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Problematizing Management Learning and Education in the Development of a Critical Management Pedagogy

Jennifer Manning
Technological University Dublin, jennifer.manning@tudublin.ie

OPINION PIECE

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Critical Management Pedagogy**

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TU Dublin
jennifer.manning@tudublin.ie

In this piece, I try to answer Contu's (2018; 2020, p. 738) call for management scholars to embrace and work towards intellectual activism in business schools whereby she invites her readers "to add your 'two cents' by working in ways that participates in building a more progressive, equitable, freer, justice-centred world". This encouraged me to reflect on my role as a management educator in an Irish university whose research and socially conscious values are positioned in the critical management studies (CMS) field. I was guided by Meek (1987, p. vi) in her foreword to Freire and Donaldo (1987), to ask myself "what are we helping students learn?". To answer this, I problematize management learning and education in regard to perpetuating inequalities and offer a critical management pedagogy to help infuse management learning and education with a critical and socially conscious awareness.

The limited attention given to the consequences of the ideology of neoliberalism in management learning and education is noteworthy as higher education institutes are considered important sites of social mobility and crucial in developing critical thinking skills. Fotaki and Prasad's (2015) work finds that management educators rely on economic orthodoxy and we often omit critiques of neoliberal capitalism and the corresponding effects of structural inequality from our teaching. Likewise, Colombo's (2022) research finds that management education is based on the assumptions that humans are driven by self-interest, management academics and students are guided by instrumental rationality, and capitalist organising driving profit maximization is normal for business and the primary measurement of success, which results in unethical behaviours and the exacerbation of societal inequalities and ecological catastrophe. Critical management scholars Bristow et al. (2017) and Rhodes et al. (2018) argue that academia has become characterised by the neoliberal manifestations of

managerialism with modes of governance based on the belief in the unrivalled supremacy of markets as mechanisms for optimising performance and productivity, and ensuring that academic work maintains the neoliberal status quo by actually having no real political impact. Thus, the neoliberal audit culture in academia clashes with the older values of academic freedom and vocation, resulting in limited scholarly work that disrupts political consensus in the name of equality. The application of neoliberal ideas in a state-funded system (the Irish Higher Education system) has impacted the criticality of management teaching and learning. Breen (2017) notes that the problems afflicting management education are so deep and widespread that there is a cultural shift towards the belief that business schools are harmful to society, fostering self-interest, unethical and even illegal behaviour by graduates. And Parker (2018a; 2018b) offers a radical suggestion to shut down the business school, arguing that business schools are intellectually fraudulent places producing unreflective managers and fostering a culture of short-termism and greed. Capitalism is taught as a science, not an ideology, and is the assumed economic model that trumped all others, and taught in business schools as if this is the only way in which human life could be arranged. Parker (2018b) argues that current management education sells a utopia for the wealthy and powerful, a group that students are encouraged to imagine themselves joining, which perpetuates our global epoch of crises and uncertainty encouraging hyper-consumption and persistent anti-democratic practices at work resulting in environmental catastrophe and growing systematic inequalities within and between countries. Business schools need to question the relationship between neoliberal capitalism and our global epoch of crisis and uncertainty, and as management educators we must consider how we might inform this relationship.

Inspired by Freire's (1968; 1973) critical pedagogy, I developed a critical management module that was rooted in the everydayness of students' lived experiences in our epoch of global crises and uncertainty. My critical pedagogy understands management education to be political, ethical, humanistic, and even radical, and invites students to take seriously the history of exploitation and oppression reproduced by different forms of political economy, including capitalism, White heteropatriarchy, colonialism and imperialism, and the progressive struggles for freedom and equality (Contu, 2018). A critical management pedagogy challenges the politics of traditional management education, experiments with pedagogy and seeks to raise the critical consciousness of students (Perriton, 2007), and has as much to do with the process of the teaching as the content being taught (Breen, 2017). This

opens up space for academic freedom to unleash collaborative emancipatory power so as to contribute to new forms of thinking and organising which challenge systematic inequalities. It's a performative act of resistance by management educators (Jones et al., 2020), and a transformative learning pedagogical approach that provides students with a deeper epistemic experience that enables them to develop the toolkit to critically question how they perceive and act in the world (Dal Margo et al., 2020).

My critical management pedagogy is a dialogical classroom pedagogical approach that works with issues of difference and engages with 'otherness' such as gender, race, sexuality, disability, socio-economic and geographic location, etc. in an educational setting to unpack the ways in which people see themselves or are seen by others as 'other' (Perriton & Reynolds, 2018). I explicitly introduce and discuss the concepts of intersectionality, decoloniality, race, among others framed by critical theories, conjugated with social, economic and epistemic justice issues, to provide students with the reflexive capacity to understand their own positionalities and to inspire modes of affective perspective-taking. In these conversations we try to unpack the intersectionality of race, class, gender and sexuality without reducing difference to identity. The work of Zulfiqar and Prasad (2021) supports this, whereby they find that their critical reflexive pedagogical approach disrupts the prevailing status quo by compelling students to become witnesses of their own elite privilege and question it; this questioning moves students towards subverting oppressive hierarchies that maintain social and economic inequalities. Zembylas (2018) finds that foregrounding ourselves as well as the privileges and inequalities experienced by ourselves and others builds empathy in students. It is in this capacity to empathise with the lived experiences of others that pathways to create social change are laid. The second lens I take in my critical management pedagogy is to explore alternative organising; that is, the working and organising practices of those who are often marginalised in mainstream management discourse, for example, indigenous groups, community cooperatives, activist groups and social movements, among others, which provides students with insights into how these organisations work towards a positive social, economic or environmental change by fostering diverse values beyond neoliberal ones, such as well-being, equality, democracy, and sustainability.

This is an engaged scholarship that is my tool of resistance against the politics of knowledge production and distribution in mainstream management that is dominated by white, Western, male, neoliberal values, and a contribution to the development of critical praxis (Bell et al., 2019; Contu, 2020; Parker & Parker, 2017; Reedy & King, 2019).

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