Teaching Leadership Critically to MBAs: Experiences from Heaven and Hell

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**Abstract**  
In 2004, after a year’s leave, I started teaching a new Masters of Business Administration (MBA) subject called ‘Leadership and Change’ in what I hoped was a more critical way. In this article I explore my experiences of launching two versions of this subject—one in a full-time MBA and one in an Executive MBA programme. I describe what I did and what happened, including the obstacles encountered—in myself and the structures around me—how it felt and how students and the institution responded. By working experientially as well as critically, I aimed to create a space in which students could challenge their ways of thinking about leadership and all of us could experiment with different ways of ‘doing’ leadership in the group. The article is written with an emphasis on ‘practical’ reflexivity. By interweaving personal reflection with insights from critical theory, I make explicit the ‘me’ in this account—as power-holder, participant and observer; as mind, body and heart, dripping with and scoured by emotion at times. Neither pure narrative nor theoretical exploration, my desire is to excavate insight from points of intersection between critical theory and personal experience. **Key Words:** critical management; leadership; MBAs; pedagogy

**Introduction**

In the areas of Critical Management Studies (CMS) and critical management pedagogy, there is little attention to studying and teaching leadership critically. This article joins a small number of case studies of critical management pedagogy (e.g. Fenwick, 2005; Grey et al., 1996; Hagen et al., 2003), and extends that interest to the critical teaching of leadership. The study of leadership has been markedly uninterested in critical analysis (Knights and Willmott, 1992). Yet given leadership education is an ever-encroaching industry and most MBA programmes make tacit or explicit claims to teach it, can leadership benefit from a critical pedagogy and if so, how?

This article explores two experiences of teaching leadership critically on MBA programmes: one seemingly from heaven, the other from hell. As well as
introducing students to a more critical way of thinking about leadership, I was experiment- ing with a more critical way of operating. I wanted to be more consciously embodied (Sinclair, 2005a, b), to teach from a pedagogical place that was less educationally hierarchical (Hooks, 1994; Marshall, 1999; Reynolds, 1999) and to model and experiment with leadership as emergent and socially constituted in the classroom (Grint, 2000).

I begin this introduction with a personal narrative which sets out the circumstances of me wanting to teach differently. The second part provides a theoretical backdrop to my desires, exploring the criticality in my pedagogical intentions and approaches in the Leadership subject.

**Wanting to Teach Leadership Differently**

The article is, first and foremost, a story about my experiences. By putting a lot of myself in these accounts, I hope to capture the intense, embodied experiences of pedagogical innovation, including feelings of powerlessness and paranoia, nostalgia for a more conventional teaching regime, alongside moments of intoxication and pleasure (Swan, 2005). Aiming for ‘practical reflexivity’ (Cunliffe, 2002; also Czarniawska, 2001), I have sought to write the personal in a way which avoids confession or too defensive a securing of the self, while drawing on critical perspectives to make visible what was ‘going on’ at the level of systems, power and identity. I probe how I contributed to the heavenly and hellish teaching conditions and how the more searing experience has perhaps taught me most.

After 13 or so years at Melbourne Business School, I had built up a portfolio of MBA curriculum and research that was deemed to be successful though occupying a rather marginalized position in the School. By early 2000, I was looking elsewhere. The curriculum seemed aimed at making our students masters of technical knowledge and the educational process too often mimicked the worst aspects of corporate life: highly pressured, hierarchical in the way knowledge was treated and interaction was organized, instrumental in advancing the power and interests of an already privileged elite (Sinclair, 1995, 2000). There was also a contradiction underpinning the MBA hype: tough and feverishly relentless, it seemed to elicit a demeanour of obedience and an absence of critical thinking (Gabriel, 2005).

I had taken a year’s leave in 2003, before I began teaching this subject, studying Eastern philosophies and qualifying as a yoga teacher. These experiences changed the way I approached my business school teaching in profound ways, both deliberate and emergent. For example, in yoga, I had been exposed to different ‘ways of being’ a teacher, seeing the potential of voice, breath and bodies in mediating openness and learning (Sinclair, 2005a).

I was also interested in extending experiential work in the classroom. After attending an experientially-run ‘Master Class’ for teachers of leadership at the Kennedy School of Government (KSG), I gathered fresh courage to proceed with my new reflective and experiential leadership curriculum. I also saw at the KSG why this was difficult work and why, as a teacher, you needed to not do it alone. I resolved to work with Richard Searle, a colleague and executive teacher from Mt Eliza Business School (our organizations had recently merged) who had also attended the KSG programme. This was a bit of a first for me. Collaborative teaching was also not part
of the School culture (see Hagen et al., 2003) and I had colluded in the past with
the expectation that good teaching is the very heroic, self-reliant performance that
I had so often critiqued in leadership.

The new subject I developed is called Leadership and Change and the rest of this
article is about my experiences teaching this subject, first to an MBA group (as an
elective) and then to an EMBA group (as a required subject). I hoped, undoubtedly
naively, that it would be ‘transformational’—that I would be able to create a space in
which students could learn in a different way about themselves and leadership. The
article documents a kind of ‘parallel process’—of me seeking to provide leadership
and to change (myself and what I offer to students) at a time of stress, merger, lead-
ership turnover and pulls towards conservatism in my institution. The experiences
of teaching this new course in a different way became a personal ‘journey’ inter-
woven with ‘identity’ work (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Rose, 1989). Part purpose-
fully, part in reaction, I found myself redefining how I wanted to teach and who I
wanted to be in my institution.

Bringing Criticality to Leadership Teaching

Both my pedagogy and my commentary here are described as critical. What is ‘criti-
cal’ about my approach? There is now a substantial body of thinking designated as
Critical Management Studies or CMS (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Fournier and
Grey, 2000). CMS builds on and is part of a wider cross-disciplinary body of critical
writing in sociology, philosophy and feminism. As Fournier and Grey (2000) show
criticality in management studies is no single nor perhaps even necessarily coherent,
line. Yet the extent of critical management scholarship is now such that scholars
often preface their work with a concern about reproducing a new orthodoxy of ‘criti-
cality’, potentially as oppressive as those traditional approaches it seeks to challenge
(Grey et al., 1996).

In critical management pedagogy, there is also extensive discussion of
approaches (content of curricula and pedagogy) that can be broadly considered criti-
cal, and of the risks, impediments and opportunities in such teaching (Currie and
Knights, 2003; French and Grey, 1996; Perriton and Reynolds, 2004; Reynolds, 1999;
Simpson et al., 2000). This work draws on the pioneering work of Freire (1972) and
feminist educators such as Ellsworth (1989) and Luke and Gore (1992), who have
critiqued critical pedagogy and, in particular, challenged its claim to be emancipa-
tory and empowering. Reynolds (1999) summarizes four generally shared principles
of critical pedagogy including questioning the taken-for-granted assumptions in the
theory and practice of management; making explicit power and ideology in institu-
tional and societal practices; confronting claims of rationality and objectivity and
how privileged interests benefit from these claims; and finally working towards an
emancipatory ideal.

Knights and Willmott (1992) have noted that leadership seems particularly resist-
ant to critical interrogation. Indeed among the few articles on teaching manage-
ment critically, I have found none that focus on leadership. With leadership
occupying such a privileged place in management and executive education, it seems
important to consider how critical learning about leadership might be undertaken
and taught.
So how did I go about infusing criticality into the content and process of the MBA Leadership subject? Certainly, if there is such a thing as a pure critical leadership curriculum, I didn’t teach it. One of the reasons for explaining my history as I have, is to suggest that my critical pedagogical practice has been framed by longstanding interests in psychoanalysis, in psychodynamic understandings of groups, and in feminism, among other things.

My overall intent was to have students identify, reflect on and challenge leadership orthodoxy, including the normative value typically given to leadership itself. The curriculum was built around questions such as ‘is leadership a good thing?’; ‘who benefits from investment in leadership?’; ‘what are the purposes to which leadership is put?’ and ‘what is going on when there are calls for ‘leadership’?’ We investigate contradictions within leadership literature, claiming to be about change but rarely questioning the power relations which sustain leaders and their investment in the status quo, nor the instrumentalism and enslavement that often sits benignly beneath exhortations to engage in transformational leadership.

Students are introduced to critical ideas of power, beyond role and located in systemic relations, able to be mobilized by those at the bottom as well as the top of organizations, able to be exercised in resistance and disruption as well as through executive edicts. Participants usually start the course with expectations of learning how to be a better leader, and they expect me to tell them. Not immediately, but over the subsequent weeks, they begin questioning prior understandings of what is regarded as ‘natural’ and ‘good’ leadership. They are encouraged to critique popular prescriptions for leaders seeing that they are often built on gendered and racialized assumptions. Drawing on critical ideas about identity, we look at how the identity of ‘leader’ justifies and is supported by cultural narratives such as omnipotent heroism.

By the end, I want students to be appraising critically what is being offered as leadership in their workplaces and envisaging new options in how they might lead. In some instances this translates into becoming more personally ‘empowered’, seeing possibilities of exit, resistance or being courageous in naming oppressive institutional practices (Fletcher, 1999). Towards the end of the subject, we review a widely-cited Harvard Business Review article on leadership. Students recognize that though this might have been the sort of article most would have hungered for initially, its cookbook template offers less potential for deep learning than our classroom.

In terms of pedagogical process, I draw on experiential and psychodynamic methods. Experiential methods are not necessarily consistent with a critical approach, particularly when undertaken from an individualized and ‘therapeutic’ perspective, where the student can be seduced by a mirage of agency with the prospect of a privatized epiphany (Rose, 1996; Vince, 1996). However, as Reynolds argues ‘experiential methods can be used to illustrate alternative, more democratic social systems in microcosm’ (Reynolds, 1999: 175). I aim to equip students with ways of ‘reading’ power relations including those in the classroom: between myself as teacher and them, but also between privileged and other student subgroups in class, such as those from non-English speaking backgrounds. I reward students in class and in assessment for critical reflection (Reynolds, 1999) where they apply what they are learning to the interactions in class. What forms is leadership taking in the group? What effects does it have? Are there different spaces available for some members of the class to exercise particular forms of leadership? How do individuals, and we as a
group, disentangle and loosen ourselves from deeply entrenched leadership orthodoxies and what does this allow?

Teaching Leadership and Change

Both the MBA and EMBA classes were of similar size (around 40 participants) and I was coming to the completion of the MBA subject (over 12 weeks) as I was starting with the EMBA group. The first 10 sessions of the MBA subject were focused on introducing reflective and critical perspectives. The central section was a period of 90-five minute experiential sessions followed by a 90-minute de-brief (10 sessions in total). The students were divided into two ‘organizations’ consisting of 20 people and charged with identifying and carrying out a task (during the time allocated) which would help them learn about leadership. They were given some examples of what these tasks might be and some conditions—the group had to adopt an inclusive process, for example. In the experiential sessions, my colleague, Richard Searle, worked with me as an observer then as joint facilitator for the de-brief about what was going on and what we could learn about leadership. The final six sessions looked at values and spirituality in leadership, again inviting a critical perspective.

There were other features of this pedagogy that were distinctive. I moved both groups to a flat seminar room which was quite crowded, with no tables and chairs arranged in two horse-shoes. We were up close and it was difficult for students to take refuge in note-taking or hide behind desks. We could all see and almost touch each other. As Ellsworth (1989) suggests, there is nothing inherently democratic in this physical arrangement. On the other hand, it did seem important that the students could see each other, not just me, and this provided a symbolic rendering of how I expected learning to occur.

I put together a readings pack, not knowing how much opportunity I would have to introduce ‘content’. As it turned out, a lot of the articles in the pack seemed to disappear or at least manifest themselves intermittently in our discussion. I did not have ways of knowing whether articles and cases were being read or whether it mattered if they were not. In a sense we had more ‘case’ material than we could possibly work with in the class itself—gender dynamics, the role of emotion, the effects of structure (good and bad), collusion, submission and dominance, flights into fantasy and ‘the election’ of a dictator.

I could not prepare for class in the usual way, letting go of a pre-determined structure or a set of slides and relying on my own and Richard’s capacity to read what was going on and make something useful from it. Could we create a ‘good-enough’ container for learning (Dubouloy, 2004), despite apparent disregard for the course guide and absence of class structure? Each of the above features of the pedagogical environment had significant implications for me and my identity and authority as teacher/professor (discussed in depth below). I felt my structural authority dissipate and power relations between me, the students and the institution came into focus as the class process was ‘talked up’ in the discursive spaces in class and outside, in the institution.

I had an expectation that I would teach similar topics, in a similar pedagogy, to both groups. Yet, the two groups had a very different history and gestation and I failed to fully acknowledge this. There were also important structural differences
that I ignored as I prepared for the two subjects, but later emerged as important. These are summarized in Table 1 below. In conventionally measured terms of student evaluations, the MBA subject was a great success and the EMBA, a disaster.

*The MBA Experience*

Starting with the MBA group, it became clear from the students’ comments in class and to me, through their written work, and through my own sense of what was happening, that this subject became a powerful catalyst for learning. The students started to ‘see’ themselves, their histories and their habits with new eyes. They visibly experimented with different ways of behaving in the group: shutting up, talking honestly, asking others for help, seeing and committing to a bigger collective goal of group learning and supporting the risk-taking of their peers.

A mixture of part and full-time students, about half came straight from work and were ‘suited up’. Often in our program there is little contact between these two cohorts and each hold stereotypes about the other. Over the duration of the subject, stereotypes were named and worked through and relationships across the two groups became stronger. Similarly, in relations between men and women there seemed to be

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Some structural features of MBA and EMBA groups</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MBA subject and group</td>
<td>EMBA subject and group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An elective. Students self selected after viewing a video presentation on how subject would be taught. Came with warnings about the different approach</td>
<td>A required or compulsory subject in a program where no choice of subjects. Minimal pre-advice/information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Part of a longstanding MBA programme with less conventional electives part of offering</td>
<td>EMBA recently re-launched—much leadership effort involved in marketing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As a teacher I had a high level of autonomy and MBS left me to it—there was little surveillance and some trust—which suited me fine</td>
<td>Subject sat within a tightly co-ordinated structure with a high degree of surveillance by the program manager who was under a lot of pressure to make it work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students were mixed part and full-time students, about one third women and culturally diverse, academically confident and towards the end of their MBA</td>
<td>Students were older, all ‘full’-time senior managers with only three women and two participants of Asian background. More mixed academic backgrounds, some with PhDs, a few with no first degree</td>
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| MBA students were younger (average age 29) with limited power and few avenues for grievances  
  • only via their final evaluations  
  • not part of culture for students to make formal complaints | EMBA students had a lot of power, as the 2nd cohort in the re-launched programme. Much effort had gone into recruitment and gaining corporate support. MBS highly sensitive to discontent |
| Subject class time was 3 hours per week over 13 weeks of term | EMBA is offered in 4 × 4 week modules or residential intensives (one overseas) between which students return home |
| Experiential sessions were co-facilitated with Richard (not unimportantly, a man) | Experiential sessions were to be co-facilitated but subject was aborted before we got to this point |
a great deal of what felt like good work. In our early classes, men dominated discussion. However, and with support from theoretical content, gendered experiences became more discussable.\(^2\) During the experiential phase, for example, my co-facilitator offered the observation that the group with fewer women was being more easily dominated by a charismatic individual and that, in his experience, groups with fewer women struggled. This comment acted as a lightning rod initially drawing rebuffs from some of the men. However, quite quickly it opened a space for the women students to ‘come out’ about their experience of gender relations in the class. This provided a platform for a more meaningful and critical discussion of gender issues in leadership in class, in the School and in individual writing projects.

One male student spent the first few classes doing his routine: taking charge, smoothing over and summarizing. Through our process and feedback he started to see that another script was possible for him. The weight visibly lifted from his (and others’ shoulders) as he found out he could be more valuable to himself and the group by listening and offering his experience selectively. An Indian student came to see me, dropping his pilau lunch all over my office floor, as he thanked me. After being silent in the MBA programme to date, a door had opened and he now could not stop writing. One part-time student was ‘stuck’ for many of our early classes, visibly convinced that he had little to learn. After feedback in class and some difficult conversations with me, he had a similar watershed. The change in his work, written and in class, was astounding.

For me, the experience felt thrilling yet full of risk. The whole group became more ready to voice emotion. There was a general letting go of physical tightness mirroring a releasing of defences. I found myself loosening as we got underway, relying on trust, instinct and experience to ‘bring it off’. I dressed in a more informal way, became more expressive and less worried about how I looked. I found myself inhabiting the teaching space differently, less concerned to be the one who ‘knows’ and more trusting that sufficient and collective insights would emerge.

The MBA Leadership and Change subject was a highlight of my teaching career and I was deeply moved by the risks taken and the leaps of insight I saw. More powerful than the high ratings, was the evidence—in students’ work, in their class contributions and in their discussions with me—that this had been an educational experience with power, integrity and meaning for most participants.

The EMBA experience

Melbourne Business School has recently reintroduced its Executive MBA Programme, designed for more senior managers, some without a first degree but typically with more experience (10–15 years) than our MBAs. This was a premium-priced product, targeted to companies who were interested in fast-tracking high potential, upper middle managers.

When the EMBA was being re-introduced, I was involved in discussions but removed myself because I grew apprehensive about the structure that was being created. The elements of that structure had, I believe, a critical role to play in the unfolding of events. These included the content of curriculum; the pedagogical process; the expectations and power of the client (both the student and their sponsoring organizations who in some cases provided both paid leave to complete the programme and partial or full fee reimbursement); the membership (including
gender and racial makeup) of the group; the unfolding group dynamics and the management of these including formal and informal rituals, subcultures and so on.

It looked to me as if the EMBA structure too closely followed the MBA (Mintzberg, 2004), reflecting the functional interests of teaching faculty, rather than a more open analysis of what might be of value. I sensed we risked teaching what they, and their employers, said they wanted, not what, from an educational perspective, they might need.

The programme that evolved was, to my eyes, hellish: intensive and very content-orientated. Academic standards were upheld through ‘rigour’, which ended up meaning a gruelling timetable and assessment programme. Everything in my consulting work and research on leadership was suggesting to me that senior executives needed a different kind of space to explore ideas without the relentless pressure of their day-to-day work environments. I wanted them to have the freedom to learn, to see the bigger picture of what was going on in society, in organizations and in their own lives. I wanted them to discover critical thinking, to have a transformative experience, to see the world and their part in it in new ways. I now see there was a lot of projection in this dream, a lot of naivety too, but back at this stage I thought I could single-handedly and genially persuade these managers to relinquish every competitive, individualistic instinct they had honed in their lives and embrace a new way of being.

In the second year the programme ran, I was persuaded, probably flattered, into thinking that I had something to offer this group. I set aside my reservations and planned four introductory sessions with the group to introduce them to the features of how I wanted us to work together: reflexively, experientially, critically. Then a couple of months later in their final module, I would teach the full subject material.

I started teaching the EMBAs, as the MBA subject was completing. The EMBA teaching experience, in contrast, became the most difficult of my career. Why I paid insufficient attention to the group, their structural circumstances and where they were at is significant to this analysis. But before going there I would like to resume the story . . .

Preparing for the first introductory session, I felt great—open, warm, ready to give—singing along to my ‘chill’ music en route. I was dressed informally (no suit) and wanted to connect. I arranged for the group to be moved from their tiered lecture theatre, where they were allocated seats by name cards into a flat and inviting room with floor to ceiling windows along one side and seats more informally arranged. I smiled and welcomed them. I introduced myself and spent a few moments outlining some key values of the subject. I started to feel hostility in the room. Then I got them up and breathing for about three or four minutes. I talked a little more, writing these values on the whiteboard. Then I asked them to draw a picture of themselves. A couple groaned and a few just sat. I asked them to form into pairs to discuss not their pictures but how they had reacted to the task. Again there were a number who were just sitting, practising passive resistance.

They had re-convened less than a week before and this was the first they had heard of my sessions being squeezed into an already tightly-packed four-week residential schedule. They were also handed out an outline of my subject containing objectives, the content of the first four classes and some assessment requirements for them to keep a journal and read a biography in the intervening period between this and the final module. Unlike the outlines for other EMBA subjects which were in
standardized fonts, kept brief by bullet-pointing, my outline was longer and with discussion of teaching philosophy.

I asked the question ‘how did you experience our start?’ Stony silence. The hostility was palpable. I was openly attacked for just about everything—giving them work to do between modules or ‘breaching the contract’ (they had negotiated and had agreement that their EMBA work would start and finish with the modules—there would be no leakage into the surrounding periods). I was attacked for moving them to another room, for asking them how they experienced the start, for not introducing myself properly. One participant stood at the back of the room for the whole session. A number were visibly furious during the session and stormed out of the room at the end.

I, and my next three sessions with the group, became a focal point generating enormous anxiety and anger in the group. I was seen as creating a division in what had been a cohesive group. I was criticized for trying to force the group to ‘do yoga’ when they had already requested that they do some meditation with another presenter.

Over the next three sessions I came under pressure to offer more ‘content’. In many conversations with the programme director I was strongly advised ‘to not take them back to that first class’. I adjusted my planned schedule and removed some material such as a discussion of work and identity and some research on masculinities in leadership that I ordinarily present.

At the start of each class, tensions were visible. Chairs were in a horseshoe and there were jokes about why no-one would sit in the inner circle—closer to me. Each time I stopped talking at them, and asked them to do things, such as work in pairs, there were long, chilly silences. A few isolated voices supported these initiatives, but it became obvious that such votes of support were viewed by the rest of the group as a political act. Unforgivably and on a couple of occasions, I got locked into slanging matches with participants who attacked my credentials, the research base for what I was arguing and the legitimacy of the tasks I was proposing. For example, in the second session I introduced some research of mine on leaders’ first families and birth order. I asked them to discuss in pairs how their backgrounds and families might have influenced their approach to leadership. This exercise and others (e.g. journal-keeping and working with dreams) were seen as alternately ‘pop psychology’ and ‘high risk’. It is true that there were no formal support structures (coaching or counselling) built into the programme. While the exhausting pace of the programme was not seen as introducing any risks to participant’s physical or mental well-being, that I asked them to reflect on themselves and our experiences was seen as harmful.

Very quickly in this period, the programme director shifted into damage control. The views of more trusted participants were relayed to me with the implication that I should follow this advice. In the face of the client flexing their power, it felt like there was a substantial evacuation of educational authority. My confidence in the integrity of the content and my teaching approach became very shaky.

Sometime during the four-week period with them, two particularly high status participants went to the Dean with a complaint that I was acting illegally—without the qualifications to do what I was doing. The Dean reacted to the spectre of legal action and asked a colleague to investigate. The investigator came to me and I explained what I had done in the classroom and why. After our discussion, the report back to the Dean was that there was no basis for any concern.
I have offered some detail here to show the ways in which the client (drawing on their own power and the threat of legal action) the institution, and to some extent, I, corroborated. Through this episode, I became a container for assorted unprocessed anxieties the group was experiencing. I became a scapegoat who was irresponsibly threatening the group solidarity and the sanity of participants.

This is almost, but not quite, the end of the story. After the fourth session and equipped with some scathing feedback evaluations (as well as a few who were positive and expressed interest in seeing what happened next), the Programme Director and I met to discuss whether I should continue with the subject. As I interpreted our discussion, continuing would require me to revert to a more conventional, content-focused pedagogy which did not ask the group to reflect on its own behaviour. Despite my well-practised masochistic tendencies, I decided I did not want to continue on these terms and a letter was devised to explain that someone else would take the planned Leadership sessions in the next module.

A couple of disappointed participants then got in touch to ask whether there might be an opportunity to continue in some form. Six of the group attended a discussion during the lunchbreak. They included one of the few women in the group (another later joined us, making seven). Much of our hour was spent discussing what happened in the earlier module. I explained my philosophy in more detail and at the end people agreed they would like to meet again.

The four weekly sessions which ensued with this subgroup of six or seven offered a surprising resurrection. Very quickly the group demonstrated a desire to do some deeper personal work and to be open in a way that had been impossible in the larger group. One said that ‘you have encouraged us to take off our suits of steel’.

Another quiet participant volunteered:

the electric atmosphere of the first attempts and the commotion it caused showed me this was obviously powerful stuff … I have gone through life thinking I am vulnerable because of this or that, without ever really considering that we’re all in the same bloody boat. It’s what you do about your own vulnerability, and how you react to others’ vulnerability that is really important.

My relief that this group salvaged something from this difficult experience has perhaps allowed me to romanticize the value of our work together. As suggested by the quote above, some may have identified with my efforts to position myself differently or felt some responsibility for what happened. It wasn’t safe to reveal much about oneself in the larger class and students had felt compelled to ‘manage’ the identity they presented. Yet we were able to discuss and theorize this identity work as part of our four sessions.

So What Happened? Critical Readings

I wanted to help students see the structural and systemic bases of practices and performances like ‘leadership’ and to move to a deeper diagnosis of their organizational experiences as beyond ‘individual problems’. I wanted to introduce them to processes by which subjectivities are constructed and identities ‘regulated’ (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). And I wanted to be reflexive, modeling the approaches I was encouraging them to try. I set about fulfilling these ideas through the content of the curriculum, to the ways I physically, emotionally and conceptually prepared for class and interacted with students.
Yet this is not a conventional critical approach, if indeed there is such a thing. As described at the outset, I was seeking to not just introduce critical readings of, for example power, gender, emotion and leadership, but naming and working with them as they played out in our classes.

I have given these accounts in a raw and largely un-theorized way, though it will be clear that the way I have positioned myself and others, the discourses and narratives invoked, can themselves be the subject of analysis. On the other hand, I want to follow David Knights’ (2002) advice in the context of Foucault’s work, and resist appropriating some ‘nuggets’ of theory to advance my own purposes or rescue my ego after the battering of the EMBA experience.

At one level, these experiences of MBA teaching are comprehensible as manifestations of institutional and individual resistance to change. Why was one MBA group so much more resistant? Structural factors are important in accounting for the differential levels of resistance and structural power is important in understanding how resistance was exercised. The EMBA group had no choice, all subjects (including mine) were compulsory. Stripped of sources of workplace status, they were under intense pressure and none of this was being discussed. There was anxiety about how participation in this course would be evaluated by employers and over the 14 month duration, some participants lost jobs, others were moved sideways or expected to express gratitude by taking on bigger workloads and sacrificing already squeezed family time.

The EMBA group, though, had much more structural power in the institutional context than the MBAs. Partially because the re-launched EMBA was new, there was a failure to problematize the level of client power with resulting capitulation of academic authority. The history of marketing and recruitment effort made the School keen to placate participants and corporate sponsors, who had invested themselves, money and time in a conventional educational product. They weren’t about to join with me in critiquing the content or the means of the management information/knowledge transfer (Grey et al., 1996). With hindsight, I monumentally underestimated the impact of structural factors and I overestimated my capacity and agency to overcome these factors. Paradoxically, I reproduced a key fantasy of leadership, that leaders stand outside the power relations in which they are embedded (Gabriel, 1997; Meindl et al., 1985).

Yet the EMBA experience should not be caricatured as simply a triumph of institutionally-anchored resistance. There was power in my formal absence from the fourth module and in the group of EMBAs who left lunch with the big group, to walk across the courtyard and engage in non-core discussion with me.

This brings me to consider my own power. As described earlier, I have felt marginalized in the Business School, despite my professorial status, and have often begun classroom teaching from a position of authority that feels compromised by my gender, the ‘soft’ subject matter I am seen to teach and various floating stereotypes. These experiences and others further back in my life have resulted in several things: a slowness in recognizing the power I have, a discomfort with taking up what I see as high-handed or autocratic teaching positions; and a tendency for my classroom authority to feel fragile so that when I am strongly challenged, it becomes hard for me to hold my ground. Researchers on feminist pedagogy have noted the institutional and societal fears of powerful women that are effective in disciplining them from taking up power too eagerly (see Luke and Gore, 1972; Marshall, 1999). I have
adapted the way I teach to work explicitly with these conditions (see Sinclair, 2000, 2005a): the simultaneous rigidities and possibilities in gendered power relations, along with my own always-under-construction appetite for risk and capacity to endure failure and humiliation.

Turning to the EMBA experience, I was so focused on challenging the conventional pedagogical assumptions of the programme, that I failed to recognize the coercion in my invitation to ‘breathe’. In my intention to facilitate ‘transformation’, I paid insufficient attention to where participants were at and how I should adapt my ambitions accordingly. I failed to see that I was exercising power and that that power was perceived as arbitrary in an overly disciplined environment.

Recently—and this is work in progress—I have sought to recognize and make explicit my power in the classroom: the power to award marks and demand compliance alongside more tacit manoeuvres which result in students identifying an ‘Amanda-line’ and then obligingly giving that back to me. I explicitly teach about the power in resistance and subversion, about how power relations are constantly under construction and how some discourses are privileged in that construction. However, teaching it is one thing, encouraging classes to work with our own power relations, requires another order of trust and openness. And it was hard to see my power when I was feeling uniquely, devastatingly, powerless.

A related reading of the MBA and EMBA emphasizes that my teaching efforts were symbolic of difference, and I was brought into line by gendered disciplinary processes. In my experience, leadership is seen to be men’s knowledge and having a woman teach it puts power in the wrong hands. The participants were senior and powerful—already accustomed to thinking of themselves as leaders. Even coming into a classroom seemed to involve for them a moment of humiliation. They are surrendering to the authority of another (something they do not do often) and the person to whom they surrender needs to be seen as demonstrably potent as themselves.

Another reading of the experiences focuses on psychodynamics and learning: the anxiety levels, containers and holding possible in the two environments. In the MBA case, my methods provoked anxiety that I was able to contain with help and within a structure with which I was familiar. There was lower surveillance and more institutional trust of me, despite the fact that it was a new subject.

In the EMBA case, the same methods were a trigger for anxieties that lay present, circulating but largely unprocessed within a new and difficult structure (Roberts, 2002). There was anxiety about the price that was being paid (in financial and other terms); about academic tasks and standards; and pressure from employers and families about ‘taking time out’. The students had negotiated to keep the structure ‘according to contract’: EMBA work was confined to the four modules. My requirement of students to keep a journal and read a biography violated this. To me, this was a contract with the devil. It kept students safe behind boundaries that they anticipated and controlled. Because no additional anxiety was allowable, the ‘contract’ protected the group against learning in wider sense (Schein, 2002; Vince, 1996). When I challenged this agreement, it suited the group to locate badness onto me. It allowed a kind of splitting and projection—I became the problem—which offered a form of respite in these anxiety laden circumstances. The institution was the silent third party, willing to sacrifice me to catch the anger and frustration of the group.
What Happened for Me? Doing Identity Work

I had committed myself to being in the classroom in a different way. I did not want to be the font of knowledge (Raab, 1997). But I shouldn’t have been surprised to find myself attacked. A question for me then is why did I think the group would suddenly ‘see’ that the methods of learning to which they had already committed, were flawed? Why did I not see the pressure they were under, creating anxiety about their capacity to ‘survive’ this course? Why was I surprised when my pedagogy was attacked?

I like to be liked. In fact I want to be loved. On the other hand, I do not want to do simply what students said they wanted. I suspect my femaleness and my informality signalled vulnerability and perhaps fed an appetite for bullying that was there in the group and looking for a target. As you can imagine, I de-briefed a lot and took a lot of advice from the Programme Director. Characterized by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) as ‘intensive, remedial “identity work”’ (2002: 626), the challenge seemed to be to hold onto enough of my sense of competence to persist, yet feelings of shame made this difficult. When I had to make a decision about proceeding I was strongly drawn by the idea that I could ‘succeed’, that I could turn them around and have them love me. On the other hand, I knew that a lot of what had happened was structurally determined, and that I was not outside this structure.

Part of me thought I could do the pedagogical job differently by ‘being’ different. A critical perspective requires that we look beyond individual actors and identify the structural ways that pedagogical practice is disciplined. These include: institutional responses, student expectations and anxieties, one’s own fears of losing expertise, status, self. A critical perspective reminds that subjectivities and markers of identity such as gender, are never outside these forces. Taking up a different style of pedagogy creates ambiguities and intensifies identity work. I was caught up in the system I was seeking to challenge. I also found myself enacting a version of the heroic leadership performance—the individual seeking to transform the system—that I was intellectually committed to critique.

My very provision of an alternative pedagogical experience for students perhaps paradoxically reinforced the power and legitimacy of the mainstream teaching content and process (Fleming and Spicer, 2003). The more I was able to mount my critique of traditional MBA learning, the more effectively the status quo was maintained. The mere presence of my subjects in the programme gave the School a lustre of pluralistic tolerance, which might have repelled more deep and far-reaching change. Indeed there was evidence that the work I was doing was valuable to the School’s marketing but not taken up in its substance. Many students liked the fact that I was there but, in the end, did not avail themselves of my teaching.

Writing about these experiences has had a transgressive, occasionally shameful, feel: both relating the incidents and the manner in which I have done so. While I hope I have avoided the excesses of a confessional discourse, I believe it is through embodied, contextualized and critical accounts that new spaces for teaching leadership might be found.

Notes

1. As noted by Judi Marshall (1999), the word ‘teach’ is an unsatisfactory, but economical word for what occurs in the classroom. I don’t ‘teach’ leadership, though this is what some
students long for. Even if it were possible to do so, the intent of the subject is rather to encourage reflectiveness about desires to lead and desires to be delivered ‘the answer’ to leadership by an authority figure.

2. Part of the critically-informed learning was the class coming to an understanding that both men and women have gender. I introduced Connell’s idea of ‘hegemonic masculinities’ to underscore that men in leadership are also disciplined by stereotypically gendered expectations.

References


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