

Gaining leadership insights from literature – an exploration of paradoxical processes and how we might make sense of them

Abstract

Management learning has much to gain from the study of literature to explore feelings of uncertainty, doubt and paradox; and how we communicate these feelings as essential, but often ignored areas, of being in organisational life. To illustrate this I draw on examples from Greek mythology, the melodrama of Edgar Allan Poe and a Shakespearean play. In doing so I offer an invitation as to how we might create and talk about our own stories as ways of developing our own leadership practice and have something worthwhile to say in the field of wider management learning, not as discrete case studies but as temporal processes where we have the potential to draw the reader in as an actor in the unfolding events.

Key Words

Paradox, leadership, reflexivity, literature, doubt, case study, reflexivity, action learning.

Introduction

I came to academia late in the day after twenty years of various managerial roles. After my first degree in microbiology in my early 20s it was not until my 40s that I completed an MBA and doctorate. It was during these studies that I noticed how literature, stories and plays¹ could establish a rich connection between what was written down and that of lived experiences in organisational life. By lived experience I mean issues of doubt, uncertainty, and anxiety as one moves into an unknown with others in the process of organising. This was in contrast with much that I had read on my MBA which had frustrated me with explanations of implied certainty (Kotter, 1996; Porter, 2008; Senge, 1990 etc).

With the use of three examples in very different genres I will draw attention to: the interaction between advice and how events play out; the importance of paradox and dilemmas in the living presence (Stacey, Griffin, & Shaw, 2000); and the interaction between the text and the reader/audience in what happens next. The literature I will draw on will be Homer's Iliad (Homer, 2003), A story from Edgar Allen Poe's Tales of Mystery and Imagination (Poe, 1993) and Shakespeare's The Tempest (Shakespeare, 1611) respectively. These processes are often ignored by the mainstream management writing but are the essential in the activity of leadership. If they are discussed in the management writing they tend towards the overly theoretical and 'clever' as can be the tendency in the critical management literature (Alvesson & Deetz, 2000; Alvesson & Willmott, 1992, 2003).

The one thing that draws the examples together is dialogue, either with us the reader or between the characters; in doing so we share or become part of the process of understanding as opposed to the articulation of formed clarity.

¹ I shall now refer to this as 'literature' as distinct from 'writing' as part of the management discourse

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A coherent feature across the whole paper is the importance of paying attention to the temporal flow of our involvement in events, rather than the style of thought and writing that implies a detached stance between the writer and the observed. I will extend the invitation of how we engage with literature to the social process of creating our own stories of organisational life in ways that are meaningful for our own development and wider management writing. And it is in this process that we can supplement cleverness with attention to feelings; by which I mean both the emotional and intellectual work that goes into everyday practice. This includes vulnerability, fear, love, doubt, loathing and so on that comes to play in the practice of reflexivity, which has its roots in histories and relationships and hangs in an anticipated and provisional future.

The use of literature – an orientation beyond the case study and the provisional nature of context

The use of literature in organisational studies and management education is not new (Czarniawska-Joerges & De Monthoux, 1994). Knights and Willmott draw on the contemporary fiction of Lodge's *Nice Work*, Kundheera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* and Wolf's *The Bonfire of the Vanities* (Knights & Willmott, 1999), Sims reflects on the childhood story of the *Velveteen Rabbit* (D Sims, 2004) to explore love for an organisation.

My approach is to illustrate what I have found important in my practice and to make an offer to you to find similar sources of literature that speak to your practice. And in doing so, over a period of time we might come up with some shared literatures that can offer insights into wider management writing and practice.

A feature in all three examples is the issue of context, but not as a means to neatly illustrate one case study from another (Flyvbjerg, 2001) but what I would call 'provisional context'. By this I mean the shifting nature of the characters in the literature and how they come to understand and react to their situations; and how we as readers shift our understanding with them. Hubert Dreyfus in a book chapter titled *Why studies of human capacities modelled on ideal natural science can never achieve their goal*, explained that although the scientific approach succeeds well in its own field it cannot work in the 'sciences' of humanity (Dreyfus, 1986, p13-14). In management education it is this case study that has often been used to explore complex events that people face in organisations and to draw some conclusions in ways that are defensible against the scientific criticism (Eisenhardt, 1989; Hartley, 2004; Yin, 2011). Czarniawska (Czarniawska, 1997, p64) cites Yin's definition of a case study as being an empirical inquiry that: investigates contemporary phenomena in real-life context; where there are boundaries between the phenomenon and context; and uses multiple sources of information (Yin, 2011). She then goes on to explore the problems that arise in such approaches, particularly how these definitions become further focused, and the

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implication this has for fixing both the context and what is noticeable, in other words to lose the provisional nature of experience.

Examples from my MBA some ten years ago that I read and discussed (many of which are still available, or have been revised, from the Case Centre²) covered topics such as leadership, including the BBC (Keys, 2003) and GE (Bartlett & Wozny, 1999) and corporate wrongdoing drawing on Enron (Nanda, 2002) and Worldcom (Ebberts, 2005).

When I read case studies such as these a characteristic that I noticed was a lack of attention given to the characters involved and how they live and make sense of what they are facing. Even case studies that focused on the leadership of an individual implied some linear trajectory, often of heroic endeavour, that were distilled into a number of attributes. This aping of the scientific approach is problematic (Mason, 2006); it seeks to predict and explain everyday activities, draws the reader to un-reflexively react in ways such as: ‘how could they have been so stupid to have done that ...’, ‘how did they think they would get away with ...’, ‘isn’t that obvious ...’, or similar.

Process over spatial separation

Several ways of researching organizations, such as action research and ethnomethodology, emphasise a dualism between the individual and the social (Stacey & Griffin, 2005, p26-27). These approaches can downplay the temporal whilst favouring the spatial as illustrated by tell-tale phrases such as ‘stepping back from the data’ and ‘what’s the big picture?’ and ‘let’s see this through another lens’. This spatial way of thinking, often accompanied by unreflexive post hoc rationalisation, obscures emergent feelings of ambiguity, sensemaking and conflict as individuals in a group (including the researcher) inch their way into the future (Warwick & Board, 2013).

Without implying that a simplistic choice between spatial and temporal is possible, there is merit in a redressing of the balance towards the temporal, paying serious attention to the detailed patterns of anticipation, action, recognition, exclusion, action etc. And it is here that literature offers promising possibilities.

Even accounts of longitude studies, capturing an element of the dilemma and ambiguity that people face (Flyvbjerg, 1998; MacIntosh, Beech, Antonacopoulou, & Sims, 2012; Samra-Fredericks, 2004), lose dramatic quality by down-playing visceral reactions to events and long term implications of power relations. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu discusses these themes in *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Bourdieu, 1977). He too argues that the abstraction of temporal flow of events is problematic illustrating this with the practice of gift

² <http://www.thecasecentre.org/educators/>

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exchange. A spatial or objective approach would imply that gift exchange is a reversible operation where gifts are to be matched by return gifts of equal value, whereby one cancels out the other. Looking at this from the temporal, of the character's own experience allows consideration of hesitation, possibilities, excitement and how this fits in with the meshed course of past events; events that point to the irreversibility of experience. Bourdieu also links this with 'style' of the return of a different gift, choice of occasion and so on that comes to affect the experience of the gift and how this might illicit further response as an ongoing process. This is something that we illustrated with the example of buying a round of drinks in an English pub (Warwick & Board, 2013, p46).

I will explore three examples in literature addressing the temporal in different ways, but ways that draw on a common thread, namely that we as readers/audience become enmeshed. We are a part of dramatic tension and relations and we share their risk, hopes and fears and how contingent these are on the actions of others and events over which we have variable control of.

I include several short vignettes of literature, not as an alternative to the full text, but to offer a bridge between my argument and the authors' work.

Interaction between advice and how events play out

In the following section of Homer's Iliad we encounter the interaction between the father, Nestor, and his son, Antilochus. We see the clear confident articulation of a plan yet we sense how fraught with danger this is and how important the stakes are. We therefore see a confident articulation in a different perspective. And from this temporal process we live with them as the consequences unfold and we sense that lived cunning of wisdom as Antilochus, the son, uses his wit and wisdom to relate his father's advice to events.

The Iliad

An extract of the advice Nestor gives to his son, Antilochus

Now let me tell you something to look out for. It is obvious enough; you cannot miss it. There is a dead tree stump, an oak or pine, standing nearly two metres high. It has not rotted in the rain and is flanked by two white stones. The track narrows at this point, but the going is good on either side of this monument, which either marks an ancient burial or must have been put up as a turning-post by people of an earlier age. In any case, it is the mark of a swift footed godlike Achilles has chosen as his turning post for this race. As you drive round it keep your team close to it and lean in your chariot just a little to the left yourself. Call in your outside horse, touch him with the whip and give him rein; but make the inside horse hug the post close enough, almost

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to scrape it with the hub of your wheel. But avoid touching the stone, or you may injure the horses and wreck the chariot ... (Homer, 2003, p404).

Later, how events unfold for Antilochus

Very soon, warlike Antilochus saw a place where the sunken track grew narrow. It ran through a gully: water piled up by the winter rains and carried part of it away and deepened the whole pass. Menelaus was picking a course through it, making it difficult for anyone to come alongside. But Antilochus steered off the track altogether and gave chase along a slight diversion. Menelaus was alarmed and shouted at him: 'Antilochus, this is stupid driving! Slow down! The tracks narrow here. There will soon be more room to pass. Watch out you don't hit my chariot and wreck us both'. So he spoke, but Antilochus, pretending he had not heard him, laid it on with the whip and drove faster than ever. They both ran in for about the distance a discus will carry when a young man releases it with a swing of the arm to test his strength. Then Menelaus's pair gave way and fell back ... (Homer, 2003, p407).

Here Antilochus has to interpret advice received from Nestor in the moment of the unfolding of events, making the most of opportunities whilst reacting to new dangers. Management discourse, in its widest sense, tends towards Nestor's rhetoric, both in terms of clarity and boldness, but also how this clarity masks uncertainty, the high price of failure and how events unfold. Caution of bold articulation of strategies, frameworks and ideas are important in leadership development so as not to get caught in any headiness of rhetoric. In considering the interaction between Nestor and Antilochus we see how this rhetoric unfolds and the importance of wisdom, knack and practice becomes apparent. This is a process that has been referred to as *Metis* (Baumard, 1999; DeCerteau, 1984; Detienne & Vernant, 1991; Scott, 1998), named after the Greek god of cunning and wisdom and described as:

... a complex but very coherent body of mental attitudes and intellectual behaviour which combine flair, wisdom, forethought, subtlety of mind, deception, resourcefulness, vigilance, opportunism, various skills, and experience acquired over the years. It is applied to situations which are transient, shifting, disconcerting and ambiguous, situations which do not lend themselves to precise measurement, exact calculation, or rigorous logic (Detienne & Vernant, 1991, p3).

We cannot hope to acquire the ability of driving a chariot in such circumstances, and certainly not from just reading, but at least we can develop an understanding of the relationship between rhetoric, practice, risk and we share a stake in the outcome. In doing so there is the opportunity to examine our own practice and to notice the rhetoric that we listen to and speak and how we interact with each other.

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Situations in which we find ourselves are rarely clear-cut, there are tensions, competing priorities that require an holistic understanding so as to make the next plausible choice, it is within this context that I will discuss paradox.

Paradox and dilemma in the living presence

With Poe's *Descent into the Maelstrom* we relate to the sailor's dilemma when his boat gets caught in a whirlpool at sea. We can only do this having established in our mind what is at stake him including his relationship with his brothers that he now mourns. Poe delivers us to a point where we can directly live the visceral sense of paradox as he momentarily weighs up life-and-death choices drawing on fragments of memory in relation to how events are unfolding.

With one of the three brothers having drowned the other two are caught, paralysed with fear. One is able to emotionally detach himself enough and to notice how certain items are escaping the vortex. With this insight he tells his brother, but he is too caught up in the moment and drowns. The observant brother manages to escape, later on he reflects:

Descent into the Maelstrom

I called to mind the great variety of buoyant matter that strewed the coast of Lofoden, having been absorbed and then thrown forth from the [maelstrom]. By far the greater number of articles were shattered in the most extraordinary way – so chafed and roughened as to have the appearance of being struck full of splinters – but then I distinctly recollected that there were *some* of them which were not quite disfigured at all. Now I could not account for this difference except by supposing that the roughened fragments were the ones which had been *completely absorbed* – that the others had entered the whirl at so late a period of the tide, or, from some reason, had descended so slowly after entering, that they did not reach the bottom before the turn of the flood came, or of the ebb as the case might be. I conceived it possible, in either instance, that they might thus be whirled up again to the level of the ocean, without undergoing the fate of which had been drawn more early or absorbed more rapidly (Poe, 1993, p59-60).

At this point of noticing, of what was around him and how this related to previous experience, he realises that his only chance of avoiding the whirlpool would be to lash himself to a barrel. And does so, and survives.

In the story we can participate in the sailor's plight and dilemma and notice with him the paradoxical process he finds himself in, in what the figurational sociologist Norbert Elias calls 'involvement and detachment' (Elias, 1987). We can understand this in an accessible way, accessible to the full range of logic and emotion. In this sense paradox is not a

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rationalist position of ‘either ... or’, or even ‘both ... and’, but is a process of ‘at the same time’, explored as a temporal process. Or as Forrest Gump mused: “I don't know if we each have a destiny, or if we're all just floatin' around accidental-like on a breeze. But I, I think maybe it's both, maybe both happening at the same time” (Zemeckis, 1994).

The US pragmatist philosopher G. H. Mead (Mead, 2002) noted in his essay *The Philosophy of the Present* that each new experience enables us to reconsider our previous experiences as we continually form our consciousness and identity as we move into the future. It is only in the distant future that we can look back with some certainty and draw a coherent thread through our experience. It is this certainty that is prevalent in many business autobiographies and case studies. What I am drawing attention to in these examples of literature is the lived presence as people try to understand their situation in relation to their past, both being mouldable, as events unfold. In relating to the sailor's paradoxical dilemma of being caught up in events, but at the same time detaching oneself, we no longer say ‘how could they have been so stupid to have done that ...’, because we share a sense of the pain, sadness, achievement and consequence. Stacey, in commenting on complexity and organisational dynamics, defines paradox as:

... a state in which two diametrically opposing forces/ideas are simultaneously present, neither of which can ever be resolved or eliminated. There is, therefore, no possibility of a choice between the opposing poles or of locating them in different spheres. Instead, what is required is a different kind of logic, such as the dialectical logic (Stacey, 2006).

This description, although meaningful, lacks a connection with lived events that Mead describes, or any sense of emotion as people face such circumstances. One is caught in a bind; the more it is described with clear words and argument the more it loses its essence. And it is here that literature can make a contribution along the lines that Edgar Allan Poe has done with a short story of a sailor's plight.

I will continue with this theme to explore how literature can illustrate a woven connection between the reader and the characters of the plot in order to develop a sense that we as readers share a developing stake in the dilemma and opportunity of those involved.

Interaction between the text and reader/audience

The next perspective I would like to take is the relationship between the author (or actors) and the reader (or audience), not as separate entities but as part of a common social process. In management literature on leadership and learning much is spoken of systems thinking (Jackson, 2003; Seddon, 2008; Senge, 1990) to draw attention to the complexities of the wider stage beyond the traditional ideas of cause and effect. However, there are some pervasive assumptions associated with systems thinking namely that the agent sits isolated

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beyond the boundaries of the system in some privileged position. This is in contrast to being immersed in the melee of the on-going endeavour, with the individual both affecting and being affected by the actions as others (Stacey et al., 2000). In the next example I pay attention to these dynamics in ways that directly affect us, the reader, in this process.

In Shakespeare's *Tempest* we arrive at the epilogue having come to understand and live with Prospero's power as he seeks to control those around him. It is only in understanding this that we can now come to appreciate the importance of his plea to us, the audience, that he should now be relieved of his magic powers and to return to his dukedom in Milan. But we also see his power is not absolute but is intertwined in the activities and thoughts of others, for example Miranda's hold over him as his beloved daughter. In other words, power is figurational through the activities and interests of others in a way which becomes clear during the progress of the play. Just as we saw that gift exchange is not a zero sum game, here power is expressed as an ongoing figuration with histories, anticipations and choices to be made; but here the uncertainty is shared with the audience. Notice the following:

Tempest

Epilogue, spoken by Prospero

Now my charms are all overthrown,
And what strength I have's mine own,
Which is most faint: now, 'tis true,
I must be here confined by you,
Or sent to Naples. Let me not, (5)
Since I have my dukedom got
And pardon'd the deceiver, dwell
In this bare island by your spell;
But release me from my bands
With the help of your good hands. (10)
Gentle breath of yours my sails
Must fill, or else my project fails,
Which was to please. Now I want
Spirits to enforce, art to enchant,
And my ending is despair, (15)
Unless I be relieved by prayer,
Which pierces so that it assaults
Mercy itself and frees all faults.
As you from crimes would pardon'd be,
Let your indulgence set me free. (Exit, 20) (Shakespeare, 1611).

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In appealing directly to the audience and asking us to make a decision we now have a stake in the process, indeed the process has now reached us to take forward. We do so at a point whereby we understand the characters and how they relate to each other. In the dialogue we experience a shift in power and we can envisage a different future in which we have an explicit role to play.

Each time I have watched the play I remember feeling a sense of immediacy at this point and slight discomfort; I was no longer a viewer but a player. My sense of immediacy has been arrived at from a developing relationship with the characters; I care for some, dislike others, and am puzzled by many. And I am now imagining a possible future, Prospero in his Dukedom, Ariel free, Caliban still captive, Miranda's future with Ferdinand and my role in the demise of Prospero's power and magic. What responsibility do I have? Contrast this with the case study there is no appeal to me (us) in the game, the invitation of 'what would you do ...?' seems distant, logical and unemotional.

The epilogue invites us to consider our own movement and participation within the unfolding of events in ways that we find unexpected and unsettling. It also draws attention to the shifting nature of power relations and how we become moved by others. We are not indulging in abstract, unconnected clarity of thought. There are important invitations in considering our own involvement that have parallels with leadership and the power relations of which we are all part, not as separate entities, but enmeshed as both actor and audience member. Here leadership is not a one way street between the leader and the led; instead we notice how the leader is influenced as well as influencing the interactions of which have led to the crucial and transformative part of the play. And in doing so adds to the debate of authentic leadership and followership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Crippen, 2012) by exploring relationships as inter-dependent processes in which we all have a stake.

Connecting themes

When I think of my career I can recall many times of profound doubt and uncertainty, ranging from decisions I was part of, others less so, sticking with a plan, taking another route, reacting to events and listening to advice; but talk of such feelings were marginalised, more often self-censored. Sims (Sims, 2003) discusses this from a different angle, that of vulnerability, particularly for the middle manager whose own story is often trampled upon by senior managers and undermined by subordinates. What I am pointing to is the experience of doubt and vulnerability in literature and how this offers a way to explore our own similar feelings in useful ways, not as atomic clips, but as temporally joined narratives from which we can gain meaning. In this way the developing leader can give voice to their own story in the provisional context of others.

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Doubt is not a subject often discussed in the management writing (Chia & Holt, 2008; Hawkins & Edwards, 2013; B. Jackson, 1996). Perhaps doubt is seen as a weakness? All three examples address doubt in different ways. Consider the mariner in *Descent into the Maelstrom*, the sailor's story focuses on doubt at a point where he has nothing more to lose, his narration is the coming to terms and making sense of his doubt between making the choice that he does. With Prospero the way that he speaks to us, the audience, speaks of doubt as he is uncertain as to the decision we might come to and how events might unfold for him; a doubt that many of us share as we make an important presentation or seek to convince someone at a meeting. But it is Nestor's tone of voice that I find the most interesting. On the one hand Nestor speaks with confidence and clarity, but this is fragile and masks deep concern over Antilochus' chances of success and the consequences of failure. A more attentive discussion of the dynamics between conviction and doubt offers the opportunity to explore power and how decisions are taken.

Moving beyond the traditional management writing towards an ethnographic approach to uncertainty and faith in contemporary society Pelkmans (Pelkmans, 2013) makes the point that doubt is an essential feature that underlies and energizes much of human thought and action. However, to explore this one must 'pay attention to the temporal dimension, and to explore how hope, belief, doubt and disillusionment may over time feed into and give way to each other' (Ibid, p4&5). But to talk of doubt is tricky with a tendency to 'vanish with articulation', a point I made earlier with the concept of paradox. Pelkmans also explains the importance of doubt, particularly within the practice of academia as without it one can't move beyond one's own habitual ideas, assumptions and truths. It is also essentially discomfiting, a view shared by Melvin Pollner (Pollner, 1991) of his reflections on the missed opportunity of reflexivity in ethnomethodology when he states '... an "unsettling" i.e. an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality. It is the antithesis of "settling down"'. Bloch also points to the social process of doubt, in that it is not solely a lonely internal process. It is a part of the dialogic process that stimulates movement of thought (Bloch, 2013), a process that can span years if not decades that can come to incite further thought and investigation (Driessen, 2013). Doubt is an essential prompt that enables critical reflexivity, and it is the separation between the observed and observer of many case studies that plays down doubt and those multiple avenues and possibilities that fleetingly emerge and close, both in our own mind and that of the characters, nudging us straightforwardly towards one side of the argument.

Creating our own literature

I would now like to turn to the act of creating our own literature as a way of exploring our own leadership. The process of writing is not solely an act of making an account of the events and facts. To convey a sense in which the reader can take part is a struggle between

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what to include and what not, and it is a tension that cannot be settled. It defies settlement because of the involvement of the reader's imagination as to how they will come to relate to what has been said. In other words, there needs to be enough opportunity for the reader to take part and form their own provisional context; to take the part of Antilochus to the writer's Nestor in a way that overly descriptive account of events inhibits. Another perspective of writing comes from Van Maanen (Van Maanen, 2006) in his paper reflecting on his research career in ethnography. In introducing the notion of 'textcraft' (p14) to refer to the intensive labour of writing that is rarely discussed I am commenting on the uncritical examination of 'textcraft' he makes the following point 'As such, it suppresses the social and contextual aspects of writing that includes reading others, discussing our ideas of content and styles with colleagues, the various shaping roles that are played by critics, reviewers and friends, ... and others in a language whose grammar, tone, voice, genre and figures of speech literally encode collectively' (Van Maanen, 2006). Nothing is isolated, from our influences of what we are writing about, how we imagine our argument and the engagement with our imagined reader. It is in this anticipated relationship with the reader that we have the opportunity and openness to imagine in a shared but provisional context the human feelings of doubt, risk and ambiguity.

I will now discuss the creation of our own literature in the context of action learning. In doing so I am not commenting on the quality of any participants' writing from a literary perspective. Pedler defines action learning as: "... the development of people in work organizations with action on their developmental problems ... It makes the task the vehicle for learning and has three main components – people, ... problems ... and the set of six or so colleagues who meet regularly to support and challenge each other and to learn" (Pedler, 1997). In other words it is an approach that enables people to address real world conflicting, paradoxical confusing problems they currently face and with the support and prompting of a learning set to help identify practical further steps that can be taken. This is a verbal process with notes taken of discussions. What I will draw attention to is the merit of writing and discussing short narratives as part of the action learning process so as to develop further what Raelin (Raelin, 2001) describes as the collective process of inquiry and critical reflective dialogue.

In addition to my own narrative based research involving a learning set I have also used writing narrative in workshops. These workshops have involved a variety of people from organisational development practitioners, to marketers, those in the digital economy and in finance. In convening these workshops people have been invited to bring a narrative of a few hundred words with them or to write one at the session. Some people take to this enthusiastically, others are more wary, perhaps drawing on negative memories of education. The only criteria that I stress are the following: it must be of a recent event; they must have had an active role; and, it needed to matter, by which they had something to gain or lose. As

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for style of writing this varied from person to person, from polished prose, poetry, a dialogue, a stream of consciousness, rough notes and so on. Here post hoc rationalisation has yet to fully dim the doubt, power relations between people, ambiguity and the multiple paths of interaction that could have taken place. One can use literature, for instance the examples I have drawn on, to notice dramatic qualities that distinguish a spatial account of events from the temporal flow of connected events, to enable the reader and author alike to envisage and live the experiences of emotion and logic. In the learning sets people read out their narratives and to notice what has not been noticed before in the interaction with others, a process that we call ‘dynamic punctuation’ (Warwick & Board, 2013). Those unnoticed assumptions that develop as part of a closed group dynamic become available for discussion in the reactions of others of the learning set, a group drawn from beyond the individuals closed group. In light of the reaction they receive they are encouraged to re-write their narrative, this time with additional discussion of the unnoticed.

Here they gain leadership insights to their own practice, not as individuals, but as part of a social process with greater understanding of taken for granted ways of working. And it is here they have leadership choices to affect the dynamic relationships that they are part of.

From this noticing a person can make choices about their practice, namely how they change the way they interact with others and the implications this has for how this in turn is responded to. Therefore this is not solely about an individual’s practice but a complex social dynamic of group noticing of the unnoticed social assumptions. This comes with person risk that needs to be considered and responded to in action or inaction as part of those social processes and the differing conversations this elicits. This is a risk that can only be mitigated by the individual, not so much a priori, but in the lived presence, thus enlivening the process of noticing and reflexivity. It is this that can be the subject for further narrative writing, again written close to the point of happening that can be taken back to the learning set for further conversation. Over a number of months or years a number of worked and reworked narratives are developed allowing a process of meta-reflexivity to consider one’s overall leadership development, both in terms of how one would explain this to oneself but also as part of a social process amongst the community of which one is part. Working with literature, such as the examples I have used, serves as a stylistic catalyst that enables a person to pay attention to the temporal, the changing of events and those ambiguous multiple possibilities that exist in the moment of happening. This might include modest changes to working practices or something more fundamental, all of which have risks that need to be considered in the process of events rolling out. These new practices, or changes in the social complexity, incite noticing and further conversations with others.

In one learning group that I facilitated we discussed this process of writing, reading it aloud and working with the ideas; here are some of the comments I captured on my voice recorder:

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- ‘I found it completely fascinating ... the relationship between thought, writing and the people here today’.
- ‘I think the social process definitely helped because I got feedback that I probably wouldn’t have thought of on my own. There is only so much you can work out by yourself, however long you think about it’.
- ‘I found the process of being met, my story being understood and response at an emotional and intellectual level was important for me. ... I understood the essence, a lot was washed away, and there was something really significant’.
- ‘There was so much going on in the tiniest of interaction’.

So what might a narrative look like? The following is a short narrative of mine from a series that spanned a two year period. It is of my involvement in a Government taskforce having come to a point of agreement following some fraught conversations. Other narratives include the policy launch, strategy conversations as to how to implement the recommendations and how this was coming to affect the frontline staff.

The September Meeting. This next meeting was held in a rather tatty hotel near Euston Station in London. Carpets were deep green and the walls had dark wood panelling. Tables were arranged in a horseshoe and were very cramped, the chairs were very close and there was not much room to put papers and other items, this made me feel uncomfortable. Our new interim Chief Executive (the previous CEO had since retired), came in and sat next to me. Again, those with the most differences sat far away from each other.

Two of the Taskforce members, the two greatest protagonists, who were sitting far apart from each other, started to discuss an important, contentious and technical issue on the notification of potential organ donors. Mark, who had expressed considerable concern in previous meetings, said that he would now go along with the suggestion. Not only this, but he went further. Michael looked astonished and was about to say something when the Chairman stepped in to make sure the point was captured. Agreement had suddenly emerged unexpectedly.

The way that the Taskforce was established meant that there were official Taskforce members and those who were “in attendance”. I was in attendance. For most of the time this distinction was immaterial, but at other times it was acutely noticeable. And so it was at part of the September meeting when the Chairman went through the recommendations and asked the Taskforce members to clarify their agreement with them. This was important as it would be the Taskforce members that would have to justify

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their decisions and have to “sell” the ideas to their professional communities. But it did heighten the sense of inclusion and exclusion, and I was excluded. However, I can rationally see that this was a necessity. When the recommendations were agreed there was a sense of relief – I felt this, and I could tell the others did too (Warwick, 2010).

This narrative is of nothing particularly special, it is an ordinary meeting. However the process of working with the narrative in a group and of its redrafting did extenuate a number of features. This in turn enabled a further engagement with management discourse. This was one narrative that when taken with others allowed for a temporal exploration of policy and implementation with much of the confusion and sensemaking that goes with practice. Each narrative was written and re-drafted following conversations as part learning set process, with material being developed or edited out and used as a means to engage with wider management writing. The narratives taken together over the span of two years offered new insights into policymaking, but importantly from the confusing and sensemaking (Weick, 2012) activity of practice. The reader develops a sense of paradox and dilemma as I worked through a series of events, less as a detached observer and more as someone who can sense and experience the dilemmas I faced. And it was in the process of writing that I found it helpful to draw on the examples from literature that I have cited to think differently about paradox, conflict and power and how strategy is taken up in the particular.

In terms of next steps, I have two thoughts, one personal the other towards action learning. On a personal front the exercise of this paper has made me aware of a male bias in my reading, reflecting issues of identity. A personal goal is to explore these themes further with the work of female authors. With respect to action learning, next steps will include using the approach I have outlined in an action learning group, meeting regularly over, say a nine month period to work with people to develop their own narrative and learning.

Conclusion

Case studies in management are frequently used to explore complex social interactions. However, there is a tendency to emphasise a detachment between the observer and the observed. In doing this we reach for the rational explanation of events that stresses the logical. This is at the expense of the array of emotional and logical processes that come to affect the individual and their leadership as they influence and are being influenced as a temporal process. Much can be gained from literature as a reflexive prompt in action learning and research to encourage such noticing. In this temporal attention we develop additional insights into our unnoticed assumptions, leadership and knowledge: both of our practice and wider academic understanding.

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