Creative writing as scholarly business research: the contribution of a literary literature

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the application of creative writing as both dissemination and method in its own right. It questions the tendency of business researchers to seek to illustrate objectivity through unsophisticated literary forms when presenting scholarly work. Going beyond this issue, the paper briefly explores the use of creative writing forms when conducting and disseminating scholarship, providing personal examples of the authors' work in this field. The presentation will take this further, with the performance of excerpts for consideration and discussion in conference.

Keywords: dissemination; paradigmatic writing; creative writing;

'You'll make stuff up? How is that still research? Sounds more like fiction, doesn't it? You'll end up with some kind of novel. I mean some of it simply won't be true' (Watson, 1995, p. 302).

INTRODUCTION

As scholars of management and organisation we thrive on paradox and irony. These and other linguistic tropes, not least metaphor, are often crucial to our understanding of the complexity, intersubjectivity and unpredictability of work-life. Arguably there is no richer way of communicating and thinking about organisational phenomena than by telling stories to each other. Throughout our lives we share ideas and learn from each other by experimenting with the ways that we can use different forms of language, whether written, spoken or symbolic. Because of this, it should not be surprising when students complain about being required to read long, impenetrable and jargon filled scholarly texts. Indeed we authors have come across a significant number who somehow manage to reach the end of their undergraduate studies without being exposed to a single refereed article. It may seem attractive to resort to superficially chatty textbooks that oversimply complex ideas, concepts, models, theories and research to make life easy for such apprentice scholars. However, this inevitably results in that dangerous phenomenon that results from too little knowledge – that of partial education and misplaced confidence based on a sort of multiple-choice testing syndrome. The particularly human way of addressing this seems to rely on story and model/theory interacting. As McCloskey

(p.6) suggested 'a story answers a model. But likewise a model answers a story'. In other words, we tend to use stories to think through and illustrate theories, while using theories to explain our stories.

Presenting scholarly work in a creatively challenging manner gives us the opportunity to present complex ideas in a readable and engaging format; telling stories (or using music, drama, verse or other artistic media) to frame messy ideas of practice in all the business disciplines, in much the same way as creative writers have sought to do since Homer's time. This paper and presentation introduce a few different examples from our own work – we don't want to spend lots of time talking *about* our attempts to write creatively in our disciplinary areas; rather we want to share some examples and discuss, with other conference participants, our actual contributions.

PHILOSOPHICAL ROOTS

Researchers have long debated the ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological assumptions made in all sorts of research, not only social investigation (although arguably *all* research tells us as much as about social norms and practices as the specific topics being studied). We propose to explore the implications of creative writing in *doing* research, especially in business (as a key arena of social investigation). Perhaps the crucial word here is *implications* (though others are also important) as this is clearly where insight trumps fact (whether or not such social facts exist anyway – a key ontological question in itself), or perhaps where 'fiction trumps fact' (Knight & Tsoukas, 2019, p. 183); implications cannot be deductive absolutes (such as *all humans are mammals and all mammals require oxygen to metabolise fuel from food, therefore all humans must have access to oxygenated air to survive*), rather they require insight, generally guided by incomplete empirical and theoretical uncertainties. Another way of presenting this argument, if rather more forcefully, was demonstrated by the marketing researcher Gummerson (2003, p.482), when asserting that 'all research is interpretative' if only because 'no ready-to-consume research results pop out like a soda can from a vending machine once we have inserted sufficient money and pushed the right button'.

Although we don't intend to over-focus on this philosophical debate, we do assume some level of familiarity with the key arguments. For example, seeing research as definable by paradigms or worldviews, represented by patterns of method has long been questioned by methodologists,

philosophers of science and/or science historians. One such historian of science, Thomas Kuhn (2012) argued that paradigms of science tend to reinforce such patterns of method and proscribe alternatives. Although serving to present an academic ideal of practice based on epistemological assumptions about rigour, it seems an almost inevitable human trait to resist any challenges to such assumptions and be suspicious of different paradigmatic possibilities.

An example of paradigmatic tension was highlighted by Czarniawska's (1998) influential work in the field. Czarniawska suggested that the importance and potential of narrative in organisation studies was challenged by the academic establishment because

> by the criteria of scientific (paradigmatic) knowledge, the knowledge carried by narratives is not very impressive. Formal logic rarely guides the reasoning [abductive reasoning being more likely than deductive or even inductive here – our observation], the level of abstraction is low, and the causal links may be established in a wholly arbitrary way' (1998, p.3).

Herein lies both the perceived weakness and, somewhat ironically, the strength of narrative-oriented research. If we see narratives as the stories people tell each other to share an experience, better understand each other, caution against some behaviours, recommend others or emphasise a moral point, they cannot hope to satisfy any need for objective and factual truth. Stories are selected, abbreviated, emphasised, elaborated, truncated and otherwise adapted to suit the purpose that we have for them. They simply do not fit the need for scientists to present an unquestioned ontological reality (they are far too subject to axiological bias). However, these very biases are so inherently a part of humanity that it would be foolish to ignore them; the insights offered about people are far richer than any carefully controlled experiment or questionnaire survey could ever hope to elicit. Indeed, such stories present a sort of intersubjective arena of humanity that could encourage us to question the *validity* of such epistemological concepts as logic, statistical reliability and, of course, validity itself.

Such a claim is likely to inspire controversy from many business researchers. Yet, most academics who engage in teaching as well as lecturing are likely to engage with this sort of narrative in supporting their students' learning. MBA students value the *war stories* of practitioner lecturers and

case studies are nothing more than carefully presented and controlled narratives to inspire debate and/or position theory in reality. Similarly, textbooks suggest novels, films and other art forms to do the same. A critical lens could frame this as a sort of an example of Orwellian doublethink (Orwell 1989), or at least a double standard that it is acceptable to use subjectively framed stories for students, while we experts somehow know better. The paradox here is that by believing we are simplifying a complex theory into a story, we are actually increasing its complexity as the very partiality of any narrative is likely to raise more questions, in an engaged audience, than it actually answers.

Another way of thinking about this relates to paradigmatic traditions of language. The convention of presenting research finding in third person passive voice is a key example of this. Perhaps this is the biggest single contributor to the clumsy nature of much such writing. Yet it does seem to be based on at best a sort of misunderstanding, at worst a strategy of exclusion and obfuscation. One possible explanation for the approach can be traced to the logical positivist movement. Language was a crucial factor for logical positivists, largely relating to the development of 'deductive formalisms' (Couvalis, 1997, p. 4) and the precise, or objective, use of 'descriptive terms in science' (1997, p. 26). The logical positivists' emphasis on language seems to be at least one reason that so many researchers perceive third person passive voice as objective in nature; anecdotally, colleagues and students often assert just this, claiming objectivity is *ensured* because this language style reduces personal bias. Exactly how this is the case is not clear and never stands up when asking such individuals how this actually works. There is another apparent irony here as logical positivists themselves have little or no problem with first person active per se, as was demonstrated by Carnap's (1936) paper that discussed their concerns with language. Largely written in first person active, it focuses on testability and meaning as key elements of scientific language rather than voice; indeed Carnap is comfortable sharing several personal views (*I believe…*) throughout the paper. To some extent at least, he is tacitly recognising an element of intersubjectivity in scholarly communication. There may be some potential merit in using passive voice when reporting observable and/or experimental phenomena, to avoid incautiously attributing causation, not so much to avoid clauses such as 'I/we manipulated variable A or B', but to avoid linking active tense with such causation

linguistically, so rather than 'A caused [or led to] B', we might write 'After A was manipulated, B could be observed'. However, such stylistic nuance does have relatively limited impact.

Next we shift our emphasis to more explicitly creative, or literary forms of scholarly writing in social research.

CREATIVE WRITING AS DISSEMINATION, ANALYSIS OR TRUTH

At the turn of the last century, the organisational sociologist Tony Watson (1995, 2000) was exploring the use of fiction in his own ethnographic work in organisations. He initially showed how there is a relatively fine line between anonymising study participants for ethical purposes and creating wholly fictional representations of phenomena and scenarios. He wasn't alone in doing this, given the role of ethnographic novels in various disciplines (Lancione, 2017), but it is certainly not common in business research. Other researchers, such as Caroline Ramsey (2011), in business education, and Maddock (2017), in accounting, have drawn on another type of creative writing, using poetry as 'a method for doing and writing inquiry' that involves readers, by allowing (perhaps encouraging) them to engage with research more creatively than is likely with traditionally formal academic writing.

As a relatively high-profile example of creative writing in business, Harvard Professor John Kotter collaborated with Holger Rathgeber (2005) to take his own research in leadership and organisational change to another level, publishing the bestselling fable 'Our Iceberg is Melting'. This aroused considerable interest for different reasons, not least the use of fiction to communicate a well-rehearsed scholarly position. Arguably, one of the key contributions of this short book was the interest and critique that it facilitated because of its unusual literary context in the largely conservative field of business research. It suggests that fictionalising an important topical issue can encourage everyone who reads it to look at that issue from a different perspective. This invites both a wider potential audience and a more literary aspect to any critique. For example, Reissner, Pagan, & Smith, (2011, p. 417) suggest 'two contrasting readings' of the fable. They suggest that although it offers a fairly clear message of Kotter's modernist orthodoxy regarding organisational change management, a more critical reading can turn this around by encouraging readers to question

> the idealistic representations of characters' roles and behaviours, and demonstrate how organisational actors may subvert the book's story and metaphoric representations to resist change… [therefore they argue that] story and metaphor can reinforce an author's underlying message, but that their ambiguity and interpretative flexibility always allow for unintended, dissenting and potentially subversive interpretations' (2011, p.317).

In this way, an explicitly non-factual presentation of ideas can invite readers to apply alternative perspectives and ask different things of a single text. In other words, fictional works can 'create a dialogue between different conceptions of a particular organizational reality' (Rhodes, 2001, p.52). Perhaps there is a tendency to treat celebrated scholarly texts as venerable accounts of truth that may discourage the sort of questioning that more *literary*, or even popular, literature can bring to the surface. For example, we could ask whether a painstakingly reported, rigorously empirical work on human ethics can illuminate the subject or inspire discussion and debate any more than celebrated literature such as Hugo's (2002) *Les Miserables*, Sophocles' (2005) *Antigone*, Eliot's (1922) *Wasteland* or even perhaps Martin's (1996) *Game of Thrones*. The third of these examples returns to the potential contribution of poetry to social and business scholarship.

VERSIFYING RESEARCH: LITERATURE AS LITERARY

The ethnographer Devika Chawla (2006) published a poem about/from her fieldwork that she later conceptualised as a 'sideways mystory which in its poetic form allowed me to shift from an interpreter of tales to a cultural critic who wants to uncover hidden truths and provoke the audience to think about complex realities and act' (2008, p.1). Chawla's mystory provides a reflexive and insightful view of scholarship within an integrated body of work. After a normal academic process involving thesis preparation and publication, creative writing offered an opportunity to further explore her scholarly persona very publicly by sharing her performance of fieldwork and, eventually (Chawla, 2008), analysing this process in a further written account of this experience. This additional reflexive account explores how Chawla (2008) 'continued to experience a level of discomfort in how I spoke for, with, and about my participants' during and after fieldwork. She explains how her reflexivity was 'too textual', as she struggled to 'bring the field alive as an organism, as a living breathing entity with colors, sounds, smells, and tones'. This is where creative writing, in this case poetry, can offer an alternative, or additional, voice to the researcher, or a sort of reflexively dialogical element (Ramsey,

2001). Rather than a simple outcome, the medium and process themselves offer the researcher an additional analytic tool. Writing, in whatever form, is a part of scholarly analysis and interpretation, giving voice to share with others but also to think and reflect more personally. Poetry is particularly strong here, as the poet necessarily thinks and emotes on paper (and, hopefully in performance) while constructing a new voice within poetic constraints. Arguably free verse is, by its free nature more constraining than traditional forms using couplets, alliterative emphasis or syllable limitations, as in the Haiku, where rules of form can, in themselves, contribute to alternative insight).

Chawla's rich and varied contributions represent a sort of methodological case-study of scholarship, research and self-identity that transcends the expected academic activity of dissecting and, to some extent, compartmentalising our research in often separable and separated units of dissemination. This trend has troublesome implications for research in itself. For example, one of the authors asked a PhD graduate about their research and was surprised that, they were explained that, as a thesis by publications, there was little to link the three papers to a single overall project. Perhaps creative writing could have helped reconsider this rather worrying conclusion to the student's work.

MAKING SENSE OF OUR SCHOLARSHIP BY CREATIVITY

The remainder of the paper presents the four authors' own work, with necessarily abbreviated excerpts from our own approaches to and reasons for engaging in creative writing. The examples represent a relatively broad church, illustrating the potential richness on offer to business scholars. Ankit (an early career academic) shows how imagining dramaturgical dialogue based on 1-2-1 interviews aids the phenomenological analysis of MBA learning while Nikki (a late-stage doctoral candidate) engages with the complex and sensitive nature of corporate leadership through fiction, using a stylised form of fable. Masha (an honours candidate) and Peter (a late-ish stage academic) both experiment with poetic forms. Masha uses verse to reflect on the challenges of methodological and disciplinary theory and research design while Peter ruminates on the implications of changes facing university employees resulting from the covid-19 pandemic.

Imagining Dramaturgical Dialogue about an MBA: Ankit

Imagine, for a moment, four MBAs in a café discussing their studies. While eavesdropping, I gradually concluded that some of these individuals were closer to becoming true *Masters* of Business Administration, while others still had a fair distance to travel first… actually this never happened. Rather I imagined it as part of my own PhD journey. Yes, I did interview all the discussants, but individually. The imagining was about how they might interact. As Watson (2000) puts it: "none of it actually happened. But it happens all the time."

Karolina: *It's all about making yourself vulnerable. You have to approach an MBA as if you know nothing. You've got to be completely open to learning, changing yourself.*

Kristine: *I agree with you, I'm just not as disciplined or open as I could be. I promise I'm all good intentions, but then it just drops off. I didn't make as much of it as I could have.*

Selina: *For me, it's the content; it drives your learning. But the Leadership course was so abstract. It's just theories, concepts, whatnot and all that reflection. It really didn't help me learn much.*

Karolina: *I understand when you say Leadership was abstract; and we kind of jumped in with both feet. But isn't that the beauty of it? This is where my thinking, my approach transformed.*

Salec: *Absolutely. Surely abstract thinking is the key to studying, isn't it Selina? I mean, before I learnt about adaptive leadership in class, I wouldn't, or couldn't, really listen to anyone at work or even at home! When I compare where I was ten years ago with where I am now, my work has completely changed. But I love it and this adaptive stuff really led my own personal changes.*

Kristine: *I sympathise too, Selina. I struggled to apply theory. OK, it's great in principle to be guided by theory, but managing is easier when you just follow tactile systems or processes.*

Selina: *That's my problem. I don't manage people, so I don't know how to apply MBA stuff. At work or any social situation, deciding which theory might or might not fit is my main concern.*

Salec: *Ah! I see your problem now, Selina. You can't really hope to learn about managing people just by sitting in a classroom. You need to do the job and study at the same time!*

Variation on a *three minute thesis* – starting a research proposal in verse: Maria (Masha)

I present a three-minute proposal to you; I've something to tell (please hear me through)
About my course on research methodology; you may know, I hail from psychology,
Majoring in marketing, but don't worry, I seek to omit the blurry,
Fussy jargon, when sharing my dilemma.

I find myself differentiating, speculating about why marketers are misinterpreting
The basics of self-image theory; we assert the ideal self is not often achievable,
So, are our messages to consumers receivable? Is this information commercially retrievable?
How can this *motivation* be perceivable?

Marketing focuses heavily on our surrounding social influences – and yes, this is true in some instances,
For example, if you are purchasing a car,
And you'd like to know, does it go far?
You may consult a friend, or look up the latest trend.
But Shruager and Schonemanm have something else to tell you, that is, they mainly argue
That social feedback from others does not influence their true view of you,
So why do consumers often become distracted,
Scrolling through and following influencers and celebrities, like Godly entities,
As if their perceptions of them will change, within a transactional exchange?

I wish to explore these discrepancies, and come out with some transparencies,
Incorporating both fields of view, will hopefully allow me to push through
And create a less frazzled, untravelled, line of thinking and thus, shrinking
Any misunderstandings.

Why did the Chicken cross the road? An organisational fable on adaption: Nikki

From her place on the top rung of the perch, Chicken looked around, the cage was under control, her two eggs had been laid for the day, she could relax. While waiting for the daily clean, Chicken brooded over her day. Wafts of manure scent floated up. The noise from all the other hens was deafening; egg production is hard work. The heat was becoming overwhelming as the day went on. With little to fill her afternoon, Chicken pondered.

From the other side of the road, the glow of another world beckoned and the sun whispered 'It's so warm and calm over here'; the green, green grass, whistled quietly in the breeze 'It's so soft and serene over here', butterflies flittered through the cosy outlook.

The cars roared past, fast and loud. Fumes filled the air, but in-between brief gaps in the traffic, a sweet scent floated over of freshly cut lawn, warming seeds. All Chicken's senses pulled her thoughts to the other side of the road.

Brought back to the cage with the overpowering squeal of the gate opening. Chicken watched below. She had been on the top rung now for six months, about as long as anyone else. Oh no. Oh no. The slaughterhouse truck had arrived. It might be her turn.

The trucks on the road were getting louder. Peak hour was approaching. It was now or never. Crossing the road was the stuff of legend; no one ever returned.

Slowly an idea formed deep within Chicken. Maybe she could lie in wait, maybe the risk of crossing the road was worth it to avoid the slaughter house – those stories were worse. Sneaking down from her rung, out through the gate, Chicken paused. Which story was true? Waiting for the traffic to slow as the peak passed, the sun was setting and the appeal faltering. Loud squawks and yelling alerted her to a flurry of activity behind her in the cage. Run Chicken run…

A chicken will only cross the road to get to the other side if the allure of the other side is greater than both the pain of staying where it is and the fear of crossing the road.

Losing collegiality: inhabiting a post-covid or post-scholarship university: Peter

Perhaps this speaks for itself as a personal reminiscence on many levels, inspired by early post-lockdown blues, returning to an underpopulated campus building.

Wandering through a grey empty corridor
Still cool with humming conditioned air.
Empty and dull, like a jumpy conspirator
Though no one's here to give suspicious stare
At someone out of place, intruding on peace…
No, not peace. Neither calm nor rest here.
More a dead place; worn out and lacking,
Like Dracule's coffin on an unrestful bier
Or a fearful boss terrified of cyberslacking.

I wonder, wandering woefully (a Young Turk
No more and never particularly clever).
'Can this place be reborn? How did it cease
its theoretical fusion and fissioning?'
Now, clones replace dishevelled misfits
unmoved by constant missioning and repositioning,
Explaining what *we* believe, value, teach,
research, and how to do it.

I recall bustling, buzzing through the corridor
News & views of students, the latest research...
Crossing another dimly lit carrefour,
I look around. Emptiness. An academic church
Where no one seeks a scholarly golden fleece
Anymore. Pause a while – wondering
Was it like this before? Did summer
(gloriously grey in here)
Leave a chilly, drab, joyless cavern slumbering
Awaiting, expecting another invigorating year.

Nostalgia is the enemy of almost every truth
(For we all know 'it never was how it was')
Like ironic use of William's 'forsooth'
(Inversed and messy double meaning), because
Memory is flawed like a rose-tinted eyepiece.
Even so, dim quietness pervades the building,
Doors uniform, sandblasted pyramidic swivels
The sounds and sights of Erwachsenenbildung
Long gone, like foliage stripped by budget hungry officials.

Is this mere summertime emptiness (holidays, conferences, fieldwork)
Or has the hum of enthusiasm left forever?

No more chance of scholarly inspiration
Through twilit shades of grey abdication.

SO WHAT? CONCLUDING REMARKS

In sharing our own examples of and insights into creative writing, we suggest a broadly tripartite value in business research. Representing a broadly hermeneutic approach to analysis, the act of writing within the constraints of a particular tradition offers researchers an alternative way of thinking beyond [but not instead of] following statistical precedent, laborious notetaking and/or painstaking coding of qualitative data. Both creative imagination and literary constraints can liberate analysis. For example, structuring thoughts into a sonnet, traditional fable or Haiku *forces* a paradoxical openness to ideas when finding novel ways to fit literary rules. This resonates with the experience of any researcher fitting their writing to the stylistic and length constraints of a publisher. Similarly, the challenge of fitting our own creative examples into one page, to satisfy ANZAM requirements here, forced a tightening that we all agree contributed to greater crispness and focus than the original pieces of work that we drew from.

Secondly, writing creatively can enable a powerful integration of the two elements of narrative and model/theory (McCloskey, 1990), sharing the author's interpretations and insights with diverse audiences. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, creative writing (like all the Arts) seeks to encourage readers to think for themselves. It may also foster discussion and debate reminiscent to the shared engagement in a schoolyard or on the factory floor socially reliving yesterday's drama. Faced with an authors' *and* study participants' interpretations of a phenomenon (the latter being conceptualised by Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, as a double hermeneutic – somewhat different to other conceptualisations of the term), readers can engage with the work as participants in their own right and construct their own interpretation of the whole rather messy business of social or organisational life as presented in the story. In this we could see this sort of engagement as a *triple* hermeneutic, further extending Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2014) two-fold version. Thus, we argue that whatever writing is shared with a readership, the most important stage is probably that which follows the sharing and the contribution made is more about the resultant discourse.

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