PROVOCATIVE THEORY AND A SCHOLARSHIP OF PRACTICE

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Abstract

The relationship between theory and management practice has been an ongoing debate during the first decade of the 21st century. This paper identifies two current understandings of how theory relates to practice – explanation and sensemaking – and offers a third, 'provocative' use of theory. Drawing on social constructionist ideas, a provocative theory is articulated as a relational process whereby academic theory 'speaks into' management practice as but one voice amongst many. The relationship is therefore one of engagement rather than the application of theory.

Having outlined the intellectual roots of provocative theory, two illustrative case studies are used to show how a provocative theory worked as managers engaged academic scholarship within a practice of inquiry to improve their managerial practice. These two stories illustrate a scholarly engagement with academic theory, as the two managers exhibited an engagement with ideas, a practice of inquiry and an attention to moment by moment relating within practice. These three processes are argued to constitute a scholarship of practice, where scholarship is seen in amidst moment by moment activity and practicing managers are involved in generating and evaluating an evidence based management.

Introduction

The relationship between academic theory, research and management practice has been a major topic of discussion in both academic research literatures (e.g. Starkey and Madan, 2001) and also in literatures aimed at the teaching of management in universities (e.g. Bennis and O'Toole, 2005; Mintzberg, 2004, Tushman et al, 2007; Ghoshal, 2005). Consideration of the relationship between management theory and practice has been shaped over recent years by two related but distinct debates. One debate has centred on the value of academically generated and taught theory, this debate has ranged around the issues of relevance and rigor. Are the theories taught in business schools relevant to the day to day management of organizations? Are the theories used by managers built upon rigorous research and evidence (Pfeffer and Sutton, 2006).

I would suggest that currently we can see two uses of academic theory in management learning contexts. Following Sutton and Staw (1995) tutors and managers can use theory as explanation to enable them to develop appropriate practices or, following Weick (1995), managers can use theory as a process of sensemaking in reflection on action. To these two approaches of theory used in management can be added a third, provocative use of theory. A provocative use of theory is built upon social constructionist premises and, in particular, ideas from reflexive (Cunliffe, 2002) or social poetic (Ramsey, 2008) learning practices. In using the term 'provocative', I seek to shift our attention away from consideration of the substance of a theory, concept, framework or research finding[2] towards how management-learners appropriate ideas from within such management thinking to their day to day managerial practice. Provocative

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[2] For the remainder of this article I will use the phrase 'academic theory' to cover this range of constructs. I do this for rhetorical purposes only – to save me using a long and clumsy phrase – not to suggest an alternative definition of theory. I am quite at ease to work with the tensions implicit in the helpful debate between Sutton and Staw, DiMaggio and Weick in the 1995 special issue of Administrative Science Quarterly.

Theory is a relational process rather than a type of academic thinking and is seen as a process whereby academic theory stimulates, incites and promotes changed practice as learning. Elsewhere (Ramsey, 2008), I have used Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony and carnivalesque relations to suggest that a "polyphonic classroom" can be created by centring attention on managers' practice-as-learning by using theory provocatively.

Over the same period, a second debate has developed connecting what has been termed a practice turn (Scatzki et al, 2001) to organizational and management learning literatures (Gherardi, 2000; 2009). The suggestion of a provocative relationship between academic theory and management practice locates management learning within social processes. It resonates strongly with those practice-based theories that understand knowing as a social and contextually dependent practice (e.g. Corrardi et al, 2010; Sole and Edmondson, 2002). Additionally, it extends such practice-based theorising by focusing on learning and scholarly domains of attention within moment-by-moment management practice.

This article is structured in four parts. First, briefly, I locate provocative theory within both the literatures on practice-based studies and understandings of management theory. I then outline the intellectual sources of a provocative take on academic theory, before using two short case studies, illustrating how managers have used academic theory to learn about managing within changing contexts. Finally, I use those stories to lift the way in which these managers' use of theory is located within what I call a scholarship of practice.

Centring practice in learning

Practice has become fashionable, indeed Corrardi and her colleagues (2010) have suggested that it could be described as a bandwagon, or perhaps bandwagons. It is not within the scope of this

article to undertake a thorough review of practice-based literatures. That has been done elsewhere (eg Corradi et al, 2010; Gherardi, 2000; 2009). My job in this section is to locate provocative theory and a scholarship of practice within these literatures. A repeated core of the various approaches to practice-based theorising is the importance of social processes, an example being Schatzki's (2001, p2) description of practices as "embodied … arrays of human activity". Practice-based literatures are agreed that practices are essentially social. But the use that scholars put practices to, varies.

Corradi and her colleagues' (2010) typology is helpful here. First, they point out, practices have been treated as an object of study. So, for example, Schatzki has illustrated that practices are not only the outworkings of practitioners, but also constitute identities. As a consequence, they become a useful unit of analysis for those who wish to understand societies (eg Bordieu, 1977) or they become a method for exploring a topic, for example those researching strategy as practice (eg Whittington, 2003). Bourdieu in seeking to understand the emergence of certain practices within societies, identifies the role of habitus, which, for example, has been used in organisational research to study how organisational learning occurs within haute cuisine (Gomez et al, 2003). For those researching strategy as practice, the goal is more to explore how strategies are actually created in practice (eg Whittington, 2003).

More significant to the project of this article is the work contained in a second type of practice-based theorising as identified by Corradi and her colleagues. Here they wrote of research and writing that centred on "knowing in practice". A central theme of this writing has been the way knowledge is seen as situated and emergent, created and expressed in social practices (e.g. Blackler & Regan 2009; Kempster & Stewart, 2010; Petit & Huault, 2008; Sole and Edmonson, 2002). Of particular importance in this stream of practice-based theorising is Orlilowski's

(2002) argument that the learning involved in working with new technology was a process of enactment. Learning from provocative theory can be seen as an extension of this thinking. For our focus, along with that of Raelin (2007; 2009) and Segal (2010) moves from researchers and their use of practices to theorise organization and management practice to management practitioners seeking reflexively to use ideas to improve their management practice.

Three Stories of Academic Theory

A provocative use of academic theory can be contrasted with two other stories of theory: theory as explanation and theory as sensemaking. A 1995 issue of Administrative Sciences Quarterly included three related articles (Di Maggio, 1995; Sutton and Staw, 1995; Weick, 1995) that discussed what organizational theory might be, or rather "what theory was not" in the case of Sutton and Staw (1995, p371). Two treatments of theory are present in the papers by Sutton and Staw and Weick. Sutton and Staw (1995) argued that discussions of literatures, listing of variables, hypotheses, diagrams or data constitute inadequate theory. They went on to argue that for theory to be strong it must contain some element of causal explanation with reasoning and logic. Theory is therefore understood to be a reasoned explanation of cause-effect relations. The context of Staw and Sutton's essay was significant. They stated that their aim was to help researchers write strong theory. This strong theory was understood to contribute to knowledge and point the way to what "may be true" (p381). Theory was seen to serve an academic pursuit of knowledge with little consideration of what use that theory might be in the development of organizational practice. DiMaggio's (1995) comments on Staw and Sutton's essay offered three views of what theory is and maintained a similar focus on academic readers with all three views offering ways of seeing the world or of gaining enlightenment.

Weick (1995) commented that Staw and Sutton had treated theory as a product, complete and therefore measurable against some absolute standards. In contrast, he suggested that theorising was a process including "interim struggles" (Runkel and Runkel, 1984) such as guessing, abstracting, generalizing and analyzing. Of particular note is his suggestion that a key element of theory construction is a process of reflection on relationships between symptoms and treatments. The example he gave was of his own paper (Weick, 1993) on the Mann Gulch disaster in which he conducted a series of "thought trials… seeing which concepts made a difference in those symptoms" (p. 389). Weick offered us a performative 'doing of' theorizing, a journeying from "one text to another", essentially a sensemaking process.

An implicit assumption however, permeates all three papers. Theory is for academics. It is the product of scholarly thinking and research and contributes to future theorizing by scholars. A question arises from this assumption; when is it appropriate to hand the theory over to managers learning in practice? Sutton and Staw (1995), Tushman and his colleagues (2007) and especially Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) would have little doubt that the answer should be when the theory has been proved to be robust through rigorous research. It is the academy's job to test, evaluate and validate academic theory before it is adjudged ready to be handed to managers. Even in Van de Ven and Johnson's (2006) engaged scholarship, where a relationship of arbitrage gives significantly more influence to managers in setting research agendas, still the research and theorizing were predominantly left to the academics. But are not managers quite capable of evaluating academic theory? Indeed, perhaps anxiety within the academy about a 'relevance gap' appears to demonstrate that managers are doing just that and not liking what they see.

Towards a provocative use of theory

As mentioned in the introduction, a provocative take on theory emerges from social constructionist thinking. In outlining any social constructionist approach to theory, there is a twofold risk that either we see social constructionism as a homogenous approach or build inpenetrable and unnecessary distinctions between types of social constructionisms. Having said that social constructionism can be seen as an ongoing conversation; participants offering different emphases in their contributions. A discursive emphasis contributing to an ongoing social constructionist conversation about the relationship between theory and practice would focus on talk and language. So, for example, Gergen (1994) wrote of generative theories that create new intelligibilities; new languages that add to our range of possible actions. Clegg and his colleagues (Clegg et al, 2004) wrote of theory interrupting, disturbing and transforming practice. Such a way of understanding centres human action around talk and other forms of discourse in sensemaking. It foregrounds talk and action as meaningful, intelligible, bearing sense and consequently can be seen to resonate with Weick's sensemaking approach to theorising.

An alternative, relational emphasis centres on human action and talk as invitational. Such an approach does not preclude processes of sensemaking, but as in Shotter's (1996) work on a social poetics, it centres the way that our talk strikes, moves, gestures to us, calling out action from us in a relationally responsive manner. This is talk as invitational. Bakhtin's (1984) work on Dostoevsky is helpful in highlighting the difference in emphasis. He argued that Dostoevsky's characters did not so much interact but interplay. Interaction would, he argued, imply finalised characters expressing finalised thoughts. That is, theory would be treated as a finalised thing, to be understood or made sense of and applied. Interplay on the other hand would

locate academic theory as an unfinalised, perhaps tentative contribution to such interplay inviting or provoking a response that is transitory and generative, not so much an application of the theory as a rejoinder that carries a conversation onwards.

What is learning and when might it happen?

So, how can we see learning in this provocative relationship between academic theory and managers learning in practice? If we follow the three stories of theory outlined above, we can see pedagogical responses to it. Starting with an understanding of theory as explanation, Tushman and his colleagues' (2007) work with companies in the Leading Change and Organizational Renewal programme offers a good example of such an approach. Tushman and his colleagues work with senior executives to identify issues for a sponsoring organization. The academic faculty then teach for about half the workshop before facilitating executive groups in action planning and follow up.

Secondly, if one follows Weick's broader understanding of theorizing as a process of sensemaking, then management education makes a shift. From such a perspective, theory's contribution to learning can be seen in supporting managers' ability to make sense of their work context and activities or in using that experience to help them make sense of the theories. Examples of the former approach would include Huxham and Beech (2003) who suggested that managers can use academic theory as a "a means of providing conceptual handles for reflection on their own practice" (p 73).   They questioned the practicality of theoretical explications of good or best practice. Instead they argued that insights could be gained in the tensions between conflicting managerial prescriptions and realities within any managerial situation. It is these tensions that provide the space, they argued, for reflection and professional development. As an example they wrote of Huxham's experience in working with organizations seeking to

collaborate. Conflicting advice could be given to such organizations. They might be encouraged to articulate clear, shared goals prior to collaborating or they could be advised to get on with joint tasks without agreeing aims. These contradictory pieces of advice were seen as extremes with most collaborators developing practice somewhere between them. Alternatively, Fenton O'Creevy (2006) and his colleagues described a course learning design where experience provides a framework for better understanding academic theories. Despite differences between them, what both the theory-as-explanation or theory-as-sensemaking have in common is that learning is seen happening primarily as manager-learners build an understanding of those theories.

 A provocative relationship with theory, in contrast, follows Raelin (2007) in wanting to focus our attention more on our use of ideas and theory rather than on the process of understanding. As Raelin points out, there are occasions where you might think business school teachers assume that having understood a particular theory, application will be easy and undertaken by students following their course of study. There is obviously nothing wrong in teaching towards a sound understanding of academic theories, but in emphasizing learning prior to practice we may be undermining the potential of managers to learn in practice, as they manage operations, people or markets in day by day activities. By emphasizing the process of understanding or sensemaking as something that goes on prior to application we may be restricting the potential for that day to day practice to speak as an alternative voice within polyphony, provoking managers into action they hadn't anticipated. A provocative use of theory promotes practice-as-learning, for it brings into focus a generative conversation between symptoms, ideas, work context and action in the creation of changed practice. The language of this conversation is that of inquiry and evidence; a scholarly conversation of learning-in-practice, perhaps a scholarship of practice.

Provocative theory, social poetic relating and improvised learning

There are four major sources to this articulation of a provocative theory for management learning. First, the name itself comes from the therapuetics of Frank Farrally (Farrelly and Brandsma, 1982; Ramsey, 2008). Farrally's provocative therapy sought to help clients develop and practice healthier ways of living rather than use understanding of human behaviour to affect cognitive changes in those clients. Farrelly explicitly argued against the notion that correct understanding of causes of behaviour could help his clients. Instead, when he used pshychological theory, it was as a method of enabling his clients to break free and see themselves as, at least in part, authors of their lives.

A second source for provocative therapy is the work of Bakhtin (1984) on Dostoevsky's poetics. A key to Dostoevsky's writing was his use of the "idea" of the novel. But rather than seeing this as a finalised concept driving the narrative forward. Bakhtin saw the "idea" being worked out, creating, and being created, in relations between characters in Dostoevsky's work. A third source for provocative theory is Dewey's (1938) use of the term "idea". Dewey defined an idea as being the anticipation of an outcome of some action. He saw ideas having different stages. First, there is a suggestion, a vague possibility of what might occur. Then, such a suggestion might form the stimulus to action. Dewey argued that this process only creates an idea when it is examined and evaluated against some measure of functional success.

The final source of provocative theory is John Shotter's work on social poetics. Shotter (2000) has argued that there are currently two realms of academic attention. The first realm of attention is on behaviour: the events determined by natural causes or social dynamics. The second is on actions: the willful, reasonable, self determined acts of a person. To these two realms, Shotter adds a third realm of attention that he calls relationally-responsive or joint action. It is within

this, third realm that theory can be seen in a provocative relationship with practice. The relating of theory to the organizational world can be provocative of new relationally-responsive practices. Shotter calls this relationally-responsive action, a social poetics and stresses how our actions strike, move and gesture towards new ways of acting together. This is not only a relationship of informing, transferring, understanding or persuading. Rather, it is better understood as the relationship between improvising actors (Johnstone, 1999); as one makes an offer that the other blocks or accepts and so a scene or story is created. In using the term social poetics, Shotter is drawing on the Greek word 'poesis' meaning creativity; academic theory can have such a generative, poetic relation to managerial practice.

In developing a provocative relationship between academic theory and management practice, theoretical writing and research findings can be seen in dialogical and performative relation with managerial practice. The theoretical and research writing does not stand free, available to be applied but, rather is as both an instigator and product of relationally-responsive, improvisational practice. It is a performance being constructed by, recreated by and also provoking and inviting managerial practice.

Examples of Provocative Learning

<u>How the stories came to be told</u>

The stories that follow were told me by two managers, Mike and Kieran[i], who were studying a postgraduate course in organizational change. They worked with me and other managers to explore how ideas from the literatures of organizational change might be of use to them in their day to day practice. I have given a more detailed account of the methods used in this course elsewhere (Ramsey, 2008). In amidst these conversations they also undertook action research

projects to test the new ideas that they were reading and hearing about in their own workplaces, which they then reported on in written documents. The stories that I retell below are edited, using Mike and Kieran's own words where possible, to fit within the constraints of a journal article. I checked the stories with Mike and Kieran to ask them (a) to confirm that they were happy for me to use the stories and (b) to ask if they wanted to add, delete or amend any element of the stories. Both agreed to my use of their stories and neither amended the stories that I had retold. I use these stores illustratively, to draw out the particular, scholarly relation between theory and management practice that I am articulating. They are in no way offered as empirical proof that I have tested a hypothesis.

Mike's story was taken from his final dissertation. He had been particularly struck by ideas gained during a classroom session with an improvised jazz band. He then explored the potential use of these ideas in a consulting and training project he was undertaking with at his employing hospital. Kieran's story is taken from a shorter report linked to a module on management development and organizational learning. Kieran's use of theory is somewhat different. Like Mike, he was seeking to help a group of staff to develop new skills but his shorter project focused more on how he tried new managerial actions as events failed to turn out in the way he hoped. Kieran's learning from theory developed as he reflected upon his actions and listened to his team speak to him and then allowed different theorists 'speak' into his reflections and so provoked changed practice.

Mike's learning

In the second year of a postgraduate course on organizational change we ran a session with a jazz band improvising and talking about how they manage the process of playing together, often with musicians who had never played together before. The link between the playing of the jazz band

and managing was made using Barrett's (1998) article on improvised jazz as a metaphor for organizing, which the students had been encouraged to read before the session. The band played and talked for about an hour and then the managers and I continued to discuss the implications of what we had heard for our own management practice, particularly with reference to change in organizations. Following one of these sessions Mike, an internal organizational development consultant with a National Health Service (NHS) hospital trust, told me of his love of ancient and renaissance music. He told me that he recognized many of the musical ideas we had discussed earlier that evening from his own involvement in Venetian polyphonic music. In particular, he was interested in the way that different musicians contributed to the final piece rather than just the composer or conductor: the Maestro di Cappella.

Shortly after this conversation, Mike proposed that he used the metaphor of Venetian polyphony as a central resource in conducting a training project with a group of ward sisters at an NHS hospital. Up until this point, Mike had seen himself as an organizational development consultant using a clinical inquiry method to "make it all better" for his clients. He started his project by using the metaphor of Venetian polyphony, describing its contribution to his learning how to hear other voices in the project. Mike had been called in to run the leadership training course by the hospital's senior nurse who had complained that a particular group of ward sisters was not developing as independent leaders. Mike's task was to help them develop in line with a National Clinical Leadership program. To this end he set up a series of training meetings with the ward sisters and the senior nurse. In his project report, Mike introduced the participants of his project but now rather than his clients being "sick" he wrote that:

> "I compare the ward sisters with the "available musicians" the Venetian composer would
> have needed to work with to not only jointly contribute to the composition of a new

commissioned piece of music but to also work together to perform it.   In the same way I

was to participate with this available group of individuals to jointly build new constructs

that would lead to the performance of new actions."

Mike used the metaphor of the Venetian polyphonic ensemble to inform his consulting practice

for this project. As Barrett's (1998) article on improvised jazz was informed by social

constructionist thinking, so Mike used constructionist and participatory literatures to provoke

new ways of relating with his clients.   He worked with the ward sisters to co-create learning

about leadership. Initially he was the key influence in what was discussed but as the group

matured, the ward sisters themselves started to introduce issues, for example trust, for

exploration. As with a Venetian ensemble, Mike positioned himself as a Maestro di Cappella in

accepting and promoting the creative input of the ward sisters. He drew a comparison between

the Venetian ensemble and a modern orchestra contrasting his role to that of a modern day

composer or conductor.

> "A *Maestro di Cappella* or composer, as already pointed out, did not have a choice about
>
> the musicians they could work with. They had to compose around the existing skills and
>
> competencies. Of course, if they were a maestro of any calibre they would also provide
>
> opportunities for development."

Mike introduced themes alongside the ward sisters; for example he, in line with the NHS

modernization agenda and the senior nurse's wishes, introduced issues of leadership, but

following a discussion about trust; that conversation moved in different directions:

> "The Maestro di Cappella or the composer of a piece of music did not stand in front of
>
> the ensemble and reign over them as modern day orchestral conductors do. They played
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> and led within the ensemble often from the harpsichord or organ, simply providing the

accompaniment for one of the virtuosi playing a solo piece. Leadership was in effect a partnership with each member giving way to the other as their part in the piece took centre stage. This coordinating of action within the framework of the music itself was supported by a common musical language that supported the *going on* between the musicians."

By this stage, Mike and the ward sisters were not only using the metaphor to inform *his* practice as a facilitator but the group's practice of leadership, community and trust. Mike ended his discussion of the project by re-exploring how leadership can occur. Drawing on the work of Eisler (1990) and Hosking (1990; 1995) he discussed the problems he foresaw for the group of ward sisters in creating new ways of working within the hierarchical relations of the NHS citing, as evidence, his feared inability, at the start of the project, to create co-constructive relations with the ward sisters. He had feared being positioned by the ward sisters as an alternative manager. His conclusion was that progress had been made; he and the ward sisters had created more of a partnership, rather than hierarchical, relationship but there were further development to be made and he intended to carry on with that journey.

Mike also let the metaphor of Venetian polyphony shape his practice of inquiry, intending that the research "finding's should not only be in his voice" but should give space for other participants from the learning group speak into the findings as well. Mike created a co-operative inquiry group (Reason, 1999) with the ward sisters. They used monthly meetings to raise issues for investigation and then decide upon methods of inquiry to explore those issues. Methods used included semi-structured, individual interviews, rich pictures (Checkland, 2001) and participant observation. In working in this way, Mike not only shaped how he could use the new ideas from

social constructionism that were starting to influence his thinking but also gave space for the wider group to develop lines of inquiry that informed group activities.

What we can see in Mike's story is a way in which a theoretical discussion provided him with a framework to read a wide array of other literatures and it invited him into a different and generative practice. It is interesting to note that following an early reference, Mike did not discuss Barrett's work on improvised jazz. It was not that he *applied* a theory but that it provoked him into a different line of exploration. It was as if it provided him with new lenses through which to see a wide array of literatures as, not just interesting, but more importantly as practical to his working context. Additionally, these new lenses enabled Mike to notice and attend to learning relations that he would not have noticed previously. Mike did not just apply a set of theories but extended them, contextualized them and enacted the emergent practice with his co-creators in the project. As the project developed over six months, Mike also found that his inquiry empowered him to question some of the ideas about leadership and trust that he had initially read. The final pages of his dissertation include a significant discussion on the value of the British NHS's clinical leadership model in vogue at that time.

Kieran's learning

Kieran's project learning was significantly different to Mike's. Whereas Mike's learning grew from an academic piece of work that provoked him to reconsider his whole practice. Kieran's learning grew as different theories informed his reflective and day to day managerial practice and invited new contributions to improved team performance.

Kieran tells the story of how he supported members of his facilities maintenance team in gaining *CORGI[ii]* gas fitters' registration. Five years earlier the experience of training had been traumatic

for the team. This time Kieran wanted it to be different. Kieran's first reflections on the process drew on Hosking's (1999) articulation of subject-object relations, where managers are treated as active subjects controlling and moving their subordinates who are understood as being passive objects.

> "I was always told that, "people will not do the training because there is nothing in it for them, they need rewarding". This was a gap in the grading scheme that we had, however filled so the monetary reward for developing yourself is now there.
>
> However I still cannot help feeling that this returns us to subject-object relationships, carrot and stick approach, at the moment it probably will help; in the future I think trust and relationships will be the driving force."

The previous scenario had seen all who worked on gas appliances commanded to do the course. Kieran saw this as an example of subject-object relations, where an active and knowing manager is able to act upon his passive and knowable staff, in order to create a desired response. He wondered if moving to a voluntary scheme would give the fitters more control. Kieran attempted to work out, in practice, some implications of moving toward a less subject-object style of management, by ceding some of the control over choosing who would attend the course. He also decided to move training off site to reduce pressure on the fitters and involved the fitters' team supervisor in the evaluation and selection of a training course. The selection was, in part, based on the college's perceived ability to speak the "fitters' language".

> "…the first college I had visited … were talking my language, more importantly they were talking the [supervisor's] language too. They offered to come over to the University and talk to our candidates; this is great I thought, this person could allay some of the people's fears."

The result was not as successful as Kieran had anticipated. Two of the first three fitters to volunteer for training dropped out of the course. At this stage Kieran started to investigate what had happened and how things might be improved.

> "This came as a blow for me, I thought I had done everything right by involving people, asking for volunteers and not pushing them but still I had failed. At this point I took a step back and thought to myself, what has gone wrong, why was it not successful, how could I make it any better?"

From my perspective, I would ask if Kieran had made any substantial move toward a less subject-object relationship with his team. The changes he made still left him as the active subject making it easier for his team of gas fitters; he did not appear to appreciate this. For Kieran, however, the idea of developing less subject-object relations was still a goal and next it provoked a serious attempt to appreciate what was going on from a fitters' perspective. He had just done some reading about narrative approaches to management (Barry, 1997; Ramsey, 2005) and asked the fitters for their stories. The stories that he was told surprised him; issues raised as important by the fitters had previously been considered unimportant by managers and supervisors,

> "Stories such as "I have only touched gas four times since I was trained five years ago, I don't feel confident with it". "A lot of gas work was put out to contract so we don't deal with it every day, if you're not dealing with it you soon lose your competence and confidence". "Eighty percent of what we learnt we have never used again". Yet the management's point of view was "the fitting shop has steered away from gas, the staff didn't want to work on gas, so some of it had to be put out to contract. I would like to see

the fitting section get the gas works back, it is certainly more lucrative and specialist

work."

Another story told of fitters benefiting during the earlier training when part of the study had

being done in groups and how that had been more successful than the individual training. This

story linked in with some reading that Kieran had been doing about Vygotsky's (1978) zone of

proximal development (ZPD). Kieran reflected that perhaps the problem was not the actual

CORGI training itself but the way the section was organized. Could a smaller, *CORGI* registered

group work together practicing, gaining the necessary hands-on experience and developing their

skills together as a community of practice (Brown and Duguid, 1991)?

Kieran was now moving his focus away from his initial hope that allowing the fitters to volunteer

for training would develop a less subject-object style of management. His hope had been that

this would make things easier for the fitters to succeed with their training. His new reading

about organizational learning and the social processes of creating ZPDs moved him to reorganize

the structure of his department and create a dedicated gas fitting team that would reduce the need

for contracting out gas fitting work. It is interesting, however, to notice that this development

grew out of his consciously listening to others' stories. Issues that Kieran had previously not

connected with training now became more closely linked, for example the issue of contracting

out gas work. Kieran was now also consciously including the work of Brown and Duguid

(1991), with a view to developing a "fluid evolution of learning through practice". I am

unconvinced that my own reading of Brown and Duguid would be the same as Kieran's. That,

however, is not relevant; for in using theory provocatively it is less important that the meaning of

any theory is understood 'correctly' but that it should contribute to the development of

managerial practice where evidence can be gathered and reflected upon and so further developed.

Here we see Kieran not just applying theory to his practice but engaging the taught content of his program and practice in a reflective 'conversation'. The theory that he had read and heard about projected into these 'conversations' and was enriching his reflection and creating with him a new ZPD, offering invitations to new 'riffs', new managerial practices and working relations (Barrett, 1998).

Kieran's story did not end 'happily ever after'; rather it represented a work-in-progress. What we can see in this story is a manager seeking to explore how theories speak to his practice and then taking the time to critique and develop that practice in reflection. Kieran's project report was a shorter piece of work than Mike's representing an assignment for one or the course's modules rather than a final dissertation. As readers we are left with a situation unresolved but also with a manager articulating ways ahead that were not on the horizon before he undertook the project. The theories he read provided him with language that enlivened his reflection-in-action and could be contextualized in the light of evidence he gathered whilst talking with colleagues.

Provocative theory as engaged, generative and projective

So what can be seen of a provocative use of theory within these two illustrative stories? I want to conclude this paper by highlighting three elements of Mike's and Kieran's learning. These three elements form, I would suggest, a scholarship of practice that helps a provocative take on theory from dropping into a relativisitic quagmire where it might appear that anything goes.First, the stories tell of how Mike and Kieran engaged with ideas from academic theory. The relationship between that academic theory and management learning-in-practice is ontological rather than epistemic. By that, I mean that Mike's and Kieran's response to the ideas that they had come across was active rather than simply cognitive. These two managers did not apply theory that they had previously understood. In many ways, they did not make use of explanatory theories

that they could have applied. Rather, they 'danced', played with and responded to the academic material that they had discussed or read. Dewey's (1938) concept of an idea as "the anticipation of an outcome" is helpful here. For both Mike and Kieran the ideas that they had come across gave them an anticipation of possible outcomes that they found attractive and provocative of changed (learned) activity.

Mike and Kieran appear to have somewhat different stories of how the theory spoke into their practice. In these two stories, I notice two strands of provocative theory. One is generative as it is built upon Gergen's (1994) concept of generative theory. For Gergen a generative management theory would be one that offers a manager a new way of going on, as can be seen particularly in Mike's story. This fits with what a provocative pedagogy will do for *much* of the time, but there are also times when academic theory provides a moment of critique or an alternative perspective on current managerial activity. In such moments, and both the stories of Mike and Kieran illustrate this, academic theory projects into ongoing activity providing a pause of questioning. So a second strand of provocative theory can be identified, when academic theory is projective. The actual term is drawn from an essay by Charles Olson (1966) entitled "Projective Verse". In this essay, Olson argued that rather than a line of poetry being understood in terms of metre or rhyme, it could only be understood as following from the previous line and then projecting into succeeding lines. Sometimes it is possible, in working with managers, to identify a particular theory that is generative of new managerial practice. On other occasions, theories and conversations blend into an emergent practice within which it is impossible to identify accurately how a theory is used.

Secondly, not only were Mike and Kieran 'dancing' with their new ideas; they were doing this within moment by moment relations with others. For, whilst both Mike and Kieran's stories are

told after the events and as part of assignments, where they reckoned they had to demonstrate a considered, academic tone to their storytelling, both include accounts of vital, in-the-moment learning. As they both tell their stories they become increasingly aware of whose voice is being heard. For Kieran, his choice of narrative interviews and for Mike, his responsiveness to the project design work done collaboratively within workshops illustrate how in the moment of organizing, the relations they were engaged in shaped how and which ideas could be involved in the organizing. The ideas that Mike and Kieran were engaged with both shaped how they related with others but were also constrained by those relations. This was a scholarship engaged in amidst moment by moment, socially constructive relating.

Finally, for both Mike and Kieran, their engagement with academic theory involved a substantial practice of inquiry. Above I stressed that neither of these managers simply applied academic theory rather that they 'played' with it. That 'play' involved a logic of inquiry as discussed by Dewey (1938). As they sought to transform their work places, so they sought evidence to guide their actions. This appears to have happened in two quite distinct moments of their inquiry. First, they sought to get a sense of the 'terrain' within which they were acting. As Shotter (2008) suggested, they were asking the question "How do I go on from here?" and to do that, they needed an account of the context that they were working in, they needed a sense of the 'terrain' in which they were travelling. So, for example, once his first initiative had failed to deliver the hoped for results, Kieran conducted a series of narrative interviews (Czarniawska, 1998; Mishler, 1986) that highlighted a very different working context to that which his initial inquiries had pointed him. Secondly, in answering the question "how do we go on from here?" both managers sought evidence that would help them evaluate the impact of their theory informed actions. Mike reflected on an action research approach, but his inquiry methods also come straight from

ethnographic methods. The meetings that he organized became venues for participative observation. Informal conversations and correspondence were detailed in field notes. One key aspect of Mike's inquiry is the way that he followed Reason's (1999) leading in facilitating other participants' ability to contribute to the design and analysis of the cooperative inquiry.

Concluding comments

In these two stories, we can see two managers engaging with academic ideas and practicing a thoughtful inquiry in a thoroughly scholarly manner. This scholarship happened within and was to some extent shaped by the context of their day to day managerial practice and the output of that scholarship is seen in terms of emerging, evidence based development of that practice and in an increased ability to 'discuss' an emerging sensemaking with the academy. This could appropriately be called a scholarship of practice. From Mike's and Kieran's stories, there appear to be three elements of such a scholarship of practice: an engagement with ideas, a practice of inquiry, and a focus on moment-by-moment relating within practice.

A vital element of this scholarship of practice is the location of the evidence on which the scholarship is based. Pfeffer and Sutton (2006) argued for an evidence based management that located the decisions about what counts as evidence and how it is to be gathered and evaluated completely in the domain of the academy. Managers are implicitly left waiting for the tablets of stone to be handed to them. What these two stories suggest to us is that managers are perfectly able to generate the evidence upon which to create and evaluate new management practice. Of course the nature of that evidence is different to that produced by academic researchers, for it is evidence that leads to action more than knowledge claims; it is a practice centred inquiry (Ramsey, 2007). Having said that, such a practice centred inquiry is not without its measures of quality. Central to an engagement in a practice centred inquiry is the action research tool of a

cycle of inquiry (Marshall, 1999; 2001; Ramsey, 2007). For it is in the cycle of inquiry, as reflection follows action before projecting into further action that evaluation of the quality of previous evidence used can be made. Kieran, for example found that later cycles of inquiry produced evidence that persuaded him to change his understanding of the nature of problems he was facing and the managerial actions he needed to take. Mike, found that repeated cycles of inquiry (particularly the meetings with ward sisters) filled out his views of the ward sisters that he was working with and offered him a sounder basis for his training and development activities.

Earlier, I suggested that provocative theory was a relational process rather than a substantive type of theory. It is a relational process that calls from a manager new managerial practice. It locates the responsibility for evidence gathering and evaluation within the moment and context of management practice and enables managers to develop a scholarship of practice within their day-to-day managerial activity. For the academy, such a provocative theory suggests a shift in our emphasis on the substance of academic theory to the potential use of that theory. It also means a need to attend to the rhetorical attractiveness of academic theory within learning and teaching contexts. Additionally, provocative theory will privilege management learning design that provides space for management learners to experiment with and evaluate ideas, rather than emphasising the development of sound understanding of those theories. Finally, it offers a relational process by which academics and practitioners can develop the kind of engaged scholarship envisioned by Van de Ven and Johnson (2006).

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[i] I have not used the managers' real names but use the names Mike and Kieran to differentiate between the two examples. Both men have seen how I have told their stories and were given the opportunity to modify them.

[ii] All fitters/technicians working on gas appliances are required by UK legislation to register in the *CORGI* scheme.