"Seeking meaning in self: the dialogical process of storytelling and educating the professional practitioner"

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Abstract

Purpose – The paper seeks to illustrate the impact, a narrative based approach to learning in practice could have in relation to management education, where reflexive critiques may provide a platform for integrating more closely the appreciation/analysis of the nature of management development with the experiences of practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Collaborative ethnography seeks to connect the self with others and the social with context; it is a method which embraces the opportunity to understand/appreciate lived experience in moments of learning.

Findings – The use of storytelling as a method to aid reflexive dialogue forces the student to move away from their pre-existing assumptions and practices and provide them with the power and conviction to seek out and recognise new meaning and differing alternatives of practice. The implication of this position in terms of an educational agenda involves challenging the "self-conceptions" of what it means to be a "practitioner" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Martin, 1992; Zubizarreta, 2004).

Practical implications – The authors argue that focus must be placed on methods through which learning resides in action. Recognising action in learning allows for the development of management education which re-directs thinking and conceptualising towards understanding the social tensions, complex relations and connections in the co-construction of knowing.

Social implications – The article has sought to exemplify how storytelling can contribute to professional and personal development in new and more enriched ways. This reflexive-style paper presented a perspective from which the writers' values and beliefs are informed, as opposed to making a claim for authenticity and authority in regards to the subject area.

Originality/value – The paper highlights the need to explore imaginative modes of management education practices (Hjorth *et al.*, 2018). Teaching students to simply tell stories is not the goal; rather, it is about sensitising students to the aesthetics of organising and the potential of approaching learning from sensuous and experimental perspectives.

Keywords Storytelling, Practice, Reflexivity, Social learning, Post-experience education

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

In recent years, critical management scholars, drawing upon postmodern debate, have raised important questions on pedagogical and epistemological assumptions upon which current MBAs, as professional development programmes, are underpinned (Sperlinger *et al.*, 2018; Shatil, 2020). So, how should schools of business/management educate and prepare students for the complex world of business? In the UK, schools of management/business are viewed as critical in delivering an income stream which has sought to bolster declining state funding and support, as well as enabling cross institutional support for other disciplinary areas which may be less attractive to incoming students (Sperlinger *et al.*, 2018). The implication of this emerging trend over the past number of years has led universities to become financially reliant on their schools of business/management, leading universities to maximise the income of these schools. As such schools of business/management have developed programmes of study which are appealing to students at both international and national level encompassing both part/full-time students, targeting different career aspirations/stages and price points,

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developing a customer orientated focus. Curricula, course titles and methods of delivery are developed in order to be attractive to perspective students' interests and desires; MBA courses suddenly become consumable products, as they can have direct influence on future careers and personal growth. While pedagogical development has taken place, the developing "consumerism" of management education has begun to influence what happens within schools and programmes of study, resulting in a propensity to produce readymade knowledge. There is a wide spread consensus that traditional pedagogical "instructional methods" alone are insufficient to adequately develop managers to deal with the complexities of running a business (Gava and Brydon-Miller, 2017). Schools of business/management tend to adopt teaching techniques without considering their epistemological and ontological view of the world, producing particular descriptions of the world as if there is only one view possible. This has led many critical theorists of management education to coin the term "managerialism" the promotion of a specific way of viewing practice and subjectivity (Higgins and Aspinall, 2011; Kilkauer, 2015; Parker, 2018). Programmes structured on this epistemological perspective tend to leave participants with abstract, unconnected knowledge and skills which, at worst, can have very little relevance to complex managerial practices (Roux and Becker, 2017; Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Barnett, 1997; Gherardi, 2016; Mangan *et al.*, 2016).

There is much to criticise about this rationalised form of knowledge transfer, first, the issue of relevance, where MBA students come as unfilled containers to be imbued with the required skills and knowledge, where the programme of study will provide all the required material and syllabus to fore fill their knowledge and practice. Second, constructivist pedagogical approaches, while they recognise that students come to programmes of study with existing knowledge and skills, tend to specifically focus on the methods of pedagogical process which enable students to reflect and make sense of their own practice in direct comparison to established ideas of theory and research, using these ideas as the essential benchmark standards, the knowledge you need to know! Third, the development of critical pedagogical approaches has sought to challenge the assumed, value-free instrumentality of management education, but this has been left largely ignored in current professional management education. All of the above critiques differ in focus, as they (maybe) have to some degree sought to offer something different, in terms of how we approach ideas of management education. However, one commonality amongst the three perspectives which is implicit in their theoretical grounding is that the primary role of the educator is to design and enable a didactic style of learning. All of the above approaches in their own individual methods seek to stimulate a more active role of engagement for the educator and student. One can acknowledge that from constructivist and critical perspectives that emphasis is focused towards placing high value on student action and sense making. These perspectives are centred on the construction of subject-object oriented relations, where the selection of content and the design of pedagogical methods remain in the control of the educator. The educator positions themselves as the active subject with the often-unintended consequence of the students being positioned not as active participants but rather as passive learners directed through a subjective – objective relationship. While one can legitimately suggest that in these approaches, students are active, which they are, and their actions are initiated because the educator has designed the learning process in such a manner as to achieve some form of structured action. In terms of pedagogy, the educator makes clear what it is the student needs to know, the transfer of this knowledge being both objective and disembodied, supported through the use of a structured syllabus, lecture notes and case based material as managerial studies is an applied field, and the issue here is that the student is sheltered and not exposed to real life practice, to the practical elements of what it means to be a practicing manager (Reedy *et al.*, 2009; King and Learmonth, 2015; Gaya and Brydon-Miller, 2017; Elliot and Reynolds, 2002; Cunliffe, 2002; Grey, 2002; Reynolds, 1999; Antonacopoulou, 2008a, b).

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

Drawing from a social constructionist position, the authors view learning as a process of embodied social relational exchanges or interactions through which we must enact in order to practice (Wittgenstein, 1980). From this perspective we look at how we make sense of experience in the context of our everyday interactions as a means of learning. The paper seeks to illustrate the impact a narrative based approach to learning in practice could have in relation to management education, where reflexive critiques may provide a platform for integrating more closely the appreciation/analysis of the nature of management development with the experiences of practice. To exemplify this standpoint, this paper presents the personal insight of a post-experience learner who participated in an MBA module which utilised storytelling as a pedagogical approach to personal and professional development of self. The authors seek to explore how storytelling, as a means of an internal and/or external dialogical exchange, can support reflexive learning through which how we practice can be viewed not simply as something that we "do" but more importantly as something we "are", (O'Neill and Roberts, 2020).

Storytelling as a dialogical relational process (learning through developing self)

The growing interest in the use of aesthetic and artist processes in management education have focused scholars towards exploring learning approaches which account for and give access to an embodied, emotional and imagine learning experience (Cunliffe and Coupland, 2012; De Cock, 2016; Fotaki *et al.*, 2016). A number of recent approaches to learning in management programmes have acknowledged the centrality of the self in the learning process, acknowledging that learning works at both sensual and emotional levels, including imaginative and intellectual levels (Sinclair, 2005, p. 91; Nash, 2018; O'Neill and Roberts, 2020). Emotive or sensual methods of pedagogical practice in management education have drawn upon art-based methods as a source of both practical and conceptual stimulas for "inquiring" into ourselves, in terms of what we can sense, feel, express and act upon (Antonacopoulou, 2014, p. 88; Beyes *et al.*, 2016; Gherardi, 2016).

The engagement in storytelling can be viewed as a powerful method to explore and make sense of our own values, beliefs and behaviour (Gold and Holman, 2001). Storytelling is the

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

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

Day to day stories and their construction are fragmented, dynamic and uncoordinated accounts of events containing multiple actors and emergent plots; it is these small stories, the ones which are created in the everyday informal conversations are of particular interest (Georyakopoulou, 2006b). The authors view storying as a construct of emerging social interactions, constructed in a piecemeal type fashion (Brown and Duguid, 2002). Stories in this context can be *"brief and fragmented across different extended and interrupted discourse"* (Boje, 1991, p. 109). The literature in organisational storytelling has offered insights on the type of stories which can be told when talking about our own professional development and identity. Such stories can take the form of satire, tragedy, comedy or even romance (Skoldberg, 2002). How these stories are structured and shaped is dependent upon the particular experience being recalled, where the narrator filters emotions, actors, events, heroes, etc. to be included or not (Gabriel, 2008). While the literature has sought to illustrate the use of storying as an insightful means to explore language and how humans make sense of experiences, much less attention has been directed towards understanding how stories are crafted. It is through the use of storytelling that our lived experiences are interpreted and given meaning (Stockoe and Edwards, 2006). For example, Sims (2003) in a series of storytelling interviews with middle managers found a degree of anxiety and vulnerability, felt by the mangers as they engaged in the process of telling their stories; this was especially evident when their stories were contested and probed by others. While much work focused on exploring the role of stories as a mode of identity construction (Gabriel, 2004), research has offered less attention to how practitioners (in the context of this paper post-experience MBA students) develop and use storytelling as a means of professional development.

Enquiring into lived experience: a methodological approach

The rationale for using storytelling as a means of developing personal and professional awareness of the self on an MBA programme grew from the authors' appreciation of how we learn and engage to make sense of our experience through the stories we narrate. Storytelling is now widely used in areas of sociology, anthropology and indeed education, yet few management focused articles discuss the explicit use of narrative as a more humanist and appreciative way of understanding social agency and practice than conventional methods.

However, getting a student to tell a story about a relevant experience is simply not enough. To gain real insight into their lived experiences, students need to engage in critical dialogue over the practical and theoretical aspects of their narratives (Watson, 2001). Furthermore, in order to tell a story, the narrator must be competent in their ability to understand "self" and have insight into their own positionality in the lived experience they recall. A story is told to someone and/or social group who listens and as such a story must be relatable, in other words, the listener must be able to understand or draw meaning of the story so that they gain an appreciation of it and its context (Kaye and Jacobson, 1999; Greene, 2001). The story told needs to have recognisable elements – people, actions and events – which are real and/or familiar to the listener (Malone and Walker, 1999). Through the narrative, the listener must be able to become aware of what is normative for the context of the story. All stories have a plot which involves a descriptive account of the story's context; there is a climax or crisis to hand which needs to be explained. This process of explaining, of re-accounting, holds the possibility for both storyteller and listener(s) to learn through re-interpreting how the story has been perceived and constructed. This can be achieved through engaging the storyteller in a process of questioning, especially with regards to their assumptions, values and beliefs. From a social constructionist position, how we learn, develop and appreciate our practice is expressed through our language, in this sense our learning can be viewed as a reflexive process involving how we become aware of the emergent nature of the dialogue we use in making sense of our experiences (Fletcher and Watson, 2007).

To illustrate the above, this paper reports on a professional development module within an MBA programme which sought to combine storytelling and reflexive dialogue. The formation of the module was to challenge dominant traditional doctrines which currently exist in business education, as presented earlier. The central aim of the module was to provide the students, the opportunity to look more deeply into what and how they were beginning to understand about their own practice and identity, to explore their experiences, interconnectedness and self-awareness, through the use of storytelling. The students were PT MBA managers, who came from a various industry-based backgrounds, from engineering to service-based sectors, both male and female, all of whom had a minimum 2 years of senior management experience, with an average age of 30 years. The module was delivered as a 3 day (weekend) learning block in the form of open space workshops. The module held three core recursive themes, that of storytelling, reflexive dialogue and learning in action: these core themes served to scaffold the module to enable students to explore their learning progressively, enabling students to apply their learning to their own professional practice, while reflexively being aware of their emerging learning during the module.

An auto-ethnographic approach to data development was utilised, auto-ethnography as a mode of inquiry into learning in the context of the experience presented in this paper enables non-traditional and diverse ways of knowing, the use of storytelling, holds the capacity to challenge and provoke established ways of thinking and learning about how we inquiry into our experiences. Unlike other forms of inquiry, we are not looking in from the outside but rather looking out from the inside which requires a uniquely informed and highly enriched practice and perspective. Such a methodological approach enabled the student to bring together the numerous stories in order help them explore alternative ways of coming to understand their own professional development what does it look like, in what context where they placing it and recognise other ways in which it can be viewed. The module sought to recognise the students' own values, beliefs and assumptions and how these might be challenged by alternative viewpoints. According to Hayler (2011, p. 1) "valuable insights into the work and identity . . . can be gained by examining our own memories and beliefs and the narrative discourses through which we understand ourselves and our work are a source of rich description and insight".

In keeping with the tone of the narrated account presented, the use of self-questioning was discomforting but equally, as depicted in this account of practice, can be seen as offering the opportunity for fruitful discussion and debate. The account offers insights into the process of writing and articulating how we come to deal with undertaking the task of storying, and through the insights, the writer seeks to give the reader insight into how the students engaged with the process of story writing, offering a very personal account of both emotional and mental challenges they met in the process of writing a story. The data were collated in the form of diary accounts. It was a conscious decision to use diary notes as a method of data collection, to capture "moments" in the student's learning when actions and judgements were most critical (Watson, 2011; Van Maanen, 2011). This process provided the student with the ability to engage in the questioning of their assumptions, being challenged through the course of their learning experience.

Articulating experience – creating a reflexive narrative

> In the midst of a very defined and framed Post Graduate education program, which typical assignments are abundant in clearly identified structures and stated expected outcomes, with grid based grading processes; the storytelling exercise came as an unexpected task. Because it was a personal task, with no definition other than the one we (students) gave it, this specific task bore a lot of unknown, and in a certain way the freedom it gave us to make it our own was also what made it a very daunting task. A lot of questions arise from this unknown . . . "What is a story", "what is an issue in my practice", "which one do I write about", "who do I write it for", "how do I write about it", and so much more . . .. So how did I tackle this challenge and these questions?
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> Defining what to write about was I believe one the biggest hurdles in the process. One aspect I struggled with was the definition of the concept of "issue". It is only through dialogue with other students, lecturers and others involved in delivering the "taught" module that I clarified what it meant for me. The dialogue facilitated my thinking into selecting a subject matter. Indeed, from then I understood that an issue was not necessarily a problematic situation to resolve but maybe just a subject matter, a project, "something" that was happening in my practice. I then chose to write about the issue that was most on my mind, something I was dealing with at the time and that required me to think about how to go about it. It had many aspects, some were new to me, and others not as much, all converged or were linked into that specific live issue. It was about writing a proposal, it was about training a member of staff, it was about achieving results, it was about becoming a business manager. It was a challenging situation with many components.
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> I had to find a way to write about this issue for an audience that is unfamiliar, or at least a lot less familiar with the language used in my practice than me, and this was a challenge. I needed to find a way to make it understandable, and moreover relatable. I needed to find a way to translate the context and the main elements, but also the subtleties, the characters, the emotions without overwhelming the reader with technical, boring and dull terms. I needed to find a way to reach out to people outside of the practice. My choice here was to combine two approaches. The first one was to link my story to a medium with which most readers could potentially connect with, and the second was to utilise that medium as a proxy for describing my practice. This–borrowing the context and elements of a wider recognised practice or maybe hobby- I believed to be a suitable way to engage the audience in the journey I was undertaking as a practitioner.

The dialogical practice of storytelling sought to invite the student to engage in critique of self, enquiring into one's own constructs and dynamics (Reason, 1994; Heron, 1996; Higgins and Elliott, 2011; Raelin, 2007). Rather than accepting prescribed content and methods, the student becomes an enquirer into their own narrative, searching for their own patterns of knowing, while simultaneously and continually questioning their own practices. Reflexivity as a pedagogical tool encourages a critique of the manner in which one views and understands their practice, their experiences and dominant assumptions (Gherardi *et al.*, 1998). Storytelling and reflexive

questioning have the ability to bring students into questioning the very assumptions upon which their practice is enacted, their personal identity and the social relationship within which they act (Gold *et al.*, 2002; Alvesson and Willmott, 1996, 2002). Through the sharing of stories, the module sought to provide a space whereby the students could help each other understand how they constructed their learning and experience (Widdershoven and Sohl, 1999). In this sense, focussing on the role of dialogue was highly appropriate given the multiple voices with which we convey meaning through the stories we tell. By inviting students to tell and retell their stories, both listeners and narrators were presented with the opportunity to think about how their interpretations of the stories were relevant to their own social context.

The use of storytelling as a method to aid reflexive dialogue forces the student to move away from their pre-existing assumptions and practices and provide them with the power and conviction to seek out and recognise new meaning and differing alternatives of practice. The implication of this position in terms of an educational agenda involves challenging the "self-conceptions" of what it means to be a "practitioner" (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Martin, 1992; Zubizarreta, 2004). Engaging in such deep reflection can be beyond some student's ability, and students who are focused towards functional orientations tend to offer very factual explanations to their stories. The creation of meaningful stories requires the storyteller to question their own assumptions. In other words, they become the object of critique, then challenge and disrupt how the story is told, the storyteller needs to be honest, and as suggested by Barone (1992, p. 143), such honesty exposes the emotional aspects of social practice. These negotiated narratives have the ability to contribute towards a developing sense of connection where the student begins to recognise and make sense of their assumptions and actions (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002; Willmott, 1997; Weick, 1995).

Dealing with self

In this sense, the developing story can be viewed as a vehicle for making sense of the self and experiences, an interpretative act (Widdershoven and Sohl, 1999; Mintzberg, 2004). The student's insight above is about a process of becoming, implying movement, agency and continuity, in which the storyteller becomes an enquirer which seeks to constantly probe, explore other perspectives and self-understanding (Schwandt, 2001, p. 274). In the narrative below, we evidence the heuristic position of the storyteller; storytelling is a social process which resonates through the support of a strong social infrastructure in order to stimulate reflexive discussion. What we can see emerging in the student's reflexive commentary below, is that the quality of learning depends on the quality of conversation. An integral part of the narration presented provides an opportunity to reflect on the insight this might provide on how we come to experience, as we engage in processes of relating. Through it, we can begin to clearly see how the processes of participation and interaction provide and constrain the context of learning in action (Gherardi and Nicolini, 2002). We can clearly see how potential conflicts and contradictions influence and shape our practice (Higgins *et al.*, 2013).

> There were two main challenges I face during the process of the module. Firstly, I faced the influence of the social context. Indeed, as a student I was part of a cohort which brought together a multitude of people with each their background, knowledge, experiences, expectations and assumptions. During the weeks and months of studying, dynamics and narratives emerged from the group, we all discussed our feelings and opinions on modules, and of course our experiences. Maybe a common assumption shared by many of the students, and which I felt was there, is that business studies should provide answers, not pose questions. It then becomes "problematic" when such assumptions are met with approaches and modules that do pose questions, and moreover, questions about ourselves. I was not prepared or equipped to deal with these questions. It made me feel uncomfortable, a feeling probably shared by most peers then. And one of the response to this discomfort is to ridicule and criticise the source of it.

> As a student I was then facing choices and pressures. On the one hand I might have wanted to remain part of the group, achieve a sense of belonging with others on the same journey. On the other hand, I might have wanted to engage in the approach offered here. When both were true I faced a dilemma, maybe an internal conflict. So perhaps there lied a barrier in the fact that social pressure could have been stronger than the desire to engage in something that was uncomfortable and challenging, but something that in the end was, and still is, extremely valuable. I chose to engage in it but at the same time keep that engagement personal. Probably a lesson learnt is that that by sharing my experience of this learning journey I could have benefited from a richer experience.

The storytellers, through enacting and constructing their story, come to make sense of their experiences through the activity of writing and engaging with their own internal reflexive dialogue. In this sense it is critical for the writer to recognise their own practice, through social structures and other actors, by seeking to make sense of their actions from inside their own experiences. Positioning the writer as an insider suggests small insights or changes that can lead to differing methods of interpretation which in turn can influence how the writer may interpret and account for their actions (Cunliffe, 2002, 2004). The use of reflexive dialogue can offer the writer the opportunity to experience multiple interpretations of social reality when they are given the opportunity to question their underlying assumptions through collective inquiry (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2005; Shotter, 1993). The process of storytelling requires the storyteller to engage in a self-reflective dialogue as the story emerges; this can be attributed to what Schon (1983) refers to as reflection-in-action, in which the voice of the storyteller is one part of the developing story, their actions and the actions of others help to shape and construct the experience. In order to engage within reflective dialogue, the storyteller must purposefully seek to engage with issues of ambiguity and uncertainty or feelings of discomfort when narrating their experiences (Cunliffe, 2004).

So, if it is that important, why is it not recognised or used more widely?

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

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

Conclusion – so what next … …

The article has sought to exemplify how storytelling can contribute to professional and personal development in new and more enriched ways. This reflexive-style paper presented a perspective from which the writers' values and beliefs are informed, as opposed to making a claim for authenticity and authority in regards to the subject area. If the use of reflexive pedagogical approaches to management education is to be encouraged and promoted, it is appropriate for the writers to give insight into an account themselves in this emerging journey (Butler, 2005). It is recognised that narratives are not a new phenomenon; there is existing research which has already adopted narrative approaches. The article presented here develops, for the reader, some strong and important insight into the relationship between storytelling and the use of reflexive dialogue as a tool of learning about self. However, there are wider lessons to be taken from this paper, for both academic and practitioners alike.

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

So how can we begin to encourage the use of more reflexive learning conversations in post-experience MBA education? In this article we have not only suggested, but also evidenced, the notion of storytelling as a reflexive dialogical process. A method for helping us to recognise our practice and those taken-for-granted aspects of our everyday action, drawing awareness towards the practical moment to moment social relations which influence and mediate our actions (Shotter, 1993). The view of learning as an enacted action draws focus towards the role of the educator and student, as co-constructors of the learning experience. In this sense our voice, our practice, involves a delicate balance, talking too much or too little, the importance of enabling, encouraging students to make connections in their conversations but at the same time refraining from spoon-feeding and making those connections for them. According to Baker *et al.* (1997, p. 7), "As soon as the intention is to follow a method in order to make good conversation happen, the very essence of good conversation that is transformative is violated". In order for students to engage in such deep dialogical conversations, the storyteller needs to have the freedom to weave and construct their own learning through their interactions, containing spontaneity and surprise, moments of realisation, which could only materialise by engaged questioning and dialogue, shaping and developing the story and storyteller. According to Cunliffe (2002) "Dialogue is a key factor in this process of exploration". The importance of how we engage and interact with students to create good conversation opportunities is important in helping to create connections and offering new knowledge.

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