

# Contingent Support: exploring ontological politics/extending management

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## Abstract

*This paper is located within the critical management tradition of management education/development. The paper seeks to introduce the neglected area of Actor Network Theory and Mol's anti-foundationalist ontological politics and demonstrates their potential to developing alternative critical pedagogy and management practice. Following a discussion of problem-based learning, the paper goes on to introduce the emergent pedagogic practice termed contingent support. Through a series of vignettes drawn from fieldwork collected from a second year undergraduate decision making module, the paper discusses carefully how the practice termed contingent support is informed by Actor Network Theory and ontological politics in particular. The paper goes on to reveal the significance of contingent support sensibilities of materiality, situatedness and performance and shows how they can give a new vigour to educators interested in developing more responsible management. Finally, the paper considers contingent support's transformational potential and sets an agenda for future research.*

## Introduction

For over a decade, management education has focused attention on relationships between conceptualisations of management and management pedagogy. Debates have emerged between approaches that focus on management orthodoxy, where management is seen as a set of techniques and practices that are learned and applied with varying levels of expertise and those approaches to management that effect a more critical stance on the nature and character of management itself. As educators we acknowledge that if we define management according to orthodoxy it is likely to be taught in an orthodox manner. If, however, we want to challenge students and management and engage in a more critical interpretation of managing then, necessity requires the search for more appropriate pedagogic practices<sup>1</sup>.

This paper is located within the Critical Management tradition of management education/development. Drawing on Actor Network Theory (ANT) and in particular and Mol's radical anti-foundationalist notion of Ontological Politics (OP), we demonstrate here how integrating problem-based learning (PBL) together with theoretically informed sensibilities we

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<sup>1</sup> For an excellent review of the central debates see: French R and Grey C (eds) *Rethinking Management Education* Sage 1996.

encouraged students to begin to philosophise on the nature of management<sup>2</sup>. We demonstrate that the combination of OP and PBL provides the opportunity for critical management to broaden the current concerns with epistemology and its attendant interests in managerial subjectivities and embrace the challenges and opportunities offered by conceptualising social life lived as multiple realities. Our specific contribution to the ongoing debate is to combine the theoretical underpinning of ANT and OP with PBL into an alternative pedagogic practice that we term *contingent support*.

In pursuing the nature of *contingent support* we differentiate our approach from a purely traditional problem-based or student-centred learning approach. We demonstrate that rather than resting heavily on student-centred learning, *contingent support* rests upon carefully selected and performed theory/practice. Through our imperative of promoting a critical understanding of the nature of management, we elevate and problematise ontology and have opted to underpin our practice by drawing on insights from science technology studies. Specifically, we make connections between management and both constructivist accounts of social material relations and ANT<sup>3</sup>. We recognise that this foregrounding is not a typical underpinning for critical management investigations but we demonstrate that these accounts offer particular insights to educators/consultants/researchers, which are underplayed or absent in more conventional critical theory. Both constructivist accounts of social technology relations and ANT deliberately amplify the material and performed nature of practice. Whilst materiality and situated action are implied in critical approaches it is possible for them to be understated and/or lost by a focus on the social as human experience. This paper will address this important but neglected area of work and explore carefully how *contingent support*, through its attention to action, materials and variety, provides a powerful means for engaging with problems of managing in practical and relevant ways.

Using vignettes drawn from our fieldwork, we demonstrate how *contingent support* offers a useful contribution to the critical traditions and opens a new space to challenge orthodox and restrictive meanings of ‘effective’ management. In this context PBL becomes a central device to render learning practical and relevant and it is worth turning now to consider this important practice more carefully.

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<sup>2</sup> The issues, approach and concerns discussed here reflect just one (our) way to engage students in philosophy of management – there are of course other routes, other practices and other positions and we by no means claim the ‘best’ or ‘only’ approach – this is simply one that works for us and our students.

<sup>3</sup> For over three decades, sociology of knowledge has informed constructive accounts of science in practice. Furthermore, there is a large empirically informed literature whose focuses of attention is on relationships between science, technology and society. Classic studies in this include but are not limited to: Bloor D *Knowledge and Social Imagery* UP of Chicago 1976; Woolgar S *The Very Idea* Tavistock 1988; Latour B and Woolgar S *Laboratory Life: the construction of scientific facts* Princeton UP 1986; Bijker W E, Hughes T P & Pinch T, (eds) *The Social Construction of Technological Systems: new directions in the sociology and history of technology*, MIT Press, 1987.

## Problem-based learning

Problem-based learning is a much used technique in management development and traditionally understood to be good pedagogic practice. PBL can be operationalised in a number of ways for example, in some educational contexts problems are set and pathways to solutions are sought – the desired outcome is finding successful solutions primarily judged on the basis of product<sup>4</sup>. In other educational contexts, PBL takes a different form and, using experiential and student-resourced approaches, raises and values both product and process<sup>5</sup>. However, one approach to PBL that is more closely aligned to critical management focuses attention on process and is most cogently expressed in the book, *Rethinking Management Education* edited by French and Grey<sup>6</sup>. A central argument of this powerful collection of essays is that pedagogy is not a neutral transmitter of knowledge, that it is always a political process and consequently new and more appropriate practices have to be found to convey management critically. Drawing on the separate chapters by Roberts, Grey and French, and Grey, Knights and Willmott, the book goes on to assert that orthodox management education fails to problematise the subject matter of management which, itself is characterised as positivist, functionally orientated, always within the bounds of technical rationality<sup>7</sup> and so raises the need to go beyond the commodified rhetoric of education<sup>8</sup> in order to develop an emancipatory imperative namely, capacities for critical self-understanding<sup>9</sup>. The implication here is that the very notion of managerial control is itself a moral fiction for, as MacIntyre states, ‘...no-one is or could be in charge’<sup>10</sup> and he goes on to assert that when management are promoting organisational effectiveness and they premise their moral authority on technical expertise, then this is fundamentally flawed. Crucially then, for the critical management

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<sup>4</sup> For an exposition and critique in the context of information systems development see: Thimbleby H and Thimbleby W ‘Solutioneering in Interface Design’ in *Behaviour & Information Technology*, Volume 12 Issue 3, 1993, pp 190 – 193.

<sup>5</sup> Demeo S ‘Gazing at the Hand: A Foucaultian View of the Teaching of Manipulative Skills to Introductory Chemistry Students in the United States and the Potential for Transforming Laboratory Instruction’, in *Curriculum Inquiry* Vol 35, No 3, 2005, pp 295-338.

<sup>6</sup> A similar position concerning the interdependence between pedagogy and its subject matter is advanced by the philosopher Paul Feyerabend in his celebrated *Three Dialogues on Knowledge* Basil Blackwell 1991.

<sup>7</sup> In French R and Grey (eds) *op-cit*, see separate chapters by Gray C and French R ‘Rethinking Management Education: An Introduction’ p 1-16; Roberts J ‘Management Education and the Limits of Technical Rationality: the conditions and consequences of management practice’ pp 54-76; Grey C, Knights D and Willmott H ‘Is a Critical Pedagogy of Management Possible?’ pp 94-110.

<sup>8</sup> Grey C, Knights D & Willmott H *ibid* p103

<sup>9</sup> Roberts J *ibid*, p 67

<sup>10</sup> MacIntyre cited in Roberts *ibid* p 58

approach to PBL, orthodox problem-based learning that sets out to provide opportunities for experiencing managerial control is by its nature disingenuous and risks entrapping students in the false belief that there is a unified controlled social order with emergent unintended consequences<sup>11</sup>. French and Grey have highlighted well the political nature that exists between orthodox management and pedagogy and their call for the need to search for alternative teaching practices to deliver management critically, is clear.

We have sought to redefine our practice in light of the above discussion. Whilst we align ourselves most closely with the Critical Management approach our emphasis is different. Our concern rests with OP rather than the epistemological politics of critical management. As with critical management, our PBL, which we have termed contingent support is wholly process oriented – the product or output of the process is an effect rather than the central concern. We put students into a problem-based situation where they experience organising and managing. A crucial aspect contingent support is that of connecting OP action with management practice where rather than relying on hypothetical or case-based reasoning, students are placed in problem situations and material settings that adequately and appropriately meet their expectations of ‘management situations’. In our PBL students are working with materials, bodies, space and budgets to resolve a managerial problem. Consequently, we have the opportunity to firstly raise awareness of how materials, bodies and budgetary devices are at work in their management practice and secondly, we have the opportunity to question what student put forward as solutions in terms of their breadth and scope of options that is, we have the opportunity to augment their meaning of ‘effective’ management.

In collaborating with students as they problem solve our role is two fold. Firstly, we seek to offer a very familiar form of support that focuses on questioning students with an intention of taking them somewhere – such interrogation is typical of critical approaches and implies either a liberal-pluralist or social constructivist agenda. In such questioning we do not seek to prescribe or solve problems but to share with our students established and coherent theoretical/methodological insights that have value in understanding managerial experiences and practice. Given this, it is easy to see how Foucault, Pinch, or Derrida may be pointed to as a source for critique and explanation – Foucault et al becomes answers of sorts. Secondly, we aim to question students from somewhere, with a view to opening up possibilities for their transformative practice. In this case, it is insufficient to simply offer deconstruction as an explanatory resource. Foucault and company become a question to be folded back on practice and constitutive of practice. Decisions now emerge about what should be changed, how it might change, why change is never without consequence and how we might ‘manage’ this situation. Connecting PBL and OP is the very lynchpin of extension of the French

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<sup>11</sup> This is a precursor to Grey’s more recent consideration of such a rationalised orthodoxy where he expresses such practice more forcefully as conceit and demands that the teaching of management has to be redefined see: Grey C *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting And Reasonably Cheap Book About Studying Organizations* Sage 2005

and Grey debate and when they argued for extending demands that this dilemma of socially constructed management action be handed back to students as their practice/responsibility.

In order to tease out these important distinctions we can now turn to our fieldwork. Here, we will briefly lay out the problem-based exercise that occupied our students for a semester and outline how this relates to conventional teaching. Subsequently, we will consider more carefully our particular concern of contingent support.

### *Module Framework: Decision Making Theory and Practice*

The module Decision Making: theory and practice is a single semester module involving 40 students. The assessment is a combination of individual and group work based upon a problem-based learning exercise comprising of four equally weighted assessment components with submissions spaced throughout the semester<sup>12</sup>. In the academic year 2005/06 this module was timetabled in a standard university pattern of a single one hour lecture and two seminar groups each with one hour contact. The lecture programme was shared and one member of staff allocated to each of the two seminar groups.

For the academic year in question, the substance of the assignment was to put on an event to promote inclusiveness and cohesion between all students on the Management degree and both academic and administrative support staff in the Department. The exercise is premised upon our view that students know very little about the immediate University organisation in which they are actively enrolled. This lack of knowledge does not simply relate to students being distant from the inner workings of University but more significantly for us, that whilst students usually know the large organising Faculty structures often, they could not name the Department in which they were located (their department) nor could they name its key players. In this context, students had little sense of identity other than the vague affiliation of being students in a Business School at the University of Lincoln. As a department, we wanted to challenge this situation for both substantive and pedagogic reasons.

The assignment became the starting point for students to compete for the right to manage a £500 plus budget and stage an event. The assignment required students to construct a tender. The tender document was thirty eight pages long, dense, highly structured, intimidating and difficult to navigate. We added a degree of additional drama to the tender process by requiring five copies to be submitted by noon on a specified date in Week Five. We required each copy to be signed off by all syndicate group members, receipted and date stamped on submission and finally stamped with the official university stamp.

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<sup>12</sup> The submissions are known locally as the tender (assessed according to group work), the log (assessed by individual work), the Event (assessed according to whole cohort work) and the viva (assessed individually).

## Contingent support

Our goal is to put individuals into situations of managing. Our approach will, ultimately, put individuals at a distance from the cherished beliefs, models, techniques, recipes and moral imperatives of modern managers. The intention is to examine both cherished beliefs and conceptualisations of management as a unified, singular and tangible object with a view to opening up possibilities of managing being other than business school orthodoxy. To this end, ANT is a significant player in contingent support and is directly related to our sensibilities; namely, we acknowledge the situated and material character of managing. ANT applies semiotic insights to materials and material performances and in so doing demonstrates agency as human, non-human and hybrid<sup>13</sup>. ANT renders material, hybrid, and fluidly endless social performances organisationally and managerially relevant in quite particular ways<sup>14</sup>. So, what are these special ways of knowing management, what does all this mean and how does it relate to contingent support in our development of managing? We eschew here the traditional approach of laying out our theory before moving on to practice and we opt instead to use a show and tell approach where we make ANT relevant and explicit. Let us illustrate through a short vignette taken from the very first seminar<sup>15</sup>:

### *Vignette 1*

**Scene** – Seminar One. Week Two. Room VH1003, Tuesday 9-10am. Early February. Raining. Cold, Room laid out as three sides of a square with one alcove area on one of the sides. Table at front with AV equipment, white board, PC and console cabinet. Chairs are the kind with small attached flap table tops. Ten minutes given over to say hello and introductions made... only the

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<sup>13</sup> For an excellent account of the central tenets of ANT see Latour B ‘Where are the Missing Masses? Sociology of a few mundane artefacts’ in Bijker W E and Law J (eds) *Shaping Technology – Building Society: studies in sociotechnical change*, MIT Press, 1992 pp 225-258; Akkrich M ‘The de-scription of technical objects’ in Bijker W E and Law J (eds) *ibid* pp 205-240. For a more extended discussion see Law J, *Organizing Modernity*, Blackwell, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> See Law J *ibid*

<sup>15</sup> We follow Dugdale A “Materiality: juggling, sameness and difference”, in Hassard J and Law J *Actor Network and After* Blackwell 1999 pp 113-135 in that for the purposes of confidentiality and to keep faith with our students we chose to represent fieldwork as fictional dialogues. However, in scripting these conversations we draw heavily on our field-work, field-notes and field-artefacts collected during 2005-06. These are not accurate verbatim reports, rather for the purpose of clarity we offer composite scenes that evoke the fieldwork and stay as close as is appropriate to the language and flow of the various meetings. In this context, characters have been drawn that cannot be mapped to any individual. In all cases, the characterizations here are selective, partial and cannot be taken as a whole and faithful representation of any individual.

lecturer is new to the group. Once the hello's are over LH states her opening and only point for the day

LH: (*talking about the assignment*) I can't stress enough here that you guys have to get on with this one now. Have you all got a copy?

Student: (*chorus*) yes ...

(*odd*) no ...

(*one*) yes, but not with me

(*another*) copy of what?

(*another*) haven't brought mine, have you got a spare Linda?

[... time passes – as folk shuffle around to share the assignment... a couple of minutes]

LH: .Right then, (*draws breath*)

[suddenly, and almost in unison, three young women reach down into bags for their pens and notebooks, they open the notebooks – they are ready to write words of wisdom... LH ignores the suggestion that she should be wise]

[Time passes in various talk and actions... with LH making sure nothing much is said... except]

LH: you will need to form groups of some kind and look at this (*waving her copy of the assignment around*)

[20 minutes in and a new student enters and checks if this is where he should be]

Lost soul: ... is this the seminar on...

LH: ... 2<sup>nd</sup> year Management? Decision Making? ... yes, come in, sit down, pull up a chair

### *Theory/practice: materials, situated performances and ontology*

Our seminar life is neither natural nor mundane but aims to be historically contingent, organised and political. Examine *Vignette 1* paying close attention to the situation and material arrangements. Our first observation here is that our seminar space is managed, it is named, ordered and bounded. Between 9 and 10 on a Tuesday morning this is our room. All that we should need for work is available or on call. The non-human players in *Vignette 1* are more than simply the set and props for our educational drama they are, in ANT terms, active agents enrolled in organising, ordering and regulating our engagement and which enrol us in their own particular performances. Take for example the case of our chairs with writing flaps. Now note that, chairs with flaps: not benches, not chairs and writing benches, not chairs and tables, not chairs at a table but chairs with writing flaps. Chairs matter. Now, such hybrids as chairs-at-a-table are particular sorts of material arrangements and are inscribed with certain possibilities and performances. These arrangements have clearly a role in boardroom, negotiations, team-working or syndicate groups. The arrangement brings table, chairs, people together and inscribes collective attention – chair-table-human hybrids. Our chairs with their flaps have different performances written into their fabric. For example, they stand alone – or rather they and their occupant are individual chair-flap-human hybrids. Whilst social engagement is not *pro-scribed* it is not *in-scribed*. Anyone who has tried to encourage small group discussion in such material arrangements will have experienced the power of the material as a disabling force and the energy required to bring about the desired and disciplined behaviour. Our chairs hold part of the script for the social life that unfolds in room VH1003. These chairs carry a history of seminars, they participate in seminars and they are productive in the net work of what

seminars are and what they might be. To engage in *contingent support* necessitates that we re-network these situations and material arrangement because if we do not they take over. In other words, chairs organise, chairs manage the development of managing.

We can take a second observation from *Vignette 1*. For us, historically, seminars are places where tutors and students engage. From both a student and an academic perspective seminars enrol particular technologies in their management, for example we find out where and when to meet through our timetables. But, whilst the seminar may be 9-10 on a given day, it is clearly more than an educational matter involving the players seen above – it is mobile. ‘Our’ seminar quite literally matter to administrators in student services, faculty offices, academic managers, time-tablers, security, estates and facility managers and others. In their own situations each work with seminar in different ways and require quite different materials. In one situation say, for example, student services, seminar is an on-line directory that can be interrogated to advise students of options, staff whereabouts and potential clashes. However, for a Dean seminars are part of a resource model and used as a means to determine staff: student ratios and for assessing effective utilisation of academic staff. Activity in room VH1003 9-10 on a Tuesday is evidence of an academic at work.

Now, let us return to *Vignette 1*, but this time paying due care to ANT. In pursuing this discussion we acknowledge the work of Mol<sup>16</sup> as she draws on Latour’s work<sup>17</sup> on vaccination, to illustrate a central contribution of ANT – material performances to multiple ontologies. In a classic ethnographic study of vaccination Latour argued that when the science of vaccination moves as an object from laboratory, to ‘medicine’ and then on to ‘clinical practice’, ‘doctor’, and ‘patient’, it carries with it new ways for experiencing reality and new ways of doing healthcare. In developing his argument, Latour draws attention to the richness and depth (the net work) of practices that are part and parcel of doing/acting/living vaccination in different locations. In this context, tracing vaccination across sites he illustrates that these practices have their own particular material arrangements and their own epistemological concerns and it is such relationships and connections of those things and their performances that are productive of different realities. Laboratory reality, surgery reality, hospital ward reality and patient reality coexist, whilst different. Mol makes pains to examine these claims and to raise their potency:

Ontologies: note that. Now the word needs to go in the plural. For, and this is the crucial move, if reality is done, and if it is historically, culturally and materially located, then it is also multiple. Realities have become multiple<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> Mol, A *The Body Multiple: ontology in medicine practice* Duke UP 2002; Mol, A ‘Ontological politics: A word and some questions’ in Law J and Hassard J (eds) *op-cit* 1999 pp 74-89.

<sup>17</sup> Latour B cited in Mol A 1999 *ibid*

<sup>18</sup> Mol A 1999 *ibid* p 75



Mol offers us engagement with managing but not at the conventional level of epistemology but as historical, cultural and materially located multiple lived realities. Our development of managing focuses on doing management and experiencing managing as a matter for inquiry. We put students in situations that, for fourteen weeks or more, they are required to experience, perform, feel and live. As students are immersed in organising their problem we bring actor net-work sensibilities of situations and material arrangements to bear. Ultimately, in ANT terms, the technique of *contingent support* is in **de-scribing** the **in-scribed** but its power is in legitimising the potentials of **pro-scribed** performances<sup>19</sup>. In other words, *contingent support* is demonstrating the political nature of managing and opening up possibilities for doing management differently.

### *Vignette 2*

**Scene** late in Week Four. Days to go to the submission of the tenders. 6pm in the Alstrom Atrium. WM and LH are settled in having a coffee and debriefing some fieldwork material. George, Lucy, Sam and Jon arrive. They hover. They approach

George: Hiya, do you mind if we interrupt?

LH: yeah ok, we have a few minutes, take a seat, how's it going?

Lucy: yeah, good we think. We have been looking at the tenders and thinking about it all. We've got a plan but we don't want to spoil the surprise... so we aren't going to tell you our idea.

WM: so what do you want?

Jon: (*business like*) (gets out his folder and tender document). We have done a Gantt chart for the project (*glances up and pauses for effect*)

WM and LH (*puzzled*)

George: (*picking up WM and LH's silence and puzzlement and trying to help*)... yeah when I did young enterprise at college we did this kind of thing ... we won. We plan to get everyone involved. We have divided up the tasks, we are going to use Belbin to sort out who does what.....there are clear responsibilities and reporting mechanisms – look here is our plan (*points to his own hand drawing of an organizational chart*)

WM and LH (still looking puzzled)

Lucy: why aren't you saying anything?

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<sup>19</sup> See Akrich M *op-cit* and Barad K “Posthumanist Performativity: toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter” in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture & Society*, Vol. 28 Issue 3, 2003, pp 801-82 for an excellent and interestingly different account of material de-scription/in-scription.

LH: (*puzzled*) well, I am not sure what you want of me? Tell me why you're doing it this way ?

[they pursue this line for a while – Lucy is getting the hang of being challenged and challenging. She quite likes it. She is happy to just talk in general about the lecture material and tries to move to conventional territory of discussing theory. This happens for a short time. Jon returns to George's plan. Pointing to the chart he draws WM's attention to the drawing]

Jon: ... is it right?

WM:... I don't know, what do you mean by 'it'

Jon:... (*continues*) our idea is to make sure everyone knows what the tasks and the deadlines are (*pause*). We have spoken to the suppliers and we know our scheduling is pretty good (*pointing to his chart*)

LH: (*eavesdropping*) I'm still confused Jon, what do you think Pinch would make of a Gantt chart?

WM: (*agitated*) never mind Pinch – what do you think Mol would say? How would she answer you?

[The students are bewildered. Jon leaps in]

Jon: but that's nothing to do with managem...

WM: ... woah, come on Jon, wait a minute, you saw the Enron video – What does your chart mean? How did they do charts? What does your chart do? Why should anyone work to it? What power does it hold? Where does that come from? (*pause, drumming on table*) Look Jon, it's more than a chart for f...

LH:... (*sensing now is the time to move away from the table – points to her watch*) right guys, sorry, but we are going to have to call it a halt there, we have another appointment back in Bridge House – think on this carefully – come and chat later – email us for a tutorial slot – we need to pick this up

### *Theory/practice: translation, displacement and the politics of possibilities*

What can we make of the scene in the Atrium? Well, it is useful to backtrack firstly, to remind ourselves of the central points under consideration and secondly, to provide some continuity between the action in *Vignette 1* and the action some weeks later in *Vignette 2*. In critical management it is understood that particular theory/practice approaches to PBL facilitate critical managing. We demonstrate here how ANT and in particular OP, with its focus on options and possibilities, contributes further opportunities for developing critical managing. Moreover, we illustrate an ANT informed approach to developing managing and our notion of *contingent support* illustrates how our ANT sensibilities are enacted.

In terms of the action, things have been hotting up. As you can see from *Vignette 2*, we are now working in different places, spaces and ways. The students are taking the initiative, working around timetables and teaching rooms. We are rather pleased that the students want to move out of the organisationally given, and heavily inscribed space of room VH1003. One significant reason for the move appears to be the way the students are opting to do competition. It seems these performances of competition require particular, rather intimate material arrangements. Conveniently, we collude to subvert the spreadsheets, timetables, registers and other control regimes and move off into coffee spaces, other rooms and meeting places. So, four weeks in and VH1003 moves into the distance and new spaces begin to matter.

At this point, our interests and the student's interests align; suddenly small groups want bespoke tutorials and so do we. It is when we move with them into these new teaching spaces that we make another make another interesting discovery and one that is evident in *Vignette 2*. The students have

been hard at work on our assignment and in the process our short brief has been translated into The Brief. Indeed, by week four even The Brief is on the move and is being translated yet again from a Brief into a project, or more accurately A Project –with title and all the trimmings. For while we know very little of the detail of their doings we know enough from the names they have given to their projects, to be able to differentiate between the Hog-Roasters, Casino Knights, Country Fayre and Av-renim. Things are getting real.

Turning to the forms of organising that our students are practising in the early weeks, their performances of planning, reading, meeting, discussing, delegating and brain storming are clearly evident. Such practices would normally be well met and affirmed by tutors but instead, our good and faithful students are getting stressed, cross or both. Why? Certainly, our students are actively engaged in the assignment and have assumed ownership and responsibility for its delivery but their problems surface when they seek our support. Our responses are not providing the reassurances that students expect.

The problem that is the source of disquiet is that by Week Four students have been confronted with tutors performing ‘support’ in two distinct ways. The first performance is recognisable as support, and adopts conventions of good practice. For example, we are available, approachable and responsive. We have clear ideas about where, in the (our) scheme of things an individual is and equally clear notions of where we would like them to travel. We have points of theory to clarify, key notions to discuss and direct questions are met with equally careful and developmental directness. However, the second performance of support, our *contingent support*, is far less comfortable for students.

With *contingent support* we have no such certainty, we quite genuinely do not know what ‘it’ (Assignment outcome) is or even what it might possibly be – ‘it’ is *contingent* upon student action. Furthermore, it is crucial to us that we keep our uncertainties open for as long as possible. The problem/strength here is that as students put in effort, present ideas and do hard work they come to us and ask “is this what you want” and we honestly answer “I don’t know, it might be”. We have to keep reaffirming this statement, reassuring students that we are not holders of secret knowledge who are playing with their naivety but that we really do not know what a good event will look like – only that we will recognise it when it happens.

*Vignette 2* offers a whole raft of interesting ‘moments’ as the discussion both reveals many of the hidden aspects of our student’s work and the commitments that they have brought to that work. There are many interesting stories to tell here with regard to the naming of things and the organisational master-plans that are emerging and the functional structures, models and charts that students hang their hopes on. However, we focus here on one particular moment that illustrates our concerns - the point in the discussion where it becomes apparent that Belbin is a hidden actor in Jon, George, Lucy and Sam’s work.

Let us return to that point in the fieldwork where Belbin appears:

WM and LH (*puzzled*)

George: (*picking up WM and LH’s silence and puzzlement and trying to help*)... yeah when I did young enterprise at college we did this kind of thing ... we won. We plan to get everyone involved. We have divided up the tasks, we are going to use Belbin to sort out who does what.....there are clear responsibilities and reporting mechanisms – look here is our plan (*points to his own hand drawing of an organizational chart*)

WM and LH (*still looking puzzled*)

What is so interesting in this little out-take? In some contexts, our students' identification of a common place modelling tool would be a 'good' thing but both our interest and our concern is aroused when, in this meeting, we see various diagnostic instruments typically used in management consultancy and development being found, aired and enrolled in our student work. In doing their assignment, these students have made a particular problem that could be labelled 'human resource management': that is organizing the human endeavours required for their master-plans to unfold. It is in this context that we find George enrolling Belbin, Young Enterprise Schemes and Experience in both organising and legitimating performances. Our interest here lies in (ontological) politics enacted in this enrolment of Belbin. In other words, we are interested in how it came to be that resourcing the project became a question of Belbin rather than for example a question of a cooperative, participation, community building, mutuality, ownership or even curiosity.

Perhaps the issue here is that there are many options for such organising and if these options were put into practice as part of the 'solution' they would offer different experiences of work, different problems and different possibilities. The infernal 'it' that our students allude to could easily be different – but the technology that is Belbin does something here that is powerful and, at the end of the day, appears to them, useful and so desirable. It is useful to explain this more carefully by juxtaposing our interest in Belbin with Annemarie Mol's account of anaemia.

In her account of OP, Mol draws on deep ethnographic fieldwork to focus attention on situated performances. Her intention is to demonstrate how reality is made in particular practices and circumstances and she offers a useful example with a deliberate account of performances of anaemia. In this example, she traces anaemia through a number of locations to argue that in each location, anaemia is a different lived reality. In pursuing her analysis Mol focuses on three medical situations of anaemia: clinical, statistical (laboratory) and pathophysiological. She notes that in medical texts these three performances are taken as aspects of a single condition in that they are related to one another as different expert perspectives on a singular medical 'deviance', anaemia. As, Mol points out, this sense of a unified object viewed from different perspectives is problematic. Indeed, at times these perspectives appear to contradict each other. For example, some patients will not present symptoms of clinical anaemia but will have a 'deviant' haemoglobin level. In other words, in one location they are not anaemic and in other they are. Equally, within one single location, say statistical anaemia, it is possible to be anaemic in one geographical location and not anaemic in another.

So, where should a decision about anaemia be made? How is anaemia detected? If clinical reality is our preferred location then a healthcare system emerges where we wait for patients to present themselves for treatment; a system that risks leaving undetected statistically anaemic individuals who do not display clinical signs or who do not think their signs sufficient reason to seek out a clinician. On the other hand, if one favours statistical performances of anaemia, then we are taken to a healthcare system that would use population to detect anaemia and population screening the likely vehicle, a situation that could lead to medical intervention for clinical non-anaemic.

In the UK, in common with western Europe, anaemia is predominantly performed as clinical reality and, Mol asks where this was decided and why. This is not a straightforward question – for why is anaemia not a statistical performance best managed by screening? In addressing the question, Mol points out that whatever the acknowledged reason for the decision that 'detection of anaemia is a clinical practice', *fixing* that fact in place will have involved a *displacement* or *translation* of the decision for example, both screening and clinical practices may be translated into NHS budgets, risk factors, quality of life measures and so forth. It is in the processes of *translation* and *displacement* that politics is practiced and options get whittled down and *fixed* in place.

In the construct ontological politics, Mol is offering the opportunity to begin theorising management in ways that transcend scientific reductions, technical competencies or subjective positions in a managerial landscape. But, more crucially for us, she is giving us the right to question notions of 'effective' management and to pose questions about how managerial landscapes could be 'cut' differently. Indeed, there are no landscapes, only particular interpretative modalities that get named management and become the site of managerial action.

Fixing on Belbin, George and company displace other possibilities such as cooperatives, mutuality, curiosity and so forth. This displacement involves translating options in a range of ways - as business school orthodoxy, as a safe pair of hands, as best practice, as benchmarking, as business process re-engineering or simply expediency. In the processes of translation and displacement the politics of modern management becomes reduced, fixed and enacted as legitimate managing. At this point we have lost where the decision was taken, development becomes a case of knowledge transmission and morality has been moved out of the question of managing and replaced by policies, protocols, and technique.

## **Transformative Practice?**

### *Outcome of the Exercise*

To conclude our discussion of OP and contingent support we want to pause for a moment and celebrate the outcome of our PBL exercise. Ostensibly, within the University, the exercise has been hailed as a remarkable success. Our student's efforts are reappearing in all sorts of guises and being talked about by all sorts of folk. In each case, the success is situated and often one account is barely recognisable by another. For us, it is probably easier if we simply describe what happened on the night of the event.

The Tender that won, set out to produce a piece of art work based upon our University logo, the head of Minerva. The art work was produced during one evening and involved a single composite of nine, one-metre square canvasses that would ultimately come together to form a mural three metres square. The production of the mural required students to commandeer Atrium space, tables, materials and refreshments. More critically, or to be more accurate and more problematically, the exercise required that the students negotiate with the University to mount the canvas on the main wall in the large atrium of the main University building. On the evening of production, the students walked, talked painted and laughed and drew in members of the department, administrative and academic and after two hours, from a hotch-potch of painters and paint, the job was done.

Alongside producing the picture - 'Make your Mark on the University Logo' - (as the event was referred to in the student's publicity flyer), other unintended but very welcomed and productive activities took place. We found 3<sup>rd</sup> year and 2<sup>nd</sup> year students talking about their courses, their experiences and the dreaded dissertation. Whilst they interacted, some journalist students were happily interviewing and a film crew from media studies has been organised so that our students could have a record of the night and disseminate their work. Currently, the mural has pride of place and shines down on us from the main atrium wall constantly a reminder of a great night. Of course, getting the mural hung on that wall... well...that is another paper. What is quite remarkable is how something as solid as a 20 metre concrete wall can be so mobile for when it comes to organisational decision making and finding out who has rights over that wall, was shall we say - yet another learning experience. In terms of PBL the product (Av-rem in as the students named the mural - Minerva backwards), does the job. From our point of view, the *viva voce* and reflective logs that were also included in the assessment regime convinced us that learning had taken place...

However, there is more. *Contingent support* makes explicit the organisational and managerial significance of conceptualising social life as fluid and continually mobile relationships involving people and materials. As students made their assumptions, their apparently trivial and mundane decisions and enrolled their various techniques, technologies and forms of order, we were ideally placed to keep opening the closures that they surfaced. As students performed managing, we were able to pose for them certain philosophical questions right from the beginning of their enterprise. Consequently, within weeks, the students were able to ask questions themselves, why management? whose management? The outcome was in many ways liberating for all concerned. Managerial style was no longer simply the case of a classificatory system but political practice.

From our point of view, the exercise has pointed to us a number of research needs. We are interested in pursuing longitudinal study, working collaboratively with students as they continue their studies and then move out of the university and into management. We have also identified that reflective logs and viva materials are also an important source of evidence, resource and assessment. Consequently, we are extending the research and seeking collaborative work with the current second years in the hope that we can include such material into our further ethnographically informed theorising. We operated on the basis of informed consent but at the time, we restricted its domain to the event activities only rather than to the full range of assessment products including logs, viva records, e-mails. It is this more extensive material that we would seek to incorporate in our subsequent study and hopefully make the student voice stronger in our narrative.

Drawing on fieldwork from a second year decision making undergraduate module, we used a series of vignettes to illustrate how the practice of *contingent support* makes explicit the organisational and managerial significance of the limitlessness of material, hybrid social performances. As the discussion of the vignettes demonstrated, *contingent support* rested on the practice of surfacing and making overt the inscribed character of situated and material hybrid arrangements thereby revealing managing not as a set of techniques and recipes to be learned and adhered to but as political in character. However, as was further illustrated in *Vignette 2*, that when reality is multiple, politics becomes the practice of displacing and translating those limitless options into a fixed location and so *contingent support* was concerned to ask how, why have particular decisions been privileged, what other possibilities could there be, how might they be performed differently and what other types of managings/management performances might they bring about.

This paper has sought to contribute to the Critical Management tradition on management and managing as activities and judgements that necessarily carry moral, ethical and philosophical concerns and to search for new and appropriate pedagogic practice in order to challenge the prescriptions and protocols of much business school teaching. Our inspiration came from science and technology studies, ANT and Annemarie Mol in particular. Taking Mol's notion of OP with its attention to performativity, materiality and situatedness, we developed it into a teaching practice that we termed *contingent support* which enabled tackling highly relevant managerial issues in practical and appropriate ways. With its emphasis on multiple realities which are historical, cultural and materially located, ANT and OP transcend the limitations of epistemological approaches. This concern with ontology or rather (political) ontologies has been seriously overlooked in critical management and it is our hope that *contingent support*, a net-work of ANT, OP and PBL, will energise further conversations and practice with educators who seek to encourage critical, reflexive and responsible managerial performances.