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# Doing academia differently: a provocation review

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## Abstract

In this paper, we celebrate the interconnected *Management Learning* traditions of provocation and reimagining academia by developing a provocation literature review (PLR) approach and applying it to the growing literature on doing academia differently (DAD). We argue that rebelling against the oppressive neoliberal academic norms requires rethinking all aspects of academia, including how we review literature. To transform ourselves, academia, and our world, we need to actively seek provocation. PRL aims to jolt us off the beaten track by foregrounding literature that particularly provokes us and enables us to be provocative. DAD literature, in particular, provokes us in three interconnected and mutually reinforcing ways: radical transgression, deep affect, and deep transformation. These give us impetus, hope and courage to navigate an academia less travelled by, embracing wilderness to seek our humanness individually and together along meandering alternative pathways.

**Keywords:** doing academia differently, provocation literature review, writing differently, academic work, business schools

## Introduction

*‘Two roads diverged in a wood and I –  
I took the one less travelled by,  
And that has made all the difference.’*

Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

What should we expect from literature reviews? Where could they take us? There are, of course, many answers to these questions, much dependent of who ‘we’ are and want to be. For devoted pilgrims following the neoliberal academic Way of Excellence, there are the standards of rigor and impact to emulate (see e.g. Kunisch et al., 2023). Along the Way, pavements of smooth and well-ordered positivism, exemplified in the stringent deductive protocols of the systematic literature review and meta-analysis methods, have become well-travelled in management and organisation studies (Rojon et al., 2021). The acolytes of the Way see their polished surface as transparent glass, showing objectively, truthfully, and comprehensively the knowledge they are revealing.

Their critics, on the other hand, see instead a mirrored surface directing the eye away from the underlying politics of epistemic and other exclusion and oppression that keep the unwanted wilderness at bay (Cassell, 2011). The golden spires of excellence shining ahead they see as illusory, with the coveted control over academic knowledge, identity, and career success fleeting and fading as soon as they come into view (Knights and Clarke, 2014).

Rather than leading to Progress in a linear and orderly fashion, for the critics ‘the Way’ is an orbital highway – overcrowded, noisy, destructive of its surroundings, unhealthy, and going round in endless circles, re-treading the same well-worn ground in the same established way. Whereas some of the critics continue to travel the highway reluctantly, seduced or otherwise captured by the neoliberal excellence game (Butler and Spoelstra, 2020), others choose to

travel differently. It is those who do so in the most spectacular ways that are the protagonists, or sometimes antagonists, of our review.

Once the way of excellence is decentred, many alternative ways of being an academic come into view (Robinson et al., 2024). Our premise in this paper is that such alternative ways of being necessitate rethinking all aspects of academic life, including how we do literature reviews. Among available approaches, critical literature reviews (CRLs) are arguably best in keeping with the ethos of critical and reflexive scholarship characterising *Management Learning*. The CRL tenets of problematisation, critical judgement, provocation, and reflexivity (Wright and Michailova, 2023) are all needed in the quest of finding and fostering ways of doing academia differently. However, the CRL approach is not without problems. Wright and Michailova's (2023) findings that most CLR articles turn out to be deeply uncritical are not that surprising given how diluted the notion of critique has become in CLR. This is evident even among Wright and Michailova's (2023) selection of exemplar CLRs, some of which are positivist and employ '[l]oose use of the term critical' (p. 186). Uncritical CLRs also fail to problematise the established norms and to provoke us off the beaten track. If we want to radically transform our thinking and practice, we must recognise our need to be provoked – out of stupor, out of routine, out of normality. We must seek out provocation. This also requires centring provocation when reviewing literature, for which we need a dedicated provocation review approach. It is harder, we propose, to de-radicalise provocation than it is to tame critique. *Management Learning*, of course, has a 30-year tradition of championing the value of and creating space for provocation in the form of the *Provocation Essays* section (previously *Provocations to Debate*), dating back to 1994 (Brewis and Bell, 2020; Willmott, 1994). On the pages of this innovative section and other pages of the journal, provocation has been a means of jolting the *Management Learning* community out of 'business as usual' by reconnecting us to our humanity in new profound ways, in requiring 'a very different

orientation to feelings of ignorance, uncertainty, confusion, ambiguity and even chaos’ (Willmott, 1994: 122), in teaching us to embrace discomfort that comes with the transformative experience ‘of *being moved* by what we write and read’ (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 534), to let our uncomfortable emotions bind us together into movements and communities that can make a difference beyond, as well as within, academia.

In relation to the latter, the *Management Learning* tradition of provocation is deeply connected with its long-standing role as a space for reimagining academic knowledge, identity, and work, especially in business schools. The literature we call ‘doing academia differently’ (DAD) isn’t new. For decades, critical scholars in management and organisation studies (MOS) and beyond have been rebelling against the highway of excellence and its increasingly oppressive prescriptions. Some of the most strident critiques appeared on the pages of this journal (e.g., Jones et al., 2020), growing with a sense of urgency of a breaking academia and the need to reimagine and revitalise it. In response, a growing momentum is gathering around the DAD movement. This includes transgressing the boundaries of what counts as academic writing, as exemplified in the *Management Learning* special issue on ‘Writing Differently’ (Gilmore et al., 2019).

In the remainder of this paper, we celebrate and draw on the above interconnected *Management Learning* traditions of provocation and reimagining academia by, first, developing our provocation review approach and, second, applying it to the DAD literature. We then conclude the paper with a few final provocations.

### Setting out to be provoked

The necessity of a provocation review (or PLR – provocation literature review, as we’ll call it) became clear to us soon after our decision to review the DAD literature. Engaging with work such as DAD (radical, disruptive, provocative) in conventional ways feels false, a

betrayal, an imposition of an imperial language through which the power of the rebellion is dulled, colonised, and all but extinguished. The medium, though ever imperfect, must always strive to embody the message, or that at least is the principle many DAD proponents, including ourselves, embrace in writing differently (e.g. Gilmore et al., 2019; Pullen et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2024)<sup>1</sup>. This principle is both a justification and the first guiding tenet of our PLR.

We owe our other PLR guiding tenets similarly to the DAD literature. Our second tenet is that in doing our PLR we purposefully set out to be provoked, searching for and selecting provocative literature. Reviewing DAD sources – a provocative body of literature – made this task easy. Our familiarity and affinity with the literature, however, was more of a double-edged sword as while we recognised its provocative features some of its emotional impact on us was lessened, as we had already assimilated its provocations. In some cases therefore, we had to engage in a form of individual and collective remembering, to relive and reflect on the impact of certain sources on us when we had first read them, and since. Our third tenet was that we wanted to avoid taking provocation for granted but rather sought to maintain openness to new meanings and experiences of being provoked. In other words, we wanted to allow for the possibility that provocation, too, can be done differently. Our final tenet involved the reflexivity of provocation, and the provocation of reflexivity: namely the Janus-like capacity of provocation to provoke as well as to be provoked. While we wanted to centre the latter – being provoked, we also kept the former – being provocative – in play, asking ourselves at the key points in the process what our own provocation to the readers is or could be.

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<sup>1</sup> We declare, unashamedly, our stake in DAD, including as editors of the new eponymous Routledge [book series](#).

We began by individually selecting five DAD sources that had particularly provoked us and reflecting on the different ways in which they have done so. In choosing these sources, we maintained openness to different subject areas, outlets and types of literature, the only criteria being that we considered these sources relevant to DAD and found them particularly provocative. In this first phase we worked independently, not to ensure any kind of ‘intercoder reliability’ but, quite the opposite, to enrich and complexify our collective understandings of provocation. We then met to discuss our selections and found both overlaps and surprises. In terms of the latter, one of us, for example, selected some sources that could be considered anti-DAD and that made claims which to us as proponents of DAD were strongly disturbing and angering. This made us reflect on the dark side of provocation and also the relative nature of provocation, recognising that what some might find provocative would not necessarily have the same effect on others.

We ended up with more literature than the fifteen originally intended sources. Some of us found it hard to draw the line because considering the ways in which we were being provoked led us to other literature that worked in a similar or, by contrast, different way. This ‘snowballing’ was amplified through collective discussion, and we gave way to it, adding further sources that we found or remembered together. Finally, we began to see patterns rising from and across our individual and collective reflections. Through further discussion, we came to see provocation working on us through three interconnected, overlapping, and mutually reinforcing ways: radical transgression, deep affect, and deep transformation. The literature sources we chose as having had particularly profound impact on us often combined multiple kinds of provocation (potentially amplifying their capacity to provoke). We discuss these patterns below with reference to a small number of example sources (limited due to the scarcity of space in this short article).

## Radical transgression

‘Why, poor traveller, should you tour the Pandemonium’s meandering streets?’

Burrell (1997: 1)

Literature that radically transgresses academic conventions, graffitiing over the road signs of the way of excellence, smashing up its barriers and sweeping us off into the wilderness, is perhaps most obviously provocative and especially memorable. Few MOS works are more so than Burrell’s (1997) *Pandemonium*. It has had a profound impact on us (including, for one of us, the decision to be an academic), demonstrating that nothing is out of bounds or impossible in academic writing. Shattering the most deeply ingrained expectations such as the sanctity of linearity in scholarly writing (complete with the warning that linearity kills), *Pandemonium* runs text in two directions on pages split horizontally by a central reservation, which the reader is both warned not to cross and encouraged to cross. One reads the top half of the book from left to right then comes back along the bottom from right to left, unless the prohibition of the central reservation is broken. Akin to fantasy novels, the reader is provided with a map showing *Pandemonium*’s attractions. These are a purposefully disconcerting mishmash of outlandish destinations, ranging from the magic kingdom, pain and disease, and abattoirs and death, to Panopticon City, the library (in the middle of the book, where the references are located), the airport lounge, and the streets of Pandemonium. As illustrated by these features, *Pandemonium* not only provokes us to write differently, but also to write about different things, significantly expanding the horizons of MOS.

This double provocation – writing transgressively about transgressive topics – characterises much of the DAD literature that has come to be associated with the label ‘writing differently’ (e.g. Gilmore et al., 2019; Kostera, 2022; Pullen et al., 2020). Many of the papers in the eponymous *Management Learning* special issue (Gilmore et al., 2019) engage in this double



provocation. Although the two aspects are not inseparable, it seems that often one leads to another. There is also a third connected element that can be involved – transgressive methods of research, education, or praxis as objects of writing. The impact of all three transgressive elements combined together can be mind-blowing. For example, when Ehrich (2024) candidly interviews themselves about their taboo role as a paid ghostwriter of student work, there is no avoiding the transformative recognition of our shared responsibilities for the education system that has made ghostwriting work not only possible but necessary. When Wetzel (2024) writes in a raw, fictionalised way about freeing long-repressed emotions through professional clown work in academia, including in teaching MBA students, there is nothing that remains unsaid and no escaping the avalanche of the unleashed feelings. This also leads us onto the next pattern of provocation.

### Deep affect

“‘She has a bomb!’” came the screams as the car full of young men screeched to a halt next to the icy sidewalk where I was gingerly pulling my luggage.’

Zulfiqar (2024: 1)

The opening line whips like a lash. The words that follow cut ever deeper. When the shock, anger, shame, sadness, and pain transmute into hope, awe, triumph, and joy, it’s like a rainbow blossoming after an endless storm. And yet, this is a pale description of a paper that makes you not only think but *feel* differently as Zulfiqar (2024) carries you with her through 15 years living in the US under the biopolitical racist gaze, and then brings you back to Pakistan, where reverse culture shock awaits. There, while her thirteen-year-old says ‘I am glad I don’t have to be brown anymore’ (Zulfiqar, 2024: 8), Zulfiqar finds herself shaped by her US experiences into a different kind of academic, driven to address the terrible plight of domestic workers. When she uses toilet cleaning to transform her elite undergraduate

business students' understanding of social realities and this produces ripples of social change way beyond her imagining, you find that your face is no longer dry. You cheer them on with all your heart, mind, and soul. When you recover, you ask yourself what *you* are doing towards meaningful social change.

Several of our chosen sources made us feel deeply and across a wide spectrum of emotions. Several papers, like Zulfiqar's, made us cry – for example, Boncori and Smith's (2019) harrowing account of miscarriage in the (academic) workplace and Kalila's (2018) poignant tale of infertility and eventual motherhood. These papers provoke and unsettle through bringing such taboo subjects and personal trauma into discussions of academics' everyday lives. Others similarly challenge boundaries between academic cerebral and corporal beings, but by provoking discomfort and squeamishness, e.g. Brewis and Williams' (2019) paper 'Writing as Skin' exploring the tension of two 'drives' in academic writing to share internal lived experience, and to externalise and abstract. They argue that exploring this tension through the bodily metaphor of skin is 'a powerful device for bringing the affective, the embodied and the material' (p. 88) into the academic practice of writing in management and organisational studies. Continuing the theme of embodied nature of academic practice and its emotive affects, Swan's (2005) discussion of pleasure in women teaching managers explores emotions in teaching through the lens of women's embodied erotics, unsettles, and potentially embarrasses or offends as it provokes us to acknowledge complex interplays of our own sexuality in our professional work (here teaching) and professional relationships we may often chose to ignore.

Anger is another emotion often suppressed in academic practice, yet being angrily provoked by what we read is not uncommon. This can happen when we perceive authors misrepresenting or dismissing unfairly a position or view we hold dear (e.g. Behling, 1980),

including, in our case, values we consider vital to DAD. To be candid, this can feel especially searing when we perceive an explicit or implicit attack on our own work, or a misrepresentation of an academic community with which our own academic identities are deeply entwined – a notorious example being Pfeffer (1993) and his paper’s continuing legacy (e.g. Glick et al., 2007). Anger can also come from more surprising places (e.g. Spicer and Alvesson, 2024), when perceived allies enacting strategies of conservatism provoke feelings of injustice and betrayal, shaking fragile academic identities, especially as swift direct response is often difficult.

The difficulty of knowing how to act in response to a deeply emotive provocation can feel paralysing. This is where our final provocation pattern comes into play by channelling such energy towards deep transformation of academic institutions and practices.

### Deep transformation

‘This essay is a provocation to debate. I argue that work in organization and management studies addressing how to theorize and construct ‘good’ theory is inherently masculinized and embraces a limited pluralism that ignores alternative, reflexive and more human ways of theorizing’. (Cunliffe 2022)

This is the gauntlet Cunliffe throws down in the first abstract line of her provocatively titled paper: ‘Must I Grow a Pair of Balls to Theorize about Theory in Organization and Management Studies’, which invites us to prick up our ears and say ‘wow, this is a call to arms for radical change and I’m in!’ This paper provokes by cutting straight to the chase in problematising one of the most entrenched parts of our academic experience – the established forms and mores of theorising and theory development – which she critiques as underpinned by ‘masculinized rationality characterized by abstraction, proceduralization and disciplinization’ (Cunliffe 2022: 2). This challenge to theoretical orthodoxy shows bravery

(we could refer to the paper's title here) and tenacity to provoke thus within the journal entitled '*Organization Theory*'. There is a delicatessen here which is delightfully provoking, but the power of this provocation, through illustrating its concept '*imaginative theorising*', is in its ability to lead us to envision transformed/alternative forms of theorising, often collective in ways which 'provoke us to understand ourselves and our lived experience in different ways' (Cunliffe 2022: 2). This provocation is both a big ask and an enticing invitation to 'embrace our humanness' which, if practiced thus in our research and theorising, could be deeply transformative for academic practice in MOS.

Many sources we have selected boldly challenge deeply established practices and taken-for-granted and provoke towards transformation through alternatives. The focus ranges widely, from Butler and Spoelstra's (2014) exposure of the clash between excellence and critical ethos, to Alakavuklar's (2024) call to embrace activist performativity, and to Dar et al.'s (2021) bold provocation for deep transformation of business schools 'structured by white supremacy' (p.695) through collective action led by scholars of colour to dismantle racialised power structures. However frustrating our limits in exploring this literature further in this short paper, its growing scope and diversity provoke us into action through their delegitimising and alternative-path-mapping work. From their spreading rhizome we draw strength, inspiration, and courage, as we hope will our readers.

### Final provocations

To return to our opening questions, what do we expect from literature reviews? Where can they take us? One of our provocations is that the answers to these questions are interconnected with our academic identities. If we see our role as critical and reflexive scholars (as befits those who are part of the *Management Learning* community) to transform

the world around us as well as our own practice, then we need our literature reviews to be provocative, so that they can jolt us out of the accustomed ways of being, feeling, and doing. PLRs, in which we purposefully set out to be provoked, maintaining an openness, letting provocation surprise us and grow into our own provocations to others, can help set off a transformative chain of provocations through which we can start, collectively, to think, feel, and do things differently, as well as do different things.

So then, as our final provocation, we ask our readers to seek, with courage, hope, and determination, new ways of doing academia differently. We ask them to rebel against the injustices and oppressions of our praxis, however ingrained, to bear alternative possibilities into being. And we suggest that they – we – purposefully privilege allies and resources, many of whom/which can be found among the *Management Learning* community, that equip, enrage, and empower us to do so. Then we can walk together the transgressive, emotive, and meandering paths of academia less travelled by, a journey of deep transformation in seeking our humanness.

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