"Seeking meaning in Self: the dialogical process of storytelling and professional development"

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Abstract

Continued criticism of management education has given rise for the promotion and development of a more critically engaged pedagogical approach towards management learning in action. Drawing from critical and social constructionist perspectives in relation to learning, the paper focuses on the use of storytelling as a reflexive dialogical practice in the context of a post experience education. In the paper presented, the authors seek to respond to calls for professional development education which utilises experiential learning to draw recognition on how we engage with and make sense of everyday practices. It does this by exploring the use of narratives to develop more insight into how, through pedagogical means, one can create the opportunity for a student to engage in meaningful reflection. The authors argue that focus must be placed on methods through which learning resides in action. Recognising action in learning allows for the development of management education which re-directs thinking and conceptualizing towards understanding the social tensions, complex relations and connections in the co-construction of knowing. In discussing the nature of experiential learning as an enacted practice, the concept of reflexivity is particularly relevant. To be reflexive, as a means of a critique, is to focus towards reflecting and questioning one's current practices of learning, (Sheppard et al., 2000). We seek to illustrate the relevance of questioning our own assumptions and those of others to explore spaces of alternative action by engaging in social interactions and micro-practices of learning, what Schon, (1983) referred to as "reflection-in-action". The critical features of this perspective rest in the recognition and use of stories through which we come to experience the social world. The paper presents an account of practice of a post-experience student and tutors on a personal and professional development module of an MBA programme which combined storytelling with reflexivity. The paper focuses on how the module was developed, its established rationale, and discusses how storytelling and reflexivity were facilitated via a student's own account of their enacted learning through the module. The paper draws insight to the understanding of how they construct their reality and identity through relating ways of knowing. It is argued here that the practice of storytelling and questioning can greatly enhance our understanding of how we can develop more collaborative and purposeful ways of practicing as means of professional development.

Introduction

In recent years, critical management scholars, drawing upon postmodern debate, have raised important questions on pedagogical and epistemological assumptions upon which current MBAs, as professional development programmes, are underpinned (French & Grey, 1996; Giroux, 1988). The criticism of current pedagogical approaches to management education highlights the need to further develop educational methods and practices which stimulate and enhance reflexive learning. This is a challenge for business schools in that it questions deeply rooted beliefs and epistemological issues on the nature of management development. Traditional pedagogical norms tend to position professional management education as a series of functional, measureable and teachable processes; an approach which has remained unquestioned for many years. Educational programmes structured on this epistemological perspective tend to leave participants with abstract, unconnected knowledge and skills which can have very little relevance to the actual complex managerial practice. These issues are further compounded by the lack of exploration of the interdisciplinary nature of management activity; leaving no room to engage with the numerous influences of political and social tensions associated with management

behaviour. However, these current approaches are coming under increasing criticism (Bennis and O'Toole, 2005, Ghoshal, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer and Fong, 2004). Numerous publication in journals such as Management Learning (e.g. Elliot and Reynolds, 2002), Journal of Management Education (e.g. Cunliffe, 2002; Grey, 2002; Reynolds, 1999), other journals (e.g. Cunliffe, 2002; Forray and Mir, 1994; Grey and Antonacopoulou, 2004, Antonacopoulou, 2008a, 2008b) and edited books (e.g. Reynolds, 1997) have focused on teaching practices which support the development of critical-based epistemological pedagogies that encourage students to explore, question and draw meaning from their own experiences.

In this sense, learning in action suggests embracing what is unknown to challenge assumptions and generate new questions to deal with our day to day activities. Making management post experience education more diverse and critical requires educators and scholars alike to develop new modes of pedagogical practice (Gibb, 2002; Gulati, 2007; Pfeffer and Fang, 2002; Starkey and Madan, 2001; Van de Ven and Johnson 2006). For learning to be enhanced, attention must be directed towards the revision of existing scholarly practices which are central to business schools (Bartunek, 2003; 2007, Van de Ven, 2007; Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006; Weick et al,. 1999; Weick and Sutcliffe, 2001). These debates suggest that there is a need to develop an engaged pedagogical approach focused on the role of critique and practice as a way of acquiring analytical thinking skills. While this offers the opportunity to challenge conventional functionalist ideologies, it too fails to fully encapsulate the informal nature of everyday actions and practice of professionals. And this specifically in terms of how students make sense of their actions and learning, which are the essence of their practice and experience. A core aspect of the student's learning through practice is their ability to unlearn, an element of learning which connects action and knowledge (Gold and Holman, 2001; Gold et al, 2002). To unlearn, in this context, means to draw on the social dynamic tensions in the learning process through questioning existing practices, exposing underlying assumptions and habits which can restrict our ability to understand our own learning. Unlearning as a reflexive practice requires one to recognise how what is already known restricts our ability to develop new questions or to pose questions differently in relation to outcomes which are sought.

Drawing from a social constructionist position, the authors view learning as a process of embodied social relational exchanges or interactions through which we must enact in order to practice (Wittgenstein, 1980). From this perspective we look at how we make sense of experience in the context of our everyday interactions as a means of learning. The paper seeks to illustrate the impact a narrative based approach to learning in practice could have in relation to management education, where reflexive critiques may provide a platform for integrating more closely the appreciation/analysis of the nature of management development with the experiences of practice. To exemplify this standpoint, this paper presents the personal insight of a post experience learner who participated in an MBA module which utilised storytelling as a pedagogical approach to personal and professional development of self. The authors seek to explore how storytelling, as a means of an internal and/or external dialogical exchange, can support reflexive learning through which how we practice can be viewed not simply as something that we "do" but more importantly as something we "are".

Storytelling as a Dialogical Process
The engagement in storytelling can be viewed as a powerful method to explore and make sense of our own values, beliefs and behaviour (Gold and Holman, 2001). Storytelling is the means by which we capture and recall our experiences, by creating a sense of social order out of a chaotic social world, the story represents our interpretation of what we see or believe to be a true account of our interpretation of a lived experience (Boje, 1991). The process of storytelling is, in the context of this paper, viewed as a collective process. Indeed, stories have many actors and are communicated to an audience, the act involves the storyteller having to engage, share with and involve others. The meaning of the story needs to be made explicit in order for the audience to relate and understand what is being said, thus context, language and identity become core aspects of the story.

Storytelling as a method of dialogical expression can aid learners in the recalling of meaningful experiences in their everyday practice. Learners who engage in telling stories can potentially locate

and identify critical moments in their narration such as assertions, heroes, villains, truth claims and justifications (Georgakopulou 2006a, Gabriel, 2008). In this sense, stories contain multiple small narratives, stories within stories, and the process of storytelling can help learners to critically articulate their own accounts of their complex everyday practice. This requires learners to become reflective, critically aware and reflexively directed (Gabriel, 2004; Morgan and Dennetry, 1997, Georgakopoulou, 2006). Through the process, the student can gain greater insight into their own assumptions and values, especially in relation to how they created their identity in their own story. In this sense, the authors suggest an approach to professional learning through engaged practice, which helps leaners make sense of their experiences.

Day to day stories and their construction are fragmented, dynamic and uncoordinated accounts of events containing multiple actors and emergent plots; it is these small stories, the ones which are created in the everyday informal conversations which are of particular interest, (Georgakopoulou, 2006b). The authors view storying as a construct of emerging social interactions, constructed in a piecemeal type fashion (Brown and Duguid, 2002). Stories in this context can be "brief and fragmented across different extended and interrupted discourse" (Boje, 1991, pp109). Literature in organisational storytelling has offered insights on the type of stories which can be told when talking about our own professional development and identity. Such stories can take the form of satire, tragedy, comedy or even romance (Skoldberg, 2002). How these stories are structured and shaped is dependent upon the particular experience being recalled, where the narrator filters emotions, actors, events, heroes etc., to be included or not (Gabriel, 2008). While literature has sought to illustrate the use of storying as an insightful means to explore language and how humans make sense of experiences, much less attention has been directed towards understanding how stories are crafted. It is through the use of storytelling that our lived experiences are interpreted and given meaning (Stockoe and Edwards, 2006). For example, Sims (2003) in a series of storytelling interviews with middle managers found a degree of anxiety and vulnerability, felt by the mangers as they engaged in the process of telling their stories, this was especially evident when their stories were contested and probed by others. While much work focused on exploring the role of stories as a mode of identity construction (Gabriel, 2004), research has offered less attention to how practitioners, (in the context of this paper post experience MBA students), develop and use storytelling as a means of professional development.

Storytelling as a relational process (Learning through developing self)

The rationale for using storytelling as a means of developing personal and professional awareness of self on a MBA programme grew from the authors' appreciation of how we learn and engage to make sense of our experience through the stories we narrate. Storytelling is now widely used in areas of sociology, anthropology and indeed education, yet few management focused articles discuss the explicit use of narrative as a more humanist and appreciative way of understanding social agency and practice than conventional methods. However, getting a student to tell a story about a relevant experience is simply not enough. To gain real insight into their lived experiences, students need to engage in critical dialogue over the practical and theoretical aspects of their narratives (Watson, 2001). Furthermore, in order to tell a story, the narrator must be competent in their ability to understand "self" and have insight into their own positionality in the lived experience they recall. A story is told to someone and/or social group who listens and as such a story must be relatable, in other words the listener must be able to understand or draw meaning of the story so that they gain an appreciation of it and its context (Kaye and Jacobson, 1999; Greene, 2001). The story told needs to have recognisable elements- people, actions and events- which are real and/or familiar to the listener (Malone and Walker, 1999). Through the narrative, the listener must be able to become aware of what is normative for the context of the story. All stories have a plot which involves a descriptive account of the story's context, there is a climax or crisis to hand which needs to be explained. This process of explaining, of re-accounting, holds the possibility for both storyteller and listener(s) to learn through re-interpreting how the story has been perceived and constructed. This can be achieved through engaging the storyteller in a process of questioning, especially with regards to their assumptions, values, and beliefs.

The formation of the module was to challenge dominant traditional doctrines which currently exist in business education, as presented earlier. The ability to challenge such fundamentalist pedagogies with the HE environment is currently limited; maybe by the necessity of some post-experience courses

(MBA), to conform with professional body regulations, for example. In addition, there are both institutional and student pressures created by a functionalist perspective in which the learning environment is structured to specifically accompany a *dyadic* approach to study; where emphasis is placed on students obtaining their awards as cleanly and as quickly as possible, thus progressing with their desired career choice (Harvey, 2007). The central aim of the module was to encourage students to critically engage and reflect upon their own personal development through the use of storytelling as a means of facilitating the development of greater awareness of their practice. The teaching philosophy moved beyond traditional models of reflection (Kolb, 1984), seeking new methods to better understand and appreciate the nature of human practice. In order to focus on active engagement and experimentation, significant importance was put on experiential learning and enacted experience. This offered the possibility of developing new ways or methods of acting and practicing, (Gold et al., 2002).

The participants in the module were part-time MBA students attending during 2015/2016, who came from industry to service-based sectors, both male and female. The module's core delivery strategy was centred on a collaborative pedagogical approach to learning, focusing towards developing the student abilities in self-engagement, using open space workshops. This required a radically different educational methodology, one which was focused on facilitation rather than instructive delivery and thus based on more participative values. As a combined unit, all three writers hold various degrees of experience be that from a practitioner, practitioner/academic and academic perspective; all are engaged in post experience education. In essence all three writers have been inspired by and to a degree their perspectives further enlighten through the use of reflexive approaches to view and make sense of their social world. In keeping with the tone of the narration to come, the use of self-questioning can be discomforting but equally, as depicted in this account of practice, can be seen as offering the opportunity for fruitful discussion and debate. In the narrative below, a MBA student offers their insights into the process of writing and articulating their own story, the narration seeks to give the reader understanding of how the student engaged with the process of story writing. The student offers the reader a very personal account of both emotional and mental challenges they met in the process of writing a story.

> *While in my first year of PT MBA studies I found myself tasked with the assignment of writing a story, a narrative of a live issue from my practice. In the midst of a very defined and framed Post Graduate education program, which typical assignments are abundant in clearly identified structures and stated expected outcomes, with grid based grading processes; the storytelling exercise came as an unexpected task. Because it was a personal task, with no definition other than the one we (students) gave it, this specific task bore a lot of unknown, and in a certain way the freedom it gave us to make it our own was also what made it a very daunting task. A lot of questions arise from this unknown… "What is a story", "what is an issue in my practice", "which one do I write about", "who do I write it for", "how do I write about it", and so much more…. So how did I tackle this challenge and these questions?*
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> *Defining what to write about was I believe one the biggest hurdles in the process. One aspect I struggled with was the definition of the concept of "issue". It is only through dialogue with other students, lecturers and others involved in delivering the "taught" module that I clarified what it meant for me. The dialogue facilitated my thinking into selecting a subject matter. Indeed, from then I understood that an issue was not necessarily a problematic situation to resolve but maybe just a subject matter, a project, "something" that was happening in my practice. I then chose to write about the issue that was most on my mind, something I was dealing with at the time and that required me to think about how to go about it. It had many aspects, some were new to me, and others not as much, all converged or were linked into that specific live issue. It was about writing a proposal, it was about training a member of staff, it was about achieving results, it was about becoming a business manager. It was a challenging situation with many components.*
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> *I had to find a way to write about this issue for an audience that is unfamiliar, or at least a lot less familiar with the language used in my practice than me, and this was a challenge. I needed to find a way to make it understandable, and moreover relatable. I needed to find a way to*

translate the context and the main elements, but also the subtleties, the characters, the emotions without overwhelming the reader with technical, boring and dull terms. I needed to find a way to reach out to people outside of the practice. My choice here was to combine two approaches. The first one was to link my story to a medium with which most readers could potentially connect with, and the second was to utilise that medium as a proxy for describing my practice. This - borrowing the context and elements of a wider recognised practice or maybe hobby- I believed to be a suitable way to engage the audience in the journey I was undertaking as a practitioner.

Now, the assumption I made there was that it was more than likely that the audience would have been familiar with the general content and context of the metaphorical elements, if this assumption was to be correct then they, in my opinion, would be able to relate to, and maybe even share, the journey I had undertaken. And through the sharing of that specific journey, a brief sneak peek into my work life, the belief was that they would be able to understand a little more what I, the storyteller and ultimately I, the practitioner, was doing in practice. Through the sharing of a story focusing on a specific series of events or the live issue, in a way that the audience and I were both able to relate to, I was building a platform onto which interactions with others could take place; because we had a common understanding, not only of the live issue itself but of some wider aspects of my practice in general.

Having identified an issue to focus on and a way of telling the story, I was then set to write down my account of what was taking place. The challenge here was to utilise language and words that would, in my mind, make the truest reflection of what was taking place in practice. There, through the story, through the words I chose to use to relate the story and write it down, I was in fact unpicking elements, making sense of that multifaceted story/issue. The simple fact of finding ways of making it a comprehensible story, a relatable subject meant that I was making sense of it myself in the process. I took opportunities of remarkable events taking place at work to make entries into the story. The narrative was based on a countdown, journal type format and each entry was one of these remarkable development of the issue as it was unfolding in my practice. Practice and storytelling became intertwined, it had become much more than making a factual account of things that were happening, it had become a part of how I was making sense of my practice, through that specific issue.

Within this process, I noticed an influence emerging from the use of a metaphor on how I was making sense of that practice. Indeed, utilising a metaphor "forced" me into thinking about my practice in a completely different way, a way I would not have considered had I not been writing the story. In effect, I was taking myself out of the practice and looking at "myself" being a practitioner through the eyes of the storyteller. I had to think about how to translate the events into elements of the metaphor, therefore I had to make sense of what was happening before I could tell my story. And as I was doing this, I started to reflect on what I was doing as I was doing it, I was reflecting in action. Now, it is my belief that we all engage in reflection in action, whether we recognise it or not (i.e. whether we are conscious of doing it or not), but through the storytelling exercise I was <u>engaging</u> in reflection in action. Through and in the story itself (and therefore in my practice), I was engaging in internal dialogues, questioning the elements of the story/of the practice, questioning my thoughts, my beliefs, my assumptions. I was making sense of what I was doing, not in isolation but in relation to others. I was widening my perspectives, enriching my knowledge within the experience itself and by doing this I was opening up options for possible action.

I mentioned storytelling and practice being intertwined and the storyteller observing the practitioner, actually this probably went further as I started to look at my practice differently, about how I was doing things by thinking like the character in my story. The fact of undertaking the storytelling exercise was shaping the way I was thinking, the way I was going about in my practice. It made me more aware of a number of things…. The context I was working in, the environment, the people around me, the people I was working with, the events I was going

through, and most importantly it made me more aware of me and how I made sense of all these elements, how they were interacting and how they then impacted on the actions I was taking in practice.

Articulating Experience - Creating a reflexive narrative.
The dialogical practice invites the student to engage in critique of self, inquiring into one's own constructs and dynamics (Reason, 1994; Heron, 1996; Higgins and Elliott, 2011; Raelin, 2007). Rather than accepting prescribed content and methods, the student becomes an enquirer into their own narrative, searching for their own patterns of knowing, while simultaneously and continually questioning their own practices. Reflexivity as a pedagogical tool encourages a critique of the manner in which one views and understands their practice, their experiences and dominant assumptions (Gherardi, et al, 1998). Storytelling and reflexive questioning have the ability to bring students into questioning the very assumptions upon which their practice is enacted, their personal identity and the social relationship within which they act (Gold et al., 2002; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996; 2002). Through the sharing of stories, the module sought to provide a space whereby the students could help each other understand how they constructed their learning and experience (Widdershoven and Sohl, 1999). In this sense, focusing on the role of dialogue was highly appropriate given the multiple voices with which we convey meaning through the stories we tell. By inviting students to tell and retell their stories, both listeners and narrators were presented with the opportunity to think about how their interpretations of the stories were relevant to their own social context.

The use of storytelling as a method to aid reflexive dialogue forces the student to move away from their pre-existing assumptions and practices and provide them with the power and <u>conviction</u> to seek out and recognise new meaning and differing alternatives of practice. The implication of this position in terms of an educational agenda involves challenging the "self-conceptions" of what it means to be a "practitioner" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Martin, 1992; Zubizarreta, 2004). Engaging in such deep reflection can be beyond some student's ability, in that students who are focused towards functional orientations tend to offer very factual explanations to their stories. The creation of meaningful stories requires the storyteller to question their own assumptions. In other words, they become the object of critique, then challenge and disrupt how the story is told, the storyteller needs to be honest, and as suggested by Barone (1992, pp143), such honesty exposes the emotional aspects of social practice. These negotiated narratives have the ability to contribute towards a developing sense of connection where the student begins to recognise and make sense of their assumptions and actions (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Willmott, 1997; Weick, 1995).

In this sense, the developing story can be viewed as a vehicle for making sense of self and experiences, an interpretative act (Widdershoven and Sohl, 1999). The student's insight above is about a process of becoming, implying movement, agency and continuity in which the storyteller becomes an inquirer which seeks to constantly probe, explore other perspectives and self-understanding (Schwandt, 2001: 274). In the narrative below we evidence the heuristic position of the storyteller; storytelling is a social process which resonates through the support of a strong social infrastructure in order to stimulate reflexive discussion. What we can see emerging in the student's reflexive commentary below, is that the quality of learning depends on the quality of conversation. An integral part of the narration presented provides an opportunity to reflect on the insight this might provide on how we come to experience, as we engage in processes of relating. Through it we can begin to clearly see how the processes of participation and interaction provide and constrain the context of learning in action (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). We can clearly see how potential conflicts and contradictions influence and shape our practice (Higgins et al 2013).

There were two main challenges I face during the process of the module. Firstly, I faced the influence of the social context. Indeed, as a student I was part of a cohort which brought together a multitude of people with each their background, knowledge, experiences, expectations and assumptions. During the weeks and months of studying, dynamics and narratives emerged from the group, we all discussed our feelings and opinions on modules, and of course our experiences. Maybe a common assumption shared by many of the students, and

which I felt was there, is that business studies should provide answers, not pose questions. It then becomes "problematic" when such assumptions are met with approaches and modules that do pose questions, and moreover, questions about ourselves. I was not prepared or equipped to deal with these questions. It made me feel uncomfortable, a feeling probably shared by most peers then. And one of the response to this discomfort is to ridicule and criticise the source of it.

As a student in this group[1] I was then facing choices and pressures. On the one hand I might have wanted to remain part of the group, achieve a sense of belonging with others on the same journey. On the other hand, I might have wanted to engage in the approach offered here. When both were true I faced a dilemma, maybe an internal conflict. So perhaps there lied a barrier in the fact that social pressure could have been stronger than the desire to engage in something that was uncomfortable and challenging, but something that in the end was, and still is, extremely valuable. I chose to engage in it but at the same time keep that engagement personal. Probably a lesson learnt is that that by sharing my experience of this learning journey I could have benefited from a richer experience. But I didn't. Because of the group's attitude you end up on that solitary experience if you want to engage with it, because the "group" message is one of dismissal and mockery, and as "one of the group" you don't want to become the subject of the dismissal

In a discussion I had with another student about the module a few months after the module was completed, they said something that confirms this thinking. They said "I remember the first session [of the module] when they said we needed to write a story about ourselves, I thought surely not, I am a business student, I want to write about facts and figures, not about myself".

Secondly, looking at the subject matter of the module itself, I faced some difficulties in learning and engaging with the approach presented here. It is only by going through the module content, and the assignments that I could recognise the value and impact of it all. The first hurdle for me was to recognise and understand the language used, I found it difficult to embrace concepts I had not been exposed to. Actually, they were concepts we probably all are exposed to on a day to day basis, but I did not "speak" the technical language of reflective practice, narrative, theoretical approaches and the philosophical roots of it all. I think this is one of the aspects I found most frustrating, feeling unprepared, or uneducated. One of the issue is then to voice this sort of problems out... because not understanding when the assumption is made that actually you should, is not something that is easy to own up to. Once I was able to recognise some of the language, through reading, through discussing, it unlocked the possibilities to do something with it. But still, it took me a while to understand that reflective practice offered me a certain freedom to think for myself, to find my own thoughts, to define my own practice, to provide my meaning to practice and self in that practice. Reaching out to that freedom takes a lot of courage...it means being exposed, getting out of our comfort zone, being prepared to confront and rethink the image we have drawn of ourselves over the years. It can have profound implications.

The storytellers, through enacting and constructing their story, come to make sense of their experiences through the activity of writing and engaging with their own internal reflexive dialogue. In this sense it is critical for the writer to recognise their own practice, through social structures and other actors, by seeking to make sense of their actions from inside their own experiences. Positioning the writer as an insider suggests small insights or changes can lead to differing methods of interpretation which in turn can influence how the writer may interpret and account for their actions (Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe, 2004). The use of reflexive dialogue can offer the writer the opportunity to experience multiple interpretations of social reality when they are given the opportunity to question their underlying assumptions through collective inquiry (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005; Shotter, 1997). The process of storytelling requires the storyteller to engage in a self-reflective dialogue as the story emerges, this can

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[1] Group in this context refers to the cohort of students in that specific module.

be attributed to what Schon (1983) refers to as reflection-in-action, in which the voice of the storyteller is one part of the developing story, their actions and the actions of others help to shape and construct the experience. In order to engage within reflective dialogue, the storyteller must purposefully seek to engage with issues of ambiguity and uncertainty or feelings of discomfort when narrating their experiences (Cunliffe, 2004).

So, if it is that important, why is it not recognised or used more widely?
Students who experienced the module met the experience with mixed emotions, some responded with willing enthusiasm, while others were conservative in their view of what management education should be. Indeed, some students who really engaged with the material reported a sense of self enlighten at being able to work with such fluid ideas and critical questioning of every day practice. They also reported an increased sense of confidence in their ability to develop their own practice and thinking as practicing managers. While these reports are simply words of mouth they carry with them strong sentiments of engaged action and intervention into lived practice. On the other hand, the tutors, when developing the module, openly acknowledged and accepted the position that for some people, engaging in narrative as a means of understanding self is not a priority in their day to day actions (Vince, and Saleem, 2004).

Undertaking the storytelling exercise clearly has impacted the way I think and go about my practice. And in a way, that to me is so much more meaningful and useful than other modules and assignments I have undertaken. Indeed, on the one hand, these other modules are equipping us with tools, models, theories and answers to some extent. They are equipping us with skills, the same set of skills provided to all the students, and for most irrespective of the practice they are in, or the experience or knowledge individuals they have; and irrespective of the context into which individuals are practicing. They can only become truly useful if the practitioner understands his or her practice, including understanding that others impact upon the practice through interactions that continually take place. Indeed, the skills, theories, models that we are equipped with through business studies, or at least the way they are taught, tend to ignore the complexity of the social environment, i.e. the real world. They are then useful only if we can apply them and understand their limits in a complex environment.

On the other hand, the personal development module as it was designed and delivered here, through the introduction to reflective practice, enabled students to develop their awareness to their specific practice in relation to their social environment. This was achieved through the storytelling exercise. This approach allowed students to connect with themselves and others, to get to understand how they function as practitioners, how they engage with their practice. It is the only module (at the time) that makes a lasting a difference at the personal level. It is not about utilising tools, or finding answers to specific questions which everyone can do more or less. But it is about knowing how we interact with practice, how we can do it better, in a more engaged, and more committed and personal way. It was not a tool, it was not a taught skill, there was no clear way of being assessed, and there was no clearly defined frame. And I mentioned earlier that this is what made it daunting, but in essence this is where its strength lies. Because it enables each individual to make it as powerful and impactful as they decide it to be. I believe that by facilitating the process of becoming more aware this approach becomes a crucial element of the business studies. It goes beyond teaching us a way or ways of doing, it enables us to develop our understanding of who we are and how we think, how we learn and how we can develop ourselves.

Conclusion – so what next……

The article has sought to exemplify how storytelling can contribute to professional and personal development in new and more enriched ways. This reflexive style paper presented a perspective from which the writers' values and beliefs are informed, as opposed to making a claim for authenticity and authority in regards to the subject area. If the use of reflexive pedagogical approaches to management education is to be encouraged and promoted, it is appropriate for the writers to give insight into an account themselves in this emerging journey (Butler, 2005). It is recognised that narratives are not a

new phenomenon; there is existing research which has already adopted narrative approaches. The article presented here develops for the reader some strong and important insight into the relationship between storytelling and the use of reflexive dialogue as a tool of learning about self. However, there are wider lessons to be taken from this paper, for both academic and practitioners alike.

Through the article, we have exemplified how the use of storytelling can foster periods of deep reflection by facilitating a form of self-reflexive inquiry. These moments enable the student to engage and speak about the experiences, dilemmas and concerns they face in their daily practice. The process of engaging in storytelling enables one to bring what can be referred to as "undiscussable" into question (Preskill and Torres, 1999). If professional education is to make a critical impact on how students understand their practice and the process of social learning, then this learning must reflect the dynamic and continuous life experiences and the struggles which the students face in their daily activities. It challenges the traditional constructions of knowledge and focuses towards knowledge and learning as opportunities for practicing in more empowering and emancipatory ways. The impact of this approach on management educational pedagogy is that it moves focus from theoretical basis to actual practice, what we think, how we think, our assumptions, influences and judgements. By embracing this view, the manner in which professionals and educators engage becomes more of a creative force as a means of learning. The process of meta-cognitive inquiry can help students to develop analytical levels of thinking, to become more self-reliant and productive in their learning endeavours. By recognising the co-construction of practice, the educator/learner can make sense of their reflexive activity and construct practical accounts in a reflexive critique of their learning practice. Current pedagogical methods ignore the complexity of social practice and its shared construction, this is not to suggest that the responsibility for learning is directly shifted to the learner, but it does mean placing the educator as a collaborator in the process of learning.

So how can we begin to encourage the use of more reflexive learning conversations in post experience MBA education? In this article we have not only suggested, but evidenced, the notion of storytelling as a reflexive dialogical process. A method for helping us to recognise our practice and those taken-for-granted aspects of our everyday action, drawing awareness towards the practical moment to moment social relations which influence and mediate our actions (Shotter, 1997). The view of learning as an enacted action draws focus towards the role of the educator and student, as co-constructors of the learning experience. In this sense our voice, our practice, involve a delicate balance; talking too much or too little, the importance of enabling, encouraging students to make connections in their conversations but at the same time refraining from spoon-feeding and making those connections for them. According to Baker, Jensen & Kolb (1997, p7), "As soon as the intention is to follow a method in order to make good conversation happen, the very essence of good conversation that is transformative is violated". In order for students to engage in such deep dialogical conversations, the storyteller needs to have the freedom to weave and construct their own learning through their interactions, containing spontaneity and surprise, moments of realisation, which could only materialise by engaged questioning and dialogue, shaping and developing the story and storyteller. According to Cunliffe (2002) "Dialogue is a key factor in this process of exploration". The importance of how we engage and interact with students to create good conversation opportunities is important in helping to create connections and offering new knowledge.

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