An Afternoon of Practical Criticism

Peter Armstrong (Chair), University of Leicester

Research Seminar, 2.30-6.30pm, Wednesday, 17th of November 2010
University of Leicester School of Management
501 Ken Edwards Building, University of Leicester

Context

In 1919, the great literary critic and linguist I. A. Richards devised one of the most influential undergraduate courses ever taught. His method of teaching literary criticism through the close analysis of particular texts proved so popular with the Cambridge undergraduates that his lectures repeatedly overflowed into the street and were applauded with cheers and stamping. Largely thought he agency of one of his students, F. R. Leavis, 'Cambridge English' ended forever the belles lettrist tradition whereby the appreciation of literature was held to be the exclusive province of the superior sensibility. Against this kind of socially exclusive pretension, Leavis insisted that literature could only be properly understood through the application of critical intelligence to the text itself, in which democratising sense it was accessible to all. Though yoked to moral preoccupations which few would find acceptable today, practical criticism as a method dominated the teaching of English for the next half century. In the process it destroyed a number of reputations which could not survive a close reading of the texts on which they were based, reputations which, in Leavis' words 'belonged more to the history of publicity that the history of literature'. Meanwhile, Richards' Practical Criticism, the text based on that pioneering course of 80 years ago, remains an important teaching resource having survived the passing of Leavisite criticism as a distinct school.

It is our belief that the social sciences of management stand in dire need of a similar approach, albeit one which dispenses with Leavis' narrow-minded authoritarianism. The aim is not censorship, but the subversion of a censorship and self-censorship which already exists. The young researcher today faces a situation in which the production of knowledge is dominated by reputations variously built on evidence-free prescription, on flat-earth empiricism or on flatulent and bloated 'theory', sometimes home-grown, more often imported and more often still, half-baked. The eminences in these fields of cultural production may be as much the product of what Bourdieu called 'professorial power' (and Leavis called 'flank-rubbing') as any qualities which their actual work may once have possessed. Certainly their current capacity to direct and constrain the effort of junior colleagues is so exercised. Examinerships, appointments committees, editorships and the advisory boards of grant-giving bodies and the managerial professions are used to favour loyalist pupils and infiltrate them into positions of influence. The result of this fissiparous, loosely structured but fundamentally authoritarian system is that the field of management research has become partitioned into a number of quasi-independent fiefdoms. Between them, there are long-running 'debates' whose inconclusiveness - and therefore continuity - is guaranteed by an imprecision of terminology, an inability to produce or criticise a logical argument, and an absence of recourse to evidence, sometimes combined with a principled avoidance of all three. Once they are up-and-running, debates of this kind can develop into fields of knowledge production in their own right, each with its own institutional embodiment and its own established reputations.
Within the enclaves of intellectual pretension created by these processes, the young researcher is under pressure to learn the outward gestures of enthusiastic conformity which all-too-frequently becomes inner motivation. This works to define the production of knowledge as the production of more of a particular same, acknowledging, in the process, the indebtedness to the particular authority which has laid down the template of that sameness. The outward signs of the process are a mass of inward-facing citations which further inflate the reputation of the authority at its centre, sometimes accompanied by more explicit, and so more excruciating, acts of homage in the text itself. It is all a long way from what research could or should be.

Since 'critical management' has so obviously been caught up these processes, and may even have originated within them, we intend to hold a conference devoted to a critical examination of the academic bases of academic authority. The rules governing the contributions are flexible, but are basically those of Richards' practical criticism. Texts which are influential in their particular fields of academic enquiry or managerial practice are to be subject to a detailed examination in respect of the arguments they make, the evidence, or the representation of previous scholarship on which they are based and the validity of their claims to have made important and original contributions. What is to be scrutinised, in other words, are the standards of scholarship which are being implicitly promulgated through the current influence-networks of managerial social science.

This basic format may be varied at the discretion of the critic and according to the case in point. The examination may be extended to a number of works of a particular authority, or even a whole corpus. Critiques which extend beyond that to include the work of a whole school would probably need to be excluded, partly because that would preclude the detailed examination of particular texts and partly because it is at this point that criticism tends merge into the boundary disputes already described. It is intended that the end-product of the conference will be an edited book of readings devoted to the close examination of prominent texts. It will serve the purpose, not only of questioning the bases on which academic authority is presently exercised, but also of providing models of practical criticism with the object of encouraging students to practice it on their own account.

**Timetable**

2:30-2:45 - Welcome and Introduction (Peter Armstrong)

2:45-3:45 - Thomas Basbøll, Copenhagen Business School
*Armchair Anthropology: A Practical Critique of Karl Weick’s Analysis of Naskapi Hunting Practices*

3:45-4:45 – Armin Beverungen, Bristol Business School
*Core Labour Process Theory: Normal Science or Four-Stroke Internal Combustion Engine?*

4:45-5:00 - Break

5:00-6:00 – Susan Kinsey, Wolverhampton Business School
*Adding value and achieving legitimacy: Dave Ulrich and the HR ‘value proposition’*

6:00-6.30 – Closing Remarks
Armchair Anthropology: A Practical Critique of Karl Weick’s Analysis of Naskapi Hunting Practices

Karl Weick’s (1979) adaption of Omar K. Moore’s (1957) theory of scapulimancy (shoulder-blade divination) among the Naskapi, which construes it as randomized decision making, has been widely accepted by organization theorists as a “weird idea that works” (Sutton 2002). This paper shows that Weick’s reading exaggerates Moore’s own assessment of the effectiveness of the practice and, more importantly, ignores the fact that Moore’s theory has long been rejected by anthropologists. The received view on divination in organization theory must likewise be rejected, I argue, tracing the consequences for organizational theory and practice. Most importantly, we must not think of randomization as a substitute for (or even contribution to) decision making; rather, in line with established anthropological knowledge, divination must be understood as an important aspect of organizational change, especially during transitions through “liminal states”. Though divination does not “work” by randomizing the outcome of decision-making processes, and does not have conservational effects (as Weick claims and Moore merely proposes), it does make an important contribution to the maintenance of social order by mediating between ideological and phenomenological worlds. This interpretation follows current anthropological consensus and, interestingly, is better in line with the research interests of contemporary sensemaking scholars. Echoing Maitlis and Sonenshein’s (2010) call for greater integration of research results in the sensemaking tradition, I therefore conclude with a call for greater care in our conduct of the “scholarship of integration” (Boyer 1990). Weick’s very influential body of work on sensemaking in organizations in particular, I argue, is due for a critical reassessment that resembles that of Margaret Mead’s work in cultural anthropology, which was initiated by the work of Derek Freeman.

Core Labour Process Theory: Normal Science or Four-Stroke Internal Combustion Engine?

In this paper I propose to read core labour process theory symptomatically. From its initial articulation by Thompson (1989; 1990) and Edwards (1990), through various defences and refinements (e.g. Jaros, 2005; Smith and Thompson, 1999; Thompson and Smith, 2009), all the way through to its most recent reassertion (Edwards, 2010; Jaros, 2010; Thompson and Smith, 2010), we have witnessed a sustained attempt to establish a conceptual framework for the study of the labour process. Ackroyd (2009) considers this to successfully constitute a variant of “normal science”, whereas O’Doherty (2009) suggests rather ironically it should be understood as the “four-stroke internal combustion engine” of labour process theory. I propose to reread the original articulation of core theory in Thompson (1989; 1990), focusing specifically on the one axiom and four consequences that Thompson presents. I demonstrate two particular features of this invention of core theory: a) it stands in an undecided relationship to Marx, and Marxist studies of work and organisation; and b) it fails to define its object of study and consequently also its boundaries. It is the latter in particular that leaves core theory falling short of the conceptual framework that Thompson et al. so desperately seek to establish. This also accounts both for the explosion of empirical work in the name of labour process theory, and in particular Thompson’s continuous frame-work to contain this multiplicity of empirical data and constrain it within a core theory. Finally, the paper seeks to point to alternative directions for labour process theory, on the basis not of a definition of a conceptual framework or a core theory, but of pointing to the way in which labour process theory might be situated in a Marxist problematic and a critique of political economy. In short, I argue that core theory is neither a normal science nor a four-stroke internal combustion engine. Rather, contrary to O’Doherty (2009), core theory is not about forward movement, even if it leads to wreckage, but is rather a way of stalling the movement of labour process theory, of making it stand still.
Adding value and achieving legitimacy: Dave Ulrich and the HR ‘value proposition’

Since the early 1990’s, one of the most widely cited and influential figures in the Human Resource Management literature has been Dave Ulrich, Professor of Business at the University of Michigan, Editor of Human Resource Management Journal for nine years from 1990-1999, he has garnered plaudits for his work on the nature, purpose and orientation of the human resources (HR) function, and was voted Business Week’s ‘number one management educator’ in 2001. Ulrich’s 20 books, copious peer-reviewed and practitioner articles and book chapters have focused on the ‘transformation’ of HR from an ineffective, incompetent and costly value-sapping function (1998) into a ‘critical contributor to business success’ (Ulrich et al, 2009). The distinctiveness of his contribution lies in the prescriptions for HR practitioners on how they should organize themselves and determine their priorities, and specifically on how the function should create a plausible organizational identity for itself. Whilst HR professionals ‘must declare, live, and encourage moral principles’, more importantly they must deliver something of value (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005), and Ulrich’s home page declares that HR must ‘give value or give notice,’ (Ulrich, 2009). This ‘value proposition’ (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005) is not informed by the principles of an independently credible HR profession informed by its own standards and ethical codes, but on the successful articulation of the goals and values of HR’s ‘customer’, predominantly line managers, by which the contribution of HR will be measured.

Ulrich’s early work advocated ‘adding value’ to investors, customers and employees alike, and the function was charged with, among other roles, championing the interests of employees (Ulrich, 1997) and acting as conscience of the organization (Ulrich and Beatty, 2001). However, more recent writings have focused less on HR’s responsibility to employees than on serving more powerful masters. Targeting perhaps the lucrative corporate client his University home page proudly boasts that ‘His teaching and research addresses how to create an organization that adds value to customers and investors.’ (University of Michigan Faculty page, 2009). Ulrich’s current ‘value proposition’ suggests that HR’s pursuit of legitimacy is ill-served by a commitment to the developmental humanism or welfare orientations of traditional personnel management. The primary concern for the HR practitioner should be the pursuit of ‘strategic business alignment’ which will enable the HR function to be ‘poised for powerful strategic advantage’ (Ulrich and Brockbank, 2005).

The seductive appeal of Ulrich’s prescriptions may thus be explained by the hope it proffers the HR function for greater organizational legitimacy and influence. Perhaps not surprisingly given such lavish claims, Ulrich’s ideas appear to have received an enthusiastic welcome from the HR practitioner community. Awarded honorary doctorates and frequent ‘top guru’ and ‘most influential person’ awards by a range of practitioner publications, the World Federation of Personnel Managers presented him with an award for ‘lifetime contribution’ to the human resource profession’ in 2000. His ideas appear to have similarly seduced the HR practitioner bodies of the UK, US and Australia. The Australian Human Resources Institute (AHRI) operates a ‘Model of Excellence’ for the HR profession based on the work of Ulrich and Brockbank. Similarly the UK’s Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) has long championed the Ulrich model of the ‘Business Partnering’ HR function as a means to ‘adding value’ in organizations. Ulrich claims to have conducted research with over half of the Fortune 200, and in the UK was extolled in the magazine of the CIPD as the ‘father’ of the HR ‘transformation’ programme in the NHS (Arkin, 2006).

In this paper I aim to question Ulrich’s claims that strategic business alignment and the ‘value proposition’ offer the only or indeed the most desirable route by which the HR function might best determine its priorities and achieve greater organisational legitimacy and professional status.
Speakers

Thomas Basbøll is the resident writing consultant of the Department of Management, Politics and Philosophy at the Copenhagen Business School. In this capacity he supports the publishing efforts of the department’s researchers and PhD students, and serves as onsite writing coach. He also teaches organization and management from a (critical) sensemaking perspective in the Business Administration and Philosophy program. His current research focuses on the scholarly practices of organization theorists, especially those working in the sensemaking tradition and has recently published a practical critique of Karl Weick’s Sensemaking in Organizations called “Softly Constrained Imagination” in Culture and Organization 16 (2): 163-178.

Armin Beverungen works as Lecturer in Organisation Studies at Bristol Business School. He is a member of the editorial collective of ephemera: theory & politics in organization, co-editor of the new independent publisher MayFly Books, and executive member of the European Business Ethics Network UK. His PhD entitled Whither Marx in the Business School? is a history of critical studies of management, dealing also extensively with the fate of labour process theory.

Susan Kinsey is a Senior Lecturer in HRM at the University of Wolverhampton Business School. She joined HE after a career in HR and teaches on a range of HRM and OB modules. She is currently writing up her doctorate which is a discourse analytic study of the identity construction of local government HR practitioners’

Further Information

For further information please contact Peter Armstrong (pja9@leicester.ac.uk) or Stephen Dunne (s.dunne@le.ac.uk)