Somatic learning: Bringing the body into critical reflection

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**Abstract**

Critical reflection is a process of bringing unquestioned assumptions to the fore for critique, through paying attention to dissatisfactions, discrepancies, tensions and contradictions in experience. It is important because it helps to reveal the complexities for and against learning that are embedded in a particular context. Aesthetics and a focus on emotional and political dynamics are two approaches already being used to encourage learning through critical reflection. However, this article argues there is still more benefit to be gained from understanding how and why a focus on the body can support critically reflective perspectives on learning. My contribution is to illustrate how Buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation and associated philosophy can inform a somatic learning process that connects bodily sensation to cognition.

**Keywords**

Somatic learning, critical reflection, mindfulness meditation, management education, body, Buddhism

**Introduction**

Critical reflection is a process of bringing unquestioned assumptions to the fore for critique, through paying attention to dissatisfactions, discrepancies, tensions and contradictions in experience (Reynolds, 1998). It is important because it helps to reveal the complexities for and against learning that are embedded in a particular context. Two particular approaches have already been used to encourage learning through critical reflection. Attention to aesthetics has illuminated learning from whole body sensory experience (Mack, 2015, Strati, 2007). A focus on the emotional and political dynamics opened up by critical reflection has helped to shift the emphasis towards both individual and collective learning (Gray, 2007). These approaches place learning about and from power and emotion centrally. However, there is still more benefit to be gained from understanding how and why a focus on the body can support critically reflective perspectives on learning. This is the primary concern of this article.

My contribution in this article is to add to the theory and practice of critical reflection in management education through a focus on the role of somatic learning in critical reflection. I explain how Buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation and associated philosophy can provide insight into a learning process that connects bodily sensation to cognition. I provide practical ways to integrate somatic learning into critical reflection. In particular, the Buddhist understanding of “mind” is integrative of physical consciousness, such that physical sensory information is both physical data about the body itself, and potentially a window into unacknowledged emotion. In addition, I differentiate Buddhist use of mindfulness from predominantly corporate uses of the term within the management learning literature. The overall value of my theme is that I outline an approach to management learning that encourages both mind and body to coexist as integral elements of the learning and managing process.

The article is structured as follows. The next section reviews debates and definitions in the critical reflection conversations, discussing how far this has gone in integrating the body. I define somatic learning and go on to make the rationale for why co-existence of mind and body in critical reflection could be beneficial for managers in their managerial and leadership practice, before making the argument for additional insights offered to critical reflection by somatic learning informed by Buddhist philosophical and psychological understanding of the ‘mind’. I highlight distinctions between this Eastern use of mindfulness and the prevalent Western uses in organisation literature. Drawing on an illustrative example I consider implications for Business School practice of integrating somatic learning into critical reflection and finally outline questions for further research.

**Critical reflection**

Reflection on experience (Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984) and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) are an accepted mode of learning in management education and development, involving mulling over past or current activity and events within their context, so as to increase understanding about what works or not, and why (Reynolds, 2011). Critical reflection advocates a deepening of critical thinking by participants on their daily realities through a process of explicitly bringing a questioning gaze to presumptions about purposes and intentions (Reynolds, 2011). A central idea is to examine anew previous taken-for-granteds in order to avoid the ‘lure of familiarity and false recognition’ (Tomkins and Urus, 2015:600) which are a risk of instrumental reflection.

Critical reflection is consequently a progression and systemisation of the political dimensions implicit in ordinary, ‘technical’ reflection (Reynolds, 2011:9), by making the emotional and power relations of a situation explicit. The purpose of reflecting critically on a situation is to reveal the complexities for and against learning that are embedded in a particular context, and ultimately also to change it (Freire, 1972). Following Habermas, Kemmis suggests ‘critical reflection self-consciously employs a dialectical form: it seeks to discover how that form and content of thought has been given by history, and how history itself has been shaped by our praxis (action informed by critical reflection)’ (Kemmis, 1985: 142). By adopting this more expansive approach, and making conscious the social, political, professional, economic and ethical assumptions constraining or supporting one’s action in a specific context, critical reflection can open up the space for creation of new ways of thinking and acting (Raelin, 2001).

Critical reflection in management and leadership education has been one of the responses made to critiques of the approaches taken by business schools in developing people for management and leadership practice (Alvesson, et al, 2009; Antonacopoulou, 2010; Cunliffe, 2002). Challenges are made to an education that places emphasis on analysis and technique whilst neglecting to engage participants in learning experientially from the kinds of messy, complex problems that characterise management practice (Mabey et al, 2015; Sutherland, 2012; Waddock and Lozano, 2013). It is also not new to identify that traditional management education has been dominated by a narrow, cognitive, rationalist ethic, privileging the mind, with little space for the affective, let alone the body.

**Approaches to stimulating critical reflection**

A variety of approaches have been used to stimulate critical reflection in educational contexts, the diversity reflecting varying interpretations of what it means to be ‘critical’ as well as whether reflection is seen as an individual cognitive, thinking process or relational (Tomkins and Ulus, 2015). Methods to stimulate critical reflection include reflective diaries, critical incident analysis, reflective journals, storytelling and reflective dialogue (Gray, 2007), application of conceptual ideas from Critical literature to inform sense-making (Grey et al, 1996), reflective conversations with a situation (Schön, 1983), and practical reflexivity (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004: 35), drawing on Heidegger’s ideas of meditative thinking for reflexive conversations that question our assumptions, ways of relating with others, our ways of communicating, and of being and acting in the world.

An ongoing conversation in the critical reflection literature concerns the value of extending its application beyond individual psychological processes to become a collective process, for example, to consider and critique organisational assumptions and practices (Reynolds and Vince, 2004; Gray, 2007). Some of the above tools lend themselves to individual use, but others (such as reflective dialogue and practical reflexivity) provide opportunity for groups of managers to share reflections. Other approaches place learning about and from power and emotion at the centre (Raelin, 2001; Vince, 2002; 2010), shifting the focus from the individual towards both individual and collective learning. Methods that support participants to collectively explore their assumptions and emotions about their experience of a situation include ‘reconstruction and critique’ to shape attention within communities of practice (Welsh and Dehler, 2004:16), and critical action learning in which strong facilitation is employed (Trehan and Rigg, 2015).

Reflection has been described as a ‘bridge between experience and learning, involving both cognition and feelings’ (Gray, 2007:496), connecting into, challenging and extending personal knowledge structures. This highlights another conversation relating to critical reflection concerning the extent to which it is more than ‘disembodied cognition’ (Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith, 2004:33) with emphasis on thinking. Within management learning Cunliffe and Coupland (2011:64) suggest ‘few studies have extended the concept of emotion to embodiment or explored the role of embodiment in the sense-making process’. One exception is Zundel’s (2012:110) explication of a contemplative reflection that is embodied, using the metaphor of ‘walking around’ to capture the notion of bodily being in the world not simply observing it. He draws a contrast between the cognitive notion of stepping back from action to ponder and contemplative reflection as a way of being, without purpose. His critique of the former is its continuation of a ‘Cartesian legacy of spatial and temporal separation’ (Zundel, 2012:112). Such attempts to overcome dichotomous separation of the here and now, and of mind and body, are integral to calls for critical reflection in organisations that invite more embodied ways of knowing (Mack, 2015) and for reflection to go ‘beyond the head’ (Pässilä, 2012, cited by Cotter et al, 2015). Action-based approaches such as arts based methods (Sutherland, 2012; Adler, 2015) and research-based theatre are advocated to elicit sensory experience that encompass ‘political, emotional and ethical components of organizing’ (Cotter, Pässilä and Vince, 2015:2). Such aesthetic approaches (Gagliardi, 1996) illuminate learning from sensory experience, as distinct from intellectual and rational knowing (Strati, 2000) through using the senses to ‘detect, discern and pay attention to our whole body responses to experience’ (Seeley and Reason, 2008: 37) and make tacit knowledge explicit (Strati, 2007).

Arts, such as music, dance, movement and drama are described as presentational knowing: ‘a bridge between experiential grounding and propositional knowing’ (Heron, 1992:175, cited by Seeley and Reason, 2008: 37). Aesthetic approaches, in providing different forms of expression and recognising knowledge based on the senses (Linstead and Höpfl, 2000) are seen to disrupt limitations of ‘cognitive-rational ways of knowing’ (Mack, 2015:158) and to afford access to different ways of knowing (Welsh, Dehler and Murray, 2007). Somatic or embodied learning is a form of aesthetic learning concerned with learning from and through the body, as Thoma (2003:17) illustrates: ‘rather than deciding where to move through my thinking mind, I am patient and waiting to discover how the intelligence of my body wants to reveal itself in motion’.

**Somatic learning**

Outside management education somatic approaches to learning are more familiar, particularly in fields such as drama and dance where bodily performance is central. For example, in actor training yoga, tai chi and Feldenkrais are employed (Posadzki et al, 2010) not only for coping with stress and anxiety, but also for fostering development of psychophysical awareness of connections ‘between the individual’s skeleto-muscular traits, habitual movements and posture and the image a person has of their self.’ (Kapsali, 2013: 77). Dance is used as a means of fostering learning from bodily awareness and sensation experienced through movement (Lipson Lawrence, 2012; Snowber, 2012). In management education the challenge remains to explore why the body and somatic learning matters for leaders and managers, and how it might be stimulated.

The term ‘somatic’ derives from the Greek word ‘soma’, meaning sensed body. As a field of practice and study, somatics is concerned with knowledge coming from experience of the body from within (Hanna, 1986), as distinct from external knowledge about the body (such as anatomy). Hanna defined somatics as first-person experiential knowledge, involving bodily senses and a process of becoming aware of the body as a source of tacit knowledge and self-insight (Mullan, 2014). He drew on Husserl’s phenomenological notion of “somatology” which he described as ‘a science that would unite a methodological knowledge of the body derived from experiential studies with the biological sciences; and by the classical Greek soma, the living bodily person’ (Johnson, 2004: 271).

Somatic learning or embodied learning (I will use the terms interchangeably) is understood to mean a process through which work with the body facilitates information to come into consciousness and be expressed through language (Gendlin, 1992). In other words bodily tacit awareness becomes knowledge when articulated in words. In this sense of cognition deriving from bodily knowledge, somatic learning encompasses both body and mind.

A strong tradition of somatic work in the West is associated with education for improved physical movement (such as dance training) and for therapeutic purposes (as in body psychotherapy), in the sense of helping a client come to know and verbalise emotions that ‘are stored in the body’ (Mullan, 2014: 259). In these traditions somatic knowledge is accepted as a pre-conceptual or non-conceptual thinking, what Polkinghorne (2004:140) describes as ‘an amalgamation of emotions, memories, spatial and temporal locations, the felt presence of other people and things, and language. ’ ‘Bodily felt meaning’ (Gendlin, 1969) is a core idea to describe a ‘holistic, implicit, bodily sense of a complex situation, a way of knowing that involves attentiveness to the body and body wisdom’ (Gendlin, 1969:5/6).

So far I have argued that critical reflection in management learning, which has already been expanded by aesthetic approaches and attention to the kinesthetic of emotion, can benefit from the additional dimension of incorporating somatic learning and work with the body. But why? Before looking at practical ways to integrate somatic learning through mindfulness into critical reflection, I first make the argument for why it is relevant and important to bring attention to the body into learning about management by considering the place of the body in management and leadership discourse.

**Body and mind in management discourse and education**

‘Managers' bodies are denuded, so far as is humanly possible, of all references to flesh and to nature. Clean-shaven, as much flesh as possible is hidden by the suit. The hands, perforce, must be visible, but otherwise only the head protrudes above the collar and tie. The tie has little if any practical value, but its aesthetics is Cartesian at its most profound: it sharply divides the 'head' from the (negated) body; seemingly cutting off the thinking part of the body from the flesh upon which it relies only, it would seem, for locomotion and visibility.’ (Harding, 2002: 68).

With this quote Harding (2002) suggests that managerial bodies of both genders, in different ways, oppress managers themselves. Management and leadership discourse has been dominated by cognitive and disembodied conceptions of leadership, to the point that the body has been described as taboo (Sinclair, 2011). In other fields of scholarship, the body as a focus for research emerged in the 1980s, assisted by Foucault’s work (e. g. 1988), and from the 1990s bodies entered research on gender, work and organisation (Kerfoot and Knights, 1996). Critical perspectives have illuminated the association of leadership with identity work and the physical body. Consequently, it seems paradoxical that so little attention has been paid to the body within management education when managerial leadership is so evidently enacted through the physical body with presence and performance, and so implicitly central to leadership practice as accomplishment (Sinclair, 2007; 2011). Body language, dress, voice, confidence, spatial layout of meetings and buildings are all recognised and are often taught as part of enacting effective leadership, yet rarely is attention paid to the underlying gendered discourse of strength, virility, or potency associated with idealised conceptions of leadership. Cunliffe and Coupland (2011:83) offer a rare exception, arguing: ‘we cannot divorce our living bodies from the context, and that recognizing this moves us beyond a pure cognitive appraisal, which enables us to understand that organizing also operates on a sensory level through sensory knowing and bodily sensations that is everyday and ordinary’.

A number of studies have shed light on embodiment within organisational work, for example, illuminating ‘embodied conduct’ (Hindmarsh and Pilnick, 2007: 1395) or exemplifying somatic learning (Goldman Schuyler, 2010), but more prevalently a Cartesian mind/body dualism continues to prevail, with most still taking the body as an object for study. The rather intangible idea that embodied learning might mean it is possible to know something in one’s physical body, such that one is ‘struck’ (Cunliffe, 2002, citing Wittgenstein, 1980:85) has seemed harder to accept compared to the dominant idea of knowledge being purely cognitive. My argument is that this paradox might be contributing to leaders being inattentive to their bodies and consequently unaware of the potential knowledge held there. As Harding suggests: ‘what is folded within the manager's body is the organization "itself", for the mimetic relationship between the human body and organization theory cannot be missed. ’ (Harding, 2002: 72). The question is, how might the potential for learning through critical reflection be further enhanced by bringing the body in more centrally to the management learning process?

In the context of therapy, Gendlin (1969) developed ‘Focusing’ as a technique for coming from body wisdom to conscious knowledge through exercises of attentiveness to the body. The somatic idea of the body being a foundation for knowledge (along with the mind and feelings) is also central to Buddhist philosophy and associated practices of mindfulness meditation (Bodhi, 1994; 2011), and it is here that I want to concentrate. Building on recent attempts to connect reflection with embodied learning (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2011) and mindfulness (Jordan et al, 2009; Keevers and Treleaven, 2011), I argue that critical reflection can be enriched by drawing on the broader understanding of ‘mind’ found in Buddhist mindfulness meditation and widening the nature of ‘data’ that is given attention to, so as to bring in somatic knowledge. My starting point in making this argument is to differentiate between mindfulness as prevails the organisation studies literature and corporate practice, and mindfulness as associated with its traditional, particularly Buddhist, philosophical and psychological origins. This is an important clarification in light of the confused and contradictory conversations emerging on mindfulness in the management and organisation studies literature.

**Appeal and promises of mindfulness**

In the past decade there has been an upsurge of Western interest in mindfulness (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011, Badham and King, 2016) applied in fields as diverse as medicine, psychology, neuroscience, school education, business and leadership development. Systematic research reports positive impacts on brain activity, producing increased control over chronic pain, anxiety and depression (Kerr et al, 2013), curtailing negative functioning and enhancing positive outcomes in mental health, physical health, behavioural regulation and interpersonal relationships (Brown et al, 2007; Desbordes et al, 2015). Mindfulness is increasingly referred to in the organisation literature, and has become popular in Western business and health sectors as a virtual panacea for personal anxiety, stress, and related illness as well as offering promise for complex organisational decision-making. A growing evidence base of the physiological and psychological benefits of mindfulness makes it hard to argue against. However, a plethora of meanings and practices come under this increasingly ubiquitous term ‘mindfulness’ and clarity is as significant for critiques as it is for those who advocate its practice.

A common understanding, which is present in each of the definitions below, is that to practice mindfulness means to pay attention to the present moment, to notice, to be aware. For example:

* ‘*learning to pay attention and be aware of what one is sensing and noticing’* (Goldman Schuyler, 2010:27)
* *‘a state of consciousness in which attention is focused on present-moment phenomena occurring externally and internally*. ’ (Dane, 2011, cited Dane and Brummel, 2013:108)
* *‘the mental ability to hang on to current objects by bringing wandering (wobbling) attention back to the intended object’* (Weick and Putnam, 2006:277)

However, looking at the subtlety of the language in these quotes, there is variation in the emphasis between ‘external’ (the world beyond the person) and ‘internal’ (mind and body), and also different emphases within the internal focus. To help clarify my own use and arguments, in this article I firstly revisit contextual origins of mindfulness before outlining dominant applications in the organisation studies field.

Whilst acknowledging that there are variations within both Buddhism and within Western secular practices, this article does not have space to explore these in depth so will make two generalisations of key contrasting distinctions between their uses of mindfulness. I argue that firstly, in corporate mindfulness there is disconnection from the contextual origins and wider philosophy. Secondly, looking back into traditional Buddhist origins of mindfulness within the Pali canon[[1]](#footnote-1) there is a broader comprehension of the concept of ‘mind’ in which physical sensation, the body, is integrated as one form of consciousness and a key source of knowledge (Bodhi, 2011). Mind is not simply understood as cognitive as in Western interpretations. The remainder of the article will elaborate on these two arguments before drawing implications for supplementing critically reflective learning processes.

**Mindfulness – contextual origins**

Mindfulness meditation is an ancient practice (Hanh, 1975), probably currently most associated in the West with Buddhism and secular yoga, though meditation is also practiced in Hinduism, Islam and Christianity (Shear, 2006). Mindfulness as associated with Buddhism is derived from the Pali word sati, which can also mean attentiveness to the present, and from the Sanskrit word smṛti, which also translates to awareness, or remembering. Kudesia and Tashi Nyiman (2015:2) argue that the construct of mindfulness is often misunderstood because of being decoupled from the ‘network of Buddhist psychological constructs in which it originated.’. As such, mindfulness is frequently seen as an isolated, individualistic intervention, defined narrowly as attention to the present moment and separate from the larger set of Buddhist practices and worldviews. In the latter, core themes at the heart of cultivating mindfulness include attentiveness to the present, non-judgemental awareness, impermanence, insight, interdependence with others (Hanh, 1975), cultivation of compassion (Badham and King, 2016) and social engagement with the world (Brazier, 2002).

The practice of mindfulness meditation involves two key ingredients, samatha (sustained concentration) and vipassanἀ (experiential enquiry) (Batchelor, 2011), usually conducted whilst sitting or walking. Concentration, which is typically focused on the breathing, encourages attentiveness to, followed by disengagement from whatever is happening in the here and now, whether that be sounds, physical sensations or what the mind is doing. During mindfulness meditation people are encouraged to simply note the coming and going of thoughts, without getting drawn into a specific train of thought or making judgements. Learning to practice mindfulness is to counteract the habitual tendency of ‘mindlessness’ (Langer and Moldoveanu, 2000), characteristics of which are described as including continually living in the past or planning the future, whilst paying scant attention to the present; feeling separate from both life and oneself; and being caught up in the mind, whilst detached from the body. A meta-awareness or discernment (Carmody, 2015) is fostered, into how the mind is so readily trapped by habitual patterns of attachment, fixations, aversion and delusion (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011).

**Mindfulness for performance**

A recent review of the burgeoning literature on mindfulness in relation to organisation management (Badham and King, 2016) categorises the multiple conversations across two dimensions: firstly, individual to collective, and secondly, for the purpose of wisdom or for performative/instrumental ends. Discussions on organisational mindfulness have been particularly influenced by Langer’s work (e. g. Langer, 1989) which emphasises paying attention to what is going on in the current moment so as to avoid unquestioned routines and repertoires of thinking and behaving, to notice unexpected signals and to achieve alertness to new possibilities. The focus is external, in the sense of concerning events outside the individual, and the rationale is organisational, for the purpose of improved information-processing (Levinthal and Rerup, 2006), avoidance of mistakes (Ray, Baker and Plowman, 2011), and better decision-making (Weick and Sutcliffe, 2006). Mindfulness from this perspective is deliverable-focused and performative, dissociated from ethical considerations.

Weick and Sutcliffe (2006) caution that our perceptions can be distorted by the rush to analyse and conceptualise. In their search for greater wisdom in decision-making and better quality of attention, they highlight how the focus of Buddhist philosophy and psychology on internal processes of attention goes beyond the distinction-making familiar in analysis. The value of such focus is to bring awareness of habits of thinking such as incomplete observations, restricted viewpoints and unquestioned responses. This is closer to mindfulness as articulated in Buddhist traditions, where the concern is more with internal processes of consciousness, mindfulness as an ongoing practice, or way of being, and with non-judgmental observation. In this context, the purpose of mindfulness meditation is to work towards the four fundamental tenets of Buddhism: loving kindness (towards oneself and others), compassion, joy in others and equanimity (Bodhi, 1994, 2011). Mindfulness is also not practiced in isolation in Buddhism, but integrated with meditation, contemplation and study (Kudesia and Tashi Nyima, 2015). In Western leadership development work a rare integrated approach drawn from Tibetan Buddhism is presented by Goldman Schuyler (2010:27), in which she combines three distinctive processes of:

* Mind training: learning compassion through cultivating constructive mind states and reducing negative ones
* Meditation: sitting still to focus and clear the mind
* Mindfulness: learning to be aware of and attentive to what one is sensing and noticing

Her objective is to support leaders’ integrity in the sense of their ability to live with high levels of stress and to assist them to preserve ‘integrity’ in the sense of ‘the capacity to hold one’s shape in the face of … perhaps unimaginable difficulties’ (2010: 26).

**Contrasting perspectives on ‘mind’**

These illuminations of distinctive Western and Eastern perspectives on mindfulness highlight a distinctive Buddhist psychology. In the Pali Canon ‘body’ is one of four establishments of mindfulness (Bodhi, 2011). ‘Mind’ is not purely cognitive, in that consciousness or knowledge is understood to come from other senses as well, meaning that learning can be somatic as well as cognitive. Somatic or embodied learning in Buddhist traditions is prominent in that mental process is understood as just one of six types of consciousness, the others being the sensory experiences taste, touch, smell, sight, hearing (Kudesia and Tashi Nyima, 2015). Reality is then something to be ‘sensed’ through any or all of these consciousnesses. Integrated with meditation, contemplation has a dual purpose to both quieten the mind to allow insights to emerge, but also through the stillness to develop a meta-awareness of the interpretative patterns of one’s mind, such as attachment, projection, aversion, indifference, arrogance, and envy or repeated patterns of fear, anxiety, self-criticism, or denigration of self and others. Mindfulness practice develops deep listening in the sense of encouraging people to remain present in the moment, to ‘sit with’ what is going on in the ‘here- and–now’. It encourages practitioners to notice and observe physical sensations and mind patterns, but without getting drawn into them. Rather than ignoring discomfort or willing a way through it, acknowledgement and acceptance helps to resolve them and/or bring conscious insight.

Mindfulness as practiced in Buddhist traditions, but also certain Western adaptations such as MBSR (mindfulness based stress reduction) (Baraz and Alexander, 2010), teaches attentiveness by the practitioner to their own bodily sensations, emotions and thought patterns. Sinclair (2011:127) also describes use of yoga to highlight this learning of ‘a non-dichotomous understanding of the place of the body alongside the mind’. In Buddhist traditions it is important to pay attention not simply to the breath during meditation, but of ten points which include ‘remembering to notice emotions in the breath [and] the pain and limitations of the body’ (Kudesia and Tashi Nyima, 2015:15). In this way, to listen through mindfulness meditation to physical sensory information is to create the space to acknowledge that discomfort and pain can be both physical data about the body itself, and potentially a window into unacknowledged emotion. It is this potential source of insight and learning through mindfulness meditation practices which I argue has potential to add a stronger somatic dimension to critical reflection. Criticality comes where that emotion is associated with organisational relations. In this sense mindfulness offers potential for both a reflective project of the self as well as for organisational reflection (Badham and King, 2016). By this they mean the individual becoming aware of ways their experience or thinking is a product of organisational actions.

**Pulling the strands together**

In this article so far I have drawn from strands of different literature to argue that the benefits of critical reflection for management learning can be enhanced by extending the theory and practice further into the somatic or embodied realm. Conversations in the field of somatic learning suggests a realm of knowing and understanding that is recognised in the aesthetic turn in critical reflection, but can be amplified by explicit attention to work with the body. I have drawn from leadership and studies literature to argue that this is relevant for managers and leaders because of the way the managerial body has been either invisible or conceived in a distorted way that is oppressive for both women and many men. The challenge is to find ways to advance somatic learning within management education both pedagogically and theoretically. To support this I have shown how Buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation and associated philosophy can provide insight into a learning process that connects bodily sensation to cognition. In particular there is value in the Buddhist understanding of “mind” as integrative of physical consciousness, which tells us that physical sensation is potentially both data about the body itself, as well as a window into unacknowledged emotion. This perspective is also supported by developmental psychologists and philosophers such as Gendlin (1969, 1992) and Polkinghorne (2004), as discussed earlier.

Critical reflection already places learning about and from emotion and power centrally, and as outlined earlier in the article offers a repertoire of approaches for stimulating such learning. I have argued however, that mindfulness meditation offers an additional and distinctive practical approach to integrate somatic learning into critical reflection, thereby addressing critiques in the literature of the paucity of alternatives offered to the cognitive predominance in critical reflection (Jordi, 2011). These strands are drawn together in the conceptual framework presented in Figure 1.

* Insert Figure 1 here -

Figure 1 puts form to a process of somatic learning stimulated by mindfulness meditation. Central is the mind-body inter-relationship I have discussed throughout the article. Learning is represented as occurring through an arc of stages beginning with attentive focus, and moving through to emergence of conscious knowledge as articulated in words or language. In more detail each stage comprises:

* *Attentive focusing* – using mindfulness meditation to still the mind and bring attention to *physical sensation*, for example, through concentrating on breathing. Mindfulness meditation commonly involves slowly conducting a mental scan of the body from head to toe, noting sensations, for example, any particular pain, tightness or numbness
* *Noting emotion* - As discussed earlier (Gendlin 1969, 1992; Kudesia and Tashi Nyima, 2015. ) there is potential for sensory information in the body to be a window into unacknowledged *emotion*.
* *Deep listening* is metaphorical, representing the idea of staying with the sensation and any emotions that arise, neither judging them nor dismissing them, just being curious as to what might emerge.
* *Discernment* refers to development of insight; a meta-awareness of habits and patterns in our ways of thinking, coming to notice what we are noticing (Vince, 2016, personal communication) and what we are not. It can be seen as a movement from non-judgementalism, to the application of wisdom, equally important in Buddhist application of mindfulness, as highlighted earlier.
* *Words* connotes the articulation of knowledge in language. This is the cognitive expression of what was previously only known somatically. Somatic learning at this stage informs critical reflection when the individual has been enabled to tap into previously unacknowledged emotions and particularly when these relate to work organisational issues. Herein lies the potential for an unfolding of the organisation from the individual’s somatic experience.

Figure 1 visually represents the somatic learning process as passing sequentially through a series of stages from attentive focus through to cognitive knowledge expressed in words. I fully acknowledge that in reality the learning process is more iterative than sequential, however, the figure is presented as a heuristic device for the purpose of illuminating how the practice of mindfulness meditation, acting as a means of eliciting somatic knowledge, can feed into conscious critical reflection.

**Illustration of somatic learning stimulating critical reflection**

In this section I present a vignette (Figure 2) to illustrate how the somatic learning process in Figure 1 can apply, such that work with the body can be brought into the practice of critical reflection. For the purposes of this article I will concentrate on mindfulness meditation as a vehicle for introducing somatic learning although, as discussed earlier with reference to dance and theatre, somatic learning could of course be broader. The vignette is drawn from my own experience and captured through journaling. It is deliberately written in the third person because its purpose is to clarify the conceptual discussion of bringing the body into critical reflection. The vignette is presented to illustrate the somatic learning process represented in Figure 1 and in particular to elucidate how a somatic intervention such as mindfulness mediation can enable knowledge and emotion held in the body to become conscious knowledge articulated in words. To aid explanation the vignette is presented in three columns. The left describes the experience. The centre provides interpretation of how the stages of Figure 1 apply. The right adds explanation.

* Insert Figure 2 here -

**From somatic learning to critical reflection**

Critical reflection, as introduced earlier, is a process of bringing unquestioned assumptions to the fore for critique through paying attention to dissatisfactions, tensions and contradictions in experience (Reynolds, 1998). It involves paying attention to the emotional and power dynamics of an experience, and fresh examination of previous taken-for-granteds (Tomkins and Ulus, 2015). But how do we come to know what our tensions and dissatisfactions are? How do we become cognisant of our unquestioned assumptions or our emotions in a given situation? The vignette illustrates how explicit attention to the body (using mindfulness meditation) taps into the realm of knowing and understanding recognised by somatic learning. This can be seen to contribute to critical reflection in two ways. Firstly, taking the Reynolds (1998) definition of paying attention to dissatisfaction and tensions in experience, the vignette shows how attention to physical discomfort opens up the possibility for somatic knowledge, held in the body as tension, to come into consciousness. In the vignette the narrator became cognisant of her emotional ambivalence through the process of mindfulness meditation.

Secondly, the process of deep listening and discernment created a distance that led to personal insight not only into the particular feelings about the specific situation, but at a meta-level into habitual patterns and unquestioned ways of operating, which are carried into the . This accords with Raelin’s (2001) view that critical reflection involves making conscious the assumptions constraining or supporting one’s actions, the recognition and insight provoked into habitual ways of thinking and implicit assumptions opens up the possibility for new ways for thinking and acting. The recognition that individual experience is a product of organisational actions is described by Badham and King (2016) as a movement from subject to object. Herein lies the potential for political insights, the unfolding of the organisation from the body (Harding, 2002), moving from individual to organisational assumptions and processes (Reynolds and Vince, 2004).

This vignette illustrates how a somatic learning experience can provoke further critical reflection about organisational life, power and politics, and bring into consciousness inter-connections between individual experiences and patterns of organising. I am not suggesting that engagement in mindfulness meditation delivers ready-made critical insights, or that it is necessarily the only way to elicit particular knowledge. My argument is that through attention to the body it offers additional sources of knowledge; enabling access to and articulation of pre-conceptual knowledge that previously was not in consciousness.

**Implications for a somatic pedagogy in a business school context**

So far in this article I have argued how and why there is scope to enrich critical reflection through somatic learning. In particular I have focused on how and why Buddhist practices of mindfulness meditation provide a learning process that facilitates cognition to emerge from bodily sensation. In the context of management learning and business school education, the challenge is how to operationalise the somatic learning process illustrated in Figure 1, that is to move from focusing on physical sensation, through recognition of emotion, discernment, to insight articulated in words. There are particular challenges for bringing the body and sensory learning into the curriculum in a way that can be institutionally accepted, in a context still dominated by Cartesian dualism. Though I might argue the benefits of a full series of yoga classes or Buddhist mindfulness meditation programme, others (e. g. Sinclair, 2007) suggest how difficult it can be to gain acceptance from colleagues and/or students, when business school pedagogies predominantly continue to emphasise cognitive learning and analysis whilst the body within the management education curriculum is either invisible or distorted.

I suggest there are other opportunities for integration of somatic learning into critical reflection through working within the bounds of accepted critical reflective pedagogic practices. Existing reflective work could be stretched by integrating mindfulness ideas and practices within existing spaces. For example, this might include introduction of the practice of noticing the body as part of exercises in active listening. Action learning, which is often used in management education, traditionally opens with the activity ‘check-in’, designed to bring concentration to the here-and-now at the start of collective reflection sessions. This could be extended to include noticing bodily sensations in addition to the existing feelings and thoughts in a situation.

Themes of personal effectiveness and stress are commonly included within business school management and leadership development programmes, and could be spaces to introduce practices like yoga or mindfulness meditation. However, to stimulate critical reflection, I argue it is crucial to add the aspect of learning to notice what we are noticing, as captured in Figure 1. This is the crux of what a Buddhist perspective on mindfulness and the practice of meditation offers to critical reflection. It is not just about learning to slow down and relax, but becoming aware of our habits of thought, our unrecognised assumptions and unconscious reactions, and why these might be significant.

**Conclusion – towards an agenda for practice and research**

My contribution to the field of critical reflection in management learning is fourfold.

Firstly, I explicate a rationale for how and why critical reflection for management learning can be enhanced by extending further into the somatic or embodied realm. Critical reflection already places learning about and from emotion and power centrally, and, as outlined earlier in the article, offers a repertoire of approaches for stimulating such learning. I have argued however, that mindfulness meditation offers an additional and distinctive practical approach to integrate somatic learning into critical reflection, connecting bodily sensation to cognition, thereby addressing critiques in the literature of the paucity of alternatives offered to the cognitive predominance in critical reflection (Jordi, 2011). Conversations in the field of somatic learning suggests a realm of knowing and understanding that is recognised in the aesthetic turn in critical reflection, but can be amplified by explicit attention to work with the body. In explicating somatic learning I have argued the value of a different way of thinking about ‘mind’ to encompass bodily experiences, drawing particularly on a Buddhist understanding of “mind” that is integrative of physical consciousness, such that physical sensory information is both physical data about the body itself, and potentially a window into unacknowledged emotion. This perspective is also supported by developmental psychologists and philosophers such as Gendlin (1969, 1992) and Polkinghorne (2004), as discussed earlier.

My second contribution is to introduce a model for practice (Figure 1) that can be used to embed somatic learning into critical reflective practices for management learning. The challenge is to find ways to advance somatic learning within management education, so as to bring greater co-existence between mind and body in the learning process. The model provides a guide for practice and I have outlined suggestions for ways in which this could be embedded both through radical curriculum changes that introduce mindfulness meditation and also, taking account of institutional acceptability, I have highlighted the potential to work within existing reflection spaces, stretching them to encompass somatic work.

My third contribution is to the management learning agenda. In the longer term somatic learning adds additional weight to those seeking more substantial reform to business school curriculum and pedagogy to counter a cognitive dominance (Mabey et al, 2015; Waddock and Lozano, 2013 and others, as discussed earlier) and develop practical wisdom and judgement for management practice (Antonacopoulou, 2010; Ramsey, 2014). The skill of learning somatically, encouraging both mind and body to coexist as integral elements in the learning and managing process, is significant for management learning beyond the business school classroom in that managers continue to learn experientially throughout their working lives.

Finally, I contribute to shaping a future research agenda. Although there are exceptions (Sinclair, 2007; Goldman Schuyler, 2010; Reitz et al, 2016) there is very little research evidence to date exploring the experiences of somatic learning in the form of mindfulness practices within management learning. In terms of the potential to elicit new sources of knowledge for critical reflection, and to enable individuals to see their experiences as a product of organisational actions insights, (as captured by Harding’s (2002) conception of unfolding of the from the body, and Badham and King’s (2016) notion of movement from subject to object), we need further evidence of how people make such critical connections, what is learned from embodied experiences in the course of mindfulness meditation, and how somatic learning might help unfold learning about the .

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| **Figure 2. Vignette** |
| ***Vignette***  | ***Figure 1 Stage***  | ***Explanation*** |
| *“She sat quietly breathing, slowing the breaths down, consciously, deliberately and gently noticing sounds around her – birds, breathing of others, movement outside the room; then bringing her attention to her body. She noted where her feet touched the floor, her back touched the chair, her thighs made contact with the seat. Then she brought her attention to her breathing – in… out… abdomen moving with each breath. . . in… out… focus on the breath, breathing in, breathing out…breathing in…*  | ***Attentive focusing*** using mindfulness meditation to still the mind and bring attention to physical sensation.  | Concentrating initially on breathing created a stillness in which attention could be focused on each part of the body.  |
| *Following the meditation teacher’s guidance she slowly scanned her body from head to toe, stopping to note any physical or emotional sensation. As her attention came to her throat she became aware of a sense of tightness there.*  | ***Physical sensation*** noticing particular sensations | Mentally running a scan of the body |
| *She focused on this physical sensation for a few moments, gently paying attention to the tightness. As she did so she became aware of a sense of fear.*  | ***Emotion*** Awareness of the emotion of fear came in association with the physical sensation of tightness in the throat | The implication is that the narrator was unaware of this before the meditation, but that the knowledge was carried in her body, as pre-conceptual knowledge (Gendlin, 1969, 1992). This is also illustrative of a Buddhist understanding of mind as comprising sensory experiences as well as cognitive.  |
| *For some moments she kept her attention on the sense of tightness in her throat and the sense of fear that she had become aware of as she did so. She did not consciously speculate on it or try to make any assessment or decisions. She kept herself open to whatever came next…* | ***Deep listening*** keeping attention on the physical sensation and associated emotion, without judgement | In letting our attention keep focused in this physical area, we bring into consciousness what was previously sub-conscious, or what Polkinghorne (2004) called pre-conceptual. Associated with that consciousness might be the recognition of a particular emotion. As we sit with that emotion, associated thoughts are likely to come into mind. We might gain insight into its source. But often during mindfulness meditation our mind wanders into a familiar train of thought for example, worry, regret, self-criticism.  |
| *In the stillness of staying with the physical sensation, and simply breathing, her mind leapt and began worrying about work. . . would there be a job for her after the restructure…. would she want what was offered… what would happen if she didn’t get one. . . would this be the opportunity to look at something totally new, …. but then again she did like a lot of things about her current work, but what if …. .* *She realised she was distracted from the meditation. With some effort she pulled her mind away from this train of anxious speculation and back to her breathing – breathing in… breathing out …. pausing just long enough to label her thinking as ‘worrying’ noting ‘I’m worrying again, I’ll come back to that later’. ”*  | ***Discernment*** - becoming aware of both the specific emotion and her habitual response of amplifying worry. Developing a meta-awareness of the way in which her mind was working.  | This example is expressive of a movement from subject to object (Badham and King, 2016) as the narrator steps outside her experience of the physical sensations within the meditation and gains some distance from the feelings of fear and worry. Through becoming less enmeshed in these she is able to recognize her patterns, and to begin to identify implications and further questions to ask of herself.   |
| *Later in the day she deliberately sat down to reflect on that habit of worrying, of escalating worry, realising she makes herself more anxious doing this. ‘OK’, she told herself, ‘what is this telling me? What is going on here?’ She realised she felt a strong sense of discomfort with the work situation and an overwhelming sense of powerlessness. She thought over assumptions she had been making about the necessity of decisions being made by senior management; about the pattern of communications in the organisation and how they positioned herself and others; about the extent to which she had choices she could make alone or with colleagues.”* | ***Words*** – formulating knowledge in words; somatic knowledge becoming cognitive  | The initially generalised sensation of fear became crystallised in particular words. The narrator named her feelings.Her personal insight has two aspects: Firstly, at a meta level, she recognises a habitual pattern in her own thought process which has consequences both personally and in the way she can choose to engage organizationally. Secondly, in naming the feelings she has about her work situation she gains clarity that this may not just be a personal issue, but one that might be shared or created by organizational context. Expressing the question ‘what is this telling me?’ advances critical reflection because it invites further thought and enquiry into power dynamics or that organisational context which assists the narrator to question assumptions of being passively subject to events.  |

1. The Pali Canon is the collection of primary Pali language texts or scriptures which form the doctrinal foundation of the ancient Theravada Buddhism [↑](#footnote-ref-1)