

Brooke

Letter from Guest Editor of Students Making Sense

by Carole Brooke

Dear Readers,

It is with some trepidation but much pleasure and relief that I present this volume 'Students Making Sense' to you. It has been a long time in the making! I first explored the possibility of publishing some of my students' work back in 2001. During 2003 I had the vision for this issue and with support from the team at TAMARA began to develop the idea further.

I believe that this is a new endeavour - a journal issue of international refereed standing which comprises work written entirely by undergraduate students. I am very grateful to the folk at Tamara, especially David Boje, for their support and encouragement in pursuing this idea. Students rarely share their insights about their learning journey with a wider community. My hope is that it will be an encouragement to other students around the world wrestling with the concepts and language they encounter during their studies of postmodernism and organization. I also hope that it will be a useful and accessible 'way in' for others reading around the topic.

This issue contains work by students who followed the third year of the Management degree course at Lincoln University in England, UK. All the papers are the result of research which the students conducted as part of their assignment writing for the course. The modules from which this work was drawn include 'Critical Perspectives on Management' and 'Contemporary Issues in Management'. The poem by Juan Watterson is a lyrical parody of a Gilbert and Sullivan song. It was written as an additional fun piece and was not part of the assessment process. I liked it so much that I decided to share it with you by way of an introduction to the whole volume. It speaks to me of what we might call 'serious play'. This is followed by six full papers in this issue. A number of other papers were considered but fell at the final hurdle for a variety of reasons, some of

which were due to time constraints. A few of these un-included papers hold promise for a future publication and it may be that we return to these possibilities at some point in the future.

I would like to give a brief context to the papers that follow. The first and second papers give accounts of an evaluation of an organisation very familiar to many in the UK - 'the Co-Op'. Best known for its high street convenience stores, the Co-Operative movement in the UK has a long and interesting history. For a full account of this see the case study which I co-wrote for the Co-Operative Bank (downloadable from www.co-operativebankcasestudy.org.uk). In 2003 the students were asked by a local Co-Op to evaluate their overall image and to give feedback which would help them to reconsider how they present themselves, especially to younger customers. I encouraged the students to conduct their work in the form of a consultancy task but to explore the material using ideas and analytical tools from critical and postmodern theory. The objective in so doing was two-fold. It produced some novel perspectives for the client to consider, and it helped the students to 'ground' many somewhat abstract notions in a project that was very immediate and 'real' for them.

Having undertaken some group evaluation, the students were asked to write up their own accounts drawing in particular upon storytelling and metatheatre to highlight the reflexive nature of their learning process and to expand the dimensions of their evaluation. Two of these (by Charlotte McClelland and Nathan Millward) have been included in this issue. Charlotte's account uses storytelling to portray two very different experiences of shopping with the Co-Op. This then enables her to develop four different aspects of the image of the Co-Op which reflects the complex and sometimes contradictory nature

of operating a co-operatively owned organisation within a capitalist society. Her conclusions are somewhat sympathetic to the organisation and echo the difficulties that this revealed tension presents. This tension leads us neatly to the opening of Nathan's account.

Nathan Millward opens with a dramatic image of the Co-Op as a beast badly wounded during an aggressive capitalist crusade but he emphasises that this is just one perspective amongst many, depending on which route you take through the 'evidence'. He proceeds to adopt a two-voice device to conduct a debate between those who see co-operatives as out of touch with commercial reality and those who see it as a potential model for developing socially sustainable business for the long term. It is interesting to reflect on all of this a few years down the line. The steady rise in recent years of social enterprise and corporate social responsibility as key issues for organization must surely invite us once again to explore what the Co-Operative movement offers and to see what we can learn from its long history and experience.

The next three papers by Stefan, Pete and Juan are connected by the internal tensions they represent, characteristic of many students' stories when encountering both reflexive styles of learning and postmodern tools of analysis for the first time.

Stefan Pertz was inspired during 2005 through his assignment to explore the nature of the 'guru' in management education. He uses metaphor and religious imagery to evaluate the process that resulted in Tom Peters becoming his guru. Through de-centring the self, he attempts some critical reflexivity and draws conclusions about the nature of the making of a guru and the making of valued knowledge. Notably he finds that guru-ness resides not in the guru but in others. Thus, Peters becomes his 'fallen angel'. In deconstructing his own guru Stefan also finds that he has to deconstruct himself, something he did not anticipate at the start of the journey. Perhaps for this reason, he

includes a brief note to the reader about his own methodology.

Peter Sawyer's contribution emerged from work he conducted in 2004 to consider whether or not postmodernism had anything useful to offer the manager of today. In particular, he asks whether it can really be applied in practice. Like Nathan, Pete adopts a two-voice device, once again de-centring the self. He analyses some basic tenets and arguments of postmodernism, the sort of information that students are frequently introduced to, and we see him struggle to make sense of this for himself. He accepts the need to be critical of one's own assumptions but this also presents him with a practical dilemma. Where does the questioning end, and if reality is indeterminate anyway how can it be analysed? He finishes with a challenge to the reader about the authenticity of what he has written.

Juan Watterson's paper is the earliest piece to be produced in this series, being first written during 2001. Juan addresses a similar question to Pete's but does so in a very different way. Juan considers the idea that language and representation have always been used by management as tools to oppress and manipulate the workers. He, therefore, decides to explore the usefulness to managers of postmodern ideas through a lens of critique that owes something to the influence of Marx. Juan concludes that organizational theory and postmodernism have a symbiotic relationship. Translating postmodern ideas into management practice, he concludes, constitutes the privileging of a particular discourse by and in the service of one group (managers) at the possible expense of another (workers). No change there then!

The last paper, by Ben Walker, entitled 'A Critical day Out' is in the form of a comic strip. Completed in 2006, Ben's paper is based on the work he did for an assignment about the nature of the 'manager'. He illustrates a story of spending the day with various key characters (Derrida, Castaneda, Taylor and

Brooke

Kroc) during which they engage in dialogue and debate. Between chats on benches, trips to McDonalds and Waterstones bookshop, the group surface some very different opinions on the nature of organization and management. Despite the large amount of contradictory information revealed by his new friends, and the threat of a headache, Ben manages to reach a place of self-realisation. He concludes that the biggest challenge is not just to find your own place in the story but to know how to present it.

Well, that brings me to the end of my letter. I hope that you will find something of use and interest amongst this collection of works by students, all struggling to make sense of their own journeys. Above all, I hope you enjoy looking at this material and will keep visiting the TAMARA journal.

Best wishes,

Carole Brooke

At the time of writing Dr. Carole Brooke is Reader in Management at the Lincoln Business School, University of Lincoln, UK.