informants, which demonstrates how varied is the discursive repertoire that can be used by academics to perform self-narrative identity work. Tab.22 summarizes the frequency of the appearance of different templates in individual narratives.

**Table 22 - Frequency of typical academic ‘life trajectories’**

		Informant														
		A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	#
Theme	Vocation	X	X		X	X	X		X		X	X	X		X	10
	Family				X	X					X	X				4
	Utilitarian							X	X				X	X		4
	Activist			X			X	X		X					X	5
	Accidental		X	X	X					X	X					5

## **Behaviours: relational identities and ‘ethological’ observations**

These descriptions of the ‘professional selves’ were gathered in an artificial setting, that of the interview. In a more ‘natural’ context, self-narration often intertwines with dramaturgical performances (Down & Reveley 2009). My ‘observant participation’ (Moeran 2009) of 35 research workshops organized by one of the Business School’s interdisciplinary research centres, provided a rich source of observation on some recurrent forms of identity-asserting performances. In this context the interaction between individuals averring their desired selves produces frictions and power relations that stirs emotions and generates power episodes.

The observation of these interpersonal exchanges allows one to investigate a third level, in addition to the personal and the collective, where identity work is enacted (Brewer & Gardner 1996). Encounters contribute to shaping the self in a relational identification process comprising both role based (institutionally sanctioned) and person-based (the individual’s character or temperament) elements (Sluss & Ashforth 2007). Rhetorical routines staged by actors in one-to-one and small group interactions have both a performative (the capacity to achieve goals) dimension and an ostensive one (Feldman & Pentland 2003). The latter refers to their capacity to ‘project’ the selves of the individuals who are enacting them, allowing them to be regarded by others according to the claims being posited (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003).

I choose to use, with a dose of irony, an ‘ethological perspective’ to illustrate emerging behaviours<sup>29</sup>:

- ‘*Displaying plumage*’: mastery and seniority are exhibited by flaunting accomplishments (publications and citations being the main currency), relational capital, or intellectual assets. Strong moves in this ritual are played by senior academics that play a ‘trump’ card by citing their published research on the discussion topic; an alternative strategy is to refer to relationships with authorities in the field. Junior academics also take part in this ritualistic display, demonstrating their command of relevant literature or referring to their own research or ‘industry’ experience
- ‘*Nit-picking*’: when a manuscript is scrutinized in a public forum, feedback typically starts with a polite, constructive, tone; yet, this usually precedes a critical turn (‘nice work ... But ...’). The default approach involves sifting contents in search of possible weak points and defects. This practice has obvious methodological justifications, since it helps produce more rigorous works that can weather the strict peer review process required for academic publication. When the content of a work is very distant from the expertise or research interest of some participants, they can always take part in this social practice by resorting to generic resources, for instance raising methodological issues. The nit-picking ritual can assume two distinct forms, depending on the salience and robustness of the role-relationship. On the one hand it can be negotiated as a form of ‘social grooming’ (‘I will help you building a stronger argument by playing the devil’s advocate’). This cooperative form marks the existence of group affiliation or of an established mentoring relationship, where the reciprocal identities are mutually acknowledged and self-reinforcing. In other circumstances it becomes a way to

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<sup>29</sup> This zoological metaphor means no disrespect; it is simply intended to highlight the embodied, pre-reflexive form that these behaviours often assume.

discipline or to assert contested identity relationship, establishing or defending a position in the ranking. The judgment in this case is passed in dismissive terms assuming the form of a disqualifying act (Watzlawick et al. 1967, pp. 75-6).

- *'Locking antlers'*: this behaviour is encountered when reciprocal identities are contested, for instance in the case of academics belonging to different disciplines, with different methodological inclinations ('quals' versus 'quants'), team affiliations, institutional roles ('intellectuals' versus 'executives'). Debates on theoretical points become episodes of explicit conflict, manifested by reacting with sarcasm or contempt to ideas and proposals presented by the 'other'. These bouts of aggression appear fuelled by person-based elements, such as personal antipathies, and can leave scars in the combatants. All these strategies assume a strong power connotation: displaying strength or highlighting weaknesses in the other becomes a way to pull rank, assert one's position as 'alpha', 'beta', or at least avoiding becoming the 'omega'.

Relational struggles are not the only outcome of these performances, which can also have generative effects, constituting forms of institutional work (Lawrence & Suddaby 2006) that reinforce both common practices and social identities. Since role modelling constitutes an essential element in the transformation of professional identities (Ibarra 1999), the academic performances can be instrumental in signalling to neophytes those behaviours that will help them to be competitive in the academic 'game', becoming resilient to critiques, capable of building more robust arguments, formulating more focused research questions. On the other hand this disciplining of the minds becomes a vehicle of normative isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell 1983) and can produce a formulaic, standardized and scarcely relevant research output (Alvesson & Gabriel 2013). A paradox arises: the constant critical scrutiny to which every academic performance is subject is aimed at improving the

quality of the output but it can also induce a defensive and extra-cautious individual stance, which can stifle the creativity, innovativeness and relevance of the research outcome.

As the ethological terminology that I employed suggests, many of these individual manifestation of spontaneity appear to have the character of pre-reflexive *behaviours*, “*mere doing*” rather than premeditated and goal-oriented *actions* (Schütz 1945, p. 536). Yet they appear to contribute, together with structural conditions, such as the number of people in the organizational unit or the form of the workspace, as well as with elements of agency (for instance leadership’s choices) to produce consistent work contexts that can have strong impact on individual attitudes and work climate. In fact, talking to management academics that come from the two different sites (the urban and the ‘rural’ campus), the evidence of two different internal ‘subcultures’ clearly emerges:

*It's so lovely to come to an environment where people smile and say 'G'day' and get on and try to help you as opposed to what happens down [here] where people really try to make it hard for you as they possibly can and don't try to help you* (B, Senior academic).

As often happens, these two different worlds sometimes scowl at each other, seemingly reproducing the contrast between an urban, cosmopolitan, detached *Gesellschaft* and a traditional, close-knit and community focused *Gemeinschaft* (Orlikowski 2007):

*People don't seem to like each other ... It's very different ways of operating ... [as] an academic I would not frame myself as an industry sector. I don't think it's viable* (A, Junior academic).

*I don't think there's been enough love [here in the City] (...) people want to be liked, they want to be respected, they want to know what they are doing matters on the whole* (H, Junior academic).

While the emergence of different subcultures in organizations is a well-known physiological consequence of differentiation and task specialization (van Maanen & Barley 1985; Sackmann 1992), the presence of tensions and conflict is recorded even within each group:

*People are so doctrinaire and so ideologically driven, to the point that is almost hypocritical ... they will champion the idea of a pluralist view of the world, so long that it conforms to theirs (I, Junior academic).*

This is frequently attributed to a personality trait that, many seem to believe, is often present in academics, egocentrism:

*To be an academic (or a certain type of academic) you've got to be very selfish so the level of selfishness is breathtaking. They will justify it but for an observer, (...) this is sheer self-indulgence (D, Senior academic).*

*A lot of academics are very precious, kind of individualist, ego, you know ego is always a part of what people do in any workplace (J, Junior academic).*

Nevertheless, individual inclinations become predominant when left without checks and balances, or even because of self-fulfilling prophecies:

*I was in a Faculty of Science (...) I didn't feel that sense of sort of emotionality (...) maybe it refers more to the fact that the way science is conducted, the material constraints (...) it, it's more a matter of fact way of having to collect your data, much more connection to technology, there's always sort of constraints that sort of limit the personal interaction I certainly noticed as a less ego driven approach and a less emotional approach, those sort of things could easily have been connected, (...) I think it's there and maybe in a business faculty and a school of management people might be more aware of issues of exploitation, issues of sort of power and they're more aware and so they look for it and they react to it (K, senior academic).*

What various informants advocate in fact is the importance, in a similar context, of soft management skills to produce an effective collaboration and a productive work environment:

*We stroke each other, we support each other, we tell each other how we appreciate each other, how we respect their work, how we've done a good job (H, junior academic).*

*We used to come together and still do. We get together for drinks every month or every six weeks, we celebrated people's successes, if someone you know had got a paper published or book published it was celebrated (B, senior academic).*

Focusing only on differences in values and cultures risk underplaying the relevance of the practical and political elements that are often causing frictions between groups. Sometimes resistances and oppositions originate from the desire to protect the symbolic and material resources that have been arduously accumulated through a long career:

*We've been working on that for 20 odd years, publishing and teaching and building our reputations and working in professional associations (...) I think it's more protecting your domain of expertise and identity. I mean a big issue is, people have developed their identity as a [subject] expert and all of the sudden they are asked to be a strategy lecturer (...) people will say I don't have that expertise and I'm not interested in that (B, senior academic).*

This implies that 'tribalism' does not simply derive from ignoring the blessing of a connected, integrated academia but from the fact that sometimes identity, sense of self-efficacy, resources, and professional worth are often connected, for genealogic reasons, to a specific disciplinary sphere. 'Integration' is a deceitful term because it suggests a biological marriage where the offspring of the union will seamlessly incorporate the genetic characters of the two parent organisms. Most 'mergers' become, in the perspective of the weaker partner, acquisitions. The brave new 'integrative' life-world has rules that will



advantage some actors' expertise and skills while disparaging others'. In the case of the observed unit there is one element of symmetry, though. On the one hand the 'merged' discipline group has finalities and ambitions which give a head start to more theory-driven and internationally well-connected 'City people'; on the other hand the 'Ku-ring-gai people' can bring to the table their demonstrated capacity to create a cohesive team with strong industry connections, the types of work ethos required by the vision of the new Business School.

The integration of differently endowed sub-communities cannot be achieved by decree but requires a great deal of coaxing and cajoling:

*The first lever is your personality and your experience because you have very little besides that (...) so there's a lot of relationship management. A great deal is about emotional intelligence (D, senior academic).*

In point of fact, the difficult journey of the MDG towards the consolidation of different sub-cultures into a well-knit community may represent a dress rehearsal for the big push forward towards a truly integrated business school. This experience emphasizes that, to facilitate a successful 'marriage' between a 'well assorted' set of organizational units, it is necessary to contemplate the impact of cultural, political, material and emotional factors on organizational members who operate in a context that characteristics of multi-localization, role fluidity and multiple accountabilities identify as post-bureaucratic (Mayer-Schönberger 2009). However, the institution in which these actors are embedded still seems to think in terms of regulatory 'iron cages'. Instead of employing sophisticated (even if not irreprehensible) techniques of 'emotion management' (Hochschild 1983; Baumeler 2010; Sieben & Wettergren 2010), both the Business School and its parent organization rely, on a day-to-day basis, on the much cruder forces of bureaucracy.

## In the shadow of “The Tower”: viscous bureaucracy

In the context of the observed group of academics, ‘the Tower’ is the metaphor that usually embodies the identity of the oppressor:

*You can put in requests... sometimes you end up in a far, far room down in the depths of the Tower (J, junior academic).*

*UTS [...] it's a totally centralised and bureaucratised university and the thing is that this Tower [...] really identifies the place (F, junior academic).*

The sobriquet of “The Tower” signifies the controversial piece of brutalist, modernist architecture, acknowledged by many as Sydney’s ugliest building (Stein 2013), which houses the central administrative offices of the university. The Tower is usually cited as a Kafkaesque entity, similar to the “Castle” (Kafka 1947), as the source of the bureaucratic apparatus that controls academics’ activities, with complaints about the excess of regulation being frequent:

*The level of bureaucracy is just insane... it's ridiculous (...) it's something I couldn't image (E, senior academic).*

March et al. (2000, p. 162) noted that the collection of written rules found in organisations “is a cumulated residue left by a history of problem solving and responding to pressures on the organization”. In fact, despite a relatively recent incorporation, UTS is an institution that has developed from and through successive mergers of pre-existing educational organisations (Salt, Ashton & Adelaide 2013), in the context of growing student numbers and increasing governmental requests for accountability (Neumann & Guthrie 2002). Administrators have to cope with a myriad of political and practical issues to which their response has been to produce formal norms. However, despite the centralizing regulatory blanket, the Business School workplace hardly resembles the ideal typical bureaucratic ‘iron

cage' (Weber 1922/1978). First, it is difficult for neophytes to know how to comply with the plethora of regulation, both because of the deficiency of knowledge management systems and the (paradoxical) absence of a formalised induction procedure.

*It's very bureaucratic but you don't know exactly what happens because you have no information* (E, senior academic).

The knowledge issue is not central though. Sociological analysis has demonstrated that excessive reliance on formal rules can produce a "displacement of goals, whereby an instrumental value becomes a terminal value" (Merton 1968b, p. 250) and by trying to suppress uncertainty can paradoxically engender parallel power structures (Crozier 1964). While rules enforcement depends on the capacity of the management in sanctioning non-compliance, senior academics sometimes openly display defiance.

*What can they do to me? Fire me? I got tenure!* (O, Senior academic, during a meeting).

Even junior members know that they can get away with a superficial level of compliance:

*A few weeks ago there was an email circulating in the business school about changing the layout of our signature in our emails. I didn't spend much time in reading the email, in taking it seriously: I just made a few changes copying from another colleague's e-mail address, and that was it for me* (F, junior academic).

In fact, those in managerial positions lament the existence of toothless management control systems: "this system is almost designed for you not to have any levers", laments one of the school executives). Reflecting the typology proposed by Gouldner (1955), most formal norms are either perceived as 'mock' and are ignored both by academics and management. In other cases norms are 'punishment-centred', becoming an area of active struggle.

*They are following inappropriate rules and applying them inappropriately and this is the managerialist underlying agenda, it's just sort of 'squeeze more efficiency', which just means more work out of everybody (M, junior academic).*

In particular the allocation of financial rewards (in the guise of research funds, travel allowances and salary supplementation) can play an important role in disciplining behaviours. Even if academics do not seem motivated by extrinsic, monetary incentives, they are not completely impassive to them, especially when these are seen as instrumental to research outcomes, indirectly leveraging on their intrinsic motivations

*Where there is [managerial] leverage is supplementation... and I still don't know how it works and nobody knows how it works, we don't know the criteria, there are no KPIs and they decide that you are worth 10 or 20% worth or more (E, senior academic).*

Another form of disciplinary control is performed by means of students evaluations, which are used to monitor educational performances, often producing tensions because of the intrinsically ambiguous role of students that, in the business education industry, can be seen either as pupils or as customers (Pfeffer & Fong 2004; Iñiguez de Onzoño 2011):

*The broader systems always back the students and treat the students like customers so that unfolds on to the coordinator, to the Head of School to hold the ground for the Faculty, to support the Faculty (A, junior academic).*

Students' feedback becomes a disciplinary technology to control and normalise academic behaviour, perfectly mirroring the role of assessments in disciplining students and regulating their performances. A similar dual disciplinary role aimed

both at students and faculty is represented by teaching policies and unit outline templates, which are becoming more similar to legal contracts than to instructional guides.

Conversely, 'representative' rules (Gouldner 1955) scarcely contribute to the formation of academic identities. Rather, the limits of the control systems combined with agents' active interpretations of the norms produce a 'liquefaction' of the bureaucracy (Clegg & Baumeler 2010) in which norms become factors of 'viscosity', a gelatinous medium that can be waded through by powerful actors while impeding less influential or experienced members.

*I suspect the most effective academics are those who have somewhat managed to subvert the system. So whether that's that you're just really good at making sure you tick off what you need to tick off and you do whatever you want. Or you just completely ignore them because you have got enough power to do that (G, junior academic).*

The image of academics struggling with a bureaucratic quagmire is suggestive but fails accurately to capture all the strategies that are employed by individuals to cope with contradictory demands. These are imposed on the one hand by research and teaching practices calling for adaptability and flexibility and, on the other hand, by an organization which imposes accountability and efficiency-bearing standardization. "Teaching is far too fluid!" laments one of my informers "and they are constantly trying to pin it down". In fact, what appears to be the primary strategy (or at least the most frequently referred to in the interviews) employed by academics is ritual compliance, symbolized by the metaphor of 'ticking off boxes'. In other words, while sometimes staff members use their might to push their way through the gooey university formalities and other times suffer because of their

being stuck in the mud, in most occasions they will invest their energies to demonstrate a purely formal observance of administrative requirements. Such a passive resistance approach enables individual actors to avoid being hassled because considered non-compliant or being regarded as underachievers for not having met the desired targets in terms of customers' satisfaction or formally measured productivity.

Nevertheless, this widespread form of "ceremonial adequacy" (Veblen 1898, p. 382) begets serious dangers. First it generates a curtain of smoke and mirrors that obstruct university management's view on the day-to-day reality of the university 'shop-floor', so that problems and issues that require high-level decisions are only perceived when they snowball out of control. Second, individual energies are expended not for the purpose of achieving tangible results but to 'perform a performativity performance' which is self-referential and unproductive:

*The more successful you are, the more time you have to spend to demonstrate you're successful* (L, senior academic).

Third, the widespread idea that there is disconnection between 'what needs to be done' and 'what needs to appear' needlessly increases the 'looseness' of the system's coupling, making the collective behaviour of academics more difficult to coordinate and direct. A bureaucratic vicious circle is generated (Crozier 1964): the presence of rigid regulations induces actors to devise strategies aimed at preserving their freedom of action; they do so by exploiting their discretionary power and by leveraging ambiguity. The reaction of top management is to enforce more rules in order to restrict autonomy, and so forth. Finally, and most importantly, this focus on formal metrics and checks supports and drives a global system that privileges appearance over substance, self-aggrandizement over expertise, espoused ideals over lived virtues (Alvesson 2013). These 'hollow' practices are coherent

with a powerful discourse which rationalizes education as an “an individual investment in a person’s own human capital rather than an expenditure by society for the collective good” (Ward 2014), which drives a shallow and ‘efficiency-driven’ approach to learning, one that induces both the proliferation of rules and their transgression, in which everyone’s energies are devoted to solve bureaucratically-imposed numeric puzzles based on the common problem of getting the maximum number of ‘credits’ with the minimal expenditure of energy (Kühl 2014). Students, teachers, researchers, administrators, all engaged in this puzzle solving activity, risk becoming hollow figures, shapes without form, gestures without motion.

The use of workspace as a tool of moral suasion to induce individuals to embrace the new ethos promoted by the organizational leadership is – in this bureaucratic edifice – only a possibility. Such a prospect is usually considered with a degree of scepticism, because the lived reality is one where space is often seen as a constraint, rather than an opportunity.

### **Inside the Tower: in a busy workplace some academics are more equal than others**

The disciplinary power of the ‘Tower’ is not only expressed by means of its human retainers. Another powerful source of influence derives from workload allocation. In particular teaching workloads are directly affected by managerial choices, both by allocating tasks and by regulating access to courses. The corporate drive towards maximisation of net benefits is commonly viewed as a powerful determinant of the quantity and the ‘quality’ (in terms of academic background, command of English, motivation) of the enrolled students. Nonetheless the situation should not be simplistically represented as a struggle between greedy administrators intent on putting more ‘bums on seats’ and heroic teachers that are

defending the fort of knowledge, as some partisan rhetoric suggests. The prestige and success of a business school depends on its capacity to supply its customers with intellectual, symbolic and social capital (Vaara & Faÿ 2011) and by lowering entry and/or exit selection criteria they risk devaluing their offer. Still, any employer will try to extract as much productivity as possible from its employees, and the business school is perceived as a demanding boss:

*When I taught a first year subject here I had 1500 students in the 'big' semester (J, junior academic).*

*There's too much of it, it's big numbers, it's like a factory mentality here (A, junior academic).*

The issue of efficiency in delivery also assumes a primary importance:

*Something that we're trying to do is to shut down a lot of our subjects. We've got too many subjects for the number of people that we have (J, junior academic).*

The emphasis on productivity, efficiency and large numbers comes with a price for the educators. The large numbers hinder the creation (at least at undergraduate level) of any sort of teacher-learner relationship:

*The numbers are so large, so many, I don't really feel I have an opportunity to build a relationship with the students (...) you can only generalise to the 1400 people so you try to use metaphors that you assume will be relevant to that age or demographic (N, junior academic).*

As a consequence students appear more and more like a faceless mass and this degradation of social bonding increases the likelihood of 'antisocial' behaviours:



*It's gone completely out of control with the way, the attitude, of the students. You can see in their attitude the level of disrespect towards faculty (A, junior academic).*

The uneasy relationship with students probably plays a role in determining the limited allure of teaching, a finding that emerged from the responses to the quantitative survey described in the previous chapter. Despite this, taught subjects sometime become constituent element of academic identities. Any 'external' attempts at modifying or suppressing them is met with resistance and can cause enduring tensions. The discourse of commodified business education (Willmott 1995; Trank & Rynes 2003) is clearly at odds with the fact that it is neither possible (nor desirable) to achieve a detachment between lecturer and subject:

*It's very hard to divorce teaching from the individual and their passions and their personalities (...) so your values, your passions, your stories as a person, your prior experiences they all come through (J, junior academic).*

On the other hand research work is for the most part autonomously determined by individual academics. The (largely informal) research performance metrics only affect members indirectly and in the long run, by determining career progression opportunities: as one academic with managerial responsibility remarks "they work hard by choice, nobody compels them". However, as the survey data have shown, everyone appears very busy: the Business School does not appear to be a workplace where 'slackers' can have an easy life:

*I've seen some whose ambitions have been thwarted and maybe a few, not too many, that once they are cruising... if that's possible, I don't think you can cruise for long, but they are under pressure and if they are not performing they are managed down so they know that. I mean the days when you were protected because you were an academic are way, way past, so in my experience I've seen lecturers, senior lecturers, squeezed and walked, exploited and left (I, junior academic).*

While cumulative workloads appear to be evenly distributed, the way in which time is apportioned depends on whether the allocated tasks permit individuals to invest enough time in research work:

*I'm so much engrossed in what I'm doing (marking) that I don't have time to do the other things (...) I do worry about my own research output, my publications.*  
(N, junior academic).

Technology is of little help, since, as one of the survey respondents laments:

*New technologies aimed to 'streamline' administration put the responsibility for record keeping back on the academics themselves therefore adding to the complexity of the workload* (junior academic, management discipline group, survey open response).

In sum, teaching workload pressures, the weakening of the teacher-pupil relationship, together with the awareness that research outputs are a determining factor for career advancement, make the relationship between teaching and research tasks difficult, a concept already revealed by previous studies (Robertson & Bond 2001).

When considered in an identity definition perspective, however, this tension reveals all its salience. Research is usually seen by the informants as identity reinforcing activity, bringing prestige and being characterised by feeling of self-efficacy and control; conversely teaching, while still considered by some as pivotal to their self-image is increasingly associated, because of high workloads and limited cachet, with an image of subordination and common labour. Finally administrative skills are necessary to perform the role, even if this part of the job is often regarded as a 'necessary evil', which brings little value and meaning to their self-image. As a consequence three ideal typical professional identities emerge and need to be incorporated in the practice of each of the informants: the 'entrepreneur' researcher, the

'labourer' teacher, and the 'manager' administrator. The different perspectives and feelings associated with each of these clearly feature in their speech:

*I feel like I'm running my own little business (A, junior academic).*

*I feel it's more like an education factory, it's like an assembly line (...) the numbers are so large, so many I don't really feel I have an opportunity to build a relationship with the students (A, junior academic).*

*You have to kind of build your portfolio almost managing a portfolio of activities (C, senior academic).*

*You're trying to manage within the budget, you're trying to align the research and the teaching, you're trying to integrate very diverse cultures (M, senior academic).*

As seen in the previous chapter, any academic has to execute a multiplicity of teaching, researching and administration tasks; obviously each type of practice will require a different attitude and a different set of resources to be mastered. However, what emerge from the words of the interviewees is that, while all academics have to be eclectic, multitasking professionals, the unequal distribution of rewards and stakes produces fragmented and conflicted identities, since some of these professional selves are less prestigious or powerful than others. As a consequence the different academic 'identities' are not equal, as suggested by the different social status implicit in the labels that I employed (labourer, manager, entrepreneur).

To complicate things, this hierarchy of identities is not linear: while teaching appears to be, in the contemporary setting, a weaker source of recompenses, both being a successful researcher-entrepreneur or an effective manager-administrator are potentially rewarding. Mastering each of the three practices necessitate a long-term investment, involving the accumulation of a relevant intellectual, symbolic and social capital. However an institution

that demands short term results in all field of practice, however, induces its members to cut some corners: phenomena like the use of 'box-ticking' tactics demonstrate that actors who have to focus their energies on the development of one set of skills and resources will try to camouflage their limited proficiency in other fields of action by adopting a ritually compliant praxis. This will also engender a situation where the privileged identity will supplement the others that will often be considered disparagingly.

## **The Tower and the Maze: disciplinary workspaces**

The use of workspace as a tool of moral suasion to induce individuals to embrace the new ethos promoted by the organizational leadership is – for the moment – only a possibility. Such a prospect is usually considered with a degree of scepticism, because the lived reality is one where space is often seen as a constraint, rather than an opportunity.

*We work in this labyrinth (...) everyone gets lost, including our visitors and the dean is locked away in a bunker (UTSB Dean, June 2011).*

Organizations can exercise control over practices by designing and allocating workspaces: a rationally constructed space is “intimately tied to relations of production and to the ‘order’ those relations impose” (Lefebvre 1991, p. 33). In fact, as discussed in Chapter 8, the construction of a new building to host the business school features prominently in local discourse, where the move to the new premises is given both an ostensive and performative justification (Feldman & Pentland 2003). It is a way to signal the business school’s brand and presence in the international business education market, on the other hand it is a strategy aimed at affecting internal practices. In the words of the Dean it is evident the intent is to create “tableaux vivants, which transform the confused, useless or dangerous multitudes into ordered multiplicities” (Foucault 1979, p. 148):

*The original idea was to create a new kind of business school, one which had a stronger emphasis on interdisciplinary thought, on creativity, on so called boundary crossing skills (UTSB Dean, March 2013).*

As noted by Lancione & Clegg (2013), the local discourse has incorporated two “repertoires of change” one projecting the idealized image of a future in which the business school has achieved international recognition as a centre for innovation, the other linking to involving the powerful external narrative advocating for a reform of business education by means of design thinking and integrative thinking. The voices that I collected reflect this, while displaying different gradations of hope and enthusiasm:

*I think that the Gehry building is one of those projects where you can have a big public achievement made that isn't necessarily frustrated by internal politics. (J, junior academic).*

*I love building spaces and places that create opportunities for people to interact. (...) I'm sure the building is going to be first rate and so I'm quite excited, you know, about an opportunity to move into a building that could be iconic. (C, senior academic)*

*Well, I'm waiting to see what is going to happen (...) we are all going to be pinned into small rooms (...) I think we're about to have a building, a Business School, that is going to have like a moat around it and the draw bridge will come down and only certain people will be allowed in: that's my biggest fear (I, junior academic).*

One does not have to wait for the new building to be completed to discern how the disposition of bodies in the working space has both intended and unintended consequences. The building that currently houses the School is believed to affect social interaction negatively.

*You can't see from one end to the other and no one knows where to find anyone (UTSB Dean, June 2011).*

The grittily urban design of the City Campus stands in stark contrast to the topology of the other site, the 'rural' campus:

*It was only a short walk to see anyone from the VC to the print room, everybody was there. So in that sense there's definitely a community that is shaped by its geography. (C, senior academic).*

The current city headquarter effectively function as an 'anopticon'<sup>30</sup>, or the opposite of a panopticon, that is a space where individuals, especially early career researchers, struggle to be noticed or be able to develop useful social capital and generate new ideas through exchanges. Formal meetings and events are occasions that attempt to fill this gap but they hardly offer the same creative opportunity that serendipitous encounters enable. As noted by Merton & Barber (2004, pp. 199-218), the way in which serendipity is allowed or constrained in organised scientific research has to do with the expectations and accountability models that research administrators have of individual scientists. In this regard the new building projects a research ethos that apparently encourages freedom of exploration through informal collaborative efforts.

Living in an opaque space is not without its blessings:

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<sup>30</sup> The idea of the anopticon is not entirely original, since it was used by Umberto Eco to address the issue of 'who controls the controller' (Eco 1992).. He imagined a jail in which the object of surveillance and punishment is the gaoler: all inmates or visitors can see the warden but s/he cannot see them. This idea has even found a practical embodiment in an Italian grassroots project aimed at mapping the presence of video-controlling devices in public spaces (Hanay Raja 2009). While I feel intrigued by the concept, in my conceptualization the anopticon is a system that controls and disciplines by instilling in its subjects the concern that their exertions might not be noted, producing an anxious self-surveillance, a multiplication of the efforts and a constant struggle to achieve visibility by 'making-out' colleagues (Burawoy 1979)

*It's also good to make yourself invisible because it's also good to work at home to have that pressure free time that you can actually do some research and writing* (K, senior academic).

The new building design, while acknowledging the need for individual working spaces (“we know academics need an office as a thinking space” says UTSB Dean), aims at flushing them into the open. In this regards the organisation of spaces in the new building will act a paradoxical injunction (Bateson 1972) since it intends to stimulate serendipitous free thinking by limiting current freedom ‘excesses’:

*If you are in a glass walled building you realise that nobody is ever there”* (E, senior academic).

In this regard it is not unlikely that the ‘transparent’ design of the new building will surface some tensions between managerial expectations (“I want you to be here, not because it’s a power trip but because I want you to change ideas” pleads a School executive) and the actual practices of the faculty:

*I still do most of my best work home* (G, junior academic).

*I do most of my research now at home, from my home office where it's quieter, you don't have the interruptions there* (A, junior academic).

At the same time there is some hope that a differently designed workspace will act to rekindle the desire to physically inhabit the workplace. In fact, when asked about the Gehry building, the same informant lightens up:

*Being in one space, everything fresh and new, I think it opens up scope for trying new things as well and I just like the way it's going* (A, junior academic).

The apparent contradiction (‘I don’t like coming to the office but I love the idea of a new office’) is not a sign of an unresolved or split personality but represents a widespread feeling

of ambivalence about the Gehry building. On the one hand its symbolic value is well understood and appreciated, on the other there is much scepticism about the capacity of purely 'architecture driven transformation' to have traction:

*I think I understand the logic of the Gehry building. (...) Will it overcome silos? No. Will it help overcome silos? Yes. What's the difference? It will take courage, you will have to be prepared to be unpopular (D, senior academic)*

*The way the reward system works is very individualistic (...) leadership is important. (...) it'll be good to hear about some of those things not just about the building, we've heard a lot about the building, but what are those things that are going to enliven our culture going forward (C, senior academic)*

*I'm not really that excited about the new building (...) I'm sure it'll be nice (...) I don't anticipate it will make huge difference to how I feel about being at work (G, junior academic)*

*Nearly everybody is just as much a rugged individualist as I am and they're all immersed in their own sort of intellectual identity and I think it's very hard to get people to negotiate or to compromise those away (L, senior academic).*

The outcomes might be uncertain but the material coming into being of the building is likely to determine a spatial-temporal Rubicon, a rhetorical divide that marks the rift between past and future, forcing change by means of a powerful wave of expectations:

*We are going to be moving in to this building in 2014, students and the public are going to have expectations of pretty innovative programs, we'd better have our act together in terms of how we fit in and reflect these kind of values (J, junior academic).*

The question is, however, whether this force will be sufficient to counterbalance the pressures coming from the institutional field in which academics are embedded.



## Work regimes: the impact of practices and production technologies

My narration has progressively diverged from the agency of protagonists towards the observation of the identity regulation effects played by structural arrangements; these include both institutionalised professional practices and the use of specific technologies to produce academic knowledge. As described in Chapters 6 and 7, New Public Management inspired reforms of academia, together with the increased emphasis on ranking and accreditations of business schools, has increased the pressure to publish, emphasizing the salience of identity academic templates based on the idea of ‘authorship’ at the expense of traditional ‘educational’ roles. As a consequence, academics are both disciplined and motivated by the ‘publishing game’, in which they try to ‘make out’ colleagues, not dissimilarly to shop floor blue-collar workers (Burawoy 1979).

*People say “Are you doing research?” but they mean “Have you published recently?” (M, junior academic)*

Again it is possible to note the emergence of the disciplinary effects of the ‘anopticon’: academics compete to achieve visibility, struggling both to obtain one of the limited spaces offered by the better ranked publishing outlets and to be acknowledged in colleagues’ work, boosting one’s citation index.

Winning the contest requires developing strategies to cope with the practical idiosyncrasies (described above, in Chapter 7) of the hyper-competitive and sometimes unfair editorial review system. Most of these stratagems revolve around the accumulation of social and symbolic capital which allows individual academics to become a node in multiple production networks, taking part at the same time in multiple research enterprises and churning out numerous works, in a perfect application of the ‘Matthew effect’ (or cumulated advantage

that makes it easier for famous researchers to receive more credit) described by Merton (1968a; 1995). Moreover, because of intrinsic biases in the peer review system, the possibility of a specific work achieving publication is not only a function of its intrinsic merit but also of a combination of elements which include the author's capacity to conform to appropriate genres and current fads, and even fortuitous circumstances, such as being appraised by a sympathetic reviewer or editor. As a consequence the most proficient *auteurs* learn not to become too attached to a particular piece of work or to a specific argument but to maintain a certain aplomb and flexibility. Unsurprisingly, the interviewed researchers are all very aware of these tricks of the trade, and explicitly adopt a coherent set of tactics based both on the application of explicit principles and on tacit knowledge and expertise:

*It's like playing tennis, my objective is to whack it over the net and not having it served back so once I get to that stage and they say ok that's accepted (...) mostly you end up writing the paper that the reviewers want you to write rather than the paper you wanted to write, I kind of just accept that that's the case and try to do it as elegantly and as stylishly and as well as I can (L, senior academic)*

*It's very hard to get sole author publications (...) it takes so long to get a single paper out there while if you have 2 or 3 really helpful co-authors you can get things on much faster (C, senior academic)*

*If you want to go in that Journal you really need to comply with the code. If you want to break the matrix you need to know the code of the matrix (F, junior academic)*

While publishing has assumed an increasingly central role in determining academic careers it is not the only game in town. Other sources of identification and legitimation can derive from the capacity to successfully obtain and manage research funds:

*To get up the ladder you get to access some funding and some of that means you're all the time looking for what the opportunities are for funding (...) you're looking for people who might be able to work with you on a grant, who are senior, who might give you some of that legitimacy (K, senior academic)*

Individual academics can therefore identify themselves with a role that is neither that of the 'intellectual/*auteur*' nor that of the 'educator' but rather that of a research project manager:

*When I'm working with a team and, say, a project comes in, I identify that these people would be good on the project so I will do the first crafting of the proposal, I will send that out to the others to have a look at so they don't have to do that nasty sort of hard yakka at the beginning (H, junior academic).*

The research and writing praxis of academics are not only influenced by these 'games'. The technologies used to perform research play a major role in shaping their behaviours and products. Information technology has enabled the current emphasis on metric based assessments of quality and has also transformed work practices.

Even a superficial observation of research work reveals the extent of its 'cyberbernization' in knowledge workers (Czarniawska 2011a): search engines and university library websites allow extensive searches for sources that would have been unthinkable a few decades ago. The availability of specialised software for quantitative and qualitative data analysis has affected research methodologies. Technology enables also new social linkages by collapsing distances: as a consequence a colleague based in a European or American institution can be perceived to be as close as someone based in an office on the other side of the building. The choice of collaborators is not driven by physical proximity but by the existence of common research interests, of complementary skills and emotional compatibility (Wilson et al. 2008). Even elementary, taken for granted features of word processing software facilitate tactics

(such as the 'tennis game' approach cited above) that would otherwise require a larger investment of time and effort. As they seamlessly incorporate the use of these devices practices are transformed and these material actants assume an active role in translating social arrangements (Callon 1986), exerting effects both on the practitioners and on their products.

*You didn't have access to nearly as much information to do your job (...) We were reliant more on key person contact, the whole role of the academic conference (...) so I would know the five people in Australia who might be working in my area (...) a sort of a smaller strong network. Now it's much more diffuse (...) At the same time there's much less dependence on in depth reading and much more dependence on fairly shallow, scan reading of vast volumes of papers (K, Senior academic)*

Cybernization of practices is intrinsically connected to the increased need for speed, in an acceleration whose velocity occurs at the expenses of memory and reflexivity (Czarniawska (Czarniawska 2011a, 2013). As a consequence the contemporary academic is very distant from the stereotypical image of the 'absent-minded' professor, permanently fixed in a meditative state. The successful researcher needs to signal a condition of constant (and productive) 'busyness' (Gershuny 2005):

*Signalling to everyone that you are productive, you're doing stuff, this is what you're working on, you have a pipeline, you have an agenda. It is about identity and profiling and showing, not that you're busy but that you have ideas and you're talking about them. (A, junior academic).*

These vignettes, being based on a limited set of observations in a single context, do not claim to represent the entirety of the experiences lived by the thousands of professionals who devote their career to advance and disseminate knowledge in this field. However, they are probably sufficient to typify the set of power dynamics and rationalizations that affect

and shape the professional lives of those who operate in this industry; comprehending how this power configuration defines academic identities and practices is the focus of this investigation. The last part of my work is devoted to integrate the findings 'produced' (rather than 'discovered') through the examination of this multi-sourced empirical material, attempting to draw conclusions on the pragmatic implications (and consequences) of this constellation of agency, structural, discursive, material forces.

# Part 5.

## Conclusions

# Chapter 11.

## Liminality, liquidity and smart management practices

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*Explanation must always grow out of description, but the description from which it grows will always necessarily contain arbitrary characteristics.*  
(Bateson 1979, p.40)

### **A conclusion or a fresh start?**

The combination of genealogical analysis, members' accounts and direct observations presented in the previous chapters depicts a panorama of academic life that has both elements of uniformity and diversity. On the one hand the observed academics are affected by a common set of institutional forces; they interface with the same machines and workspaces; they are subject to the same attempts at disciplining their behaviours through norms and the extraction of economic value through various forms of direct and indirect pressures. On the other hand, different individuals, depending on their biographies, inclinations, creativity, and position in the relational network, can mobilize different resources, resort to different strategies, pursue dissimilar objectives and develop distinctive habits. In brief, they 'play the game' differently.

In this final chapter I attempt to bring together the different reflections that were developed from the critical reading of the data presented before. In particular I use these to present a comprehensive narrative that offers an original interpretation of the 'life world'

of management academics. Probably most of these ‘conclusions’ will not sound new to my audience; actually I hope to elicit a sense of *déjà vu*, of extreme familiarity in my portrait: after all my readers are likely to be not dissimilar to the same ‘natives’ that I have observed.

Does this mean that I failed in my attempt to problematize, to challenge the assumptions of my audience? I hope not. The novelty of this contribution does not rest in presenting an unexpected piece of evidence but in narrating a more complete story, one that tries to capture the consequences of a multiplicity of pressures, acts of resistances, acts of power. What I try to challenge with my ‘broad historiography’, describing a genealogy of events that looks both in the past (of narratives, ideologies, institutions) and in the present (of behaviours, emotions, strategies) is the way in which the management academics’ life world is rationalized in order to justify actions. The objective explicitly is to persuade my audience to re-evaluate their practices by simultaneously taking stock of the various elements that compose their field, overcoming the alibis that derive from considering in isolation individual elements and influences. By showing the multiplicity of discourses that are at play and their multiple power/knowledge effects I aim to show the relativity of particularistic ‘truths’.

More importantly, I aim to contribute to the debate by taking the risk of suggesting positive alternatives. This entails tackling some beliefs and even some taboos: the idea that being an academic means performing a clear role; the idea that this job requires self-centred individual pursuits rather than team efforts; the idea that academic work is an intellectual pursuit governed by logic and not by emotions. This leads me to advocate a heretic belief: the idea that academics need to be managed; can benefit from being effectively managed, and therefore *should* be better managed.



The problem, I suggest, is not 'managerialism' but the form of managerialism that is in use. The problem resides not in the 'corporatized' university but in the fact that, as with any other corporation, universities must not overlooks their social, moral and political responsibilities. Finally, it is not in the request for public accountability by part of government and society but in the manner in which academic outcomes are assessed and measured.

The final synthesis that I propose is not a proper 'conclusion' but an invitation to a new beginning, by considering alternative ways of approaching the problem of organizing academic work. Such a new academic management would require academics to sacrifice part of their freedom (from organizational regulatory attempts) to regain liberty from the broader discursive forces that still 'bottle' their innovative potential. At the same time, it implies that administrators need to do the same, reducing (bureaucratic) controls to enhance governance, through influence, facilitation and empowerment.

## **Schizophrenic academics?**

The characteristics of academic work, and the way in which the tertiary education industry is organized, demands that academics perform multiple roles, each of which calls for different skills and assets, exposing them to distinct requests and accountabilities, offering uneven rewards. These requirements are not intrinsic to these roles' 'essence' but derive from an alignment of economic, political, cultural and material forces. Power shapes practices and practices constitute identity

The practice of teaching, traditionally the breeding ground for the identity of educators and mentors, is morphing both under the pressure of increased students' number and of a neoliberal ideology that presents tertiary education as a commodity or an investment that

must pay dividends. Consequently, many teachers become assimilated to being tertiary industry labourers, dealing with an undifferentiated mass of paying customers. The desire to enlighten rather than simply instruct is often thwarted by time pressures, limited availability of support and practical isolation. For instance students' feedback is not used systematically as a means for organizational learning, for instance by comparing data on performances of different teachers and trying to isolate the impact of different variables or systematically socialising and discussing feedback results as part of a continual improvement process, or even to celebrate successes and symbolically reward members. Data are predominantly used as a disciplinary tool, to wean individual non-conformities and punish 'underperforming' subjects. Other factors that reduce the allure of teaching and that reinforce the sense of its being a scarcely rewarded, low value added activity are the increasing workloads, driven not only by the number of students but also by their linguistic, cultural and educational diversity. On the other hand lecturers have limited control of some means of production: the allocation of workspaces and lecture times seems to be the result of a blind draw rather than an integral part of instructional design.

As a consequence it is no surprise that teaching related activities are increasingly shunned by senior academics; when this combines with the managerial imperative of reducing overheads the result is a rampant casualization of teaching. Entrusting teaching to non-permanent academics is not necessarily a scourge in a field where practical experience and connections are valued, provided that the majority of the lecturing is not delegated to inexperienced aspirant academics. Nevertheless, it raises an important managerial issue: it has been long established in organizational studies that, when there is an imperfect knowledge of transformation process and a limited capacity to measure outputs (as it happens for a 'loosely coupled' activity as teaching), supervising and coordinating activities require "ceremonial forms of control [that] require the stability of membership which

characterizes the clan” (Ouchi 1979, p. 849). Instead, the organization tries to fix the incoherence caused by the use of ‘market’ mechanisms to manage activities that would require a ‘clanic’ attachment by exacerbating formal bureaucratic controls, a practice which only promotes ritual forms of compliance. Teachers’ role models become evanescent, which explains the apparent incongruity of senior academics declaring that they are more influenced in their teaching practices by role models than are their junior colleagues and, as a consequence, social identity templates lose import. Anything goes, as teachers, as long as the students/customers are kept happy.

Such a depiction clearly exaggerates the negative aspects. Truth to be said, I found the professionalism, commitment and expertise of the lecturers whose activities I had the chance to observe were outstanding. However, they generally appear to pour passion and talent in their teaching *despite* the way in which the system is rigged. Limited rewards, limited support, limited control on inputs, yet with a strong personal academic ethos and desire to ‘leave a mark’ in at least some of their students, they remind one of missionaries who, while still possessing an unwavering faith, have lost trust in their Church.

On the other hand, the practice of researching and its associated identity has run a different trajectory. From being an important but not overpowering aspect of academic life, it has become a pivotal feature, making or breaking careers. In line with a performative and ‘result-oriented’ ethos, the focus of the attention is neither on the research process nor on the knowledge outcomes but rather on the researcher’s capacity to attract quantifiable inputs, in the form of research grants, and to produce tangible outputs in form of ‘prestigious’ publications. Operating in a research field that does not require complex instrumentations or massive collaboration to produce and analyse experimental data, management academics tend to identify themselves as sole-traders or small business

owners. To be successful, they need to develop collaboration networks that enable them to have multiple works in their pipeline, in order to diversify their investments in a highly competitive academic publishing market. They also need to develop the ability to conform to different narrative styles and fashions required by different publication outlets. They also need to create a 'brand' out of their name, something that is not just a function of the influence of their works but also of the capacity to promote a coherently consistent and recognisable research agenda, since this type of visibility creates self-reinforcing positive reputational effects. In order to cultivate these forms of social, intellectual and symbolic capital they take part in and sustain a political economy based on mostly unpaid contributions in form of authoring, editing, reviewing, conference organising. While journals and conferences as means for communicating the result of research endeavours have been around for a long time, New Public Management (NPM) inspired practices, putting emphasis on 'accountability through quantity' is promoting a phenomenon of 'goal displacement', transforming these 'ancillary' activities into the main purpose of research.

The contemporary researcher, as an entrepreneur caught in the corporate rat race, also becomes very concerned with beating competitors and with maintaining a constant outflow of product. To cope with these increasing pressures academics, similarly to other knowledge workers, need to 'evolve' into cyborgs, "a hybrid between a human being and a machine" (Czarniawska 2012, p. 38) whose practices incorporate, almost in an unconscious manner, a variety of software tools. Search engines, reference managers, publishing tools, and software for data analysis, etcetera, expand their productive capacity. However these 'artificial implants' are not obedient servants: material instrument become powerful actants, which constrain and shape their masters' behaviour and margins of manoeuvre (Callon 1986). For instance it has been noted that "algorithms such as Google's PageRank don't so much 'search reality' as create it" (Orlikowski 2007, p. 1440). Researchers (being

human) tend to trust the neutrality of an impersonal outfit, while being ignorant of the undisclosed heuristic rules that produce search-results (van Dijck 2010). In the 'Google-universe', quality and quantity, interconnectedness and relevance, popularity and importance, all overlap and this serious epistemological short-circuit is hidden by the speed and facility of use of the tool: "the simpler the interface, the more complex and invisible its underlying algorithms" (van Dijck 2010, p. 587). In addition, the easy accessibility of enormous quantities of digitally stored information, united to the availability of tools that enable quick scanning, skimming, filtering, extraction of 'relevant' texts pushes academics to develop new heuristic strategies aimed at managing this overflow (Löfgren 2013), using practices that rely mostly on tacit, embodied knowledge.

Being a formidable (albeit myopic) research cyborg is not sufficient in the competitive and globalized academic market. Since the institutional context is one informed by NPM notions of accountability, where public funds are allocated through competitive grant systems, researchers need to master the art of grant winning. Especially in a discipline such as management studies, where the most significant research expenditure is represented by the researcher's salary, it would probably be economically more viable to avoid investing time and resources to obtain a contribution from the Government, exactly as a small business could decide to self-finance its operations. However the researcher is not a sole trader but the employee of an organization that is not contented with 'self-sufficient' researchers, regardless of their publication output. Competitive grants are an important source of income for the institution and the capacity to bring in funds is considered an essential role requirement for senior academics (Allan 2014). The system is self-perpetuating, since universities, in order to obtain and manage these funds need to employ a conspicuous bureaucracy of administrators and professional advisers. Similar considerations apply for the accreditation and ranking pursuits, which require the

maintenance of a hefty bureaucracy. As prophesised by Weber, bureaucracies tends to autopoietically self-reproduce and will expand “until the last ton of fossilized coal is burnt” (Weber 1920/2005, p. 123), or at least until they literally choke themselves, their organizational learning capacities suffocated by the numbing effect of rules (Schulz 1998). Universities appear to be following a similar trajectory: the traditional dualism between the academic ‘collegium’ and the hierarchy/bureaucracy has been transformed by the increasing power and dimension of the latter over the former (Kogan 2007).

For instance in the case of UTS, financial report data (UTS 2013d, p. 21) show that the university spends slightly more to remunerate its non-academic staff than it does for its academic faculty. In fact in term of labour force size, non-academics outnumber academics 1661 to 1449 (UTS 2014b). The increase in bureaucracy in this case can be partially explained also by the growth in size of the institution, since the latter variable tend to propel the former, albeit at a decreasing rate (Donaldson 1996). In addition to this large administrative and managerial body the “full-time academic bureaucrat is becoming more common” (Kogan 2007, p. 171). In fact, one can assume that this role is a possible career alternative for a number of lecturers and professors and even attractive from a remuneration perspective. A bureaucratized university tries to breed administratively inclined academic-managers, capable of conferring the sacraments of conformity and standardization.

Responding both emotionally and rationally to the distribution of opportunities and threats and to the request to play multiple roles, the observed management academics tend to embrace a favourite professional self. At the same time they need to accommodate in their daily routine activities and practices that require assuming different sets of behaviours and attitudes. The distinction is not philosophical but linked to the practical requirements of the

roles. While the researcher's and the teacher's personae can be coherent and complementary when the task is that of coaching a small number of postgraduate students, their compatibility is dramatically decreased in a context where the lecturer must face a large audience of anonymous, undergraduate students. Analogously, the administrative and the entrepreneurial identity cannot easily be reconciled, since the former should be informed by a more organizationally focused, team oriented and standardization seeking approach, while the latter often leads to a self-centred, outward looking and creativity oriented behaviour. Being a manager-administrator implies exerting a centripetal force, pulling activities and bodies towards an ideal centre defined by the normative ideal defined in organizational policies, while acting as researcher-entrepreneur often involves a centrifugal tendency, towards external opportunities and resources and away from the constraints imposed by the structure.

Tasks, practices and identities do not overlap perfectly: for instance teaching incorporates a small component of research (in the moment of instructional design) and a more conspicuous portion of managerial practice in the form of course administration. In any case, contemporary academics find it problematic to assume a single, fixed professional identity based on a coherent social template, since different stakeholders require different roles at different times. Consequently they often juggle multiple identities, switching from being an entrepreneurial small business owner, to a compliant and obedient labourer, or an effective manager of resources and guardian of conformity. In addition to these 'functional' identities they also interpret scripts associated with the privileged narrative reconstruction of their mission: as activist, *auteur*, innovator, educator, or public sector employee.

At any rates the academics that I observed sometimes reminded me of the protagonist of a novel of Luigi Pirandello, *One, no one, and one hundred thousand*, who realizes that all his

acquaintances have constructed an image of his persona that is different from his own. In the attempt to repossess his identity he becomes crazy, escaping from the social cages in which his self is imprisoned by getting lost in the phenomenological flow of reality (Pirandello 1926/1993). Similarly many of my informants lamented the fact that the requests of various stakeholders force them to assume some identities that are alien to their self-representations and desires. Sometimes they would love to be – simply – educators (or writers, scientists, activist, philosophers, managers, innovators) but they are forced to be all the rest, and they have to lose themselves in a ceaseless flow of activities and deadlines to flee the suffering caused by having to be different from what they would like to be.

## **Sources of fragmentation: liminality, abundance, memory and forgetfulness**

It is not just a matter of multiple roles requiring different approaches, skills, and attitudes. The academics portrayed in my research appear to be ‘border dwellers’, caught between two sources of practice and identity regulation: the closer, but weaker, influence played by the institution in which they are embedded and the further but more powerful effects of the practices of ‘Academia’, the mimetic effects simulated by belonging to a transnational professional community and the ‘structural’ influences caused by technology.

An idea that can be used to describe this condition is that of *liminality*, a concept originally developed in anthropology to describe rites of passage but which has also recently been employed in studies on the formation of organisational identity to describe the interplay between individual identity work and organisational attempts to regulate identity (Beech 2011). “Liminality thrives on ambiguity rather than on clarity. It refers to the fluid processes



where normal order is suspended and a new order, based on emerging frames, is under construction” (Cunha et al. 2010, p. 202). Defined as the “condition of being betwixt and between” (Turner 1969), liminality is usually considered as a temporary circumstance that characterises individuals during role transitions or identity transformations. However, in the academics observed liminality seems to be a permanent condition. In some respects this parallels the status of management consultants, who choose to live in a limbo that neither represent a transient nor an undesirable condition but is an essential component of their professional identity (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003).

It is possible to argue that, while consultants opted for their liminal position, the status of contemporary academics is the result of a progressive process of erosion of entitlements, casualization, and de-professionalization (Parker & Jary 1995). However, having different, contrasting sources of professional identification, resources and belonging can constitute an empowering factor. Truly, the tensions that derive from the marginal collocation of academics have been highlighted before the ‘neoliberal turn’ that affected academia. Bourdieu (1988) distinguished between academic power, deriving from the institutional ‘brand’, and intellectual power, derived from the ideas of the individual, noting that some intellectually renowned thinkers (such as Althusser and Foucault) held marginal positions in the university system. This distinction recalls a much earlier one, proposed by Gouldner (1957, 1958) between “cosmopolitans” and “locals”: the former are usually experts, highly committed to specialized role skills and oriented to external reference groups, while the latter are highly loyal to the employing organization.

Hekman et al. (2009) have empirically investigated the cosmopolitan/local issue, finding that a high degree of professional identification (typical of cosmopolitans) "reduces the level of compliance with administrative influence and consequently hinders the adoption of

new work behaviours promoted by the local organisation, “those whose self-concepts were strongly tied to the profession and weakly tied to the organization viewed administrators as rivals” (Hekman et al. 2009, p. 1331). The fact, also experienced in my ethnographic exploration, that academics tend to form ‘tribes’ (Knights & Willmott 1997), contributes to the estrangement of the role. Being in the cognitive territory of another tribe, where members use different enrolling and translating strategies to mobilize knowledge (Callon 1986) is a challenging experience, and one that can slow the adoption of innovations (Ferlie et al. 2005).

In addition to the multiplicity of the functions performed, academics are constantly exposed to the ambiguity of being ‘betwixt and between’ because, by guiding their students in the transition between different intellectual and social status, they become “conveyors of liminality” (Guimarães-Costa & Cunha 2013, p. 58). The university itself is a place characterised by rituals, temporary communions of individuals and transformation, elements that define liminality (Guimarães-Costa & Cunha 2013). In addition to this symbolic function there is also the very concrete social pressure to demonstrate the capacity to perform alternative roles. Not a single one of my informants could ‘afford’ sticking to a single mono-thematic role. For instance even the most successful ‘research stars’ are requested to demonstrate their ‘managerial self’, and even overburdened school administrators are keen to preserve their social identity as knowledge producers and teachers by taking part in research projects and acting as mentors for doctoral students.

In line with the notion that border dwellers cannot afford to cling to a distinct, monolingual identity, especially when the border is changeable or is very permeable, allowing circulation of people from different backgrounds, the demand for eclecticism becomes institutionalized and formalized in organizational policies and contracts. Every academic is required to

perform multiple roles, including those to which the individual is not inclined, despite the fact that this de-specialization is hardly conducive to the high productivity that is, at the same time, commanded. Quite paradoxically, while academics must be jacks-of-all-trades, the non-academic side of the organization knows instead a flourishing of specializations.

Contradictory requests originating in an institutional field that wants both productivity and originality, stimulating the continuous production of novel ideas and ground-breaking discoveries, combined with the opportunities offered by increasingly technology-driven interactions and retention of information practices creates a landscape dominated by two correlated immaterial conditions: *timeliness* and *overflow*. There are strong economic and political forces that promote an agenda of acceleration, of “time-space compression”, a process aimed at “reducing the total cycle time of global financial capital accumulation by quickening the time from design to sale (...) Most of our electronic devices are dedicated to speeding things up. Commodified times relentlessly colonize and replace the social rhythms” (Clark 2007, p. 5013). The fierce international competition brought about by a globalized business education industry and a globalized academic labour market drives this speeding of academic activities, trying to beat rivals thanks to novelty and currency of the individual and institutional offering. The virtue of speed (Czarniawska 2013) is incorporated in practice and identity under the guise of a fixation for timeliness, the idea of being up-to-date, cutting-edge, current. This trend is sustained also by little, innocuous and impersonal actants, such as the choice of referencing methods in academic writing. In the field of management studies in-text referencing styles (e.g. ‘Harvard’) have completely replaced the running notes (e.g. ‘Vancouver’) system. This choice gives more prominence to the publication year, promoting an idea of general timeliness of the research (Gibaldi 2009, p. 127). In fact every research student will receive heartfelt recommendations to include the most recently published papers and books in their work. While this sounds to be utterly

reasonable advice, it can induce negative side effects if not taken critically, and with a grain of salt. In first place it can produce an anxious surveillance of recently published literature, where currency and timeliness take precedence on reflection and meditation. Moreover, it posits that more recent works of scholarship will incorporate all the wisdom present in earlier work. This positivistic assumption, possibly sensible in the context of 'hard' sciences and technology, fails to consider the relational and recursive character of knowledge produced in social sciences, the fact that those who 'reproduce' and 'cite' previous works are more often than not co-producers, *translators* (in an Actor Network Theory sense), enrolling and mobilizing the ideas of other scholars. Including (i.e. citing) a large portion of recently published works is, nevertheless, universally assumed to be an essential requisite for any quality paper.

The preoccupation with being up-to-date could be one element which contribute to the diffusion of management fashions (Abrahamson 1991, 1996; Kieser 1997; Clark 2004; Czarniawska 2005a; ten Bos & Heusinkveld 2007) because of the viral character (Røvik 2011) of this 'chase for currency'. Since at any given moment in time there is only space for a limited number of 'current fads', authors who have to include in their papers a vast portion of the latest works will inevitably end up strengthening the vogue. This does not imply that the adoption of a referencing style is the main force driving the surge of management fashions: I rather wish to point out how a set of practices and 'neutral' actants become element of a discourse, of a facilitative circuit of power that surreptitiously shapes academics' practices and professional identities.

Despite its relationship with fashion, timeliness and currency do not imply ephemerality. As Brose (2004) highlights, acceleration and short-termism go hand in hand with innovation strategies that make possible a future orientation: simultaneity fosters non-simultaneity.

Correspondingly, the 'pursuit of currency' involves both an idea of transience, the fast ageing of products, fashions, ideas, but also a preoccupation with preserving the ephemeral. A perfect alliance of efficient means and neurotic desires enables and sustains a paradoxical condition: everything becomes immediately obsolete but everything is preserved. In fact preservation of data has never been so easy and inexpensive. The transition between analogic to digital, electronic methods for storing information means that every bit of experience, every fickle idea, passing mood, fleeting experience can be recorded and maintained effortlessly thanks to multiple electronic aids. This produces overabundance, an *overflow* of information to be managed.

Overflow is not objectively 'too much', since this would require identifying the 'ideal' amount of a resource: "Who decides there is a surplus?" (Czarniawska & Löfgren 2012, p. 10). As Callon (1998) noted, overflow is created by framing, by the idea that there is a norm. Overflow might be only in the eye of the beholder but – as illustrated in the two previous chapters – most of the observed management academics perceive this excess of demands as an 'objective reality'. They never complain, however, about overabundant availability of sources and research data; they usually feel overwhelmed by aspects of other practices, teaching and managing. In the case of teaching the problem can be linked to the external locus of control in the management of activities. As observed above, lecturers have limited control of a number of important elements that affect their practice, such as the selection of students or the size of the cohort. The possibility of using the same selection techniques that are employed by researchers to manage overflow of research data, such as selecting, skimming, ignoring and forgetting, is reduced (Löfgren 2013).

The capacity to exercise selective memory becomes even more central in the case of the bureaucratic aspect of the academic role. The fact that rules are decided by external

agencies (in my case study typically they are perceived as emanating from 'the Tower' or from other institutions, such as the Australian Research Council or AACSB) is compounded with the different relevance of memory in the practice of research and in the practice of bureaucracy. When one is subject to or is exercising bureaucratic rule, forgetfulness is not acceptable: *ignorantia juris non excusat*, and all decisions must be recorded in writing (Weber 1922/1978, p. 219). Late modern bureaucracies, powered by the panoptical opportunities offered by information technologies demonstrate, to paraphrase Nietzsche, an inexorable 'will to remembrance', as exemplified by incidents such as that of a North American aspiring teacher whose degree was denied because of an old Facebook photo in which she appeared intoxicated or the case of the Canadian psychotherapist who has been barred from entering the United States because a border agent located an online article in which he mentioned using LSD in the 1960s (Mayer-Schönberger 2009).

Being at the same time subject to, and in charge of, enforcing the multiple rules of a bureaucratic organization, 'managers-academic' must possess a perfect memory of all requirements, policies, and procedures. Not only is this demand perceived as an extra burden on minds, bodies and workspaces already cluttered with concepts, research materials, teaching notes, assignments to be marked. Having to remember everything is at odds with learning, discovery, reflection, practices that entail the exercise of selective knowledge (Löfgren 2013). The idea is splendidly illustrated by a fictional character created by Jorge Luis Borges, 'Funes' (Borges 1942/1964), a man cursed by a perfect memory, a condition that overflows his consciousness with countless details, making him incapable of abstraction, generalization, invention. This is more than an imaginary allegory: the accuracy of Borges' imagination has been confirmed both by the clinical observation of individuals affected by 'hypermnnesia' (Luria 1968) and by recent neuropsychiatric research (Quiroga 2012), which show how the capacity to discard information is crucial to our capacity to

produce theory and plans. As Czarniawska (2013, p. 12) noted “forgetting is as important as remembering, as it allows us to move forward”.

These reflections point to the fact that, in the case of these management academics, overflow is not just the product of an overabundance of resources, demands, stimuli, produced by the speeding up of their world, the prodigality of a hyper-connected world, and the demands of a commodified education but also by the fact that different practices have contradictory requirements. While performing the role of teacher and researcher, forgetting what is not relevant or distracting is an essential skill for academics. However this selective memory does not allow them to effectively discharge their administrative, bureaucratic responsibilities.

In conclusion, academic identities gain their liminal status from multiple sources: their role requires them to be involved and to celebrate rites of passage; their activities are performed across a multiplicity of sites and times, often dissolving the distinction between life and work; they need, and often desire, to maintain both a local and a cosmopolitan orientation; they have multiple roles presenting conflicting demands necessitating different resources, skillsets and attitudes. In addition they have multiple accountabilities, answering to a multiplicity of stakeholders (administrators, students, supervisors, other academics, general public). Finally, they operate in different task environments: in the knowledge production field loose coupling between means and ends calls for adaptability and exploration; when performing administrative and accreditation roles strict compliance to rules and policies is essential; when teaching large cohorts of students and managing the connected workload, efficiency and customer orientation are required; when trying to achieve publication or obtaining funds they need to be adaptable, tactical, business-like.

Many of these 'liminality drivers' also characterize other professions: for instance, management consultants are even more 'nomadic' than academics in their work practices; contemporary managers have to juggle multiple accountabilities and balance efficiency, effectiveness, legitimacy; police officers and social workers have to harmonize rule compliance with the need to 'get the job done'. However there are few (if any) occupations where practitioners are exposed to so many concurrent pressures and opportunities, in a rare combination of ample freedom of action (granted by loose coupling, professional autonomy, lack of standardized practices, ideological exaltation of the self) and binding institutional norms, limited resource availability and multiple demands.

## **Liquid spirits, leaky iron cages and impermeable discursive vessels**

As a consequence of this concentration of fault lines and co-presence of multiple attractors, the praxis of the observed academics cannot be the linear outcome of a wilful strategy or the performance of a *habitus* through a set of routines. It rather emerges from a political interplay that involves individual adaptation, managerial pressures, institutional logics and materially bound constraints and opportunities. Coherent with a 'circuits of power' model (Clegg 1989), individual actions by academics and university administrators play out at the level of the episodic circuit of power. At the same time, normative efforts of the institution, which happen in the form of management control systems, imposition of formal rules, allocation of tasks and workloads and structuring of workspace, work by "fixing and refixing relations of meaning and of membership" (Clegg 1989, p. 224), constituting the "dispositional" circuit of power. Finally, these agencies become further empowered and disempowered by the transformation in technologies and modes of knowledge production and by the accepted institutional logics underlying the publishing game and the



accountability and social function of academic work, elements of the “facilitative” circuit of power (Clegg 1989).

Not only is academic work performed on a contested frontier but also the overall social context is becoming less fixed and secure. The metaphor of liquidity has been proposed by Baumann (2000; see also Bauman & Bauman 2011) to describe the distinctive features of the contemporary world, one in which social reality is made fluid by the presence of competing discursive sites, making our existence increasingly precarious and uncertain. With the fragmentation, liquefaction and increased interconnectedness brought about by socio-political and technological transformations in late modernity, roles become “improvised rather than scripted” (Alvesson & Willmott 2002, p. 626).

The liquefaction of identity is connected with a dynamic and mutually constitutive relation between agency and structure. Even if individuals do not have the power to transform the dominant mode of rationality (Clegg & Baunsgaard 2013) to which they are exposed they can attribute salience to different aspects and discourses through their identity work and their improvised performance of practices. On the one hand resistance to a single dominant discourse is difficult to achieve, since members can hardly resist a context that encompasses and defines their subjectivity. In fact academics are active doing institutional work, participating in the reproduction of institutional norms, material structures and organisational rhetoric through their praxis.

Yet again these actors do not, and cannot, assume fixed and pre-determined identities: they display agency in their identity work, letting their liquid identities flow in different directions according to the topography of the discursive space in which they position themselves. Academia is characterized by the co-presence of multiple discourses: it is *heteroglossic* (Rhodes 2001); as a consequence faculty members find themselves at the

centre of a branching network of local and global discourses. Choosing how to position their self in this discursive 'plexus', emphasizing or understating the relevance of a certain set of discourses in defining their identity, enacts their identity work. They do so for instance by emphasizing the importance of external versus internal acknowledgement and legitimation, therefore privileging the 'local status', investing more energies in the internal arena and focusing on their 'managerial' career, rather than their 'cosmopolitan prestige' (as internationally renowned scholars or well-connected industry advisers).

Multiple discourses and material pressures affect every academic but they can choose different ways to position themselves, altering the salience of alternative discourses. As a consequence, the explicated identities become, in an ethnomethodological sense, "accounts" (Garfinkel 1967), used as "member's categorization devices" (Sacks 1972) instrumentally employed to justify actors' choices, judge other members' behaviour, position themselves in relation both to the status quo and to planned change. Narrated identity becomes therefore a categorizing social practice, used by political actors to position themselves in relation to other actors, the institutions and broader discourses, while the actors' life-world requires them to frequently change their stance and attitude.

In this regard the issues of tribalism and 'silo' thinking are secondary to the other sources of identity fragmentation. As any other individual, academics will find it difficult to communicate with members of different communities, who speak different dialects, have distinct customs and adopt dissimilar heuristics. However, this is a less pervasive driver of differentiation than the contraposition between different 'functional roles' (labourer, entrepreneur, bureaucrat), or incompatible 'missions' (activists, educators, auteurs, etc.). Therefore, the identity-clash is not just an external one, among members of different tribes but is also interior, happening when individuals struggle to reconcile contradictory requests of the different practices they have to perform. Consequently, the main challenge is not, as

current rhetoric suggests, how to 'break down' disciplinary silos but rather how to better channel the flow of academic energies, acknowledging the powerful influence of discursive and material forces and promoting integration among individual efforts.

Liquidity does not imply that everyone acts in full autonomy. Instead, what happens is a replacement of disciplinary setting: the model of coordinated group action is replaced by swarming. Bauman offers a vivid description of the implication of this mode of collective action:

“In a swarm, there is not much division of labour (...) Each unit is expected to be a jack-of-all trades, in possession of the complete set of tools and skills necessary for the job to be done. (...) The comfort of swarming comes from the security of numbers – the belief that direction of action must have been properly chosen, since an impressively large number of people are following it” (Bauman 2008, p. 16).

While 'liquid' academics seem to be resistant to organizational impositions, they are docile to institutional imperatives, their actions easily channelled by 'facilitative' circuits of power. Maintaining an illusion of self-determination, they swarm, following no leader but the irresistible attraction of intangible lures and the reassuring imitation of their peers' movements, convening and communing periodically in mega-swarms at major conferences. This metaphor captures well why a community of individuals selected and trained to employ critical spirit, exercise self judgement and devote their intellect and passion to the production of original and influential contributions tend to display a remarkable uniformity of behaviours, producing an output that “assumes standardized forms and expressions, predictable structures and signposts, and even routine content” (Alvesson & Gabriel 2013, p. 246) under the influence of institutional pressures.

What is depicted here is a very different representation to that which typically accompanies organizational academic change projects. There is no steady state to be 'unfrozen' and moved to a new steady state by sensible managerial actions. Interventions are made and justified as judicious, such as curriculum reform and a new building; however, once unleashed in the viscous world depicted here, how and where they will flow and what they will shape is highly indeterminate. Of course, this will not stop the parade of rationalist representations that are marshalled for ritual events, such as accreditation and audit processes, nor should it, if only because rituals have a normatively binding purpose: hypocrisy has its uses, as Brunsson (1989) assures us. The uses of hypocrisy should, however, suggest a degree of managerial sophistication: the only problem occurs when the management is naïve enough to believe and commit to the rhetoric of their own hypocrisy and experience frustration and surprise as the most appropriate response to the complex canalizations that liquidity can produce.

Individual academics are not the only one to 'lose integrity'. Universities themselves are becoming liquid workplaces (Batko 2014), where expertise replaces understanding, the search of productivity replaces the search for wisdom, auditing culture replace trust, and shallow round the clock virtual interaction replaces in-depth engagement. Universities have been in business longer than most other structured organizations (the oldest continuously operating one, the University of Bologna, was founded in 1088) basing their endurance and stability on a guild like organizational model and on an elitist orientation<sup>31</sup> which gives them a glacier like flow: slow and unstoppable.

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<sup>31</sup> The number of university students worldwide was only 500,000 in 1900 while is now around 150 million (Batko 2014, p. 106). If one compares these figure with estimates on world population, which

These centuries-old traditions, rituals and customs are put in question by the request of performativity and dynamism. Becoming 'edu-factories' competing on an international market for resources and attention has clearly produced acceleration in their flow. Like a frozen river at thaw their current is now impetuous but still filled with solid blocks of ice. Any hopes of return to old models is thwarted by forces that are not merely ideological (NPM might be a passing fancy and in time may go) but also material. It is not thinkable to recreate an Oxbridge atmosphere when the challenge is educating masses, or to the pursuit of only intellectual curiosities when faced with the requests of a myriad of stakeholders. Moreover it is not conceivable to manage the organization collegially when tenured academics are a minority of the University staff. It is necessary to re-invent academic management.

## **In search of a new beginning: reflecting on alternative academic management practices**

Academic identities have been described as mobile and fluid, influenced both by idealised roles and by political challenges and opportunities. What are the practical and moral implications of being 'liquid spirits' rather than solid essences? Is a 'liquid' academic identity preferable and, if so, by whom?

First, liquid identities cannot be effectively disciplined by the direct use of rewards and punishments or by the enforcement of formal norms. The classic story, narrated by Herodotus, of how the Persian King Xerxes, having seen his efforts to build a boat bridge

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was around 1.6 billion in 1900 and 7.1 billion today (US Census Bureau 2014) the percentage of university educated students has risen 70 times, from 0.03% to 2.1%

across the Hellespont frustrated, ordered the unruly sea to be whipped and chained, provides a nice illustration of the weak effects of the imposition of rules and policies on academic identities and casts doubts on the effective capacity of a new building to beget a new era of coalescence of these liquidities, these identities, these practices.

On the one hand, liquids can be bottled: in this case the container is provided by professional and work practices. On the other hand the games played by academics to build their networks, secure their identity by means of achieving publication; the entanglement of tacit knowledge, institutional norms and technology that they mobilize to perform their educational duties; the suite of managerial techniques they use to carry out their administrative, corporate functions, all become powerful determinants of their transmuting capacity, from one liquid state into another.

As a consequence, attempts to 'organise' their behaviour are problematic. Their behaviour is embedded in practice that is the product of the constant interaction of multiple ideal, material, individual and social elements. As such, it will always be hostage to the liquidity of those slippery identities whose viscosity eludes easy canalization. Any attempt to regulate academic behaviour by normalising a single element of their practice is likely to be destined to frustration by the liquid nature of the various academic identities the attempt confronts. It is rather by means of exploiting the institutional, discursive and structural forces that shape their practices that is possible to coordinate and direct their individual efforts; for instance, by reinforcing their capacity to build networks, be entrepreneurial, be self-motivated. Putting them in a new building can probably nudge them in a new direction but, by itself, mere bricks and mortar are far too porous to discipline these liquid spirits. What is even more problematic, the building itself risks becoming trapped in the sterile fight

between bureaucratic attempts at regulation and individual acts of active and passive resistance.

And yet, it is very likely that the curved facades, the interaction walls, the monastic glass offices won't only be a passive object of translation attempts. The building will resist and fight back, altering the organization's dynamics in unforeseen ways. Does this mean that all hope must be abandoned and that there is no possibility of fostering collaboration and integration, 'herding these liquid cats'? The possibility of nurturing (if not guiding) the desired transformation exists but must be found in innovating managerial practices, which currently rely essentially on a mismatched hodge-potch of modernist bureaucracy and pre-modern craft-guild management practices. On the one hand it is quite evident that the bureaucratic iron cages built by the university (and by government agencies) in the attempt to foster productivity and guarantee academic accountability are only sorting the effects of ensnaring weak actors (casual teachers, early career researchers, locally focused academic) while allowing the more powerful, experienced and resourceful subjects to be free to flow. A blind pursuit of order and conformity, materialized in mindless acts of box ticking, bookkeeping and reporting by a bureaucratic structure oblivious of the praxis of knowledge production and transmission threatens productivity and quality.

On the other hand human resources practices are still redolent of an past era when tertiary education was the reserve of a privileged upper class elite, of a semi-mythical Oxbridge world where teaching (to a small number of selected and well-tutored pupils) and researching could be seamlessly integrated by a small collegium of tenured academics, whose selection and progression was managed through an apprentice-journeyman-master evolution typical of medieval guilds. More precisely, the system seems to be a strange hybrid of these pre-modern HR practices (clearly still present in the 'production' of doctoral

students) and decidedly post-modern forms of casualization and intermittence of employment. Mourning the loss of this 'golden age' of the 'collegium' is comprehensible but short-sighted, considering the masses of students who have now access to universities, as well as the presence of stringent financial constraints (Shirky 2014). If a restaurant only has to cater for 30 high paying customers a day it can aspire to be as El Bulli or Noma; however, one which has to serve thousands of cheap dishes will see McDonaldisation not as a bane but as a reasonable alternative.

This comparison with corporate business will raise some eyebrows: universities, and even business schools, should not just be exclusively concerned with their competitiveness or profitability, since they have a number of other social responsibilities (Zell 2001). In fact I am not joining the chorus of those hailing the advent of the 'Entrepreneurial University' (Özbilgin 2009; Gabriel 2010), since I believe this notion has two important flaws: first it unduly privileges the function of academia as a catalyzer for economic growth, ignoring the other moral responsibilities of education and research; second, it does not discuss the core assumption of traditional academic practice: the taken-for-granted idea that it is a solitary, uncoordinated endeavour. Rather my argument is that it would be worthwhile to consider the possibility of using different organizational and managerial settings to enhance the potential of individual researchers and educators.

Business school management cannot ignore the presence of powerful pressures to compete by participating in ranking exercises, nor can they underestimate budgetary constraints, especially in a situation where public funding is waning under the blows of a dominant neoliberal ideology. If a 'collegiate', guild-like institution has become financially unsustainable and even undesirable because of its elitism, the problem is not to demonize managerialism in Universities but to criticise the concrete forms that it is assuming. Tertiary



education institutions, especially in Australia, seem to be pervaded by a brand of Fordist, bureaucratic managerialism (Anderson 2006). However, the loosely coupled character of universities, together with the 'liquid' character of academic identities, in the presence of overpowering environmental and institutional forces shaping academic practices, suggests that contemporary universities would be better assimilated as a part of creative industry and to professional practices such as consulting.

Managing the specific challenges of this context, in which talented people are also motivated by extrinsic incentives, where products are of an infinite variety and there is an irreducible uncertainty about the outcomes of efforts (Caves 2000), requires the use of sophisticated, post-bureaucratic, methods. In post-bureaucratic organizations "shared meanings, values, beliefs, ideas and symbols become key elements of normative organizational control" (Alvesson & Robertson 2006, p. 196), in particular by purposefully shaping professional identities in accordance with desired standards (Alvesson & Willmott 2002). These soft but pervasive forms of supervision are aimed at harnessing not just the labour but also the creative energies of employees. The evolution from pre-modern forms of control to bureaucracies and then to post-bureaucracies has been described in terms of different modulations of organization-individual relationship (Maravelias 2003). Instead of requiring only the performance of standardized roles, as happen in bureaucracies, post-bureaucratic organizations extend their reach by internalizing specific aspects of the individual but without reverting to taking charge of the 'entire person' as happened in pre-modern organizations (for instance those based on servitude). The potential reduction in efficiency linked to the difficulty of designing and planning interaction among more complex subjects is offset by delegating responsibility and accountability for achievements, using their 'freedom' as a disciplinary device (Maravelias 2003). In other words the rise of post-bureaucratic organizations does not necessarily imply the adoption of an Orwellian

dystopia, simply because the exercise of a totalitarian regime of control would be dysfunctional to organizations for which being not too inclusive is a way to avoid the hassle of looking after or managing the lives of their employees (Maravelias 2003).

Two types of organizations incorporate the quintessence of the post-bureaucratic control model: management consulting firms and Internet companies. The human asset management issues and needs of consulting firms are not very different from those of business schools, as the list presented in Table 23 demonstrates:

**Table 23 - Characteristics of management consulting identities and practices**

<b>Characteristics of management consulting work practices and identities</b>	<b>Similitude with observed management academics practice</b>
Work is project based (Engwall & Kipping 2002)	<b>High:</b> all academic activities are project based
Collaboration/Competition dynamics (Engwall & Kipping 2002). Presence of internal divisions which makes managing as like “herding wild cats” (Alvesson 2012, p. 307)	<b>Medium:</b> academics compete for limited research funds and space in publication, albeit usually not directly with colleagues from the same institution. However there is a constant tacit internal competition to deflect unwanted tasks and workloads. Tribalism is endemic.
Role progression based on junior roles as providing research and operation support to superiors, then being progressively given the opportunity to manage more complex and multiple projects (Ibarra 1999)	<b>Medium-High:</b> apprenticeship is based on (tutor/research assistant) or assuming secondary roles in research collaborations. However management academics tend to work more on individual projects
Strong strategic reliance of new team leaders on senior partners (Ibarra 1999)	<b>High:</b> senior academics are the main source of advice and guidance
People are the most significant asset for the consulting company, both in terms of cost and strategic relevance (Alvesson 2012)	<b>High:</b> staff is indispensable for the production of academic services and their remunerations constitute the most substantial expenditure
Strong client orientation (Ibarra 1999). The relationship with the client is complex, characterized by an interplay of power, knowledge and rhetorical acts (Nikolova & Devinney 2012)	<b>Medium-High:</b> student-customers are becoming increasingly important and reviewers-editors or research fund assessors can be assimilated to clients
Career progression tailored to individual capacities (Ibarra 1999)	<b>High:</b> career is now exclusively dependent on ‘individual productivity’

<b>Characteristics of management consulting work practices and identities</b>	<b>Similitude with observed management academics practice</b>
Ontological insecurity and lack of stable identity (Clegg et al. 2007) Need to provide an anchor that helps staff to work effectively in high ambiguity situations(Alvesson & Robertson 2006)	<b>High:</b> fragmented identities; role ambiguities and conflict (in required resources, investments, rationalities and behaviours) among different roles of teacher, researcher, administrator
Organizational identity used to construct a self-view as elite or to re-construct disparaging images promoted by competitors (Alvesson 2012)	<b>High:</b> business school compete to establish their image as 'winners' through the ranking system or to negotiate their 'losers' status by highlighting other moderating characteristics (e.g. young age, connections with the local milieu)
Importance of collaboration for successful idea production (Clark & Greatbatch 2002) and importance of developing and maintaining social relationship (Alvesson 2001)	<b>High:</b> sustained success in publishing depends on the capacity of creating and maintaining effective collaboration network
Long working hours, with work invading the personal life sphere (Costas & Fleming 2009)	<b>High:</b> especially for senior academics
Symbiotic relationship with management fashions (Kieser 2002): consultants both create and disseminate fashions and use them as a strategic asset	<b>High:</b> academics are both producers (Worren 1996) and consumers of fashions (Barley et al. 1988), acting also as 'taste-masters' (ten Bos & Heusinkveld 2007)
Multi-location of work activities (Hislop & Axtell 2009): nomadic character of consultants who often work 'on the move'	<b>Medium-High:</b> although not mobile as management consultants, academic work is performed in various locations
Prevalence of males over females especially in senior roles (Engwall 2012)	<b>High:</b> data show a marked gender inequality especially in the professoriate
Management consultants as knowledge workers (Alvesson 2012)	<b>High:</b> academics are the quintessential knowledge workers
Need to promote self-discipline in autonomous workers (Alvesson & Robertson 2006).	<b>High:</b> the loose-coupled nature of academic work make supervision and control highly problematic
Need to retain talent (Alvesson & Robertson 2006).	<b>Medium:</b> the level of academic staff turnover is much lower than in consulting firms; however retaining the most productive researchers is always a challenge, because of a globalized work-market
Elitism (the sense of being the 'best and brightest') does not necessarily overlap with having a top position in the organization (Alvesson & Robertson 2006). This poses specific managerial problems because it weakens the position of top-management (Alvesson 2012)	<b>High:</b> being a top researcher (or teacher), if only in a niche disciplinary context, is a frequently encountered ambition, one that the institution promotes. However powerful 'professionals' are difficult to discipline and wade through the viscous bureaucracy

Characteristics of management consulting work practices and identities	Similitude with observed management academics practice
Difficult to separate 'pure' knowledge from embodied capacities (motivation, social skills, technical skills etc.) (Alvesson 2001)	<b>Medium high:</b> despite the quasi-mythical status of 'pure knowledge', rigour etc. the capacity to mobilize symbolic, social, material resources is vital for achieving success in academia
Ambiguity of work evaluation and relevance of image and rhetoric resources (Alvesson 2001)	<b>High:</b> despite the increasing presence of performance measuring systems, the difficulty in establishing a causal connection between methods and results make assessments problematic
Consultants as 'border-dwellers' (Czarniawska & Mazza 2003) and their work relationships are very fluid (Alvesson 2012)	<b>High:</b> despite being embedded in their institutions, academics tend project their practices and identities across organizational boundaries

The similarities between these two life-worlds clearly dwarf the differences, even if – to be honest – one significant divergence, that in salaries and economic bonuses, has not been included in the list. While it has been suggested that business schools are role models for consultancies which tend to adopt academic attributes (Engwall 2012), this mimicking has been mostly limited to the symbolic reproduction of academic practices (researching, publishing, educating) by consulting companies. I argue it would be useful to invert this role modelling relationship, by enriching the current mix of pre-modern and modernist management practices that are used in business school with some of the post-bureaucratic tool-box employed by large consulting firms.

Another benchmark in terms of adoption of post-bureaucratic management and human resource management practices is the IT industry. The company that, above any other, embodies the idea of the Internet economy is Google Inc. This organization, which in only one decade and half grew from a start-up company into to one of the world's most powerful and rich companies, with a 60 billion US\$ revenue, uses the entire arsenal of post-bureaucratic inclusive-engagement methods. Employees are lured into working longer hours thanks to the offer of rich perks (like free gourmet food, haircuts, fitness etc.) and a

pleasant workspace that they can adjust according to their whims; their productivity increased thanks to a range of integration mechanism that are supposed to shelter work teams from the scourges of bureaucracy and office politics; they are motivated to give their best, thanks to the awareness of being the cream of the crop; they have some freedom in choosing their tasks and time to pursue freely chosen projects (Wieland 2010). By doing thus the company does not just achieve stellar performance but also, allegedly, nurtures very high levels of job satisfaction (Crowley 2013).

High standards of performances in creative industries and professional organizations are largely self-imposed and so they are in academia. Many academics believe, as one of my informants does, that “my avocation is my vocation” (L, junior academic). For these individuals work-life balance is not the main concern and they probably would be attracted by the possibility of working in a context designed around their practices, which tries to lead them not through rigid supervision but by leveraging their professional identity and culture. Applying post-bureaucracy to the business school requires deploying ‘smart management’ that acknowledges the existence of powerful discursive forces and ‘games’ that shape academic practices and that leverages these forces in order to catalyse the best energies of its staff, stimulating collaboration by using rewards, resources allocations, even emotion management. This could include:

1. Rebuilding a relationship between institution and academics based on trust, rather than bureaucratic supervision: this involves delegation of budgetary responsibility to cost centres and stronger emphasis on controlling results rather than processes. This could be achieved progressively, using the reduction of bureaucratic control as an incentive in exchange for demonstrated achievement, offering the possibility of virtuous circles of productivity and cost-efficiency driven de-regulation;

2. Reviewing the administrative burden and re-orienting approaches to regulations by making sure, both via a comprehensive review of existing norms and a collaborative consultation processes, that 'mock' bureaucratic norms are removed, 'punitive' ones minimized and 'representative' rules effectively communicated;
3. Foster the development of a research team ethos, both offering incentives and opportunities for establishing continuous collaborations among internal researchers and teachers and supporting the development and participation in international academic networks, considering this not as a simple opportunity for interested researchers but a specific role demand. This also involves developing systems to foster co-ownership of this essential social capital that must cease to be considered only as personal assets of individual researchers;
4. Leverage of the School achievements (including the creation of the new building) as a common symbolic asset and making sure that all staff member can actually enjoy the positive opportunities (even in term of professional image) offered by working in a successful and world-class environment. A practical, short-term implication of this point is the necessity of considering the powerful emotional effect of 'first impressions'. Employees moving into a new building are likely to experience a variety of small glitches, which could overshadow positive emotions. For this reason it is important that extra support is made available during the transition period and that special care is taken to deal with any issues and difficulties experienced by individuals. Moreover buildings are living spaces: if the intent is that of using architecture to facilitate certain social behaviours the task of the designer will be not exhausted once the last brick is laid or the last computer socket is connected. Observing and understanding the way in which staff interaction is affected by the new space and how the building is tamed or disciplined by those whom it is meant to discipline is a vital action-research activity.

5. Emotional, embodied components of academic work and forms of explicit management of 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1979, 1983) need to be taken into account, since a great deal of academic practice requires dealing with, harnessing or controlling emotions. In this regard fostering an integrative culture will also require actions aimed at developing a positive climate and – in some cases – temper destructive emotional displays.
6. Innovating Human Resources practices to accommodate a wider range of employment relationships. Instead of focusing exclusively on the 'tenured core' or hoping to enlarge this privileged circle to all staff, it would be preferable to deploy a full range of intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, inclusion and socialization policies, forms of participations etcetera, aimed at the increasingly relevant causal academic staff.

Embracing post-bureaucratic ways is neither unproblematic nor straightforward. First, the adoption of these approaches is not inspired by the desire to emancipate workers from 'iron cages' but simply to better exploit their talents by trapping them in different types of enclosures, made of glass or velvet (Clegg & Baumeler 2010). Second, it is not easy to transform the existing structure: bureaucratic forms are resistant because they are not ideal typical constructs aimed at rationally organizing action but concrete social systems adapted to different political regimes and supported by elites' processes (Courpasson & Clegg 2006). The administrative personnel should, for instance, renounce the reassuring (and influential) position of controllers of compliance to adopt the role of service oriented supports and facilitators, a proposition that is certain to be met with active and passive resistances. Third, the resulting organization would anyhow need to maintain elements of hybridity (Josserand et al. 2006; Archer 2008), since the administrative necessities deriving from supervising tens of thousands of students, united with the need to comply with the

normative requirements imposed by government and accreditation bodies, demands the preservation of a traditional bureaucracy.

In fact, reflecting on this notion of hybridity, it might be necessary to transcend even the idea of post-bureaucracy, and its bureaucratic pedigree, to consider the possibility of 'post-collegial' forms of governance which, instead of looking back at the medieval age of guilds, are willing to experiment with models of open, non-hierarchical social collaboration. Two possible strategies to develop this post-collegial framework could be found in a structured effort for the 'rhizomatic multiplication' of academic networks and in the differentiation of academic professional profiles.

The first strategy refers to organizational initiatives (i.e. promoted and supported by the business school or by its Departments) aimed at developing the capacity to build and extend the existing net of social connections that individual academics are part of. This requires monitoring the effective density and reach of the existing formal and informal collaboration networks of each academic, assessing the degree of interconnectedness between the networks of different faculty members. It also involves explicitly rewarding individual academics' capacity to build and share this form of social capital, and testing and employing policies to facilitate network-building actions. The essential idea is to overcome a model according to which a Business School recruits and rewards individuals for their research potential (which demands the ability to build collaboration networks) but then leaves its staff members to their own devices in expressing their potential. Conversely, a corporate driven and supported development of connections that spread out as rhizomes, incorporating and reinforcing those of the close colleagues and collaborators can become a way to strengthen the influence and governance role of academics, since it would make them part of cohesive 'horizontal' groups whose performance is vital for the organization.



The second neo-collegial strategy starts by rejecting the traditional idea that there is only one possible career track, the one that retraces an apprentice/journeyman/master progression and that tends to reproduce clones based on the same mould. Instead, by acknowledging that there can be different ways of excelling and giving an useful contribution to organized, collaborative academic pursuits, it proposes to bring in social-sciences 'industrial modes' of academic productions that in other disciplines, and especially in the 'hard sciences', are well established. In many fields this collaboration mode is forced upon the scientific community by the need to share very complex and expensive equipment, such as a Particle Collider or a Telescope. I don't want to suggest that all researchers in a business school should devote their efforts to a single large experiment but that it could be worthwhile to consider the possibility to join forces systematically and create productive synergies by leveraging different 'functional' attitudes and skillsets. In other words, that it might be time to overcome the 'Leonardo da Vinci' syndrome, according to which each researcher must excel in every research skill. This means, for instance, encouraging researchers to develop specific strengths (in project management, or in observation, data analysis, writing and editing, etcetera) in order to form research teams that include different talents. Again, consulting teams or research and development project teams provide a good example of this organizational model, whereas individual professionals share a core skillset but also have specific strengths. Academic collaborations that exploit this principle are already practiced but they rarely (if ever) happen as the result of explicit, coordinated, managerial efforts.

Despite the limitations and criticisms presented in Chapter 9, the redesign of the workspace, represented by the creation of the DCCW building has a significant potential as an instrument for stimulating positive innovations in academic work practices. Architecture can be an instrument of hegemonic power, ordering practices by disciplining spaces but can

also unsettle established social orders, becoming a creative force (Clegg & Kornberger 2006). In this regard the new building holds the promise of stimulating creativity and divergent thinking both in its functional-technical aspects, by privileging meeting spaces and offering, and as an art-object, a convention-defying appearance, made of curves and folds. Yet the way in which it will be 'colonized' and brought to life by its dwellers will be crucial.

Finally, even if moral implications are disregarded and resistances to change overcome, it is not certain that a post-bureaucratic business school would be free of challenges and problems, since it would not be enough to make academic staff happier, more productive and better integrated, as elite consultants or Google employees are often convinced is the case. The organization would also need to meet the challenge of translating this creative output into money and legitimacy in order to survive and thrive. Well-travelled and critically reflexive academics are less likely to be easily charmed than young Generation 2.0 geeks by the promises of a brave new post-bureaucratic workplace so it is possible that not everyone would appreciate attempts to harness their energies by means of identity manipulation and post-modern practice engineering. Nonetheless, would it not be preferable to wrestle a nimble and smart post-bureaucratic beast rather than be crushed by a dumb bureaucratic Leviathan?

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