Open Research Online

Citation

Bell, Emma and Bridgman, Todd (2018). Expecting the unexpected in Management Learning. Management Learning, 49(1) pp. 3–7.

URL

https://oro.open.ac.uk/53503/

License

Policy

Versions

'If you do not expect the unexpected, you will not find it; for it is hard to be sought out and difficult.'

Heraclitus, Fragment 7[i]

When we are invited as editors to contribute to conference sessions, workshops and talks on journal publishing we sometimes hear the word 'quirky' as a label used to describe work published in *Management Learning*. What we take people to mean when they describe the journal in this way is that articles are unexpected, unconventional, unusual and unorthodox. These characteristics are highly consistent with the remit of *Management Learning*, which is to publish thought-provoking work that opens up existing ways of thinking about knowledge and learning to critical scrutiny. Evidence of the appeal of quirky scholarship may be inferred from the journal's rising impact factor, which increased further this year from 1.393 to 1.836 (Management JCR 89/194). However, quirkiness also implies deviation from the mainstream. It can therefore be seen as work that is risky - or even marginal and eccentric - and hence not to be taken especially seriously.

In this editorial we seek to explore the meaning of quirkiness and, through this, to embrace the possibilities that such a positioning affords. In so doing, we follow a tradition of reclaiming words that have formerly been used to subjugate or undermine, such as 'queer', and using them to 'question dominant foundational assumptions about what is "normal" and what is "abnormal"' (Rumens and Tyler, 2016: 225). By attempting to unsettle what is considered 'normal' in the study of management knowledge and learning, we endeavour to reclaim the word 'quirky' as a term with critical, reflexive potential.

Our view is that quirky scholarship arises from the exercise of disciplined, sociological imagination (Mills, 1959) in pursuit of scholarly creativity. One of the ways in which quirky scholarship can be cultivated, is through exposure to the unexpected. This is a feature of ethnomethodology which involves deliberately engineering unexpected situations and observing the social reactions that this provokes - a practice known as 'breaching' (Garfinkel, 1967). This enables insight into the practices that social actors use to produce and maintain settings as understandable, consistent and accountable. In the context of journal publishing, these practices contribute to the development of shared paradigms (Kuhn, 1970) - beliefs, values, ideas and techniques about what we should study and how to study it. Yet unexpected or quirky articles in *Management Learning* are characterised by conscious (careful and meticulous) violation of these shared norms. Authors of quirky articles in this journal can be understood as engaged in what might therefore be understood as acts of 'positive deviance' (Rafalovich, 2006), destabilising or denaturalizing (Grey, 2009) what is taken for granted. Breaching established norms can be intellectually and emotionally discomforting. Yet it is only by seeking to understand why pressures to conform exist, and where they come from, that insights are able to be generated.

Being prepared to be surprised, or to expect the unexpected, arises from exposure to uncertainty which, in the case of academic articles, potentially involves focusing on phenomena that are puzzling or discomforting and asking questions which cannot be answered satisfactorily. Heraclitus, quoted at the start of this editorial, suggests the unexpected arises from the dialectical relationship between harmony and strife which are inseparable elements of human knowing that are only able to be reconciled through practice. In order for unexpectedness to be realised in papers published in *Management Learning*, we depend on authors and reviewers to be able to deal with a degree of strife and the emotions that this can provoke. It is commonly argued that 'good scholarship' involves joining an existing conversation, such as in a particular journal, in order to meaningfully contribute to it and, through this, to be accepted as a conversationalist/author (Huff, 1999). This sentiment is expressed in the *Management Learning* author submission guidelines which state:

Manuscripts should be situated within a relevant body of literature, connect to important conversations in the field *and* the journal, make a significant and substantial contribution to the development of management and organizational learning, and be coherent, clear and compelling.

While we agree with Huff, who recommends academic authors to connect with points that have already been made (by reading and engaging with existing work in the field), and to listen before they speak (in order to know the conversations that they wish to participate in and the audiences they want to reach), we are also conscious of the need to avoid pushing these requirements too far. This is because the imperative to contribute to existing conversations in a journal can lead to paradigmatic closure, through regulation of disciplinary borders, and a consequent potential undermining of the surprising or unexpected.

In enabling quirky scholarship, we rely on the commitment and generosity of our International Editorial Board members and reviewers who remain open to the unexpected while also guiding authors in reflecting on their claims and refining them in the presence of a sympathetic audience. This involves working with authors to cultivate and nurture their contributions and make them broadly accessible to potential audiences. We are therefore saddened by accounts of the journal review process which suggest it is a humiliating experience that tends to crush the spirit and erode the passion that we consider a vital element of quirky scholarship. Cederström and Spicer (2017) describe the process of putting 'thousands of hours' into an article only to have it rejected by several journals, eventually publishing it ten years after writing the original manuscript: '[a]ll intellectual excitement had been beaten out of us. It no longer felt like our words. It was now just an assemblage of what the reviewers wanted us to write, thinly disguised as an academic article' (p.708). What Cederström and Spicer describe is a consequence of the complex power dynamics that characterise the academic peer-review process, where knowledge claims are socially constituted through a process of unequal negotiation (Bedeian, 2004). Yet occasionally, when it works well, intellectual conversations between reviewers and authors may be experienced as liberating - see for example Tomkins and Ulus who talk about their experience of being encouraged by *Management Learning* reviewers to take risks in their development of critiques of established practice[ii].

What we interpret Cederström and Spicer (2017) also to be describing is the process of producing 'formulaic' articles – 'truly joyless text[s], whose publication may bring relief or even a sense of victory but no deep fulfilment' (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013: 253). At *Management Learning* we are committed to going beyond 'formulaic research' which resorts to the use of standardised language and is organised into highly predictable sections: introduction, literature review, methods section, results/findings, discussion and conclusion (Alvesson and Gabriel, 2013). One of the ways in which Alvesson and Gabriel suggest the tendency towards formulaic articles can be overcome, is by encouraging condensed papers which have a strong clear message, rather than conforming to the tendency for papers to expand considerably (12,000 words not being unusual), as authors seek to accommodate the requirements of reviewers and associate editors. We share Alvesson and Gabriel's belief that articles should not become overly lengthy as a consequence of peer-reviewing conventions and for this reason the journal has recently introduced an all-inclusive 9000-word limit for initial submissions, which can be exceeded a little as the paper moves through the review process.

A further, and potentially more controversial, way in which *Management Learning* articles may be understood as 'quirky' arises from calling into question received understandings of acceptable academic writing. As has been said by others, there is a tendency, particularly among some critical, philosophically-minded scholars, for academic articles to be written in a way that is abstract, obtuse

and impenetrable to all but a small group of insiders (Grey and Sinclair, 2006). Cederström and Spicer describe how the formulaic requirements of journal publishing drove them to want to write differently, addressing extra-academic audiences in a critical reflexive manner. We are supportive this form of scholarly activity, as discussed in last year's editorial which focused on the concept of 'engagement' (Bell and Bridgman, 2017). Unexpected scholarship therefore requires us as authors, editors and reviewers to remain open to diverse ways of communicating ideas that are published in the journal. An example concerns the work of our talented Social Media Editor, Deborah Brewis, who has grown the journal's presence on social media platforms including Twitter and Facebook and produces the video series 'Management Learning Meets'. In addition, we encourage *Management Learning* authors to be proactive in taking up the challenge of bringing the value of quirky scholarship to wide audiences, such as by contributing to the SAGE Ink blog or producing their own videos and educational resources based on articles published they publish in the journal.

However, in this multimodal environment it is important not to lose sight of the importance of the written article. In our view, it would be a significant loss if journal publishing in our field became a medium without an audience that existed principally as a means through which academics demonstrate compliance with university audit regimes. We therefore believe that journals such as this one must publish work that is 'intellectually vivid without being academically constipated', rather than this being the sole preserve of books for the educated general reader and essays for intellectual magazines (Cederström and Spicer, 2017: 709).

It is for this reason that an increasing number of management and organisational scholars are seeking out opportunities to explore different forms and ways of writing. The significance of this trend is evident from the response to the recent *Management Learning* Special Issue Call on 'Writing Differently', guest edited by Sarah Gilmore, Nancy Harding, Jenny Helin and Alison Pullen (scheduled for publication in 2019). Remaking the boundaries of what constitutes an academic journal article in ways that are more permeable can help to stimulate enhanced creativity and innovation. The challenge that arises from encouraging quirkier forms of academic writing is in making sure that, by blurring the boundaries, the perceived quality and integrity of the journal is not compromised. We therefore welcome feedback from *Management Learning* authors, reviewers and readers on how the journal might pursue these agendas in future. For example, are there instances where locating the work within a relevant body of literature might not be warranted and requiring authors to connect to existing conversations in the journal limit can limit the possibilities for disruptive conversations or saying the unsayable? There is value, we believe, in thinking about and debating these issues, whilst acknowledging these might be uncomfortable or difficult conversations.

While there are numerous examples of quirky articles in *Management Learning,* we take this opportunity to refer to two published in the journal very recently. The first is Willems' (published in this issue) ethnographic study of train dispatchers. Willems challenges the emphasis within mainstream management learning scholarship on cognition, showing instead how the dispatchers learn by experiencing the railways in bodily, material and emotional ways, such as by touching the tracks, seeing the switches and recalling the experience of feeling a train enter a tunnel. The second article that we use to illustrate the diversity and originality of quirky scholarship is Allen's (2017) analysis of the 'business method', developed by the Religious Society of Friends, or Quakers. Using autobiographical vignettes, Allen uses a relational ontology to argue that these practices enable better appreciation of 'unknowing', and the disturbance and anxiety that arises from this, which constitutes an important aspect of reflexivity. Both of these articles, in different ways, illustrate the considerable potential of quirky scholarship in *Management Learning* and its value in crafting new ways of knowing.

2018 promises to be another exciting year for the journal and looking a little further ahead, we will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2020 (including the years when it was *Management Education and Development*). To mark this occasion, we have commissioned a Special Issue which examines the history of management education, knowledge and learning - guest edited by Gabrielle Durepos, Rafael Alcadipani, Mairi Maclean and Stephen Cummings. Rather than looking back as an end in itself, the Anniversary Special Issue uses a critical historical lens to interrogate and imagine possible futures for *Management Learning* by challenging orthodox thinking and proposing alternatives. The call for papers is published in this issue.

Finally, we are pleased to announce the *Management Learning* Best Paper 2017 for [title] by [name], published in [vol/issue], pp. xx-yy. The *Management Learning* Book Reviewer Award 2017 goes to [name] for their review of [title], which appeared in the xx issue of last year.

References

Allen S (2017) Learning from friends: Developing appreciations for unknowing in reflexive practice. *Management Learning* 48(2): 125-139.

Alvesson M and Gabriel Y (2013) Beyond formulaic research: In praise of greater diversity in organizational research and publications. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 12(2): 245-263.

Bedeian AG (2004) Peer review and the social construction of knowledge in the management discipline. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 3(2): 198-216.

Bell E and Bridgman T (2017) Why management learning matters. *Management Learning* 48(1): 3-6.

Cederström C and Spicer A (2017) Going public. *Organization* 24(5): 708-711.

Garfinkel H (1967) *Studies in Ethnomethodology.* Englewood Cliffs NJ: Prentice Hall.

Grey C and Sinclair A (2006) Writing differently. *Organization* 13(3): 443-453.

Grey C (2009) *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Organizations.* 2nd edition. London: Sage.

Huff A (1999) *Writing for Scholarly Publication.* London: Sage.

Kuhn T (1970) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions.* 2nd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Mills C Wright (1959) *The Sociological Imagination,* 40th anniversary edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rafalovich A (2006) Making sociology relevant: The assignment and application of breaching experiments. *Teaching Sociology* 34: 156-163.

Rumens N and Tyler M (2016) Queer theory. In: Mir R, Willmott H and Greenwood M (eds) *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy in Organization Studies*. London: Routledge, 225-236.

Willems T (forthcoming) Sensing and sensing the railways: A phenomenological view on practice-based learning. *Management Learning* DOI: 10.1177/1350507617725188

---

[i] John Burnet (1892) *Early Greek Philosophy.* London: Adam and Charles Black.

[ii] Reflections on publishing with Leah Tomkins and Eda Ulus
http://journals.sagepub.com/page/mlq/videos/index