

# **Critical management education: Selected auto-ethnographic vignettes on how attachment to identity may disrupt learning**

**David Knights, Guy Huber, Richard Longman**

## **Introduction**

In this essay, we explore the limitations of the identity work literature in failing to interrogate how attachments to identity are severe obstacles to thinking and feeling differently and are especially problematic for critical management learning and education. Although identity work is ubiquitous in all aspects of social and organizational life, ‘what constitutes identity work is under-explored’ (Brown 2017: 296). Brown summarises how identity work can be seen as either discursive, dramaturgical, symbolic, socio-cognitive, or psychodynamic (ibid.) but neglects to interrogate identity itself. Yet, being attached at all costs to an identity, can be a major obstacle to teaching and learning. This is because identity attachments put closure on externalities such as knowledge and relations that may be seen as threatening to the self or its stability and security (Clough, 1992). The question we ask is whether we can learn to avoid the entrapment of identity attachments that are inclined to treat everything, including education, instrumentally as a means of securing the self? In this essay, we interrogate our own teaching that is inspired by a critical management education (CME) perspective – albeit one not to be seen as a single, unitary whole (Grey and Willmott, 2005). We illustrate this pedagogic problematic through three auto-ethnographic vignettes in the anticipation that it will provoke others to do similarly.

Although CME varies dramatically in terms of pedagogy, content and on several other dimensions, what scholars seem to share within the perspective is a resistance to the status quo of power and social inequality and a concern to ‘plant the seed for challenging injustice’ (Dehler, 2009: 45). CME focuses on teaching about management without presuming that shareholder value, performativity and profit should be elevated as the only priority (Cabantous et al., 2016). Pedagogically, however, there is also a demand that we engage our students in the interpretation, contestability, and at times, even the production, of knowledge.

Because identity provides us with a sense of who we are it is readily taken for granted rather than interrogated but if we return to early developments of a focus on the topic, we find that the self is recursively and unendingly a social process of multiple interpretations of others’ attitudes towards us (Mead, 1934/1972). This is the closest we come to what might be seen as a definition partly because we think it is more important to focus on what identity *does* rather than what it is; in short, a performative conception (Butler, 2010). Although identity is generally valorised among academics as well as in everyday life, its social accomplishment is unendingly performative.

While each of us may work to secure our identities, we can never predict let alone control how others see us and this means that we are often in a state of anxiety and insecurity regarding our sense of ourselves (Knights and Willmott, 1999/2004). Despite the ephemeral, fragile, precarious, and transient phenomenology of the self, nonetheless we are still inclined to become *attached* to identities that, by their very social construction, are continually threatened by disconfirmation (Knights and Clarke, 2017). Still, identity work theorists tend to focus on the intentionality of agents in creating and sustaining ‘personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept’ (Snow and Anderson, 1987: 1348). Identity work scholars

seem steeped in this mode of describing the processes of generating or maintaining (Ybema et al., 2009; Brown, 2015; Gill, 2015), rather than on the 'darker' side of a challenge to or disruption of identity. While it might be expected that CME scholars would be more aware of how attachments to identities might prevent us from thinking and teaching differently, this is often not the case because we are inclined to be equally concerned to secure our identities. Not least this is because considerable discomfort may arise from critically challenging our own and others' taken-for-granted senses of identity. A good example is, while aware that a dependence on 'PowerPoint' slides and 'lecturing at' the students are pedagogically problematic, we tend to fall back on these 'safer' teaching vehicles because they are less threatening to identity than experimenting with alternative methods where the uncertainty of outcomes renders the presumed stability of identities vulnerable. Unfortunately, the literature has not examined the identity work that teachers are inclined to deploy in their pedagogic practices.

We contemplate these alternative pedagogies to show how they depend on learning to think 'differently rather than just legitimating what one already knows' (Deleuze, quoting from Foucault and cited in Macey, 2019: 547). This may involve cultivating the 'courage' to 'embrace discomfort' (Foucault, 1997: 137), but it also necessitates some level of detachment from prevailing identities. While in principle, identity work ought to facilitate these aims, its valorisation of and focus primarily upon how to achieve or sustain, identity or identities serves only to reinforce particular attachments (Knights and Clarke, 2017).

The essay first elaborates a little more on the theme of identity and management education that has been prefaced in the introduction before turning, in the second section, to our auto-ethnographic pedagogic experiences. In the third section, we analyse the problems we confront and our view of how they can be managed. In so doing, we seek to demonstrate the relevance

of our approach to identity for the lives of academics and more limitedly to students as well as to business and political practice (Bridgman, 2007). Finally, we speculate on the implications of our pedagogy for inculcating more critical forms of identity work, through which we might free ourselves to think differently.

### **Identity work and education**

It has been argued, provocatively, that the identity work literature has suffered a degree of amnesia and myopia for it has tended to presume, take for granted and valorise, rather than *interrogate and challenge* our preoccupation with, and attachment to, identity (Knights and Clarke, 2017, *our emphasis*). In this sense, the identity work literature remains descriptive or prescriptive in elaborating the strategies for gaining or sustaining one or other of our identities.

The formation of the self is itself a reflexive project constituted through discourses and social practices yet our tendency to become attached to a preferred identity is rendered problematic by the indeterminacy of social relations through which it is constructed, modified, sustained or destroyed. While fragility is a condition of the indeterminacy surrounding the self, it does stimulate an attachment to a ‘stable’ identity, despite contingent forces rendering this eminently ‘unrealizable’ (Knights and Clarke, 2014, 336).

Still, it is important to acknowledge that positive valorisations of identity are prevalent in everyday life and how, at least temporarily, it may be necessary to fix ‘a coherent sense of self’ (Hay and Samra-Fredericks, 2016: 407). Not to do so may generate the kind of discomfort that is debilitating counterproductive insofar as we all rely on some degree of order in life. What

is perhaps needed is a looser attachment to particular identities since the stronger the attachment the more resistant subjects are to thinking and feeling differently. At the same time, we commend those amongst us who retreat from 'saying things that everyone takes for granted'; those among 'us' who don't 'push on' with 'a ready answer... learned long ago' in the hope that their gesture is accepted as true by others, even though - below the surface - their self-feeling tells them otherwise (Pelias, 2003: 371).

Insofar as identity is an effect of power/knowledge relations (Foucault, 1982), there is 'a seemingly natural connection, perhaps, between education and identity work' (Gagnon, 2008: 375). Identity work concentrates on how individuals acquire a self that is 'coherent and desirable' (Petriglieri and Petriglieri, 2010: 45) and given that this involves learning about the world and ourselves partly through education, the two fields are intimately interrelated. One actually expects learning and education to be disruptive in challenging the coherence of our identities since it involves 'eclectic' (Ibarra, 1999), 'anxiety-provoking' and 'emotional' (Knights and Willmott, 1999/2004) experiences for both teachers and students. Indeed, education is mostly about learning something new which necessarily must challenge what we have taken for granted, including our own identities.

One way in which the more disruptive aspects of learning can be ameliorated, and this may or may not be encouraged by teachers, is for learners to comply by developing the self to fit with what is being taught. Here learners are generally impressed by, or in awe of, teachers sufficiently to endorse the content of their pedagogy. An alternative is where, learners comply by 'enacting [the] required self' (Gagnon, 2008: 389) so appearing committed whilst retaining a cognitive and emotional distance to protect the self against the identity embedded in the pedagogic programme. In both cases, there is a degree of tension either in subordinating the

self to the teacher or in simply protecting an identity. The experience of learning and education is 'comprised of fears, doubts... wounds, [and] lessons learned' (Courpasson and Monties, 2017: 48) involving intersubjective and evaluative processes, and not least, identity work (Brown, 2015). Still, identity theorists do not seem to have fully responded to the criticisms that the 'process by which identity evolves remains under-explained' (Ibarra, 1999: 765).

Within management education, the fragility of academic identities has been highlighted against the background of normalizing, unitary and disciplining discourses within business schools (Knights and Clarke, 2014). However, it is important also to reflect upon how attachments to, and protections of, a 'fixed' identity can obstruct the *transformational* potential of educational experiences. For, academic habits that dampen affective emotions and embodied relations can efface critical reflexivity. We teachers occupy and exercise power in relation to our students, through which, we may exercise emotional labour in refraining from working reflexively on our identity. For example, attachments to 'masculinized' identities position 'us' as strong and in control, rather than susceptible and sensitive to the feedback of others, such that 'we' may attempt to conceal our vulnerabilities through defensive forms of identity work that curtail 'alternative ways of... being and learning' (Corlett et al., 2019: 556).

The teacher is thus faced with a dilemma of whether to feed prevailing student identities or render them even more precarious by exposing them to conflicting values and, perhaps, to the realization that a *secure* identity is transitory, uncertain, and ultimately unattainable. As a teaching vehicle, CME commits academics to expose students to the myth of a secure and stable identity but there is a danger of this becoming a new alternative replacement of one taken-for-granted, comfortable identity with that of another. Consequently, as teachers, we must be aware of our potential to perform identity work on ourselves as protection against

external precarity. Just like our students, we can readily seek solace and stability in a paradigm of 'truth' that contrasts with mainstream status quos. While not suggesting a nihilistic relativism (where the ground of any value is removed as soon as it looks as if it is nurturing an identity) it is important to encourage ourselves, as well as our students, to think 'the unthought' (Foucault, 1973: 326) and to acknowledge that 'in this delusive attachment to himself, man [sic] generates his madness like a mirage' (Foucault 1965: 27). It is our view that identity work might generate the seeds of its own destruction by showing how our attachments to identities may obstruct a potential to learn to think and feel differently.

When it is participative, embodied and engaged, pedagogy is productive of these reflections and may enable us to think and feel differently, even though we are bound to experience failures, setbacks and insecurities that can lead to self-questioning and, perhaps, growth and transformation (Beech et al., 2012). That said, the opposite is equally true. Active learning – through which the self might be transformed – is often forestalled by our subjective attachments to identity and its 'reproduction of the narcissism of contemporary life' (Knights and Clarke, 2017: 338). While no one has a monopoly over participative learning since many mainstream teachers employ various pedagogic techniques to engage their students, we do feel that CME has an obligation to generate embodied and engaged relations with their students. Otherwise, CME only serves to reproduce the authoritative pedagogies that subordinate students to a passive and unquestioning learning experience.

To explore these issues further, we turn now to some selected autoethnographic reflections on our individual teaching experiences. All three authors entered UK academia from careers elsewhere<sup>i</sup> and these vignettes report our early experiences and anxieties, many of which related to our attachment to identities as competent teachers and the vulnerability of our

positions as early career academics subscribing to unconventional pedagogies and CME. Through participative pedagogies and our embodied engagement with the students, we began gradually to loosen our attachments to identities that were a constraint on teaching differently.

### **Learning through teaching differently**

As the 1st author, I report here on my experiences of breaking from mainstream approaches in the 1970s in the UK when I was involved in the embryonic developments of CME. Not only was this course an anomaly in content, but it also diverged from the expectations of students in business schools to acquire the technical tools to become ‘successful’ managers. Rather than ‘feed’ these expectations, I raised them as topics for self-reflection and analysis whereby there was some mutual questioning of the assumptions underlying the instrumental pursuit of ambition. This formed the basis for a critical examination of neo-liberal market economies and the competitive, individual self-interest which they reflect and reproduce (Harvey, 2005).

I felt incredibly vulnerable in diverging so far from the conventions in business schools but, as my supervisor suggested, I was tolerated as the moral conscience of the department. This was an identity I readily endorsed and to which I became dangerously *attached* resulting in devoting myself to teaching and neglecting writing and publishing – a situation that was possibly an escape from the demands of research. Having left school at 16 and not becoming a lecturer until aged 31, I suffered from the ‘imposter syndrome’ of feeling not quite ‘good enough’ – a condition highly prevalent among academics (Knights and Clarke, 2014: 341). Indeed, it was this anxiety and insecurity that drove me to reflect upon and seek to theorize identity (Knights and Willmott, 1985) but later, when reflecting on my own relationship to different



masculinities, I began to realise how dangerous, defensive, and destructive was our *attachment* to identities (Knights, 2006).

Initially, I began by encouraging the students to review critically their other courses and how these were primarily concerned with managerialist techniques for improving management efficiency, rationality, and profitability. I realised how this was extremely challenging for students who had chosen to study management because it seemed like a passport to a ‘good’ job and a successful career but argued that learning to think differently would be valuable whatever future path they pursued. I also drew attention to the form of pedagogy in these conventional classes that usually involved formal lectures aimed at transmitting data, information, and techniques from teacher to student often, as the critics of this approach claim ironically, without passing through the minds, let alone the bodies, of either.

As a mature undergraduate, I had been disappointed by the ‘dry’ and disembodied pedagogy of being ‘lectured at’ and this form of teaching soon became my *bête noire*. Committed to an alternative, I sought to engage students as embodied subjects by encouraging their participation in the production or reproduction, of ideas and knowledge, rather than treat them as mere passive recipients or empty vessels in which to pour knowledge. I encouraged a reflection not only of what, and how, students were taught in business schools but also how instrumental concerns with results can be counterproductive to learning and ultimately, desired outcomes. Countering students’ aspirations was difficult but was made possible through their active participation and embodied engagement not just with ideas but also with one another that contrasted sharply with their educational experience elsewhere. It was, of course, also possible to trade on a student radicalism prominent in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Webster, 2015).

At first, student numbers were sufficiently small to deploy a seminar format, but when they increased, seminars were supplemented with participative lectures. These took the form of students being asked questions and encouraged to engage in a debate that I would seek to sum up by weaving their views into a framework that integrated various concepts, theories, and empirical studies. This participative style of pedagogy, not dissimilar to the approach of the public philosopher TV lectures<sup>ii</sup>, enabled the principal course concepts of power, inequality, identity, and insecurity to make sense. The latter two of these resonated strongly with students' everyday experiences, especially around education, and the former were compatible with the interests of those who were already politicized. Insofar as embodied participation militates against taking notes, shortly after each session, I provided comprehensive written summaries of what I felt had, or could have been, learnt in each session while still encouraging students to challenge and question the ideas in lectures and their essays.

It was possible to relate their anxieties and insecurities to fears about failing or not meeting their expectations in exams and to link identity to their often-instrumental concerns to attain top grades to facilitate securing a 'good' job on graduation. These could, in turn, be related to issues of power and inequality, especially around notions of gender and race. Discussions and debates would draw on student experiences to facilitate critical self-reflection and some understanding of how *chasing* security through an attachment to an aspirant identity could be self-defeating (Knights and Clarke, 2017). One issue I began to realize was how easy it was to become attached to this alternative critical identity whereupon learning to think differently would be seriously curtailed. It was necessary for me to confront this tendency with respect to my identity as much as to detect it in students.

Feedback from the students confirmed that the course had facilitated their thinking differently and critically about much of what previously they had taken for granted (Foucault, 2011) and this partially relieved my anxiety concerning the risks to which this radical, reflexive pedagogy subjected me as well as them. However, aware of this as a temporary and transient identity confirmation, I was aware that becoming attached to this as any other identity was dangerous insofar as it ‘closes down’ rather than ‘opens up’ critical and self-reflexive embodied engagement. This is only likely to restrict pedagogic developments and experimentations that are necessary to participative learning as we confront changing situations, such as the recent demands of teaching remotely during the Covid pandemic.

### **Crafting identities through provocations to debate**

My [2<sup>nd</sup> author] first teaching assignment was to co-lead the module ‘International Business Strategy’ with a mandate to refresh the course, which had consistently received poor student feedback. My lengthy work experience had made me critical of management in general and corporations in particular. In redesigning the course, I wanted students to consider the more contentious issues of whether multinational corporations simply seek to dominate markets thereby limiting price competition and securing monopoly profits, with little concern for social values or environmental sustainability (Chomsky and Waterstone, 2021)? Yet, my teaching practices reiterated the corporate norms through which I had come to understand myself and relate to others. This manifested itself in my desire to be a sedulous, self-assured and competent purveyor of knowledge, thereby giving students confidence in their learning. Though this approach was moderately successful, I was struck by a lack of student engagement in my classes. I became naggingly aware of my limitations, and this made precarious the sustaining of my identity. My reflections encouraged me to question my *attachment* to the romantic identity I had of myself as an efficient and effective disseminator of knowledge, and I began to

realize that in order to engage students it was necessary for them to participate in the process rather than just be passive recipients. The discomfort that accompanied me interrogating my own assumptions disturbed my complacency and engendered a desire also to open up similar reflexive practices in my students.

This critique of international business models left my co-module leader apoplectic – “you are too political” and “not objective”, while falsely claiming impartiality for herself. She suggested, I "delete most of the quoted material, media reports and [philosophically orientated] critique" from my slides. Good pedagogy, from her position, seemed to mean managing student's understandings through assertive and efficient delivery, whereby there is no encouragement for thinking differently. My colleague wished me to separate pedagogy from any meaningful political debate. Yet, an attachment to a mythical ‘objectivity’ rendered her identity threatened by a critique of what she took for granted (cf. Grey et al., 1996). However, through the process of teaching and my collaboration with colleagues in writing this vignette, I began to realise that I might be equally attached to my identity as a critic as was my co-module leader attached to an identity reflecting the political status quo. As one student pointed out, engaging a plurality of perspectives would help students “do assignments so they don't feel pressured to write in a certain way”<sup>iii</sup>.

Consequently, I began increasingly to facilitate a climate in which students felt comfortable to question me and the ideas to which I subscribe as well as their own prior assumptions about international business. This involved stimulating student engagement with the constructed dimensions of what in other courses are presented as ‘objective’ business theories and ‘facts’. Would students become engaged by my views as they pictured how neoliberal ideology has amplified the climate emergency; constituted stagnating economies and inhibited corporate

social responsibility where it could not be linked to efficiency or productivity (Chomsky and Waterstone, 2021)? Would students become concerned, read beyond ideological business arguments, and feel driven to critique? And, more importantly in the context of this essay, would they reflect on their attachment to identities that sustain rather than challenge neoliberal concerns with 'free-market' economic growth?

In seminars, students were intrigued, and some felt challenged and wished to *speak up for business and capitalism*, which generated debate. I engaged with their views and finally, asked students, "How does it make you feel to critique ideas to which "most of your teachers in the business school subscribe"? I was surprised when, rather than concentrate their replies on the content of lectures, students spoke to "the informal aspect of seminars where discussion is encouraged" and "the atmosphere in the classroom, which was so inviting that I found myself contributing regularly. Even at times when I didn't speak up, I remained switched on as I really wanted to contribute". Students displayed a range of emotions, from nods of agreement to smiles, felt surprised (and shocked) in response to the course materials. Some expressed uncertainty in trying to reach a conclusion, others asked follow-up questions, while many tried to voice their own emerging sentiments in relation to my provocations to debate. One student wrote, "I was constantly challenged to think differently" which was apparent when students continued to debate their ideas as they left the class. As the seminars progressed, students began engaging me in conversations where, in the light of what they had learned, they actively reflected on their own identities concerning a world less 'fixed', more questionable, and troubling for their ambitions and aspirations.

These interactions with students began to define and shape my pedagogy although I still desired their approval, particularly as my identity had felt 'on the line' due to an established lecturer

challenging my approach. I felt subject to the gaze of others – the students, my co-module leader, my senior professors, the university. This identity threat was heightened when my program leader insisted that he teach on the module, so as “to gain a better idea of what you are doing”? He, I was sure, would not engage with, understand, or care for my emerging pedagogy – transformed, as I had been, through my interactions with students, themselves absorbed in the performative context of our mutual learning. I acquiesced to his demand, though this strained my self-assurance, buoyed by student feedback: “[Second author] challenges our thinking... gave us the platform to question, critique and think freely without risking being judged or told our way of thinking is wrong, just because it doesn't align with what the majority of society thinks/is-taught". As I suspected, four weeks into the program, my program leader appeared (at least on the surface) un-swayed. He emails me, to express his “grave concerns” about my methods. Whether I can change his mind is debateable, but of course, there remains the possibility that his unease may trigger in him (and perhaps me) ‘the witnessing of new possibilities’ (Butler, 2000: 728). One of these possibilities, is for me not to be so attached to my new-found identity as a competent teacher so as to encourage thinking differently in ways that generate student engagement. In the context of contemporary environmental and pandemic crises, we may then all be inclined to reflect critically upon how management education can tend to privilege and reproduce the single-minded vision of corporate profits to the neglect of other social, ethical and environmental values.

### **By teaching, we learn**

Whilst completing my doctoral studies, I [3<sup>rd</sup> author] secured hourly paid work that supported my stipend but obliged me to teach a “managerialist tool-kit” to undergraduates. In my previous career, I had taken great pride in teaching students; but, as I tried to consolidate a new “critical management” identity, I realised my previous approach had been rather narrow and

instrumental. Still, I was attracted to an academic career and felt unremittingly attached to impressing senior colleagues whose support might prove crucial should the department advertise a permanent post. Myriad contradictions and self-doubts surfaced concerning me training capitalism's foot soldiers (Ehrensals, 2002) and how I was teaching many of them, fuelled perhaps by my attachment to an ideal image and identity of what it was to be a competent teacher.

Despite my manifold privileges, the precarity of life on a temporary teaching contract made me feel insecure. I was attached to a future identity as an academic and, despite numerous misgivings, was careful to cultivate an impression of disciplined delivery of taught materials to satisfy my manager. So far, I had struggled to embody critical theories in my teaching, and it saddened me that I could not relinquish my attachment to an earlier pedagogic identity in which I was prone to instruct others what to think. This precarity was uncomfortable, but it did prompt me to interrogate my own identity work and revealed how, by teaching others, I was learning about myself. This helped me to loosen my attachment to an identity of possessing knowledge to transmit and strengthened my resolve to be open to a more reflexive and embodied mode of engaging with students.

My excitement was palpable when I was allocated seminars on the department's one *Critical Management Studies* module. The module leader [2nd author] suggested I encourage the students to become engaged in their learning, by first discussing with them the aims of each seminar and how best to realise them. It was unsettling to deviate from my previous approach of crafting neatly structured seminar activities, but I trusted the module leader since we shared similar values concerning ethics, justice, and the environment. Also, the approach he advocated facilitated an embodied engagement with learning (Knights and Clarke, 2014). Throughout the

semester, seminars involved lively (and sometimes exhilarating) debates. I had not experienced that before, which made me question how my attachment to a previous identity had held me back. Now, when I hanker for a teaching plan mapped onto a set of learning outcomes to calm my nerves, I am reminded how this practice can constrain debate as well as limit student engagement beyond what appears to secure instrumental benefits.

Teaching from a CME perspective was new to me, and it challenged the orthodoxy of the institution in which I hoped to progress – I was teaching against the grain as well as transgressing ‘the consistency of student experience’ (Tomkins and Nicholds, 2017: 259). Students in seminars tended to embrace managerial assumptions and were unsettled by my tentative steps to embody alternatives to this hegemony implicit in mainstream teaching. I was anxious about how students would respond to heterodox ideas and pedagogic practices which challenged their prevailing identities and their expectations of a Business and Management degree programme. In part, this revealed my own early-career fragility and was a further manifestation of anxieties around my attachment to being an exponent of CME. I tried to detach myself from a narcissistic project of self-presentation (which had hitherto framed how I approached teaching), which in practice, involved engaging with the inherent danger of constructing limited meaning around my actions through my attaching myself to positive affirmations of knowledge.

None of this was easy but embracing students’ ideas was stimulating and rewarding; and, as I relaxed, students engaged more and co-created an atmosphere of self-reflexive learning. Resistance to having their ideas and identities challenged began to soften and debate stimulated questions about the precariousness of life and how identity cannot be taken for granted. In module feedback, one student wrote, ‘It’s refreshing to take a module that challenged narrow-



minded thinking. I am really grateful to [3<sup>rd</sup> author] who enabled me to explore my ideas further, which was reflected in my essays'. While this provided welcome confirmation of my pedagogy, I was also cautious that it might make me as attached to my new CME pedagogic identity as I had been to my earlier instruction-driven one. These experiences exposed me to the limitations of my attempts not to be too attached to my identity. More positively, it made me aware of student's expectations and, crucially, their potential to think differently once engaged with ideas rather than merely implicated in rote learning. My embodied engagement in a pedagogy that was not just a means-to-an-end but an end in itself helped me discern that by teaching others, I was learning about myself, particularly through my efforts to encompass a transformative realization of how insecurity and uncertainty are a condition of human existence and not just a pedagogic experience. I was inspired to embrace and debate this transformation through my participative teaching of CME.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

While issues of identity, self-discipline, and relations of power and knowledge are now central to our understanding, how we learn to think differently or even think the unthought is difficult because it involves transforming the self (Foucault, 1994). This essay has been an attempt to contemplate this neglect by showing how raising anxieties, vulnerabilities, uncertainties, and conflicting emotions (Schön 1995), teaching and learning can enable us to think differently. However, this might not happen unless we can resist treating a disruption of what we have taken for granted as a threat to our identities or at least one that encourages us to question that to which we have become attached.

We must realize that our attachment to identity whether in sustaining or seeking to disrupt the prevailing social order is exceedingly deep and capable of generating a closure on thinking and

feeling differently. CME may or may not generate this self-transformation depending on our capacity to avoid routinely taking for granted identity as a stable and solid sense of self. For, while we may have been drawn politically away from establishment ideas, an attachment to identity may deter us from transforming our pedagogy; consequently, we may continue to transmit, albeit our new-found critical, knowledge in precisely the same manner as before we began to think differently. We have argued that CME is not just about the content of knowledge but equally concerns ways of teaching and learning. In our enthusiasm for critical analysis, we are in danger of becoming evangelical and imposing views that challenge neoliberalism but in precisely the same way as the mainstream reflects and reproduces it. It is, of course, possible to articulate a critique of the way things are without changing the way we are and simply transfer our critical knowledge to students who then remain passive recipients, rather than active participants, in the educational experience. CME demands that we be as critical in our pedagogy as we are in our examinations of the world in which we live. This requires learning and teaching that, in constituting discomfort, enables our students and ourselves to reflect on our attachments to identity that constrain us from thinking and feeling differently. That way, however threatening, we are more able to reflect on our identities and the work we devote to them as well as the socio-political conditions of their possibility.

This can involve us cultivating the 'courage' to 'embrace discomfort' (Foucault, 1997: 137). For, we might ask what it means to learn, 'if it does not, rather than legitimising what one already knows, consist of an attempt to know how and to what extent it is possible to think differently' (Deleuze, quoting from Foucault and cited in Macey, 2019: 547)? By considering prescriptive and instrumental models for managerial efficiency concomitantly – within and against wider 'political' debates and perhaps even more personal issues – we can begin to think for ourselves. In doing so, we are challenged to engage in ideas as well as to reflect on our

tendency to become attached to them as a way of securing the self in a solid and stable identity. In practical terms, this involves working through, identifying with, embodying, and interrogating normative, oppositional, and contradictory discourses on the basis that knowledge is inescapably contestable. It also means embracing discourses that centre on questioning rather than simply embellishing management control; it emphasises social responsibility above individual self-interest and involves accepting difference and diversity in contrast to a focus on preserving identity, sameness and homogeneity. These debates could shift our sense of self and our attachment to particular identities in ways that are equally as radical in their impact as the critical knowledge of management this engenders.

We accept that, in attempting to decentre ourselves as teachers, we still occupy asymmetrical power relations and that some students are likely to absorb uncritically our ‘superior’ opinions and arguments. Yet, if this can be a topic for discussion rather than remaining a tacit and often hidden source of power, it has the potential to enable ways of thinking differently. Methodologically our essay suffers the limitations shared by most autoethnographies insofar as they are retrospective reconstructions where the authors are so embedded in the events as to preclude raising questions of how others are experiencing them. Another limitation is that all three authors are white, male, middle-class academics in a comparatively affluent Western economy, and this is undoubtedly a privilege that has massive intersectional (i.e., class, disability, ethnic, gender and race) repercussions on our pedagogic practices as well as the wider environment within which education takes place. Nonetheless, the pedagogy has some potential to transcend intersectional inequalities although only other, more diverse, researchers could confirm or disconfirm this.

In embracing uncertainty and accepting that *discomfort* renders our identities fragile, we have been able to transform our interactions with students who then became engaged and, perhaps,

less trapped by convention. In our experience, a reflexive relationship to one's identity produces liberating forms of knowledge through which we might 'free thought from what it thinks silently' (Foucault, 1985: 9).

## References

- Beech N, Gilmore G, Cochrane E and Greig G (2012) Identity work as a response to tensions: A re-narration in opera rehearsals. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 28(1): 39–47.
- Bridgman T (2007) Reconstituting Relevance, *Management Learning* 38(4): 425–39.
- Brown AD (2015) Identities and identity work in organizations. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 17(1): 20–40.
- Brown AD (2017) Identity work and organizational identification. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 19(3): 296–317.
- Butler J (2000) Changing the subject: Judith Butler's politics of radical resignification. In interview with Olson GA and Worsham L. *JAC* 20(4): 727–765.
- Butler J (2010) Performative Agency, *Journal of Cultural Economy* 3(2): 147
- Cabantous L, Gond JP, Harding N, and Learmonth M (2016) Critical Essay: Reconsidering critical performativity. *Human Relations* 69(2): 197–213.
- Chomsky N and Waterstone M (2021) *Consequences of capitalism: Manufacturing discontent and resistance*. Penguin Random House.
- Clough PT (1992) *The End(s) of Ethnography: From Realism to Social Criticism*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Corlett, S, Mavin S and Beech N (2019) Reconceptualising vulnerability and its value for managerial identity and learning. *Management Learning* 50(5): 556–575.

Courpasson D and Monties V (2017) “I am my body”. Physical selves of police officers in a changing institution. *Journal of Management Studies* 54(1): 32–57.

Dehler GE (2009) Prospects and Possibilities of Critical Management Education, *Management Learning* 40(1): 31-49.

Deleuze G (1995) *Negotiations*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Ehrensals KN (2001) Training Capitalism’s Foot Soldiers: The Hidden Curriculum of Undergraduate Business Education. In: Margolis E (ed) *The hidden curriculum in higher education*. New York: Routledge, 107-124.

Foucault M (1965) *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. New York: Random House.

Foucault M (1973) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books.

Foucault M (1982) Afterword: The subject and power. In: Dreyfus HF and Rabinow P (eds) *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. Brighton: Harvester Press, 208–226.

Foucault M (1985) *The Use of Pleasure: The history of sexuality (vol. 2)*. New York: Pantheon.

Foucault, M (1994) *Discourses and Practices, 1954-1988*, Defert D and Ewald F (eds). Paris: Gallimard.

Foucault M (1997) *Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth. Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, Rabinow P (ed). New York: The New Press.

Foucault M (2011) *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the College de France 1983–4*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Gagnon S (2008) Compelling identity: Selves and insecurity in global, corporate management development. *Management Learning* 39(4): 375–391.

Gill M (2015) Elite identity and status anxiety: an interpretative phenomenological analysis of management consultants. *Organization* 22(3): 306–325.

Grey C, Knights D and Willmott H (1996) Is a critical pedagogy of management possible? In: French R and Grey C (eds) *Rethinking Management Education*. London: Sage, 94–110.

Grey C and Willmott H (2005) *Critical Management Studies: A Reader*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harvey D (2005) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hay A and Samra-Fredericks D (2016) Desperately seeking fixedness: Practitioners' accounts of becoming doctoral researchers. *Management Learning* 47(4): 407–423.

Ibarra H (1999) Provisional selves: Experimenting with image and identity in professional adaptation. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 44(4): 764–791.

Knights D (2006) Authority at Work: Reflections and Recollections'. *Organization Studies* 27(5): 723–744.

Knights D and Clarke CA (2014) It's a bittersweet symphony, this life: Fragile academic selves and insecure identities at work. *Organization Studies* 35(3): 335–357.

Knights D and Clarke CA (2017) Pushing the boundaries of amnesia and myopia: A critical review of the literature on identity in management and organization studies. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 19(3): 337–356.

Knights D and Willmott H (1985) Power and Identity in Theory and Practice. *Sociological Review* 33(1): 22–46.

Knights D and Willmott H (1999/2004) *Management Lives! Power and Identity in Work Organisations*. London: Sage.

Macey D (2019) *The Lives of Michel Foucault*. London: Verso.

Mead GH (1934/1972) *Mind, self and society*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Pelias RJ (2003) The academic tourist: An autoethnography. *Qualitative Inquiry* 9(3): 369–373.

Petriglieri G and Petriglieri JL (2010) Identity workspaces: The case of business schools. *Academy of Management Learning and Education* 9(1): 44–60.

Schön DA (1995) Knowing in action. The new scholarship requires a new epistemology. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 27(6): 27–34.

Snow DA and Anderson L (1987) Identity work among the homeless: The verbal construction and avowal of personal identities. *American Journal of Sociology* 92(6): 1336–1371.

Tomkins L and Nicholds A (2017) Make me authentic, but not here: Reflexive struggles with academic identity and authentic leadership. *Management Learning* 48(3): 253–270.

Webster SL (2015) Protest Activity in the British Student Movement, 1945 to 2011, *Doctoral Dissertation*, Manchester University.

Ybema S, Keenoy T, Oswick C, Beverungen A, Ellis N and Sabelis I (2009) Articulating identities. *Human Relations* 62(3): 299–322.

---

#### Notes

<sup>i</sup> The first two authors had spent 20 years in business largely in the finance sector and the 3<sup>rd</sup> author had a professional life in music/education

<sup>ii</sup> See Michael Sanders <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b01nmlh2/episodes/player>

<sup>iii</sup> Students did not *take in everything*, but rather *what [theory and evidence] they wanted and could use* in thinking more critically (Deleuze 1995: 139).