**Rights and wrongs of manager identity: implications for manager education**

**Introduction**

There is a problem with manager education: the continuing popularity of programmes such as the MBA is matched by ongoing criticism of such programmes as a “flawed product” ([O'Toole, 2009, p. 549](#_ENREF_16)) which typically fails to deliver what either managers or businesses need. O’Toole ([2009](#_ENREF_16)) argues that this reflects a failure to question what the purpose of manager education is: management educators are continually developing innovative ways of ‘how’ to deliver manager education without fully determining ‘what’ that education should be or is for. In this chapter I extend O’Toole’s challenge. As well as needing to establish what manager education is for, I argue that we need to go further and more critically examine the nature of management itself. Drawing on the concept of identity and the notion of management as an identity project, and presenting empirical data from a case study of managers working in social housing, I propose a conceptualisation of management which is quite different to the normative assumptions on which much manager education is based. I then go on to demonstrate how such a conceptualisation might frame both the purpose and methods of manager education programmes.

**Manager identity and the nature of management**

An increasing body of research conceptualises management as an identity project ([Andersson, 2010](#_ENREF_4); [Harding, Lee & Ford, 2014](#_ENREF_11); [Sturdy, Brocklehurst, Winstanley & Littlejohns, 2006](#_ENREF_21); [Thomas & Linstead, 2002](#_ENREF_23); [Warhurst, 2011](#_ENREF_24); [Watson, 2001](#_ENREF_25)). Rather than the acquisition of formal knowledge and specified competences, management is understood as a social and relational process of ‘becoming’, in which the individual is able to understand and define themselves as a manager, and to be recognised as such by others ([Andersson, 2012](#_ENREF_5); [Sturdy, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_21); [Warhurst, 2011](#_ENREF_24)). This understanding of management is further illuminated by the concept of ‘identity work’, which expresses identity as the dynamic between the individual’s sense of self, or self-identity, and identity regulation, or the effects of social practices ([Alvesson & Willmott, 2002](#_ENREF_3)). Identity is conceived as an ongoing struggle of “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising” ([Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165](#_ENREF_22)) self-identities in different social contexts in order to sustain a (perceived) sense of a coherent and meaningful self, and to account for ourselves as consistent and moral to others ([Ricoeur, 1992](#_ENREF_18)). Management as an identity project is therefore more than understanding oneself as a manager. Managers may experience tensions between their own desires and expectations as managers and those of organisational colleagues ([Andersson, 2010](#_ENREF_4), [2012](#_ENREF_5); [Harding, et al., 2014](#_ENREF_11)) and threats to their position from more senior managers or staff ([Sims, 2003](#_ENREF_20); [Warhurst, 2011](#_ENREF_24)). Their role and status as managers is contextual and fragile, requiring constant maintenance and re-forming ([Thomas & Linstead, 2002](#_ENREF_23)).

Conceptualising management as an identity project has already informed some critiquing of manager education, and particularly the popular emphasis on the acquisition of knowledge, tools and techniques assumed to be essential for managers. One effect has been the proposal to re-frame programmes such as MBAs primarily as resources for manager identity formation, enabling managers to develop greater self-confidence and personal credibility ([Sturdy, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_21); [Warhurst, 2011](#_ENREF_24)). An identity conceptualisation of management also highlights the disconnect between rational models and closed problems learned in the classroom and the messy, complex and irrational nature of real-time organisational situations, including relations with others, and how organisations may fail to recognise the ways in which managers have learned not only new ways of doing, but new ways of being ([Andersson, 2012](#_ENREF_5); [Raelin, 2009](#_ENREF_17)). Nevertheless, despite these important insights, I argue that management as an identity project still risks replicating and reifying normative assumptions of the nature of management itself. I therefore seek to critically extend the implications of manager identity and identity work in order to demonstrate how such a conceptualisation can provide a very different perspective of managers and management, and therefore for the purpose and design of manager education.

Management as an identity project implies a goal of manager education as being the successful construction and maintenance of a manager identity ([Sturdy, et al., 2006](#_ENREF_21); [Warhurst, 2011](#_ENREF_24)). However, what ‘manager identity’ precisely means is rarely stated. Semantically it may refer to two quite different things. Firstly, it may express the notion of *manager* identity, in which an individual is able to talk about themselves, understand themselves and behave in ways which are socially recognisable as ‘management’, or being a manager. This externalises management as an agreed or recognisable construct defined as a set of particular practices, behaviours and values, and indeed reflects an ongoing concern of business schools to define and professionalise management ([Khurana, 2007](#_ENREF_14)). Such constructs are therefore implicitly reproduced: manager identity reflects the degree to which an individual has successfully acquired a certain kind of self-knowledge and understanding. Second, however, is the notion of manager *identity*, or the personal sense that an individual makes of a ‘manager’ role in an organisation, and how they incorporate possible meanings and expectations of the role they occupy into their own self-identity. This locates management as part of the individual’s meaning-making and identity work. Rather than evaluating whether an individual is able to make a credible claim to ‘be a manager’, such a framing asks how individuals occupying manager roles experience and make personal sense of that role, and what it means to ‘be a manager’. It invites us not to rush to definitions of management or managers, but to attend instead to the individual experiences and identity work of those occupying the role ([Harding, et al., 2014](#_ENREF_11)).

The organisational position of managers further highlights the nature of management as subjective and experiential. From an organisational perspective management is a necessary function for achieving objectives though the control of resources and for creating alignment and consensus with the organisation’s objectives ([Hassard, McCann & Morris, 2009](#_ENREF_12)). This perspective also informs manager education programmes and the ongoing concerns that manager education is not providing managers with the skills that organisations require ([O'Toole, 2009](#_ENREF_16)). However, from the perspective of the individual occupying a management role the meaning of being a manager may be rather less clear. A significant but largely under-researched feature of a majority of manager roles is their position in-between those whom they manage and those whom they are managed by ([Rostron, 2016](#_ENREF_19)). Managers are not simply required to implement organisational objectives but to “translate” ([Currie & Proctor, 2005](#_ENREF_7); [Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015](#_ENREF_9)) executive intentions and strategy into something that can be realised operationally. Managers are subject to multiple expectations and discourses, and accountable to multiple constituencies. These may indeed include organisational claims that seek to construct them as active and transformational agents for the organisation ([Du Gay, 1996](#_ENREF_8); [Hassard et al., 2009](#_ENREF_12)). However, managers may also spend significant amounts of time with the staff they manage and need to develop effective personal relationships with them ([Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2005](#_ENREF_2); [Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015](#_ENREF_9)) which may include expectations to defend and protect staff interests ([Alimo-Metcalfe & Alban-Metcalfe, 2005](#_ENREF_2); [Jones & Kriflik, 2006](#_ENREF_13)). Managers may also be positioned by discourses of professional values, operational practice or customer needs, particularly if they have come from a practitioner role ([Alexiadou, 2001](#_ENREF_1); [Croft, Currie & Lockett, 2015](#_ENREF_6)). From the perspective of the individual manager, management as an identity project is not simply growing in maturity into an organisational role, or developing the ‘right’ kind of manager identity, but making personal sense of a complex and contingent role which is subject to multiple and competing demands and discourses. In answer to the question I posed at the beginning of this chapter, management is a social and moral practice, in which managers are required to both interpret and respond to the needs of others, and to shape meanings, values and human commitments ([Watson, 2001](#_ENREF_25)), while accounting for oneself to those others ([Ricoeur, 1992](#_ENREF_18)).

**Manager identities at work**

In order to further examine this conceptualisation of management as an identity project and its implications for the role and design of manager education, I present four contrasting examples of managers making personal sense of their organisational role. The cases all come from research carried out during 2013-4 at ‘Panorama Housing’, a social housing provider managing over 11,500 properties in the North West of England. The project aim was to investigate the ways in which managers constructed workplace identities in the context of their organisational position in-between those they managed and were responsible for, and the organisation they were responsible to, with particular focus on the extent to which they recognised, and made sense of their position in-between multiple interests and subject positons. I therefore defined as a ‘manager’ anyone who both directly managed other staff and who was also directly managed. This identified twenty-two eligible managers within the organisation and twenty-one agreed to take part in the research, comprising eleven team leaders or first level managers, eight service managers and two operations directors.

During the course of the research I interviewed all twenty-one managers using a narrative approach in which I invited each manager to tell me a story about a workplace occasion or event which they felt represented their own understanding of their role within the organisation. The manager’s story then formed the basis for the rest of the interview ([Wengraf, 2001](#_ENREF_26)) in which I explored the sense and meaning of the story for the manager, including the reasons for their choice of story, how they came to understand their organisational role, and how they thought others viewed them and their function. By using story elicitation, and by giving managers opportunity to choose one in advance of the interview, I deliberately formulated the interviews as occasions for self-presentation, in which managers could account for themselves and their role on their own terms ([Ricoeur, 1992](#_ENREF_18)), rather than seeking to frame their experience in particular ways ([Flick, 2009](#_ENREF_10)); and I sought to achieve some degree of disruption of the traditional interview format of question and answer in order to further uncover personal meanings rather than dominant organisational accounts.

Analysis was multi-staged but always based on interpreting the interview texts as particular instances of self-presentation, and sought to identify and examine processes of identity work undertaken during such a social interaction. For the purposes of this chapter two analytical stages are relevant. First, a form of thematic analysis ([King & Horrocks, 2010](#_ENREF_15)) was used to identify the possible subject positions that managers recognised in their talk, and the ways in which managers interpreted and responded to possible subject positions, including ways in which they utilised available discursive resources to support, reject or re-work such positions. Second, the manager texts were re-read in terms of the research conceptualisation of the manager in-between. Following a further form of thematic analysis ([King & Horrocks, 2010](#_ENREF_15)) descriptive and then thematic codes were developed to capture talk in which managers interpreted their organisational position and its meaning, in order to characterise the range of ways in which managers described and made sense of their organisational position and role.

**Ways of being a manager**

I now present the cases of four team leaders or first level managers. Such managers represent a particularly intense example of the manager in-between: they typically work closely with the staff that they manage and may have formally been their peer; they are more likely to retain technical or professional knowledge and experience and be concerned with directly managing operations or services; and they represent the immediate face of the organisation, or ‘management’ to their staff ([Croft, et al., 2015](#_ENREF_6); [Ericsson & Augustinsson, 2015](#_ENREF_9)). Moreover, by selecting managers who work in the same organisation at the same level and with similar responsibilities for managing a staff team, the cases are able to highlight the contrasting ways in which managers may make sense of organisational positions, and their personal responses to multiple demands and subject positions. Nevertheless, they are also reflective of the wider cohort of twenty-one manager interviewees.

***Varley – the team’s champion***

*The story of the recruitment panel:* Varley was the junior member of a panel recruiting to a position within her team. One candidate was very young and inexperienced, but nevertheless performed very strongly in the interview, and better than another more experienced candidate whom the panel had expected to be able to appoint. Varley argued the young candidate’s case, pointing out that they had evidently researched the position as well as demonstrating knowledge and aptitude, and eventually persuaded senior managers to appoint them by accepting full responsibility for the decision: “It was, right, well, you’ve got to manage them, on your head be it”. The applicant has since continued to flourish in their new role, vindicating Varley’s judgement.

Varley’s chosen story included several themes which continued to feature significantly as we discussed her story, and Varley herself was quite clear as to its meaning:

*“I’m proud particularly of the fact that I stood up for that person, argued their case and when it was a marginal decision as to who was going to be appointed, I had the guts to basically argue the case for that person.”*

Varley’s story and subsequent interview talk constructed her as an advocate and defender of her staff, who is prepared to challenge more senior managers. She referred to many other occasions of taking up “battles” against senior manager decisions, such as when a new office system was introduced which undermined the team’s essential work processes. Varley accounted for herself, and her sometime willingness not to “toe the party line” in several ways. First, she claimed direct responsibility for her staff: she is their “first port of call” for any issues and she is required to be sensitive to any “strength of feeling amongst the team”, identifying the “key issues that are affecting people and...trying to move them”. This is reflected in her story where she was the only one to stand up for the outsider candidate. Second, she claimed responsibility for her own service area, based on her expert knowledge. Varley was able to accurately assess the young candidate’s capabilities based on her own detailed knowledge of her service, in contrast to senior managers: “A lot of people...haven’t even had the experience of front line housing”; and such knowledge also justifies her taking up issues that affect her staff and service operation. Finally, Varley constructed her role as a moral one. Her story is one of doing the right thing by challenging senior managers, “having the guts” when “it would have been so much easier not to have gone down that route and played it safe”. Again, she contrasted herself with senior managers who deferred responsibility – “on your head be it” – whereas Varley put her own “neck on the line”.

***Kendall – the expert who delivers***

*The story of a new system:* Panorama needed a new case management system and Kendall was asked to join a team dedicated to configuring and implementing it. Kendall attended an extensive training course and then spent many months working on the system. Initially she felt out of her depth, but other colleagues on the team reminded her that she was bringing her operational expertise on which the group were heavily reliant: “Once I’d learned [the systems], then I could bring all my other skills in to what I was doing”. The eventual roll-out was a success, but Kendall then found managing the system undemanding: “I said you’re paying me an awful lot of money to sit in a room and do filing”. Eventually Kendall was able to secure her current position that fully reflects and utilises her skills and knowledge.

Kendall constructed her organisational role as a loyal and skilled expert at the service of the organisation. Reflecting on why she had chosen this story, Kendall concluded:

*“I’ve got kind of transferable skills that I’m more than happy to use...I don’t care what my role is, what I’m called, as long as I’m providing something that the business needs.”*

For Kendall, therefore, her current manager role is secondary to her skills and knowledge, and her primary concern is that her skills and knowledge are being appropriately recognised and used. This self-construction informed Kendall’s accounting of her management practice. Like Varley, Kendall positioned herself as being responsible for the effective running and delivery of her service, her expertise meaning that “nine times out of ten I will have the answers”. However, Kendall also carefully distinguished between her own role and that of her manager: “I’m quite good at fixing things...I might not be as strategically aware...as [them]”. Her role, as the expert, is to deliver services on behalf of her manager, to identify and raise problems for her manager’s attention and to advise on possible solutions, but it is her manager’s job to make decisions and to instruct Kendall to implement them – which she will do loyally and effectively. Kendall’s self-construct as an expert also informed her relations with her staff. In her interview talk she similarly positioned staff as fulfilling a particular role which they had been appointed to and were qualified for, and therefore she would not undertake the “painful option” of trying to make staff undertake additional responsibilities they did not want, despite Panorama’s emphasis on staff empowerment and development. “They don’t want to be promoted and they’re happy doing what they do, so I wouldn’t push them into doing something that they’re not comfortable with”, nor would she try to persuade staff of the merits of a decision she personally disagreed with: “If someone was to complain I’d say...I possibly agree with you to a certain extent but this is what we’ve been told to do, and it is what it is”. Ultimately, Kendall’s role as the expert is to make a decision work, rather than to challenge it.

***Goddard – blending management and practice***

*The story of rising from the floor:* Goddard was an experienced officer whose career has mirrored the creation and growth of Panorama: “I’ve seen it from the beginning”. Goddard wanted to “progress my career” and found support from his manager who gave him additional responsibilities and supported his application for promotion. Goddard was successful, but then faced the challenge of “having to manage people who you were once before”. However, he continued to receive support from his manager, including formal management training, and has been able to successfully manage staff through his personal knowledge of the service: “So I know the issues that they face, I know the difficulties, I know the challenges”.

Goddard’s story emphasised two features which featured strongly in his interview talk, and which informed his identity as a manager. The first is that he draws strongly on having expert knowledge to inform his management practice and account for his new manager position to the team, based on his experience. However, the second is a strong identification with the organisation:

*“So really I’ve seen it from the beginning, it’s grown, and I’ve been a part of that change...the whole organisation’s developed a lot which, I think to be made to feel part of that change is important. I obviously see myself as contributing towards that.”*

Not only has Goddard’s career mirrored the growth of Panorama, but he also claims to have mirrored the organisation’s commitment to change and development by his own willingness to change and develop into a manager role. Goddard drew on these two themes to account for himself in contrast to both his staff and his own manager. To staff with whom he had previously worked, Goddard suggested that although they were experienced, they were also constrained by past practice – “that’s the way we’ve always done it” – whereas Goddard is open to changing and developing with the organisation: “We’re looking to go forward and we’re trying to improve it and progress it”. Goddard also accounted for himself to his own manager who relies on him for operational experience: “This is a bit more hands-on whereas [they are] more strategic and political... they will come to [me] to find some information for them on the systems, whereas I fully understand [the] working environment”. Goddard’s story of promotion constructed an organisational position by drawing on features of both staff and his manager, aligning himself with the organisation and its objectives, whilst maintaining a distinctive contribution to those objectives.

***Oakley – becoming a manager***

Oakley initially offered two stories, one of delivering a marketing event and one of managing the reorganisation of his service. However, analysing Oakley’s text as a whole, and reflecting Oakley’s own reasons for telling these stories – as evidence of his skills and capabilities as a manager – I identified a broader, meta-story of becoming a manager.

*The story of a new role:* Although Oakley was an experienced team leader, an organisational restructure led to him managing a service he had little previous experience of. Staff looked to him for expert support and knowledge, but because he was “still learning on the job”, he did not “always have the right answers” and Oakley had to work hard to build up trust with the team and learn about the service. However, Oakley also sought to develop his management skills, including volunteering for formal manager training that the organisation was offering: “It’s a great opportunity, it really is...this is another string to my bow”. Oakley has started to recognise himself as a manager, not only in undertaking such training, but in demonstrating manager skills such as delivering a project marketing his service and supporting staff through a difficult change, and now has ambitions to progress to a senior management role.

In contrast to the other team leaders who appeared to present relatively settled accounts of themselves, Oakley’s text suggested a considerably greater degree of ongoing identity work in order to make sense of his organisational role and identity. A significant challenge to Oakley’s identity was being asked to manage an unfamiliar team, which threatened his ability to construct a role of expert knowledge and experience he had previously relied on, and which his team expected of him. Furthermore, during the re-structure Oakley discovered that many staff saw him as “management” and part of that decision making process rather than part of the team: “That was quite difficult because you think you’ve built up a trust with people, over the period you’ve worked with them”. In our conversation Oakley countered discourses of technical expertise by drawing on alternative discourses of management skills, learning and development. He presented his acceptance of the new role as taking on “a new challenge” rather than sticking to what was familiar, and drew on his willingness to take advantage of studying for a management qualification through the organisation’s talent management programme, in contrast to some other team leaders: “Having the qualifications does help. I know experience is important as well but I think if you’ve got the balance it does help”. Oakley’s two chosen stories can therefore be read as part of his identity work in constructing himself as a manager recognisable to the organisation. The marketing campaign demonstrated his ability to deliver organisational objectives: “It’s a task that I’ve been asked to do and I’ve done it”, while the second illustrated their experience of change management “because it was something that is...in management books and everything isn’t it”. Oakley summed up his role thus:

*“It’s...trying to persuade people...you try to get the best for the staff, you try to get the best out of the staff but also at the same time make sure the business objectives are met.”*

**Manager identity work: developing manager education**

Read within a normative understanding of management, Oakley and then Goddard present the most mature manager identities. They both described developing into a manager role, with Oakley in particular being able to name and attribute to himself management qualities and a desire to develop further as a manager. They both also presented themselves as strongly identifying with the organisation, with a responsibility to promote organisational values to staff. By contrast, within a normative understanding of management, Varley and Kendall represent more problematic or under-developed manager identities. Varley positioned herself in some opposition to the organisation, often “fighting battles” on behalf of her team, while Kendall suggested passively implementing rather than actively promoting organisational decisions, seeing herself more as an expert than as a manager. However, read as identity work, and as individuals making personal sense of a manager position within the organisation, the cases reveal four highly personal manager identities which reflect the fragile, complex and contingent nature of management and what it means to be a manager. Within their interview texts the four managers reflected the multiple and competing constituencies, discourses and positions implicated in their organisational role: a deliverer of organisational objectives; a representative of the organisation; a member of a team; a representative and defender of staff; a technical expert; and their texts reveal them as accounting for themselves and justifying their personal meaning-making and enactment of their organisational position. Invited to present themselves as they wished, the stories of Varley, Kendall, Goddard and Oakley illustrate how organisational roles, including management, are not objective sets of functions, but interpreted and enacted by an individual post-holder. Indeed, Oakley’s most (normatively) developed manager identity was partially instigated by other positions such as being an expert and being a member of the team (positions utilised by Varley, Kendall, and Goddard) becoming unavailable. Rather than describing the ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ kind of manager identity, the managers’ stories and interview texts reveal the role of their own self-identity in making ongoing personal sense of a discursively constructed position.

I began this chapter by arguing that to answer O’Toole’s ([2009](#_ENREF_16)) challenge to define the purpose of manager education we first needed to critically examine the nature of managers and management itself, the people whom we seek to educate and the role for which we seek to prepare them. I have argued that management is not simply a defined set of activities for the purpose of acting in the service of the organisation and its objectives, but is contingent and subject to multiple and potentially competing discourses, subject positions and expectations from different organisational constituencies; and that manager identity is not the achievement of a particular kind of self-understanding (the ‘right’ kind of manager identity) but rather the personal sense that individuals make of a contingent and contested positon. This conceptualisation of management therefore implies a particular purpose for manager education. Whereas manager education has typically been concerned with the achievement of prescribed knowledge, skills, practices – and much debate around manager education has simply been whether programmes are delivering the right knowledge, skills and practices – I propose instead that the purpose of manager education should be to enable managers to make ongoing and deepening personal sense of their organisational position and particular situation, in order to enact that position more effectively. In particular, its purpose should be to enable managers to identify the aspects of their roles that they especially value, and which are most personally meaningful. By enabling managers to integrate different values and experiences with their managerial position, manager education can support more generative relationships between the manager and their organisation, in which the manager feels valued, recognised and able to invest positively and creatively in their organisational role.

I therefore conclude this chapter by exploring what such a form of manager education might look like, setting out some of the key principles which should underpin it, and then identifying some key methods and practices that would support such a way of ‘doing’ manager education.

The first principle for designing such manager education programmes is that their purpose is to generate new knowledge and understandings of management, rather than to merely reproduce dominant modes of management. This requires manager education programmes to explicitly recognise the contested and contingent nature of management and the manager’s organisational position, and the diverse ways in which such positions may be experienced and enacted, retaining a critical awareness and recognition of management ideologies. Following this, the second principle is that manager education programmes should be genuinely manager-centred. This requires recognising and honouring the lived experiences of managers as the essential starting point for understanding management and the role of managers; it means giving managers permission, and perhaps the language to be able to speak of and reflect on the organisational realities, expectations, tensions and conflicts which they experience; and it means recognising the agency of managers to make personal sense of their position and to enact their role in ways that align with their own self-identity and the organisational context in which they work. The third principle is that manager education is not simply about the education and learning of the manager, but a tripartite process of mutual learning involving the manager, the organisation and business schools. By creating such opportunities for managers to acknowledge, discuss and reflect on the ways in which they experience, interpret and enact their organisational roles, manager education programmes can enable further insight into the nature of manager roles, the tensions within which they work and the range of ways in which such tensions might be managed. In particular, giving voice to alternative interpretations of the manager role – as described by Varley, Kendall, Goddard and Oakley – draws attention to the heteroglossia of discourses and interests which are commonly hidden within organisations. Rather than always seeking consensus by creating managers in the organisation’s image, organisations might equally seek creative dissensus by being open to alternative perspectives, interests and concerns which are reflected in the identity work and organisational positionings of managers.

Finally, how might these principles of manager education – of knowledge generation, manager-centring and mutual learning – be turned into deliverables? O’Toole ([2009, p. 549](#_ENREF_16)) notes the ever-expanding “eclectic grab-bag” of methods available, but I suggest that four are critical to fulfilling these principles. First, reflexivity must be at the heart of manager education, its design and delivery: it must be a way of being and doing rather than a separate, often optional topic of study. It is only through being able to critically reflect on both dominant ideologies and discourses and on their own practice and interactions with others, that managers will be able to expand and deepen their own understanding of management and their personal management practice; and it is only through such reflexivity that teachers and researchers will be able to critically examine their own knowledge and assumptions of management. Second, it is from such reflexivity that managers will start to determine and evaluate their current practices and selves as managers, and their desired selves: therefore manager education should be fully self-determined, with managers able to select topics and projects in order to meet their own identified learning and development needs, rather than following a set programme of pre-determined and generic competences. Third, manager education must be experiential, grounded in the ongoing and daily lived experiences of managers, for it is in their daily organisational work that managers must continue to make sense of and enact their manager roles. But fourthly, manager education should also recognise and value the role of the classroom. In a tripartite partnership of learning between manager, organisation and teacher/researcher, the latter role is crucial in several ways. The classroom provides an essential physical and temporal space away from the manager’s job and from their organisational context. It is a space to bring their organisational experiences, a space in which to discuss and reflect on those experiences, to listen to and explore different perspectives, and in which to more critically examine their organisational assumptions, ideologies, interactions and practices. The teacher/researcher’s role is neither to hand out pre-determined and pre-packaged knowledge, nor to increasingly withdraw as managers determine their own learning, but to remain as engaged, reflexive partners in the manager’s learning, critically facilitating the manager’s own reflexive learning and practice, and providing access to new ideas and perspectives.

The features of manager education programmes that I have outlined look very different to traditional programmes of taught categories such as the MBA. I have argued that such an approach offers many benefits for managers, organisations and management research, in enabling managers to invest personally and generatively in their organisational role, and in opening up alternative and potentially creative perspectives. However, these benefits cannot be fully realised while organisations continue to outsource not only the delivery but the content of manager education to business schools. The MBA may no longer be meeting the needs of businesses ([O'Toole, 2009](#_ENREF_16)), but businesses continue to send managers to study MBAs and regard MBAs as a measure of manager competence. Re-framing manager education also requires organisations to develop the capability to support manager learning and development and, crucially, the capacity to learn and develop with managers: to be open to challenge rather than simply reproducing normative expectations. Generative manager education will depend on increased and open collaboration and partnership between organisations, their managers and business schools, in which the perspectives of each are both valued and respected, and open to challenge.

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