**Reviewing *Management Learning*:**

**the field and the journal**

**Abstract**

We trace the origins and development of the management learning movement that has come to be closely associated with the journal *Management Learning* and explain how ideas that shaped the creation of business schools influenced the inception of this field. We then examine themes and trends that have been prevalent in the field in the second half of the journal’s 50-year history, through an analysis of its coverage over a 24-year period from 1994 to 2018. During this time, there has been a marked shift away from an applied focus on manager and management development towards a more theoretical perspective of the field, in keeping with trends in academic journals more generally. We focus on the journal’s contribution to the scholarship of management and organisational learning through an analysis of both strong and weak themes and its most cited papers. Finally, we propose ways in which our analysis of the past might offer new ways of thinking about our scholarship and we propose a future direction for the field and the journal that connects to the original intentions to shape organisational practice in order to address broader issues of social and economic exchange.

**Introduction**

Recent studies suggest that examining what we have taken to be important in a particular field in the past can result in new thinking and broaden perspectives (Cummings and Bridgman, 2016: Hassard 2012). The management learning movement is now 50 years old and this significant anniversary and special issue present a timely opportunity to reflect on how the field has developed, how it stands and how it might develop in the future. In this paper, we examine the historical roots of management learning through the development of business schools and the content of the journal bearing its name. In positioning our study in this way, we emphasise the centrality of teaching and learning activities in business schools and their original intention to engage and educate management practitioners (Anderson et al, 2017) as a means of having an impact on management practice (Antonacopoulou, 2009, 2010).

The paper begins by tracing the origins and development of the movement that we refer to as ‘management learning’, and which has come to be closely associated with the journal *Management Learning*. The first section of the paper focuses on the development of the business school movement, including the launch of the journal entitled *Management Education and Development* (MEAD) in 1970 and up to 1994 when *Management Learning* first appeared. We explain how ideas that shaped the creation and growth of Business Schools in the US and the UK influenced the inception of this field which sought to understand how managers learn and could be developed and, by so doing, to strengthen the management profession more generally. We then go on to examine the themes and trends that have been prevalent in the field in the second half of the journal’s 50-year history, through an analysis of its coverage over a 24-year period from 1994 to 2018, which is as close to the current day as the deadline for this issue would allow. During this time, there has been a marked shift away from an applied focus on manager and management development towards a more theoretical perspective of the field. This is in keeping with trends in academic journals more generally, as each strives to raise its profile in an increasingly globally-competitive market for journals of academic quality. This means that the theoretical and conceptual underpinnings of management learning have been strengthened but that the links with the work of practitioners are less obvious. We focus on the journal’s contribution to scholarship in the field of management and organizational learning through an analysis of both strong and weak themes, and its most cited papers. Finally, we propose ways in which our analysis of the past might offer new ways of thinking about our scholarship and how it might influence the work of business schools and the impact they have on society.

**The establishment of business schools in the UK**

It is useful to place the ideas and ambitions for *Management Learning,* as we now know it, firmly within a cultural and historical context. There is a strong connection between the founding of UK business schools, the agendas they set themselves and the academic areas of interest with which they were concerned, and this connection is pertinent to our review of management learning (the field) and *Management Learning* (the journal). Interest in the topic of management learning and education and the connections with management practice were central to the interests of the newly established business schools in the UK which were in turn influenced by the development of business schools in the USA.

The emergence and growth of UK business schools was part of an increase in the overall number of university places, fuelled by a recognition that in order to grow the economy and become more productive, an increased supply of university graduates was needed. The Robbins Report into higher education in the UK (Robbins, 1963) projected an increase from the 1962-63 figure of 216,00 students in higher education to 344,000 in 1970-71 and 588,000 by 1988. This recognition that a better educated workforce would produce a positive impact on the national economy was prompted by the US model. There, business schools were already well established and going through a period of funding higher-level research and this was also evident in other European countries such as France where *l’explosion scolaire* was taking place (Kast, 1965). In the USA, the Ford Foundation and Carnegie Corporation reports of 1959 and the books and articles that followed (Gordon and Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959) were both highly critical of the lack of theoretical underpinning to business school curricula and of their largely untrained faculty. Daniel, (1998) suggests these reports focused attention too firmly back on a theoretical approach, basing research on abstract models that have little impact on practice. However, the Graduate School of Industrial Administration (henceforth GSIA) at Carnegie Mellon University with its focus on a practice-based interdisciplinary approach to the study of management and as the key to maximising organisational performance was positioned as an exemplar business school and the Ford Foundation helped to fund its diffusion (Khurana and Spender, 2012). However, Khurana and Spender (2012: 632), acknowledging the significant influence of Herbert Simon in stressing the central role of interdisciplinarity in the development of business schools and particularly GSIA, position the central challenge of business school design as one creating a multidisciplinary intellectual space that developed both managerial judgement and logical scientific analysis. This dialectical tension between research and practice is still apparent almost sixty years on and provides a key motif for academics discussing the problems of business schools and how to teach managers (see, Starkey and Madan, 2001; Burke and Rau, 2010; Bartunek and Rynes, 2014).

The technological revolution that was happening across post-war Europe prompted a push for the development of competent managers in the UK in order to ensure levels of productivity and efficiency that could match those achieved in the USA (Kast 1965). The Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963) also recommended that two postgraduate schools of business should be established in London (with the LSE and Imperial College) and at Manchester University. The idea that managers could be trained was however quite contentious. McClelland (1964:350) observes that despite the establishment of the British Institute of Management and the Administrative Staff College following World War 2, there was a still a belief that managers should work their way up from the shop floor, that they were born rather than made through a university education. Kast (1965:82) reports a deep-seated distrust between universities and the business community that existed in Britain. He cites the Franks report (1963) to illustrate this:

‘The most difficult single issue for the future of British Business Schools … (is) … the uneasiness felt in some academic circles about the intensions (sic) of business and the uneasiness felt in many academic quarters about the intentions of the universities’

However, academics in the two newly established business schools in the UK worked closely with practitioners and at Manchester in particular, there was an interest in understanding the role that managers performed within organisations and how management education could best be delivered. The curriculum was designed to reflect the need for educated managers to be able to use theories and concepts to guide their practice whilst at the same time addressing real organisational problems and issues; this subsequently become known as the “Manchester Method” (Wilson, 1992) and can be identified as the start of the management learning movement in the UK.

One of the driving forces behind the establishment of business schools were industrialists (practitioners, in other words) who saw the benefit of investing in management education at university level in order to maintain the level of UK competitiveness and productivity (Nind, 1985). Some of their early ideas included the study of pedagogical issues in the context of how ‘educated men’ (sic) could gain ‘mastery of a field of knowledge, breadth of outlook and the capacity to think’: abilities considered critical to compete on a global stage (Nind, 1985). Between 1962 and 1967, the Management Education Foundation (later, the FME, Foundation for Management Education) gave itself the task and responsibility of liaising with various government bodies to identify how funds might be raised to meet their aims and be directed to initiatives that could be seen to promote business and management as a field within British business schools.

An interest in pedagogy and the success enjoyed at Manchester served to focus the FME’s attention on teacher development and led to the beginning of support for its career academics to learn how to develop managers. In the 1970s, considerable sums were committed to developing a fellowship scheme to help individuals develop their teaching. The Centre for the Study of Management Learning (CSML) was established with the aim of carrying out research into teaching and learning in the field of management at Lancaster University in 1973. One of its first faculty was John Burgoyne, an academic who had worked previously at Manchester Business School; on his appointment as its first director, he brought with him many of the ideas trialled and developed at Manchester. Within the first two years, the University Grants Commission secured its funding. CSML was made a full department in 1984 and appointed its first professor shortly after, changing its name to the Department of Management Learning.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The Association of Teachers in Management (which became the Association of Management Education and Development) established the *Journal for the Association of Management Education and Development* in 1970 with the intention of enabling management teachers to contribute to the policies and practices of the profession’ (Pugh, 1970:1). The association very quickly became dominated by practitioners, many of them management consultants and in order to raise the academic status and profile of management education research, a new journal was established in 1970 entitled *Management Education and Development* (*MEAD*). 10 years after the establishment of MEAD the then editor made a call for rigorous and relevant articles to replace the ‘trendy *avant garde* to the solidly if occasionally pedestrian learned paper’ that he saw as characterising the journal (Berry, 1980). In 1994, the journal was renamed and repositioned as *Management Learning: The journal for managerial and organisational learning*. The rationale behind the change in name and approach, set out in the first editorial (James and Snell, 1994), was that the journal and the field needed a stronger international perspective and that ‘our understanding of learning … needs to be increasingly rigorous’ (James and Snell, 1994:7). There was also advice that case studies or evaluations of current application would not be acceptable unless they provided new insights (James and Snell, 1994:8). This was a move to reposition management learning as a serious field of research and one which would have a significant impact on the practice of business school academics.

**Research objectives and context**

Against the backdrop of this account of how the management learning field developed in the period up until 1994, we set out to examine how it has evolved since that date through an analysis of the content of the journal. This is something of a stock-taking activity and an account that will allow stakeholders in management learning to think about where it could or should be headed next; we offer our own thoughts and reflections on this at the end of the paper. Our analysis also sets out how scholars new to the field of management learning might understand it through an engagement with the journal.

**Methodology**

The method we adopted for reviewingthe journal was similar to that of a systematic literature review in that we reviewed all the papers published in *Management Learning* between 1994 and 2018 in order to map the intellectual territory (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003). Management researchers use this type of analysis to map fields of academic study and develop ‘a reliable knowledge base’ (see Macpherson and Holt, 2007; Thorpe and Holt, 2008). Using this approach was appropriate for our analysis because we wanted to learn about the journal in its entirety, and to consider exactly what was covered in the journal and the field of management learning over time (Thorpe and Holt, 2008; Pittaway et al, 2004). This allowed us to review a large volume of information and synthesise the research. Systematic reviews are more commonly associated with qualitative research (Dixon-Woods *et al*, 2006) but our strategy differed from the typical approach because we were concerned with understanding the subject matter of this journal and not with assessing the evidence or quality of a range of papers, as in other systematic reviews (Tranfield *et al*, 2003; Macpherson and Holt, 2007).

Our strategy for gathering the data was straightforward since the journal has all abstracts and papers, right from its inception, available online. Trawling these allowed us to create a comprehensive EndNote database of every paper in the journal. We collected all details, including abstracts of these papers, and read many of them. The systematic nature of reviewing all journal papers allowed us to avoid biases we might have held about the journal and field, as well as allowing us to treat all papers equally (at least initially), without judging them based on some type of impact assessment (we list the most highly cited papers later, but this did not influence our decisions). We then generated mind maps, using MindGenius software, to explore the different areas and themes that came from reviewing all the abstracts of the journal from 1994 up to issue 4 in 2018. This was a purely inductive phase of analysis and the maps we developed show what themes, topics and special issues were featured in each year of the journal. We also reviewed earlier papers in *MEAD* to understand how the journal had evolved from a more practitioner-involved journal to an academic journal with international coverage. In addition to this, we used the publisher’s reports to access lists of highly cited papers.

**The coding process**

Informed by the key areas highlighted by the mind-mapping exercise, and a reading of the editorials and the various papers published in the journal that had taken an overview (e.g. Turnbull James and Denyer, 2009), we proceeded to code the data. Because a systematic approach cannot provide the same intuitive insights that come with expertise in a given field (Thorpe, Holt, Macpherson, and Pittaway, 2005), in this third phase of our analysis we used a coder with extensive understanding of the field to categorise the papers based on her understanding of the academic disciplines, authors and research domains involved. We omitted reviews, responses to papers, editorials and the recent ‘Provocations to Debate’. The quality of the abstracts made this phase possible in most cases (Macpherson and Holt, 2007) and when this was not possible, papers and keywords were examined in more detail. In order to facilitate the second phase of coding, we built an NVivo database using the abstracts stored in EndNote.

The collection and coding of the data happened at two points in time, 6 years apart. This happened because the study was originally looking at the development of the field from 1994 up until 2011 and the project was then rekindled in 2018 to fit with the 50th anniversary of the journal. Both phases of coding involved two coders; the coding and organizing of papers took place over an 8-year period and one of the original coders took no further part in the coding process after the 2011 papers were added. Subsequent coding of the papers from 2012-18 was carried out by another researcher but cross-checked by the original second coder. This has ensured consistency over the period of development of the research. In the first phase that took place between 2010 and 2012, there were 432 papers in the database. The subsequent updating of the database in 2018 took the total number of papers in the database to 570.

In each of the phases, once the papers had been coded for a second time, the two coders compared results and discussed each other’s decisions to code papers differently. We then re-analysed these papers, considering keywords, abstracts and each paper itself. The discrepancies between the two sets of results were explained by an inconsistency in coding by either research domain or theme, and we decided to add new codes for research domains in each of the two phases: ‘critical management education and pedagogy’ in the first phase and ‘reflection, reflexivity and autoethnography’ in the second. We then re-coded these papers by research domain and not theme. For example, a paper about gender within MBA programmes was coded as ‘business schools and management education’. Where the papers may have covered more than one research domain, we made a judgement about which was the dominant domain, and this was coded.

In order to ensure the highest degree of inter-rater reliability possible in such a situation, we discussed the abstracts that could have been coded in more than one way and made a decision between us as to where it should sit, often by reading the full paper and engaging in a further discussion. One example of such a decision took place over the examination of Heizmann and Liu’s (2018) ‘Becoming green, becoming leaders; identity narratives in sustainability leadership development’. This paper could have been coded in at least three categories: leadership development, language-based studies and sustainability. Our decision to code it under ‘sustainability’ was driven by the paper’s underpinning message that there is a need for leadership developers to transform the neoliberal regimes that undermine and downplay the need for environmental sustainability. In this case, as in the majority of others, we looked to the conclusions section of the paper to examine the authors’ intended area of contribution. However, we cannot guarantee complete reproducibility of our coding and our list of themes because each scholar will come up with different readings and interpretations of a paper, based on their own research interests and frames. As we mentioned earlier, we wanted to try to read the field in a way that someone new to it might see it and, in each phase, one of the coders fitted this description. Our intention is to offer methodological transparency (Aguinis et al, 2018) and we emphasise that this is *our* analysis of the journal’s content, derived in a manner that was as rigorous and systematic as possible.

**Guiding themes**

This second phase of the timespan of the management learning field (1994-2018) is characterised by its development as a recognised field of study and an increasingly rigorous approach to research published in the journal. A paper written by Burgoyne (1994:49) and published in the journal, uses four concepts, expressed in the processual rather than the object form, to explain the scope of management learning: learning, managing, organising and exchanging. These concepts are used here as a starting point in explaining how the focus and fashions of management learning have changed since Burgoyne wrote this field-defining ‘Managing by Learning’ paper. The lynchpin of these four concepts is the process of social and economic exchange; organising provides the framework for such exchange; managing oversees, controls or constrains (dependent on the perspective taken) such organising; and learning involves finding better ways of managing. Burgoyne (1994) admits that such a framework is essentially normative and relies upon an assumption that the creation of wealth, in the widest sense of the phrase, is an ultimate goal of individuals, organisations and society. For the purposes of surveying the field since 1994, it provides an interesting perspective and useful starting point from which to review how academics (and occasionally practitioners) have individually and collectively changed this original emphasis, introducing new ideas and trends to the study and practice of management learning.

**Findings**

Table 1 lists the dominant themes that emerged from the analysis and the number of papers in each of them.

\*\*Insert Table 1 here\*\*

**Organisational learning**

Of the papers published in *Management Learning* in the period under examination, 22% deal with organisational learning, a theme that spans Burgoyne’s (1994:52) original concepts of exchanging (in the sense that the shared knowledge becomes a communal asset), organising (building on the premise of the learning organisation – Pedler *et al,* 1991) and learning. These papers range from early inquiries into the nature of organisational learning (e.g. French and Bazalgette, 1996; Edmonson and Moingeon, 1998), through to case studies of organisational attempts to introduce learning organisation ideas and practices (Elkjaer, 2001), to specific studies such as the role of artefacts in generating collective learning in small firms (Macpherson *et al*, 2010). This is evidently a strong and enduring element of the management learning field, and an examination of the articles indicates a shift away from the original emphasis on dealing with broad concepts (the learning organisation in particular) to the application of such concepts and, more recently, to the development of sub-concepts that await wider application such as the place of liminality in learning (e.g. Hawkins and Edwards, 2013). There is also a stream of writing emerging that has a particular focus on power relationships in organisational learning (for example, Collien, 2018; Hawkins, Pye and Correia, 2017; Pattinson, Preece and Dawson, 2016) underlining the critical focus of the journal.

Organisational learning has been and remains, the overarching theme that is most visible in *Management Learning* in terms of the amount of content and space it commands in the journal. The *Academy of Management Learning and Education* (AMLE), launched in 2002 with a focus on ‘the institutional environment and administration of business schools and their stakeholders’ and on ‘management education and learning in all types of settings’ (aom.org, 2018). AMLE’s editors acknowledge *Management Learning*’s space in the field:

*‘…* [*AMLE*] would not consider manuscripts on organizational learning unless a business school or corporate learning center was the research setting … journals such as *Management Learning* have a well-established reputation for publishing quality work in this area’ (Arbaugh, 2009:479).

**Business schools and management education**

Articles in this category deal with the broader issues of the nature and purpose of business schools and the state of management education. They fall into Burgoyne’s (1994) processual category of organising. *Management Learning* still continues to attract studies in this area; the body of work has also been strengthened by the rise of *AMLE* and coverage in the two journals ensures that the discussion is internationally focused.

Fox (1994a, 1994b, 1994c), provided the basis for a continuing debate about management education in *Management Learning* and articles have since included thought-provoking and highly-cited polemics (Raelin, 1994; Willmott, 1994: Gosling and Mintzberg, 2006) and case studies (e.g. Sinclair, 2007; Hay and Hodgkinson, 2008). It should also be noted that many of the 26 papers classified under the ‘critical management education and pedagogy’ heading could have been included here too. This approach to critique, rarely seen in US journals, may account for the distinctly UK flavour of the discussions about business schools and management education. Few comparative studies are published, and the sub-discipline is constituted by a stream of critiques (eg., Alcadipani, 2017; Koris et al, 2017) and case studies of the MBA and of the organising of business schools. Such pieces would suggest that although there is evidence of promising practice in some cases, little has changed for the better at a policy level in business schools despite everything that has been published. We discuss this in more depth towards the end of this paper.

**Pedagogy of individual learning and management development techniques**

In their editorial Cunliffe and Sadler-Smith (2012) propose that of the 26 articles published in 2011, five were concerned with management education pedagogy, or teaching and learning. This is broadly in line with the numbers published in previous years and confirms their proposition that although this area is significant, it is by no means dominant. The trend has been for the journal to move away from what may have been considered as normative approaches to pedagogy to those with a more ‘critical edge’ (Cunliffe and Sadler-Smith, 2012).

There have been several important articles dealing with theories and models of individual learning (Fineman, 1997; Reynolds, 1998; Sadler-Smith *et al*, 2000) although these attempts to theorise individual learning appear rather meagre in number given the stated aims of the journal. The number of studies published in the journal in this area is also declining; we coded 8 papers in the second phase of our analysis (2012-2018) in comparison to 37 in the first phase (1994-2011). This indicates that the average number of papers published per year has fallen from an average of 2.2 papers per year to 1.3. In comparison to similar treatments of organisational learning, this area is, we suggest, under-theorised in the journal. Those studies that do theorise individual learning, tend to be small scale (e.g Bureau and Komporozos-Athanasiou, 2017; Culpin and Scott, 2012) and there is a decline in the meta theorising of individual learning that might serve as a guide to practice such as those mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph.

It is increasingly clear that although 48 papers dealt with leadership and management development techniques, the journal is not the place for papers that deal with *mainstream* practice in this area. Articles such as that written by Blackler and Kennedy (2004) – which details and critiques the design and evaluation of a leadership programme for public-sector chief executives – are not now routinely published. However, a space has opened up for the discussion of new approaches and we coded 4 papers under the theme of ‘Arts based and creative learning’ as this appeared to be a burgeoning area of discussion and of promising practice.

**Strong themes and notable silences**

Two of the original concepts underpinning the discipline – organization and organizing, and research methodology and methods – have been constant and consistent features in *Management Learning*, often dealing with issues that have a clear link to other themes. Two particular trends in management research are evident in the form of the practice and linguistic turns and the 23 papers that have been classified purely as ‘Language- based studies’ in this study, is testament to that. The reflexive turn was exemplified in earlier papers, not in a particular body of writing but in a mode of expression and meaning-making or an analytical approach (e.g. Ford and Harding, 2007) but this is now established as a theme in its own right with authors such as McDonald (2016) and Allen (2016) positioning it as the core idea of their paper.

A number of themes that we expected to feature in the journal were underplayed. For example, given the importance of ethics to management and management education in particular, we expected to see a larger number of articles dedicated solely to the discussion of ethics and values –although this does feature as a sub-theme or sub-text in much of the journal’s content (e.g. Maclagan, 1995; Fenwick, 2005; Gherardi and Rodeschini, 2016). Gender/diversity and entrepreneurship discussions also feature in the list of minority topics but some studies of management education draw on both of these themes (e.g. Farquharson et al, 2014)

There is also little journal space given to the discussion of management as a profession, except for the occasional article dealing with professional doctorates (Gold *et al*, 2007; Perry and Zuber-Skerritt, 1994) and Reed’s (2018) more recent article examining the role of the professional body in contemporary professionalization. Although the debate on the management profession is carried through many of the articles in the journal dealing with management education and business schools, it is not considered to be the sole focus of discussion even once in the 24 years under review here. The notion of what it means to be a manager in the early twenty first century and how that impacts on the ways in which managers learn is also curiously absent.

**Conceptual slippage**

During our coding of the papers and in our subsequent discussions as to where several seemingly anomalous articles might fit, we were struck by the array of interpretations of the work that goes on in the field. We were particularly intrigued by the ‘conceptual slippage’ that appears to be the norm in our writing and speaking about what we do and what we think. A prime example of such slippage is in the use of the word ‘pedagogy’, which has a range of meanings and connotations and now appears to be out of fashion. In our analysis of the papers in the journal, several other words and terms were diffuse enough to make us question our understanding of them, including ‘organisational knowing’ (in relation to organisational learning), ‘emancipation’, ‘critical’ (with a lower- or upper-case ‘c’), ‘practice’, ‘diversity’ and ‘impact’.

This seemingly liberal approach to language is indicative of both movement and progression in the field, and of new or recycled themes and ideas that are in need of further specification and definition. This challenge of finding words to represent our ideas provides us with an opportunity for thought and debate. There appears to be a general acceptance in the field that terms are fluid rather than fixed, and that all is well as long as individual researchers are clear and consistent about what they mean and understand by a given term. However, for those new to the field, especially doctoral students, these axioms of ambiguity in language are not always immediately evident; many are bound to spend a significant part of their studies searching for clarity only to find that none exists. Our study suggests that this capricious use of language is at the core of the ontology of management learning.

One of the consequences of this approach to language and definitions is the relative and gradual decline of interest (reflected by the volume of papers in the journal) in the scholarship of management pedagogy. This has occurred because pedagogy has come to signify learning that goes on in the classroom and is therefore closely associated with education. As such, it is downgraded by that association because ‘learning’ has come to signify a more rigorous and scholarly activity than ‘education’ in our community. The sociolinguistics of our language deserve more attention than we have space but it would appear that research fashions (such as the ‘practice bandwagon’ – Corradi, Gherardi, and Verzelloni, 2010) may add to the breadth of the field but can make other sites of research appear less appealing, less current and therefore less publishable. Consequently, we may be tempted to give more research focus and airtime to those fashionable issues at the periphery of our field than those that form the core.

**Highly-cited papers**

The 20 most cited papers in the journal, according to the publisher’s statistics in 2019 are shown in Table 2

\*\* insert Table 2 here \*\*

Many of the highly-cited papers deal with big and enduring issues that provide a high-level analysis on their subject. Unsurprisingly, they also reflect two of the main themes that were drawn out in our analysis of papers: organisational learning and knowledge and knowing. There is a distinctly critical flavour to the list, especially in terms of critical reflection and reflexivity and it appears that the papers with the most impact, measured in terms of citations, are those that reflect Management Learning’s newest tag line, changed from *The journal for managerial and organisational learning,* to *The journal for critical, reflexive scholarship on organisation and learning* in 2014. We also extracted a list of the most highly cited papers from the last 10 years that made it into the overall top 100 and this short list reflects the relatively recent fascination with practice studies across the management field and includes two papers that examine leadership.

\*\*Insert Table 3 here\*\*

In the next section, we move on to look at the influence that successive editors have brought to bear on the journal.

**Editorials**

In the first editorial of the newly conceived *Management Learning* in 1994, Snell and James stressed that they were looking for ‘academic focus’, a ‘critical view’ and application across private, public and educational contexts. They wished the journal to be a ‘challenging voice’ but also to be accessible (Snell and James, 1994). They stressed that they were open to including studies using a diverse range of strategies and methodologies, providing they could offer new insights or cover new ground (James and Snell, 1994). This has been repeated by editors over 24 years. Sims and McAulay (1995) requested that contributors question their assumptions and asserted that the managerial stance, often expressed as objectivity, appeared to be ‘a pipedream’. Editors have also continued the tradition of positioning the journal towards eclecticism, encouraging authors to acknowledge their own biases, and to reflect on and apply critique (Vince and Elkjaer, 2005, 2007). In their 2010 editorial, Cunliffe and Sadler-Smith take this a step further, stating that ‘they ask for rigour and relevance not uncritical practice and destructive critique’. In 2012, they refer to the journal’s ‘distinctive critical edge’, although this remains largely undefined.

Editors have often stated that *Management Learning* is different; Vince and Elkjaer remark that Beatty and Leigh (2006) noted that what made *Management Learning* different from *AMLE* and *JME* was its focus on organisations and its interest in practice. In 2010, the new editors wrote that the journal was continuing to be different, promoting ‘distinctive scholarship that combines a ‘critical’ edge with innovation, imagination, provocation, engagement, excellence and careful and thoughtful work’ (Cunliffe and Sadler-Smith, 2010: 3). They also state that as Grey (2009) and McAulay and Sims (2009) remind us, *Management Learning* provides an outlet for a freer and ‘at times iconoclastic kind of writing’ and that it ‘respects and promulgates a plurality of values and norms’ (2010:2).

Later editorials overtly challenge the neoliberalism of modern business schools and position the journal as a safe space for authors to be thoughtful and provocative (Cunliffe and Bell, 2016:113). Bell and Bridgman (2017) propose that the notion of ‘engagement’ should be preferred to ‘relevance’ and ‘impact’, encompassing intellectual engagement, interdisciplinary research and a rationale for how critical studies might impact on ‘our teaching, research and interactions with individuals and organisations in the community’ (Bell and Bridgman, 2017: 4).

Perhaps it is the journal’s positioning as being different from the mainstream and diverse in its values, norms and agenda that prevents the editors being able to precisely pin down what *Management Learning* is; it is perhaps a case of you know it when you see it. From our analysis of the papers published in the journal, management learning research has moved over 24 years from being practice-led to practice-based, from having a focus on reflection to one of reflexivity, from management to leadership development, from studies about academia to studies of academics and to a point where ‘quirkiness’ (Bell and Bridgman, 2018:3) both in terms of methodological approach and the focus and style of writing is becoming a new norm.

We do acknowledge the UK-centric approach that we have adopted in this review; this is largely due to the historical approach that we have taken but we could also be accused of having taken a rather colonialist view of management learning. However, the increasingly diverse make-up of the editorial team and the content suggest that the journal has an increasingly internationalist and inclusive approach and that is likely to shape the field in the next few years.

**The future**

If business historians are to reflect back in 50 years’ time on the current management learning movement as it has played out in the development of business schools and through the journal, it would be characterised as having begun with an impetus in the 1960’s to improve the practice of management through the development of management scholarship and of a deeper understanding of the practices that make organisations more efficient and effective. A sub-theme of this agenda, namely the scholarship of management education and pedagogy, was then developed through *Management Education and Development*, established in 1970. The establishment of *Management Learning* in 1994 marked the beginning of a deepening and widening of this scholarship to include a stronger focus on organisational learning and the development of the field’s now signature critically reflexive approach. The content of *Management Learning* would show our future historians that a small but significant group of academics concerned themselves with challenging the received wisdom of how management is practiced, researched and learned. In common with other journals, for example the *Journal of Management Studies*, *Management Learning* strives for scholarship without the self-imposed constraints of emulating the rather technical approach often adopted by many North American journals. This ambition appears to have proved successful in one sense at least, with its impact factor steadily rising (Bell and Bridgman, 2018).

The scholarly community engaged in the field of management learning is now far more disparate and widespread than ever before, and the ideas of management learning are more pervasive and recognisable in other fields of management. Editors position the journal as ‘different’ and ‘quirky’ and our review suggests that the nature of this difference comes from a qualitative approach to research with an emphasis on critique as opposed to the construction of frameworks or grand theories. However, in terms of how this develops the field and impacts on the practice of managers and management educators in a range of settings – the original intentions of the management learning movement - we question the value of a critique that is, by nature, retrospective and encourages speculation rather than widespread change. For example, there is a stream of papers addressing the limitations of the MBA, but we are not aware that any of them offers an alternative that has been implemented in the wider business school environment, and consequently there appears to have been little widespread impact on learners apart from in pockets of good practice. This, of course, may be a feature of the control mechanisms that are currently present in business schools and specifically the impact of a rankings culture (Wilkins and Huisman, 2012) that create a safe and rewarded space for homogeneity with only the odd risky approach to learning tolerated as a nod to innovation. Thus, the journal does provide an engagement with critical issues in business schools, but this does not necessarily lead to change at any noticeable scale in business schools or in management practice.

Our starting point for this review of *Management Learning* was Burgoyne’s (1994) paper, which appeared in the first edition of the journal. The four elements of learning, managing, organising and exchanging are still representative of the field, but there is a marked emphasis on learning and organising. Managing as an activity and as a profession is significantly downplayed, and the context for management learning (‘exchange’) – where we would expect to see current ‘hot topics’ such as sustainability, the economic downturn and Brexit have a high profile – is largely defined within individual articles. *Management Learning* is not alone in now publishing papers that theorise at a micro level, and, as rigorous and engaging as most of them are, they appear to have no tangible impact on the way business schools teach managers or what managers learn. However, they are all excellent pieces in their own right and are worthy of their place in any research quality assessment. Unwittingly perhaps, the journal (populated by researchers in the field) has distanced itself from practitioners in the face of the inexorable pressures of the various attempts to measure the quality of research. We suggest that such a lack of engagement with management development practitioners - the original MEAD readers - has meant that work in this field is poorly represented and under-researched. Our new scholar would gain the impression that ‘learning’ in Burgoyne’s (1994) context of ‘finding better ways of managing’ is a side issue. Many papers in the journal make compelling reading but are niche when compared to the day-to-day work that most academics are forced to engage with, such as the way in which student evaluations and feedback determine careers, the precarity of academic contracts and how these impact on learning and the tyranny of Excellence in measuring and managing the classroom. Our business historians of 2068 might see these last 50 years as a missed opportunity for the management learning community to influence these big issues from a critical, informed and engaged perspective.

Business schools have faced criticism for a lack of engagement with the needs of practitioners (Aguinis et al, 2014) and that the research that they produce has little to do with the day-to-day practice of managers and is effectively irrelevant (Pfeffer and Fong, 2002; Collinson, 2017). Many management researchers will currently find themselves in a double bind of needing to fulfil the requirements of their employers’ expectations of their publication output and their desire to have an impact on practice, practitioners and on wider societal, political and economic issues. If we position business school academics as the conduit through which research is shared with managers in order to influence and shape their practice, then this in turn should shape the nature of the research that is produced. We need to take care that we do not appear to be writing for ourselves in a way that does not inform practice but merely satisfies our own intellectual curiosity and interest. Whilst the support for papers that are non-formulaic and quirky (Bell and Bridgman, 2018) serves to counter the culture of the publications production line, it is possible that the body of writing could become self-referential and appear closed, especially to those new scholars we mentioned earlier on in this paper and who, we would like to think, join our profession in the hope of making a difference through their scholarship rather than simply gaining tenure; the two should not be incompatible. We do acknowledge that the current editors encourage ‘risky’ scholarship, but this is most visible at a micro level because many of the papers that appear in the journal are driven by a need for academics to publish regularly and often.

The methodology we have employed here provides only one way of reviewing the content of the journal and of ‘counting the countable’ (Lee, 1999). It does not reveal the critical feel and approach of the journal and how that has developed. Another possible methodology could have been a close reading of small number of papers chosen from over the same period to identify changes in tone, methodological approach and intention, asking questions such as what is the purpose of the paper and how does it help us know more about management learning? We could also have interviewed significant figures in the development of the field and presented an oral history of management learning.

However, based on what we have found by adopting the approach of reviewing what was written about and within the field over this first 50 years, we offer three thoughts in moving forward.

First, that there should be the development of scholarship that is more outward-looking and ambitious and seeks to inform the way that organisations, in the broadest sense of that word, operate and the way that managers practice within them. This does not mean that papers should include normative prescriptions but, quite the contrary, that they should provoke critical reflection that results in action and the development of new practice for future and current managers; our collective body of research and writing forms the basis of our teaching and knowledge exchange activities and is the way in which we engage with practitioners in our scholarship. We could begin by asking how each piece of research and writing might create new thinking for our students as current and future managers and scholars, and propose this as an additional ‘so what?’ for authors and reviewers.

Secondly, we should aspire as a management learning community to have an impact on the broader, international socio-economic environment and to question, for example, the extreme views perpetrated in various political arenas, the gap between the world’s richest and poorest people, the neoliberalist and free market capitalist model upon which economic growth is predicated and the environmental crisis that the international community as a whole currently faces. Our research, teaching and engagement with practice give us the opportunity and responsibility to have an impact at a micro and macro level and to encourage an orientation to relationism, ethics and reflexivity (Cunliffe, 2009). Whilst our three main academic activities might currently be cast as separate strands to be assessed and star-rated, such a philosophy predisposes us to take account of all stakeholders in organisations, question the status quo and ultimately bring about change.

Finally, we should ensure that *Management Learning* provides a space for these first two aspirations to begin to happen and that the journal continues to encourage the publication of articles that resist, question and critique the taken-for-granted in the study and practice of management and organisations.

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1. The Department for Management Learning at Lancaster University closed in 2018; this can be noted as marking the end of the second phase of development of the management learning field that focused heavily on management education and pedagogy. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)