Managing to Learn: the Social Poetics of a Polyphonic ‘Classroom’

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Abstract
This paper draws on Bakhtin’s use of Polyphony and explores it potential for organising processes within management education. In developing the concept of a polyphonic ‘classroom’, the interplay between tutor, manager-student and theory is related to Bakhtin’s identification of the relationship between hero, other characters and idea within Dostoevsky’s novels. In particular, a carnivalesque polyphonic relations is argued to change tutor-student relations, extend the physical classroom into a wider polyphonic ‘classroom’ that includes the manager-student’s work context and re-imagines learning as a changing, social poetic performance beyond common understanding of learning as cognitive processes of understanding or sense making.

Key words
Polyphony, Bakhtin, Social Poetics, Management Education, Work Based Learning

Biography
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Introduction

One conventional approach to management education, which is commonly presented in MBA programmes, sets out a body of knowledge, which if learned and applied by aspirant managers in the practice of their business life, should enable them to achieve success. Such an approach has come in for heavy criticism in recent years and yet, as recently as 2005, Navarro was able to present the knowledge that “the best MBAs” taught. He and his colleagues presented a synopsis of the “concepts, skills and (yes) tools that” businesses managers could apply and use in their everyday business life. The picture assumed here is one where empty vessels are filled by expert, knowing teachers and then are able to apply and use the knowledge that has been imparted. The critiques of this knowledge transfer approach has come from three different perspectives. First, what we might call a ‘relevance’ approach has questioned the ideas that (a) managers come as empty vessels to be filled and that (b) the MBA provides a relevant and useful syllabus (Mintzberg, 2004; also Bennis and O’Toole, 2005). Secondly, constructivist pedagogies (Biggs, 1999; Fenton-O’Creevy et al, 2006) share Mintzberg’s conclusion that many managers come to courses such as the MBA bringing much knowledge and expertise already but focus primarily on pedagogical processes that enable manager-students to make sense and reflect upon their practice in the light of ideas from management theory and research. Finally, critical pedagogies have challenged the assumed, value free instrumentality of much management education.

Each of these different critiques of conventional MBAs offer alternative approaches to management education. However, one thing that they all share is an implicit assumption of the primary role of the academic tutor in designing and facilitating learning. In their different ways each of these approaches promote a more active role for the manager-student. Indeed for both constructivist and critical approaches, a high value is placed on student activity and sense making. Still, however, subject-object relations tend to be constructed, where the selection of content and design of pedagogical processes remains almost entirely in the control of the academic tutor. The tutor is treated as the active subject with the unintended but emergent consequence of manager-students being rendered as passive learners. Where students are active, it is because the tutor has designed the learning process in such a way that they are able to be active. An alternative view of classroom relations is possible. Rather than view these relations as monologic, with the ‘voice’ of the academic tutor being dominant, we can view classroom relations as being polyphonic, socially constructed and negotiated.

How might a polyphonic learning experience be created, how would it be different to current pedagogical practices and what might be the benefits to participants of such learning? Bakhtin’s thesis of a polyphonic novel, with its aspects of hero, idea and linkage principles (plots), provides a language to discuss opportunities for co-constructive learning. As hero-student and idea(s) interweave and provoke adventure and carnival, so students, academic theory and course design can converse in ways that are generative of new learning-in-practice. Central to the
changes needed for the creation of polyphonic learning is the reappraisal of ownership and authority over the learning process but no less important is an attention to the moment by moment activities of tutor and manager-students in creating a polyphonic ‘classroom’. So a discussion of the relevance and contribution of Bakhtin’s use of polyphony within management education must also include discussion of the ‘classroom’ as a site of organising.

My argument is constructed in three parts. First, I discuss how Bakhtin (1984) used three tools to analyse a polyphonic novel and how these tools might contribute to a constructionist (Dachler and Hosking, 1995) or social poetic (Shotter, 1996, Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003) approach to management and management education. Bakhtin identified in Dostoevsky’s writing new treatments of the hero, the idea and plotline that interwove ‘hero’ and ‘idea’ as they interplayed in polyphonic relations. In the second section, I develop what I call a ‘Provocative Pedagogy’ by telling a story of experimentation with three methods that I have used in working with managers involved in postgraduate study. In telling this story, I seek to illustrate key themes from the earlier discussion and highlight the moment by moment organisational processes and changes that are involved in the creation of a polyphonic ‘classroom’. Finally, I discuss the differences between this, polyphonic or provocative pedagogy and other common, discursive practices within an academic classroom.

**Bakhtin’s Analysis of Dostoevsky as an Invitation to the Polyphonic ‘Classroom’**

Bakhtin (1984) identified three tools for his analysis of the polyphonic novel as written by Dostoevsky. First, he wrote of the ‘hero’ as a consciousness and contrasted this with the more conventional treatments of a novel’s hero as a determined and finalised character. The unfinalised nature of Dostoevsky’s heroes meant that the novel could become a process by which they experienced and made sense of the world and themselves. Importantly, this was not a process of discovery but of creation. Bakhtin argued that the heroes “worked out” themselves and ‘the idea’ in dialogic relation with other characters in the novel. There was a ‘carnivalesque’ recreation of the characters; they performed themselves rather than were themselves. An additional point here is that Bakhtin pointed out that Dostoevsky’s characters did not so much interact (suggesting conversations between finalised characters) but, rather, they interplayed.

The second of Bakhtin’s tools that he used in his approach to Dostoevsky’s work was the ‘idea’. Here again however, he argued that the novel’s idea was always expressed by the hero or another character within a context and that it was never finalised but always in dialogue, complex and contradictory. “Ideas not fully emerged” are expressed and pursued by characters even as they also shape those characters. Here again, we can see, in Bakhtin’s exploration of Dostoevsky’s novels a focus on the creative, he writes of “idea forces” that shape and live within the dialogical contacts for characters “where they began living a new and eventful life” (Bakhtin, 1984; 91).

The final tool in Bakhtin’s analysis of the polyphonic novel was to do with the way heroes and ideas were linked. Two factors are of interest to us in exploring the construction of a polyphonic classroom. First, Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky wrote plotlines that pulled characters and ideas into “extraordinary situations” or events to test and reshape the ideas as they were expressed and lived. Secondly, for Bakhtin, Dostoevsky organised these events within a carnival frame where all were participants, where hierarchy was suspended and where new personae could be
performed and new relations explored. These were not merely authorial concepts behind a novel but “sensuous, ritual-pageant played out in life itself”. A polyphonic classroom becomes carnivalesque as participants adopt new roles and perform new practices. The carnival of the Middle Ages that Bakhtin used in his discussion of Dostoevsky’s novels was not facilitated by some wise, tutor-like person designing learning experiences or syllabi. Rather, it was an embodied, improvised performance where roles were adopted and co-created in interplay between participants. In the same way, a polyphonic ‘classroom’ sees clearly defined roles of tutor and student blurred, exchanged, usurped and achieved and relinquished.

Recent uses of Bakhtin’s ideas within processes of organising (e.g. Hazen, 1993; Clegg et al, 2006; Kornberger et al, 2005) have tended to emphasise polyphony and to a lesser extent carnival. Polyphony is treated as a naturally occurring phenomenon. So, Clegg and his colleagues question Parker’s (2002) concern over asymmetric power relations within management by arguing that the polyphonic nature of organising will mitigate management’s power to act unilaterally. This emphasis on polyphony has carried with it an emphasis on a valuing of skilled behaviour in attending to multiple voices within the organising process and that, in turn, has created an emphasis on cognitive processes of appreciating, understanding and, to some extent, accommodating the polyphonic voices in creating organisational change. Bakhtin, however, did not treat polyphony as a naturally occurring phenomenon of the novel. For Bakhtin, polyphony was Dostoevsky’s achievement. We could say that polyphony is an artifice in a novel, created by the interplay of unfinalised characters and ideas. Carnival is the operating principal that both creates and is created with polyphony. If we are to understand the implications for polyphony within organising processes, be they in management education ‘classrooms’ or elsewhere, then we need to engage with Dostoevsky’s heroes as they explore and develop ideas, relations and actions within carnivalesque situations.

Linking the polyphonic novel to a social poetic of learning

Bakhtin’s thesis of the polyphonic novel has significant resonances with relational (Hosking, 1999) or social constructionist (Gergen, 1994) premises of learning and practice. In particular, it creates an interesting dialogical space with John Shotter’s development of Wittgenstein’s later work into a Social Poetics (Shotter, 1996; 2000, Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003; Shotter and Katz, 1996). A particular value of engaging with polyphony through the lens of social poetics is that learning is not restricted to cognitive processes. Instead relational processes within polyphony are seen as creating new, if always unfinalised characters-in-relation and three emphases shared between a social poetics and Bakhtin’s polyphony can be used to radically reform management education especially at a post-experience level for students who are also practicing managers or organisational participants of some other type.

First, Bakhtin’s centring of the hero as a distinct consciousness, rather than as a determined and finalised character links with Shotter’s concept of the manager as a “practical author” (Shotter, 1993; Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003). Instead of seeing the student as someone whose actions are affected and finalised by the ‘teaching’ of academic knowledge and theory; we are offered students as heroes. They can be seen as relatively autonomous sense makers and users of the academic content of management education, as creators of learning-in-practice. Secondly, that academic content (theory, propositional knowledge, heuristics and prescriptions) is re-imagined
as provocative of the hero-student’s practice rather than just a development of their sense making. It is to be understood not in some finalised, monological form to be applied or understood but as provocative of the student-hero’s emerging practice. Finally, that practice is seen as emerging within relational processes where those relations are not between distinct, finalised entities (for example, students and tutors) but generative of new and ongoing dialogic relations. The academic content of a course, together with a tutor’s actions, enact invitation and contribution to the hero-student’s learning-in-practice. The idea-force of academic theory finds its power not in some monological transfer and application (e.g. Navarro, 2005) or in enriched sense making by students (e.g. Fenton O’Creeway et al, 2006) but in its capacity to move manager-students to new ways of acting, going on, exploring relations and testing the generative potential of those ideas within their work context. Additionally, the challenge of the carnival to hierarchical authority enables the development of new relations between tutor and student (Ramsey, 2004; 2006b) where the asymmetrical power relations are replaced by more spacious, equal and co-generative relations.

**Narrating Practices of Provocative Learning**

In telling any story, the choice of where to start is somewhat arbitrary but I enjoy dating the genesis of my interest in pedagogy to a particular night some nine years ago. I could not sleep and so, at about three in the morning, I found myself preparing the slides for a lecture to my Organisational Change students. In this particular lecture, I was using Friere’s (1970/1993) concept of subject-object relations to illustrate how change is created relationally and how conventional change literatures that privilege the initiative of change agents acting as knowing subjects will lead to the rendering of other organisational participants as passive objects. This, I argued, not only empowered the interests of hierarchy but also exaggerated that power of senior management to actually achieve organisational change. I gave a series of examples of subject-object relations each demonstrating how the object was left passive and so unable to act upon their own initiative. The stream of examples poured furiously from my keyboard: “I manage you, I motivate you, I empower you” the litany of examples went on until I heard myself rehearse “I teach you.” The effect was immediate and salutary. Up to that moment, I had taught at Coventry University for about 5 years and had been a popular lecturer using, unquestioningly, learning and teaching practices that centred on lectures and seminars. In each case, I assumed a strongly tutor managed approach, although often claiming that my use of seminar activities and assignments were student centred. In a moment of epiphany, whilst preparing that lecture, I began to re-examine my own practices in the light of the social constructionist premises that had been influencing the content of my teaching for about two years.

**Ethno-experiments**

One early experiment in re-creating more spacious, polyphonic learning relations with manager-students made use of redesigning an assessment to use an activity I called ‘ethno-experiments’ (Ramsey, 2007). In developing his ideas on ethnomethodology, Garfinkel (1967) set his students activities that allowed them to experience the ways that local societal rules were constituted. Examples of these activities included asking students to behave at home as if they were strangers or getting them to haggle over the price of low price goods at a supermarket. In both these cases, the students would experience some the strictness of unwritten social rules.
the same way, I set students tasks to undertake that would place them in a position to experience some of the relational dynamics that we have been talking about in class. However, I used the word experiment because I intended that the students should not only experience current relational processes but should also attend to the creation of new relational processes. One such task was the Conversational Trajectories assignment. This assignment owed much to the work of Deborah Tannen (1994) on conversational styles and of Riane Eisler (1990) on social relations. The students, all managers undertaking an MBA course, were asked to work in learning groups of 3-4 in order to experiment with 3 pairs of conversational styles (and/but, invitation/explanation, complementary/competitive conversation styles) over a 3 week period. During that time, they were also asked to write reflections on what happened and how their colleagues responded when they used these different styles. Finally, they were asked to write a group report on the experience drawing on the course literature that they had been reading (e.g. Burr, 1997; Ramsey, 1998).

The object of this exercise was to provide the students with some space to create their own learning. Whilst I set a framework for that learning, in much the same way as Bakhtin argued that Dostoevsky created situations for ‘his’ characters to interact with each other and the idea; the task was designed in such a way that the actual learning constructed by the students was very much in their own hands. Their choice of (a) team members, (b) sites for experimentation and (c) practices for joining their work together into a final team report would all shape what they could learn. Furthermore, and this is crucial, in designing an assignment that would take place in the students’ place of work, I was ceding some of my tutorial control over the assignment and learning process. I could have organised a similar experiment in circumstances over which I had more control, for example using a case study or some such classroom exercise. Instead, I set up a situation in which the ‘idea’ of the course (the importance of relational processes in organisational change) was to engage with the working and social contexts of the students’ choice. This had an additional effect. The interplay of idea and context would generate new realities; in talking with their friends, family and colleagues in different ways; the students would be likely to change those relations. This created very different sorts of learning environments to those designed by Fenton O’Creevy and his colleagues (Fenton-O’Creevy et al 2006). There, tutors designed an interaction that engaged students, idea and work experience in an environment divorced from the students’ work context. The sense making done was evaluative, whereas the emergent sense making actions of ‘my’ students were much more generative. This does, of course, raise issues about creating a safe place for students to try out new ideas and for some students; Fenton-O’Creevy’s design would be considered a wiser choice. However, the students on the Change course were undertaking their final taught module before their dissertation, and that provided a context that justified a riskier assignment.

In the event their learning was generated through four interplays. First, students started to explore the way that they were relating within the study groups; they became conscious firstly of the effects of their relations and secondly of the importance of the ‘idea’ that relating could be considered generative rather than just interactional. In Bakhtin’s terms, they became conscious of the sensuous interplay of relations. Secondly, as Dostoevsky heroes would reflect upon their developing consciousness, so these manager-students reflected upon their managerial practice. They became increasingly conscious of how they were developing new actions at work and how
those actions impacted upon their colleagues there. Students reported significant changes that were occurring in their work. Thirdly, the ‘ideas’ of the Change module had become provocative; moving them, pointing out to them, gesturing them towards and co-creating with them new realities that they were now performing in relation to others. The level of reflective debate that was going on in the different learning groups became marked and started to include issues of power, gender and control, each team finding themselves with somewhat different emphases in their learning. Finally, the ethno-experiment provided changed opportunities for dialogue between students and tutor. What every group noticed, in different ways, was that these conversational practices with which they were experimenting were skilled activities and that there was no way of noting that the topic had been learned (finalised). Consequently, their conversations with me, as the module tutor, developed an exploratory tone. We discussed, for example, how they might avoid being positioned as ‘losing’ an argument when they used an ‘and’ type conversation or we discussed if using different conversational styles might just be a way of manipulating others. I was re-positioned as a voice speaking into a conversation. I had, with my reading and research, something to contribute to their learning but I could not, because I wasn’t a part of their working context, complete or finalise their learning.

Using Poetry

Shortly after the Ethno-experiment exercise, I was working with a couple of undergraduate groups. Here, I found that creating a carnivalesque, polyphonic relationship with the students more difficult because they were not able to bring the same richness of work context to our conversations. I found that the students spoke in rigid terms of what was what in management and that they tended to accept anything that they read in textbooks as if true. I wanted to disturb these certainties. I wanted to help the students explore other ways of understanding management ideas. As I considered what to do, I drew on Barrett’s (1998) work on improvised Jazz, where he had written of how band members would “interrupt” the way a band was playing a particular song. Using Shotter’s concept of Social Poetics, I would now see myself speaking in a way that would strike the students, move them, gesture to a new way of relating with so-called, authoritative figures such as textbook authors or tutors. Bakhtin’s understanding of Dostoevsky’s carnivalesque plotlines gives a richer picture, for it points to me consciously reducing my authorial power over the students. In using poetry in an undergraduate class, I was consciously opening up, not only management ideas for changed discussion but also my own competence as a teacher. Several students challenged me to my face as to whether this was an appropriate way to ‘teach’ rational, best practices in management.

Elsewhere (Ramsey, 2006a) I have argued that poetry provides a mode of inquiry where an inquirer can ‘play’ with ideas. Poetry can provide a medium for juxtaposing surprising actions in ways that offer new views of old issues. Poetic writing illuminates and invites almost because it does not pursue the closure and finalising of conventional linear arguments. Poetry facilitates the use of irony, allegory and metaphor in ways that may provoke readers to alternative actions. I want to suggest that poetry is one way in which a tutor can contribute to academic and practitioner dialogue without completing it. Having said that, following these two experiments with using poems as the basis of undergraduate seminars, (see Ramsey, 2005) I moved away from using poetry in as a set piece centre of a seminar. My reasoning for this had to do with
there being too many students who struggled to see a purpose and so switched off during the sessions. A selection of the comments made by third year students as to what they were going to do following a seminar where I had used a poem (Decisions) informed this practice:

Figure 1 about here

Whilst other student comments indicated a greater interest in what was going on, I concluded that too many students were too mystified by the experience to benefit from it. It is possible to conduct a conversation in a way that is too unstructured for some students and I have found that there is a fine line between the co-creation of a zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978) with a student, where that student has space to develop their own answers and new practices and the co-creation of a chasm between me and that student, which leaves him or her floundering. As discussed above, my actions are an invitation and contribution to ongoing learning relations but so are the actions of the student. The skilful use of poetry is a social interplay and performance not a tutorial competence. Therefore, the tutor attends to the moment by moment, social poetics (Shotter and Katz, 1996) of the classroom and aspires to contribute to relations that create mutually appreciated learning. Creating carnivalesque relations between student and tutor can, sometimes, create ways of going on that are not to the tutor’s choosing!

Whilst, the use of poetry with undergraduates did not create the learning relations I had hoped for; I have found that conversations with post-graduate, experienced managers do benefit from the use of poetry. Two differences have contributed to a more successful experience with manager-students. First, I am generally working with more mature men and women who are able to handle conversations coming from ‘left field’ (I do still, however, hear some surprise when a poem is used during a formal, classroom conversation). The second difference is that I have moved my use of poetry from a set-piece seminar, where the poem is at the centre of activity, to ongoing conversations, where I think that a poem might speak into an idea or situation we are discussing. In a sense, the poems engage with students in a context where they are already co-creating the topic for discussion and, within that context, they add a certain carnivalesque atmosphere, enabling us to shift conversations into new areas. Shotter (1996; Shotter and Katz, 1996) writes of how Wittgenstein sought to use poetic tropes such as metaphors, imagery and similes in order to raise issues that were normally not noticed. In the same way, I use poetry – my own – and students’ writing to lift issues for discussion. One poem that I have used is one of my own poems, *Transitory Art*. The final stanza reads:

“We value what will stand the test of time: structures, strictures, standards. And in so doing, give no worth to the transitory art of becoming.”

The poem was not written about management. I wrote it after seeing a couple of photographs at Tate Modern. However, having written it, I was struck by the idea of the transitory nature of so much of our lives and, in particular our organising. I now use the poem to raise the moment-by-moment activities that make up organising and contrast them with managerial actions that tend to be structural. In classroom contexts, a use of poetry appears to offer students more freedom to talk questioningly, there is a permission to talk doubtfully. Many students will say that they do
not know much about poetry. Some will doubt its appropriateness to the rational processes of management and others will pick over what the poem means to them. What frequently happens is that students will light upon different lines that strike them, and so the conversation becomes more tentative with participants giving each other space to offer alternative interpretations. Consequently, the conversational trajectory becomes more of possibilities arising from ideas and less a debate over what is the case, correct or best practice (structures, strictures, standards). A second ‘poetic’ exercise that I do is to ask the students to pick out 6 words that describe a problem situation that they are confronting at work. I then ask them to write poetically, be it by picking on a rhythm of their chosen words, using a rhyme, assonance or alliteration. Whilst some students do panic at “not being good at that sort of thing”, most find themselves writing some sort of verse and noticing things about the problem situation that they hadn’t noticed before.

Woven into these conversations are different theories of management, usually raised by the students themselves because of their own reading. What, however, is different is that the theories and research findings are contextualised within a conversation where they contribute to the flow rather than stipulate a best practice. In one conversation last year, use of a poem provoked a conversation where a couple of students drew on some reading in the area of complexity (Shaw, 2002) and contrasted it with work that I had done with conversations (Ramsey, 1998). Other students told stories of their workplace and the conversation moved through Reason’s (1994) discussion of a participatory worldview towards a series of suggestions from students and me as to possible actions in the work situations we had narrated. The relationship between theory, tutor and student had changed. Module content had provoked changed actions, changed learning; but rather than being held in an authoritative position over managerial action it was held as a resource to provoke action.

Farrelly’s Provocative Therapy and a social poetics of learning

In my use of poetry, I started to notice the benefits of shifting my attention away from formal, set piece, tutor designed pedagogical activities towards my contributions to ongoing conversations. Re-reading Bakhtin (1984) now, with some hindsight, I can see in my emerging practice a shift in relations from a tutor designed (authored) intentional polyphony to a more co-created practice. I was again, as with the use of poetry, ceding my ability to design particular pedagogical practices and seeking, instead, to contribute to students’ own learning adventure. Using Bakhtin’s terminology, the student was becoming the hero developing within polyphony, where my, tutorial voice was but one contribution to our dialogical relations. One voice that was speaking into my own learning journey at this stage was the therapist, Frank Farrelly. Farrelly trained as a psychotherapist within a Freudian community of practice; he was then influenced by humanistic psychology and worked with Carl Rogers in the person-centred tradition. Two assumptions that permeate Farrelly’s (Farrelly and Brandsma, 1974) work point towards Shotter’s ideas of Social Poetics. First, Farrelly assumed that clients have the potential to change their actions that, rather than being passive ‘readers’ of their past, their relations and other deterministic forces; their actions were responsive; changed challenges could see changed actions. They were, at least in part, authors of their circumstances. Secondly, Farrelly saw changed actions as a part of social processes. He focused, in particular, on the social relationship
between therapist and client. He saw two ways that the therapist could relate with a client to promote certain kinds of self enhancing actions. First, the therapist could challenge the client and secondly, she could use the one-to-one relationship with a client to model other interpersonal relations. If we appreciate Farrelly’s contribution to a provocative pedagogy in terms of practice that it renders sensible, then we can note that, like Shotter’s social poetics, Farrelly gestures us towards attention to the relational-responsive, creative consequences of moment-by-moment relations. In reading Farrelly’s work through the eyes of Social Poetics I noticed the way that many of Farrelly’s ploys create “arresting moments” (Shotter, 1996) that may help managers explore their practices from a different vantage point. From that vantage point, new learning-in-practice might become possible. If we then enrich this reading of Farrelly by framing it through Bakhtin’s analysis, we can see the ‘idea’ being used provocatively in the creation of actions and relations; the idea shaping and being shaped within interplay between tutor and manager-student and their work context.

For Farrelly, the context of these relations is the therapist’s room, but his aspirations for his clients need not be dissimilar to an academic tutor working with students. For the provocative therapist the goal is to provoke clients to “move toward positive psychosocial behaviour” (Farrelly and Brandsma, 1974: 37). The academic tutor’s provocative equivalent might be to centre attention on how students can develop new management ‘riffs’ (Barrett, 1998), which they might find useful in their work. Two of Farrelly’s many ploys are useful in the classroom and in supervision situations. First, Farrelly will use multiple theories and explanations for a given situation. He offers his clients a pick and mix variety of theories to choose from. Frequently these theories or research ‘findings’ will be made up on the spot. His reasoning for doing this is to show the fruitlessness of a search for “cognitive insights” that might be available from an explanation to the client or student. Instead, he seeks to provoke the client into new actions. In a similar way, theory, for a provocative tutor, is not used to create a finalised account and so explain why people (the ‘hero’ or other characters) do not like change or work in certain ways within teams or create particular organisational cultures. Instead, theory is used as a provocation for enacting managerial actions within a carnival, where new relations and actions can be tested for their possible consequences in moment-by-moment, organisational relations. Farrelly will frequently lampoon theories and although I do this on occasion, I have found that I need to be careful with students as they first try to make their theoretical reading useful at work. As David Mamet’s professor found in “Oleanna” (Mamet, 1989) ridiculing academic mores, from a position of power and apparent achievement, can have very negative effects on students who are still aspiring to join that academic community. However, pointing out, for example, that we rarely find changing our underwear stressful nor do we often resist upward changes in our salary can provoke discussion around the taken for granted ‘truth’ that people do not like change and need to be managed through it. The goal here is emancipatory; to offer the student freedom from a finalised, determined best practice and authority over theories, research findings and prescriptions offered in management texts.

A second of Farrelly’s techniques is role play. Farrelly would adopt different identities in therapy sessions, sometimes a family member; sometimes the client’s worst fears or on other occasions an accuser. This again allows for the creation of circumstances in which an ‘idea’ can be tested and recreated by manager-students in the context of their practice. In each of these
roles, Farrelly was seeking to support the client develop their own answers and responses to the questions posed and the challenges made. In the same way I, as a tutor, will play several different roles; often I will play a fictional colleague responding to the student’s plans; giving them the space to practice their own strategies. On other occasions, I play an enthusiast, urging students to try out ideas in their workplace. As I play that role I often will also find myself offering a ‘shoulder to cry on’ when those ideas do not work out as had been hoped. Finally, taking my lead from Anderson’s (1997) work, I will perform the role of ‘not knowing’. It is not that I know nothing about an academic topic under discussion, but in focusing on how that topic relates to the student’s own workplace, I am positioned in a genuinely ‘not knowing’ position where the student must explain to me how a theory or a research finding that they have read has impacted on their own workplace.

One postgraduate course that I was involved in used Action Learning (Revans, 1980) within the work place in order to help students learn about Organisational Change. Students, therefore, expected an element of a syllabus to be delivered by an expert tutor. They had some reason for this expectation, for apart from their experiences in formal education through school and university, the students had been taught by three of my colleagues before they came to ‘my’ module. In the first session we debated how the module should be assessed. I pointed out that I would not give lectures and suggested that the very concept of managing change, as a job done by one person acting upon others, was open to serious question. This caused a considerable degree of anxiety. More than once a student shouted at me to “just tell me how to manage change” or “... how to manage organisational learning”. My goal in this session was to start the transfer of ownership of the module content from myself, as expert deliverer of knowledge (the finalised ‘idea’), to them as practitioners and creators of practice-theory relations. To do this I provoked an “arresting moment” (Shotter, 1996) or an “interruption” (Barrett, 1998) and so sought to shift students’ attentions to new ways of relating with a tutor. I was, in effect, instituting a carnival, where existing, hierarchical ideas of expertise were overturned and so new relations could be explored. Here again, on occasion, instituting a carnival resulted in the manager-students insisting on our recreating conventional tutor-student roles.

Additional “arresting moments” occurred throughout the course, in the casual surroundings of coffee, in one-to-one tutorials as well as in formal, classroom sessions. Shotter (1996; 2000) writes of people being “struck by” comments rather than being informed by them. Many of my conversations with students sought to do this. I avoided part pre-digesting theories and research material, seeking rather to point out, gesture or direct their attention towards new ways of looking at change in organisations. In particular, following Shotter’s work on Social Poetics, I sought to point students towards moment-by-moment creative potential of social relating. In doing this I also drew upon the work of Marshall (1999) and developments in first person action research. Marshall wrote of “inner arcs of attention” which explore an inquirer’s feelings and responses to circumstances. She then went on to write of “outer arcs of attention” which attend to the impact of the inquirer’s words and actions upon others. It is in these “outer arcs of attention” that I would argue we were achieving something very similar to Mintzberg’s action and teaching impact. Likewise I use “inner arcs of attention” in order to sensitise them to how their actions are “called out” (Shotter, 1996; 2000) by earlier actions.
Concluding Comments: so what is different?

There is a sense in which some readers might argue that there is very little difference between the above tutorial practices and other discursive or Socratic pedagogies common in higher education. If I, as an academic tutor, am positioned (Davies and Harré, 1990) as an expert designer of learning environments and if the above practices are read through an understanding of teaching and learning as subject-object relations, where a knowing, active tutor-as-subject is responsible for what students learn and how they learn, then that case can be made. All academic tutors use informal conversations; many tutors will seek ways of helping students apply a body of management knowledge and I am not alone in using slightly ‘off the wall’ methods to direct students’ attention to important points.

However, two shifts in attention cast the above practices in a more radical light. First, we can recognise that all relations are co-created, even subject-object relations. Some students expect to be passive objects to an academic tutor’s teaching subject. A tutor’s ability to move a class into more equally, co-creative learning is always subject to the relational contribution of students. This is where Bakhtin’s concepts of the relationship between the ‘hero’ and ‘idea’ become important. In treating academic research and theory as unfinalisable and provocative, tutors and students are able to (a) radically reform the power relations between them and (b) introduce practices consistent with ‘carnival’ to provide space for the manager-student. Crucially, the learning environment moves out of a monological, physical classroom and is contextualised within the manager-student’s workplace. There, the tutor must cede authority, or at least share it with the manager-student’s local knowledge.

Furthermore, as the ‘classroom’ enlarges to embrace the manager-students’ work contexts, learning moves from being primarily a cognitive, sensemaking exercise, divorced from the social interplay of the manager-student’s work context. It becomes an active (re)creation of working relations in ways that include the questioning, testing and inquiry involved as the manager-students engage the ideas from academia in their own day-to-day, working relations and activity. I find the ideas and practices outlined by Fenton-O’Creevy and his colleagues (2006) very convivial to my own physical-classroom activities. However, what I would argue is that a provocative pedagogy offers, within the enlarged polyphonic ‘classroom’, a learning within live and emergent practice as opposed to informed reflection upon past activities or finalised descriptions of manager-students’ organisations. In this way, a provocative pedagogy is tackling much the same territory as Mintzberg (2004) with his concept of “Impact”. Here, however, it is providing a process and practice of what might be called impact-ful learning. For the relationship of any impact for the manager-student will be somewhat different to that envisaged by Mintzberg. Importantly, he argues that students will have an impact upon their organisations “in the process of developing better managers, rather than as a consequence of developing them…” (Mintzberg, 2004:336, emphasis in the original). However, the four impacts that Mintzberg identifies: sharing materials, applying methods, changing behaviours and provoking new frames, all show the learning impact to be in one direction. The academic impacts upon the manager-students’ work context in a monological manner. From a polyphonic perspective, Mintzberg is quite right in saying that the impact of learning happens “in the process of” learning for the manager-students’ work context is another voice speaking into their learning-in-practice.
The impact is dialogical, as the organisational impact of a polyphonic ‘classroom’ facilitates the work context’s voice to contribute to the learning. The issue here is whether there is ever some finalised learning, for example course material or correctly applied method. This point, in turn, leads to the second shift in attention, for learning is not seen as the cognitive appreciation, understanding and application of new ideas. Its creation is more embodied, temporal and generative than that.

So secondly, a tutor will need to attend not just, to what is meant by any conversational contribution but also to its invitational or perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1962). Within a provocative pedagogy, a tutor’s words and actions are only partly intended to convey the content of a theory or knowledge claim, they also contribute to what happens next; what students do and what learning is performed. The tutor and the ideas discussed offer invitations and contributions to how manager-students go on. The ideas and characters (tutors and manager-students) are being developed and changed not purely in some dualistic way as cognitive learning is applied in practice but as the plot engages characters and practice is a mutually (re)creative process. Within a polyphonic ‘classroom’ the tutor is not designing the learning experience as a distinct mover rather, as Shotter (1996) points out; she is acting responsively into learning relations. Comments, lectures and activities are not only meaningful but generative and poetic, contributory parts of socially performed (learned) activity.

These two, shifts in attention also provide a significant difference with Critical Pedagogies. Whilst my own practice has certainly been informed by Critical Pedagogy and I would place my work within that a broadly defined critical perspective; still I would want to move a relational or polyphonic pedagogy beyond boundaries implicit in a Critical stance. This is for two reasons. First, Critical Pedagogy (e.g. Dehler et al; 2001, Grey et al, 1996; Perriton and Reynolds, 2004; Reynolds; 1997; 1998) focuses on cognitive processes of knowing and understanding; learning content rather than practice. The content of this learning is significantly different to that envisaged by Navarro, Mintzberg or Fenton-O’Creevy and his colleagues but the critical management educators are still engaging with cognitive processes to enable students to have a better understanding of, for example, asymmetric power relations. In contrast, a provocative pedagogy will focus more on the students’ and tutors’ learning as a performance of becoming. Secondly, Critical pedagogy includes a universal narrative that educational emancipation must include a discussion of power relations and the impact of political and social processes upon knowledge. As Ellsworth (1989) has pointed out, there is an irony here, as it implies tutors still use their asymmetric power relations to define what students should and should not learn. This leaves in place the tutor’s right to shape learning and limits the ability of student and tutor to co-create learning that is local in its value to the student.

With these two shifts, we can see three key differences between a provocative pedagogy and a discursive mediation of conventional higher education. First, we are offered a learning that is focused on innovative practice rather than cognitive processes of sensemaking, interpreting or critique. It is not that no sensemaking is going on within a provocative pedagogy but that it is not the evidence of learning that might be expected within conventional higher education (e.g. Laurillard, 1993). Secondly, academic theory and research are treated as provocations of this new, learned practice. The measure of any theory becomes not its accuracy in relation to a real
world but its provocative capacity to promote professional practice that manager-students consider beneficial in their working or other context. Finally, a provocative pedagogy moves the academic tutor from an expert position of authority over student learning, noted at the start of these concluding comments and repositions him or her as a supportive companion along a student’s learning journey. I have described elsewhere (Ramsey, 2006b) this position as that of a ‘Paraclete’, one called alongside, inviting and contributing to new performances. Indeed, perhaps it is in becoming a Paraclete, a voice within polyphony, instead of a tutor that the greatest innovation proposed in this paper is found.

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Vygotsky, Lev
Figure 1

- BE VAIN
- Am I going to eat -> fuel for the brain
- Never make a decision ever again 'cos it's bad!
- Get Caroline to tell me what it was all about
- Decisions have nothing to do with change, something can seem like it is changing by having a decision making process but in actual fact nothing happens
- Decisions can help make people - create them - give them a purpose
- Learnt a bit about the term rhetorical in the context of this seminar within decision making
- Decision making is more than vanity
- The vanity aspect of decisions was something I hadn't considered
- A 'who' is made
- We make decisions but decisions make us