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Original

Availability:

This version is available <http://hdl.handle.net/11390/1197551> since 2021-02-03T22:52:37Z

Publisher:

Sinergie Italian Journal of Management

Published

DOI:

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Critical management education, “the role of the reader” and “new media literacy”: teaching management studies as a social practice

FRANCESCO CRISCI*

Abstract

Objectives. *This work investigates an urgent challenge of Management Education (ME) and business schools: “(re)considering the dichotomy between (i) what students learn and academics theorize and (ii) what professionals believe should constitute “useful knowledge” and “relevant skills”. The article aims to: (a) bring out the participatory dimension of learning processes by introducing a practice-based learning approach; (b) analyse this mechanism as a form of “intellectual activism” and “cultural emancipation and responsibility” (Critical Management Education).*

Methodology. *The case study, “an ethnography from the field” of a work practice, reconstructs a teaching experience in an undergraduate management course. The hypothesis is that the intertwining of theory and practice is a pedagogical problem related to the character of reflexivity in the ME: “management learning changes as it applies the principle of learning to itself”.*

Findings. *By combining narrative theories (textual cooperation) and linguistics studies (new media literacy), the participatory dimension of learning arises from the “dialogue” between the text produced by the course films and the constructs to reread management theories in a knowledge-based key. Management tools and economic paradigms come out “thoughtfully”, problematized through the same dimensions that characterize “the methodological tools for theorizing on ME as a practice, materially and historically situated”.*

Research limits. *The dynamics between practical and theoretical knowledge emerges in the perspective of the CME, only one of the possible expressions of critical pedagogy.*

Originality of the study. *The topic is addressed in terms of organisational learning (practice-based approach) with an interdisciplinary approach.*

Key words: *critical management education; practice-based learning; textual cooperation; new media literacy; participatory culture*

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1. Introduction and Theoretical Context

This work investigates one of the most pressing challenges in the evolution of Management Education (ME: Burgoyne, Reynolds 1997; Reynolds, Vince 2007; McLean 2006; Alvesson 2013) and in the transformation of the (dominant) organisational model of business schools (Khurana 2007; Anteby 2013; Bok 2013; Kennedy *et al.* 2015): “(re)consider” the debate on the alleged dichotomy between (i) what students learn and academics theorize and (ii) what professionals believe should constitute “useful knowledge” and “relevant skills”. Framing the phenomenon in a particular organizational learning perspective (Esterby-Smith *et al.* 1998, 2000; Esterby-Smith, Lyles 2011; Gherardi, Nicolini 2002; Gherardi 2009; Nicolini 2012; Gherardi 2017a, 2017b), the work hypothesis is that the intertwining of theoretical and practical knowledge is a pedagogical problem, which can be traced back to the character of reflexivity in the ME: “management learning changes as it applies the principle of learning to itself” Burgoyne, Reynolds 1997: p. 6). The article, a grounded-theory-based interpretive research (Alvesson, Sköldbberg 2009), has a dual function: (a) to bring out the participatory mechanism of learning processes by introducing a practice-based learning approach (Reynolds, Vince 2007; Gherardi 2009, 2017b; Kennedy *et al.* 2015); (b) to analyse this mechanism as a tangible manifestation of “intellectual activism” and “cultural emancipation and responsibility” in a Critical Management Education perspective (CME: Cunliffe *et al.* 2002; Cunliffe 2008; Grey *et al.* 1996; Burgoyne, Reynolds 1997; Reynolds 1998; Adler *et al.* 2007; Perriton, Reynolds 2004, 2018; Boje, Al Avkoubi 2009; Contu 2009).

The term practice is so pervasive that it could fuel some ambiguity when one approaches a perspective labeled *practice-based learning* to the investigation of the relationship between theory and practice in management studies. On the contrary, the term practice naturally links the two terms of the issue: training for students’ professional careers and the legitimacy of management knowledge in such professional contexts. First of all, in the evolution of ME, the ambiguity around the term practice is fueled by its static conception, when it is declined as a synonym of both “workplace” and “occupation or profession” (Gherardi, in Kennedy *et al.* 2015). Among other things, such a conception can produce a certain contradiction also in the perspective of critical pedagogy which risks accentuating, trivializing them, certain dualisms such as “worker vs. manager, reflection vs. experience, individual vs. organizational” (Fenwick 2005).

Moreover, this ambiguity has a foundation in the birth of the very model of business schools, starting from the United States (O’Connor, in Steyaert *et al.* 2016; Grey 2004; Anteby 2013; Bok 2013). These historical events date back to the period between the last quarter of the 19th and the first two decades of the 20th century (Bok 2013): the Wharton School, at the University of Pennsylvania, was founded in 1881; and between 1898 and 1913 at least twenty other universities created business schools, including the University of California, Berkeley, Northwestern, Michigan, Harvard, and Chicago. The modern history of business schools and the very evolution of the organizational model of the ME are focused on the issues of “professionalization” for management knowledge and the “institutionalization” of management as a scientific discipline, so that Khurana (2007) highlights how: “an institution created to legitimate management has become, through the abandonment of the professionalization project that provided its initial direction and impetus, a vehicle for the *delegitimation* of management” (p. 363).

The term practice in ME retains its pervasiveness and ambiguity even in the most recent debate: with the emergence of the journal *Academy of Management Learning and Education-AMLE* (in 2002); with the growing scientific interest in ME (for a review: Currie, Pandher 2013), the expansion of the topic in the UK, as well as outside the Anglo-Saxon context (e.g. in France: Harker *et al.* 2016; Hahn, Vignon 2019); with the publication of the “Carnegie Report” in 2011 (Steyaert *et al.* 2016); in the “guiding concepts” of the most current pedagogical approaches dealing with linking social sciences and ME (“experiential learning theory”, “psychodynamic theory”, “critical theory”, “sociomaterial” and, coincidentally, “practice-based approaches”: Reynolds, Vince 2007; Thomas, Seely Brown 2011; Kolb 2015; Steinberg, Down 2020). The interpretative perspective of this work is summarized by Silvia Gherardi (in Kennedy *et al.* 2015):

«What is silenced is the *situated nature of knowledge* and its organizational dimension. Can a profession be learned once and for all, and independently from the workplace where it will be practiced? (The professional knowledge) is anchored in the *sociomaterial relations of the workplace in a specific organization*. (...) A more dynamic and process-oriented concept of practice (i.e. as *practicing*) may be more productive. Moreover, when ‘practice’ is used as a synonym for ‘profession’, the tacit assumption behind the use of the expression (...) is that ‘*the profession*’ remains the same in different contexts of practice and in different organizations. This ambiguity become important when we must answer the question: what is learnt in the context of situated working practices, and how can teachers provide significant learning opportunities generating significant personal experiences? (...) In the passage *from knowledge to knowing*, we can focus on how becoming a professional (and teaching for it) is related to learning how to produce knowledge within a professional field and how a professional field validates its epistemic practices» (p. 175).

In line with Dewey’s classic definition of learning (“as a deliberately conducted practice”), according to Kolb (1984/2015), “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 49). In particular, the notion of “experiential learning” (Kolb 2015; Brandi, Elkjaer in Steyaert *et al.* 2016), developed in the context of philosophical pragmatism (à la Dewey) and in its variants (e.g. Lewin’s “action research”; Piaget’s constructivism; Vygotsky’s “proximal zone of development”; or Freire’s “experience in dialogue”), is the link between *practice-based learning* (as an operational approach) and CME (as a pedagogical perspective) (Reynolds, Vince 2004; Perriton, Reynolds 2004, 2018).

On the one hand, the tradition of pragmatism “brings important dimensions to practice theory when the issue is the complexities of contemporary management practice” (Gherardi, in Steyaert *et al.* 2016: p. 265), starting from the fact that “what makes the world of practice is not just sociocultural but also sociomaterial” (Fenwick in Steyaert *et al.* 2016; Fenwick *et al.* 2010). On the other hand, “critique in management education is sustained through a continuous desire to doubt or unsettle prevailing knowledge” (Gherardi, in Steyaert *et al.* 2016: p. 266), emphasizing one of the principles of critical pedagogy that an educator should never shirk from (Steinberg, Downcoming): presenting alternatives, bringing out and discussing different positions, proposing a multiplicity of points of reference, “without imposing any of them” (Freire, 1972; Freire, Macedo, 1995; Giroux, 2011; Cowden, Singh, 2013; Melling, Pilkington, 2018). So, in a *practice-based learning* approach, managerial knowledge is:

«an *epistemic object* (...), is ‘always in the making’ and the *texture of practices* in which it is produced is the symbolic space in which the negotiation of meanings and the influence of imagination of the future are exerted. (...) In the present, there is the need to make management teaching more meaningful for students to learn, and the quest for sense is grounded in an ethical stance that is not external to managerial practices, but is internal to the way in which sociomaterial collectives perform responsibility and care for the world. The challenge for a managerial experimentation with education is an open possibility to engage with ways to *de-naturalize* the world of management, as we know it, in order to keep it open practices to emerge and become institutionalized. In fact, when we consider educational practices in their emergence we become able to appreciate local experimentations and the autonomous bricolage in renewing academic work» (Gherardi, in Steyaert *et al.* 2016: p. 269-270).

The previous passage is related to the subject of this work: the relationship between *practice-based learning*, critical pedagogy and CME is declined through the specific “participatory” mechanism in learning processes. The next paragraph describes the structure of the educational project designed for an undergraduate course of management theories. From a methodological point of view, the case study is configured as “an ethnography (a tale) from the field” of a working practice (Czarniawska 1997; Gherardi 2012): in terms of course contents, management tools and economic paradigms emerge “thoughtfully”, problematized through the same dimensions that characterize “the methodological tools for theorizing on ME as a practice, materially and historically situated” (Gherardi, in Steyaert *et al.* 2016).

In the results section, combining narrative theories (the concept of *textual cooperation*: Eco 1994/2005) and linguistics studies (the *new media literacies*-NMLs: Jenkins *et al.* 2009; Gee 2004; Gee, Hayes 2011), the participatory mechanism comes out through the narrative logic that characterizes the educational project (Czarniawska 1997). The text “produced by the classroom” (the classroom discussion on the video materials of the course) “dialogues” with the text “produced

for the classroom” (the textbooks, dealt with as weekly “assignments”, in preparation for the lessons), taking the form of a “meta-text”: the classroom tries to bring out the properties of the categories (the different “constructs”) through which to “reread” management phenomena (theories and practices) in a knowledge-based perspective. The NMLs constitute the set of skills that students are called to exploit and develop in the interaction between the two “texts”: to a first approximation, the concept of participatory culture, “shifts the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement” (Jenkins 2006; Jenkins *et al.* 2009). In the conclusions, the concept of participatory culture is traced back to the logic of “intellectual activism” and “cultural emancipation and responsibility” that characterize the CME as *critical pedagogy*.

2. An experience in lecturing practices

The experience described in this work concerns an undergraduate course of management theories in an Italian university (9 CFU/ECTS). The relationship between learning objectives (a re-reading of management theories and economic paradigms in a knowledge-based perspective) and teaching philosophy (a “critical pedagogy” approach, declined in terms of CME) develops in a narrative perspective (Czarniawska 1997): the course itself can be interpreted as the construction of a “narrative text” (Echo 2004, 2005) which is the result of different stories collected in video format; the stories used draw from very different “genres”, such as journalistic inquiries, TED talk, documentaries and theatre performances (Strati 2007; Bell *et al.* 2019; Martin *et al.* 2018; Laurell *et al.* 2019; Starkey *et al.* 2019). The materials selected in this way form a “story”, a screenplay whose coherence is given by a specific plot and by the succession of topics dealt with within the course calendar; on the other hand, the need for story and narrative discourse (Eco 2004, 2005) influenced the selection of materials and particular events covering a period between the mid-19th century and the present day (on the historical approach in the ME: Bridgman *et al.* 2016, 2019; Cummings, Bridgman 2011, 2016; Tennent *et al.* 2019). What emerges is the development of a narrative text that is prepared to be interpreted and then used as a “meta-text” (Eco 2004) to address the dimensions and logical categories that allow (literally) a “rereading” of organizational and management phenomena in a knowledge-based perspective.

This paragraph describes the structure of the course in terms of: (i) how the “narrative text” was conceived, (ii) how its plot takes shape with respect to the narrative discourse, (iii) and how the themes and dimensions of analysis hold the overall narrative together. Figure 1 (taken from the syllabus of the course), provides a representation of this structure. In the upper part, the figure shows the scheduling of the lessons (three interventions per week for thirteen weeks of work), the succession of the six assignments, the division into four themes (A. Design & Social Movements, B. Design & Utopia, C. Design & Ethics, D. Design & Innovation) and as many dimensions of analysis (agency, structure, sociocultural context, competitive context). In the lower part of the figure the 14 videos (plus 2 videos used as introduction and conclusion) are presented in succession, resuming the sequence of assignments and drawing a sort of plot of the course. The note to the figure lists the compulsory course readings and the label that will be used in this text to identify the materials as sources (i.e.: Rullani, 1989, 2004a, 2004b). The (Handbook) label identifies the manual that students use in addition to the mandatory readings (students select the “reading” manual from a list of management texts provided to them at the beginning of the course).

The themes (social movements, utopia, ethics, innovation,) are the common thread around the concept of design in order to decline an idea of “socialmateriality” of a practice-based project (e.g.: Strati 2007): on the one hand, «(socio-material approaches) promote methods by which to recognize and trace the multifarious struggles, negotiations and accommodations whose effects constitute the ‘things’ in education: students, teachers, learning activities and spaces, knowledge representations such as texts, pedagogy, curriculum content, and so forth» (Fenwick *et al.* 2011: p. 2); on the other hand, «sociomaterial is a broad term adopted here to represent a range of theoretical approaches: STS (science and technology studies), including actor-network theory and its many ‘post’

development; 'new materialism' and posthuman analyses; geography and complexity theory-based resources» (Fenwick, in Steyaert *et al.* 2016: p. 251).

The objects ("artifacts") protagonists in the various stages of the story are: (1) a small prototyping card adopted by the world community of digital makers and (2) the first personal computer, made by one of the most innovative companies in the history of modern capitalism, to question the business models and theoretical oppositions around the dualism agency/structure; (3) the "construction" of a dam and the dramatic story of a man-made-disaster, an infrastructure to face the idea of social complexity; (4) an ancient clay cylinder, from one of the most prestigious museum collections in the world, to introduce the idea of "archaeology/biography of things"; (5) the events of a fabric and a garment (the blue jeans) that have accompanied the succession of industrial revolutions from a cultural point of view; (6) an iconic Italian city car and the stories of the great Italian coachbuilders (i.e., Pininfarina, Bertone, Michelotti, Zagato, Giugiaro) as examples of "hybrid assemblages of materials, ideas, symbols, desires, bodies, natural forces, etc.". (Fenwick 2005) in the evolution of industrial design. In the conclusion, the TED Talk by Neri Oxman, from MIT Media Lab, talks about "hybrid objects", "things" thought by crossing computational design, additive manufacturing, materials engineering and synthetic biology.

On the other hand, the four dimensions of analysis explicitly recall the contents of the course, with the dual purpose of providing a "guide" around the emergence of: (a) the assumptions and didactic choices; (b) the constructs and factors that characterize the re-reading of organizational and management phenomena in a knowledge-based key. In the first case, didactic choices are based on the idea that (Rullani 1989): management theory and practice cannot be separated; "theoretical representations" cannot be "deterministic" in nature but "experimentation" needs "a space of interpretative and innovative discretion"; the management theory that emerges is "historicized", i.e. "the abstract categories of theory can become more concrete if they are qualified and specified by the definition of the historical context in which the individual management problems are placed" (p. 14). Secondly, the same structure of the course brings into play the dimensions of analysis related to its contents: the morphogenesis of business models, through the subject-system-context scheme (Rullani, 1989); the dimensions that characterize knowledge as a productive factor (personal, social and proprietary dimension) and the functioning of the knowledge factory (the knowledge economy is a production chain economy, based on a multipliable and not scarce resource, whose propagation requires creative processes (Rullani 2004b)).

Introduction (Week 1). In which students become familiar with the contents of the course (the introduction to management theories and tools), with its logic (the CME), with the tools and methods used (the didactics), with the learning and evaluation methods. And in which, through the excerpt of the play "ITIS Galileo" by Marco Paolini (video #01, about 13') and with the parable of "Old-New-Education" (Rullani, 2004b), students become familiar with the idea that the ME issues in which they will be directly involved (critical pedagogy) are directly connected with the logic of the knowledge economy they are about to face (also high education systems are subject to theoretical experimentation and operational evolution of "unconventional" organizational models).

First episode (Assignment #01, Week 2 and 3). In which students address the topic of the "digital world" through two examples of investigative journalism (video #02 and #03 on digital manufacturing and Industry 4.0). In which, through the TED talk format (video #04 and #05), students discover the concept of community and the phenomenon of social movements: through the point of view of digital makers, starting from the entrepreneurial story of *Arduino*, a small digital prototyping board; reflecting on the functioning of social media algorithms and social networking. In which students become aware of what it means for social sciences to take an authentically inter/trans-disciplinary perspective to investigate phenomena such as new media. And in which, starting from phenomena that are only seemingly "new", the class begins to become familiar with the particular value drivers (effectiveness, multiplication and appropriation) that characterize knowledge as a productive factor.

Second episode (Assignment #02, week 4 and 5). In which students face the evolution of a business model (its *morphogenesis*: Rullani, 1989) through the story of Adriano Olivetti (video #06,

#07 and #08). In which students immerse themselves in a concept of ME as a learning process when they face Adriano's training path. And in which, from the dialectics used by Adriano to deal with the relationship between "theoretical knowledge" and "practical knowledge", an idea of experiential learning takes shape developing the peculiar business model of the "brick factory". In which students, when faced with the variety and variability of behaviour and content of Olivetti's managerial practices, begin to doubt the existence of a "one best way" and the myth of the standard company. In which, around the birth of "Programma 101", strong doubts are raised about how traditional theory deals, for example, with the themes of entrepreneurship, leadership, strategic analysis, innovation dynamics, organizational change processes (Handbook). In which, through documentaries, the importance of the historical perspective takes shape in the classroom. And in which students begin to become familiar with the idea that theories and practices of management and organizational studies are not "ready-to-use tools", and that they are phenomena that need to be "historicized/contextualized" (Rullani, 1989).

Third episode (Assignment #03, week 6 and 7). In which students address the issue of the competitive environment and the socio-cultural environment in a dialectical way with respect to the alleged dualism between agency and structure (value chain, business idea and strategic dimension: (Rullani, 1989)). In which the theme of territory (video #09) acts as a filter with respect to the umpteenth theoretical dualism between the concepts of society and community. In which students get used to an elusive concept, combined with the emergence of innovative business models and transitional economic paradigms. In which students, comparing stories, try to work out the meaning of the expression: "production of knowledge by means of knowledge" (Rullani, 2004b) and socialize with two relatively new concepts (coding and standards; sharing and experiences). In which the knowledge factory expresses its characteristics, bringing out the "machinery" through which knowledge is "transformed". In which students learn that "new" knowledge is combined in ways that are sometimes unexpected (or simply neglected by traditional theories (Handbook)) when cognitive machinery operates on the structure, the form, the flows and the relationships of "original" knowledge (Rullani, 2004a).

Fourth episode (Assignment #04, week 8 and 9). In which the classroom, facing "the story of Vajont" (video #10), the theatrical performance by Marco Paolini, openly confronts the theme of narration. In which the students, having examined the "machinery" of the knowledge factory, find themselves in the need to "read" the organizational and management phenomena "in action" (as processes). In which, in a clear way and confronted with the expression man-made disaster, students face the theme of the ethical dimension of management and organization studies (and the relationship between ethics and morality):

Scene (1). November, eighth week of class. The classroom is called to reason on the concept of man-made-disaster proposed by Barry A. Turner: "The analysis (of) the "social distribution of knowledge" on potential dangers (of a disaster) is not intended to be limited to identifying the mechanisms of forecasting (...). We are interested in a much less dramatic but more pervasive form of knowledge. Disasters happen because we do not know enough about the forces we are trying to dominate. The result is that energy is released at the wrong time, in the wrong place or with the wrong intensity. It becomes so essential to consider (also) the ways in which we acquire, distribute, and control information about the exploitation (of energy). Evidently, this is not only about the technical information available to scientists and engineers: (many disasters) are caused solely by administrative and social factors, or by a combination of technical and administrative factors. Those who hold power positions, those who direct the management and decision-making processes and those who control the administrative systems will realize that their actions inadvertently contribute to the causes of a disaster" (from the syllabus of the course).

Fifth episode (Assignment #05, week 10 and 11). In which students are called to combine the three stories (the "digital world", the "Olivetti's world" and the "story of Vajont"). In which the classroom becomes aware of the complexity of epistemological positions in management and organizational studies. And in which students understand that the structure of knowledge is a powerful "machinery" that (re)brings into play very different logical structures (Rullani, 2004a): causal data and laws, information and algorithms, representations and models, functions and rules, meanings and languages, meaning and practices. In which students deal with the variety of forms of

knowledge and its material bases (Rullani, 2004a): culture and aesthetics, body, personal skills, artifacts and symbols, analog and digital technologies, simulations, rules. In which students, facing the logistic dimension of the knowledge factory, realize that the distributive space of knowledge is (still) multilevel (Rullani, 2004a): interpersonal flows, local flows, metropolitan flows and global flows. And in which the classroom understands that market and hierarchy are not the only (traditional: (Handbook)) ways to manage interdependencies (relationships) in the cognitive chain (Rullani, 2004a): self-production, industrial secret, market, hierarchy, network of companies, territory, community, public sphere, gift.

Sixth episode (Assignment #06, week 12 and 13). In which, from the story about the “Cyrus cylinder” (video #11), the classroom becomes familiar with the concept of “archaeology of things”. In which the students face, by analogy, the history of industrial design as “history of things” (video #12, #13, #14 and #15). In which students definitely understand how “objects” can become “things” when they become part of a “cultural project”. In which students understand that a knowledge economy has always existed in the history of economic paradigms (Rullani, 2004b). And in which the classroom understands that by combining the characteristics of “knowledge as a productive factor” and the possible configurations of the “machinery” of the knowledge factory, plausible “theoretical frames” are produced. And in which, finally, the classroom realizes how it is possible to “redesign” the nature of historical paradigms in a knowledge-based perspective: in every historical moment, business models and organizational forms present themselves as “hybrids” between (Rullani, 2004a) traditional production, liberal capitalism, Fordism, widespread enterprise and communicative capitalism. In which, ultimately, students become aware of CME as a pedagogical perspective: every organizational and management phenomenon and every plausible “theoretical framework” can contribute to managerial knowledge (theoretical and practical).

3. Methodology

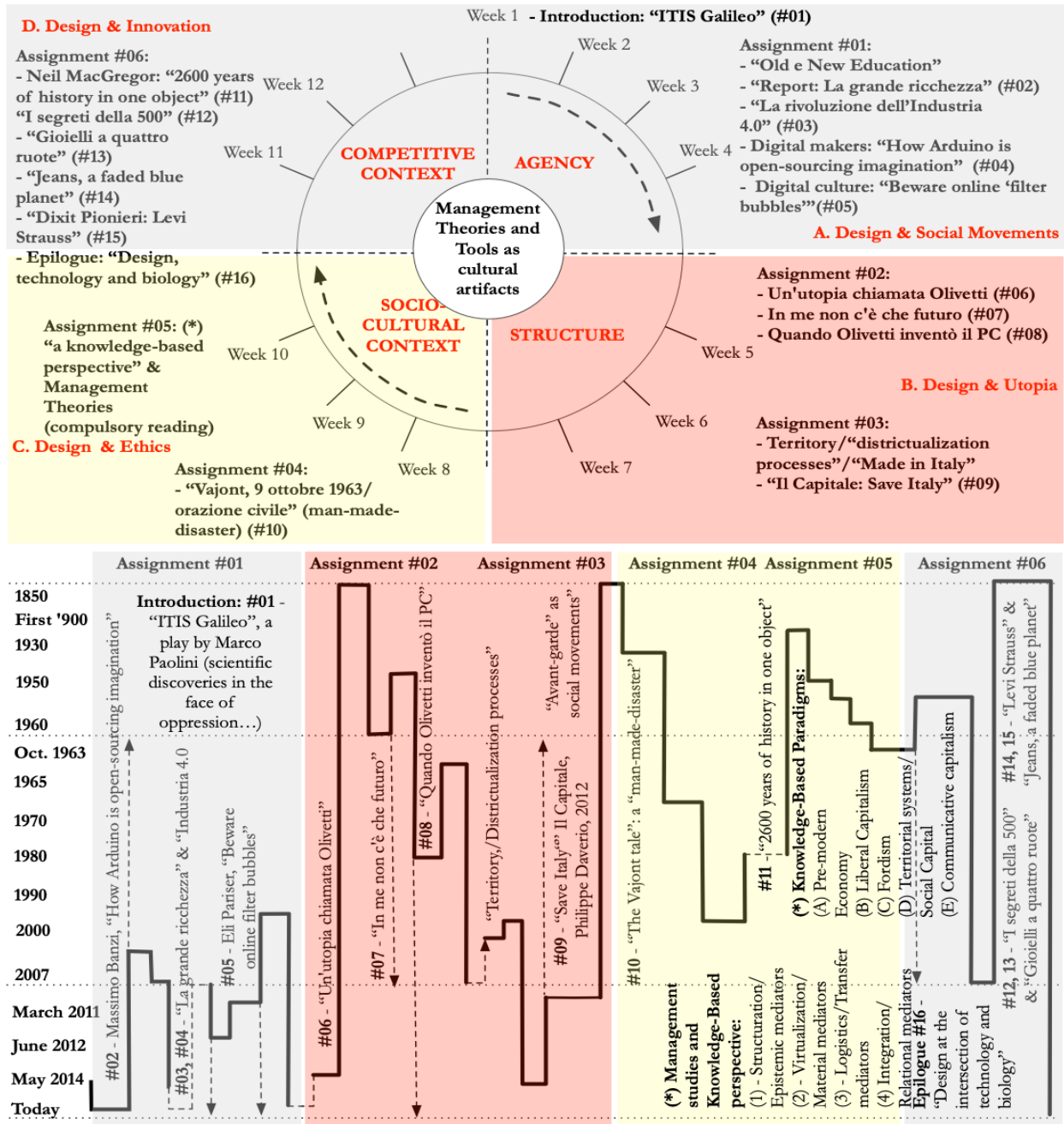
In order to “problematize” (Alvesson, Sandler 2011) the role of the pedagogical dimension in ME, the work takes on the form of a case study based on an “ethnography from the field” (on *autoethnography* in ME: O’Shea 2019; Tienari 2019) of a teaching experience as a working practice:

«(a) working practice is a collective activity undertaken in a particular place and at a particular time. It therefore assumes all the variability connected with the context and encloses it and makes it possible. It thus expresses a contextual rationality: that is, a form of action and practical reasoning applied to the work at hand, interactions with others, the setting and all the resources present in it (Gherardi 2012, p. 202).

Figure 1 provides a representation of the structure of the course: the research design, coherently with the perspective of the *grounded theory* (Glaser, Strauss 1967; Goulding 2002), reconstructs the logics that characterized its design. In fact, the teaching experience taken into consideration allows to investigate a particular empirical aspect which, in the language of the *grounded theory*, defines a *substantive theory*: the emergence of the participatory dimension in learning processes and the importance of the relationship between didactics and pedagogy in an education project. Considering learning processes as “social practices” emphasizes a fundamental structure, the “reflexivity” (Alvesson, Sköldböck 2009; in the ME: Hibbert 2012; Hardy, Tolhurst 2014; Dyer, Hurd 2016; Vince *et al.* 2018):

«Embedded in the management learning idea is the proposition that theory and practice are deeply intertwined - all practice ‘implements’ some theory or constructs practice out of it, and all theory actually or potentially shapes or creates reality through its practice. The continuous mutual influence of theory and practice is one description of the learning process itself, which surfaces another primary characteristic of management learning: its *reflexivity*. *Management learning changes as it applies the principle of learning to itself*» (Burgoyne e Reynolds 1997, p. 6).

Fig. 1: The structure and the plot of the course



(*) Catalogue materials:

RULLANI 2004a - Rullani E. (2004), *La fabbrica dell'immateriale* [The Knowledge Factory], Carocci, Roma

RULLANI 2004b - Rullani E. (2004), *L'economia della conoscenza* [The Knowledge Economy], Carocci, Roma

RULLANI 1989 - Rullani E. (1989), "La teoria dell'impresa: soggetti, sistemi, evoluzione. In Rispoli M. (ed.), *L'impresa industriale. Economia, tecnologia e management*, Il Mulino, Bologna (pp. 12-110).

HANDBOOK - A handbook of management studies freely selected by students (in Italian).

Source: from the syllabus of the course

This position is consistent with Margaret Archer's (1979/2014) method suggestion who, by introducing the notion of *morphogenesis* to investigate the change in education systems, reiterates this statement: «This is a statement about the need to acknowledge, to tackle and to combine *agency* and *structure* rather than conflating them» (2014, p. ix).

The *participatory culture*, borrowed from linguistics studies, emerges as *conceptual category*, a “bridge concept” in the theory building logic which characterizes the *grounded theory*. The *substantive theory* on the participatory dimension of learning processes (compared to a more general “education theory”) is based on the relationship between didactic and pedagogical choices: the first ones are attributable to the *practice-based learning* approach, whereby the principle of interpretative cooperation in narrative (Eco 2004, 2005) is approached to the *New Literacies Studies* (Gee 2004); the latter are associated with “intellectual activism” and “cultural emancipation and responsibility” and expressed in terms of CME.

4. Teaching Management Studies as a Social Practice

Scene (2). October, fifth week of class. The discussion in the classroom continues from the introduction of one of the videos related to assignment #02: “There was a moment, in the mid-1960s, when an Italian company had the opportunity to lead the world computer revolution, ten years before the “Boys of Silicon Valley”, by Steve Jobs and Bill Gates: a technological revolution that had its roots in a cultural and social revolution, in an industrial model conceived beyond socialism and capitalism, and that its promoter, Adriano Olivetti, had begun to experiment since the 1930s, in Ivrea, in the province of Turin. Olivetti had become the largest Italian company, with the greatest international commercial success, capable of covering one third of the world market in its sector: an atypical multinational with strong territorial roots, characterized by futuristic social policies, permanent training and cultural activities of international scope that were the secret of its commercial success and not the philanthropic or patronizing consequence of its profits. What was this entrepreneurial model, which also promoted an alternative model of society and which led to the threshold of the greatest industrial opportunity that Italy has ever had? (...)» (source: “In me non c’è che futuro”, see: figure 1, video #07).

The scene (2) is part of the story of the extraordinary entrepreneurial history of Olivetti of Camillo and Adriano. It is not (only) a case of *corporate social responsibility*. And it is not (only) a story of *family business*. The two parts of the film (“The origins of a model” and “The concrete community model”) allow to historically reconstruct the “morphogenesis” of an absolutely anomalous business model (Rullani, 1989). “Problematizing” the relationship between *agency* and *structure*, by introducing the subject/system dialectic and the relationship with the (competitive and socio-cultural) context, students see a different system of capitalism emerge (within capitalism itself); and the same management tools, introduced a few days before by the course manual (Handbook), emerge as “cultural artifacts”: not as “ready-to-use objects”, but as integral and “coherent” parts of the story that produced them (ad e.g., on the theme of leadership: Shotter, Tsoukas 2014; Wolfram Cox, Hassard 2018; Willis 2019).

During the week students are encouraged to “compare” some of the analysis dimensions of the two *assignments* made. The combination between the “unconventional” entrepreneurship of *digital makers* and the “emerging properties” of an apparently more traditional business model revolves around two “artifacts”: (i) the “Programme 101 (P101)”, the first personal computer in the world created in 1964 by the team of Pier Giorgio Perotto; (ii) and “Arduino”, a digital prototyping board born precisely in Ivrea forty years later, the most widespread micro-controller adopted by the world community of *digital makers*. In video #08 two protagonists of the original team of designers are intent on connecting a P101 to the Internet using an “Arduino” board, which in turn is considered a digital artifact (a *new media*), an entrepreneurial project and a learning platform (an authentic *sharing economy* model). The scheme of the *morphogenesis* of the entrepreneurial models (subject-system-environment: (Rullani, 1989)), emerges from the ability of the students to identify their structures through the aspects that the two experiences have in common (in an unconventional way, for example, with respect to the most common themes of the “entrepreneurial team formation” or “corporate entrepreneurship”). For example, the two entrepreneurial models have the peculiar collective dimension of the *organisational learning processes* in common: they are two examples of “educational platforms”, an “epistemic community” dedicated to learning the entrepreneurship (Thomas, Seely Brown 2011). By analogy, the students realise that the (learning) experience they are having and some dimensions of the phenomenon that they have recognised “in action”, in the

two entrepreneurial experiences overlap (reflexivity and *experiential learning*: Kolb 2015; Engeström 2015, 2016).

A *practice-based* theoretical perspective (Nicolini 2012) that frames the relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge in management studies as a pedagogical problem, attributes enormous value to narrative knowledge precisely for its characteristic of stimulating “reflexive thought” (Czarniawska 1997; Gherardi 2009). From the didactic point of view, the “text produced by the class”, through discussion (a form of “dialogic learning”), constitutes in all respects a *narrative text* subjected to the principle that Umberto Eco (1979/2004; 1994/2005) defines as *interpretative cooperation*:

«The very existence of texts can not only be freely interpreted but also cooperatively generated by the addressee (the original text constituting a flexible *type* of which may *tokens* can be legitimately realized) posits the problem of a rather peculiar strategy of communication based upon a flexible system of signification» (Eco 1979, p. 3).

Even the story that follows a text, in essence, “is a product whose interpretative fate must be part of its generative mechanism” (Eco 2004, p. 50). Eco, using the metaphor of a famous Borges’ novel, suggests that:

«if “a wood is a garden of forking paths», in a narrative text «the reader is forced to make choices all the time. Indeed, this obligation to choose is found even at the level of the individual sentence (...). Whenever the speaker is about to end a sentence, we as readers or listeners make a bet (albeit unconsciously): we predict his or her choice, or anxiously wonder what choice will be made» (1994, p. 6).

This metaphor gave shape to the six Norton Lectures that Eco held at Harvard (1992-1993): the titles of those lessons are reproduced below (as a tribute to the author) to decline the principle of interpretative cooperation in the case of the narrative text “generated” in the classroom by the teacher and the students from the selected videos.

Entering the woods. When the reader enters narrative woods he is supposed to make choices as part of the “narrative triad”. The *Empirical Reader* is anyone who reads a text, without particular rules of conduct and without any particular precautions: the history of Olivetti is a case of *family business*, Olivetti’s social services are simply a *corporate welfare*, Olivetti’s *business model* is that of a multinational company at most “with a human side”, a *successful case* which however does not produce emulation and which inevitably disappears when the *entrepreneur-hero* disappears, therefore cannot be included among the *best practices*. The *Model Reader*, on the other hand, “lets himself be created by the text itself” by becoming aware of its “rules” and willingly accepting them. The rules of the “narrative game” are dictated by the Author: not by the *Empirical Author*, by whom physically making the documentary or the journalistic inquiry; or by the *Narrator*, by whom speaking firsthand within the stories without, however, necessarily having to coincide with the Empirical author; but by the *Model Author* (the teacher) who, sometimes addressing anonymously to the *Model Reader* (the student), even surreptitiously, suggests assignments and establishes strategies for interpreting the text.

The woods of Loisy. Therefore, according to Umberto Eco, there are at least two ways of walking in narrative woods (2005): the empirical student-Reader moves quickly as in a maze and tries to get out of it as soon as possible, trying to understand the end of the story in an instrumental way; on the other hand, the model student-Reader moves on so as to understand how the woods are made, to understand why “some roads are accessible and others are not”, to “recognize the Model Author”, understand his will and make it his own. Eco recalls his literary passion with the *Loisy woods*, but the story by Gérard de Nerval has characteristics that are common to the narrative texts:

«The apparent uncertainty concerning times and places which constitutes the fascination of *Sylvie* (and bridge about crisis in the first-level reader) is founded on a narrative strategy and grammatical tactics as perfect as clockwork - which, however, are visible only to the second-level reader. How does a person (a student) become a second-level model reader? We must reconstruct the sequence of events that the narrator virtually lost, in order to understand not so much how the narrator (*the classroom*) lost it but how Nerval (*the teacher*) leads the reader to lose it» (1994, p. 32).

Modern narrativity theories introduce the notion of *narrative structures* (Eco 1979): the themes of “fabula and plot” bring about the *content* of the text, while the “speech” refers to its *expression*. These dimensions are linked to the identification of the *topic*, the theme of the story, which means making hypotheses about the regularities that the text seemingly shows in terms of “textual behaviour”, that is, through “the intentions virtually contained in the statement” (Eco 2005, p. 62). Through the narrative speech (the “themes” and the “dimensions of analysis”) the teacher (Model Author) “manifests himself” in order to “organise the fabula”: the representation in the lower part of figure 1 provides an example of how these dimensions can combine within the educational project.

Lingering in the woods. Eco emphasizes that the Author and Model Reader are therefore “textual strategies” (1975, p. 10): and thus the textual cooperation takes place between two textual strategies, not between two “real” subjects. In this passage Eco introduces the notion of *inferential walks*: «If a text is a lazy machine that appeals to the reader to do some of its work, why might a text linger, slow down, take its time?» (1994, p. 49). In analogy with teaching, the question is not only linked to the time needed to deal with the themes and to bring out the theoretical constructs. In Eco’s metaphor:

«(...) in a wood, you go for a walk. If you’re not forced to leave it (...), it is lovely to linger. Lingering doesn’t mean wasting time: frequently one stops to ponder before making a decision. But since one can wander in a wood without going anywhere in particular, and since at times it’s fun to get lost just for the hell of it, I shall be dealing with those walks that the author’s strategy induces the reader to take» (1994, p. 50).

Inferential walks allow the reader to “exit from the text” and are necessary for the interpretation process to frame it with one’s own experiences. This aspect, which is connectable to the teaching of *experiential learning*, is associated with the forms of “activism” and the sense of “emancipation” which should guide the relationship between teacher and student: through storytelling, narration and history, the class grasps how a theory arises from context in which it is practiced (and in which one’s experience is “enacted”, becoming “significant”).

Possible woods. The narrative text is based on a *fictional pact*: «the reader has to know that what is being narrated is an imaginary story, but he must not therefore believe that the writer is telling lies» (Eco 1979, p. 75). Walking in narrative woods involves exploring the complex relationships between fictional worlds and the real world. On the one hand, “narrative worlds are parasites of real worlds” since what the former do not expressly mention or describe must be understood as if they followed the laws of the latter (Eco 2005). On the other hand, *inferential walks* and *possible worlds* do not flee away from the concept of “truth” which, in a narrative world, is reasonably attributable to what «is true within the framework of the *possible world* of a given story» (1979, p. 88). In other words, «the way we accept the representation of the actual worlds scarcely differs from the way we accept the representation of fictional worlds» (p. 90). The “text produced by the class”, in essence: (i) both “negotiates” facts and events between the Author-Teacher and the Reader-Student; (ii) and provides the student with information on the real world that the teacher believes is essential for the class so as to contribute to the understanding of the story.

The strange case of the Rue Servandoni. The previous theme is connected to the episode that Eco uses to address this question: «what happens when in a fictional text the author posits, as an element of the actual world (which is the background of the fictional one), something that does not obtain in the actual world?» (1996: p. 100; Eco 2004). In Rue Servandoni, in A. Dumas’ *The Three Musketeers*, an ontologically interesting situation takes place which makes the position of a character in the novel potentially inexplicable. That road could not have existed in 1625: Servandoni was an eighteenth-century architect involved a century later in designing the *façade* of the nearby church of Saint-Sulpice. But the author’s material error produces an interesting phenomenon in his relationship with an overzealous reader. That road coincided (in 1600 reality) with another street mentioned in the novel, thus altering in substance the specific episode (of the *fictional* reality) in which D’Artagnan has an unexpected meeting, in an area of Paris involving (unintentionally) the alleged private accommodation of the three musketeers. This refined speculation poses a precise

question: if one can safely survive after Dumas' material error (assuming it is an error, *sic!*), what is the "knowledge of the real world" that the Model Author (the teacher) assumes a Model Reader (the student) must have? The answer Eco suggests is that the text is not supposed to make it explicit but understanding it is part of the problem of discovering the strategies of the Model Author: this dimension is also attributable to the "dialogue" between teacher and student based on "activism" and "emancipation" (and fueled by a good dose of "intellectual curiosity").

Fictional protocols. «If fictional worlds are so comfortable, why not try to read the actual world as if it were a work of fiction? Or, if fictional worlds are so small and deceptively comfortable, why not try to devise fictional worlds that are as complex, contradictory, and provocative as the actual one?» (Eco 1994, p. 117). The answer to the second question is quite immediate when the didactic choices are connected to the critical pedagogy: the "text produced by the class", being it a "meta-text", should be at least as complex (and provocative) as the text to which it continually alludes, that is the "text produced for the class" (Rullani, 2004a). Rereading the management theories and the reclassification of economic paradigms in a *knowledge-based* way aims *also* to address controversial aspects, at least unexpected or, in part, not fully considered in traditional studies on managerial knowledge (theoretical and practical). Umberto Eco answers to the first question in this way: «it is easy to understand why fiction fascinates us so. It offers us the opportunity to employ limitlessly our faculties for perceiving the world and reconstructing the past» (p. 131).

5. Discussion and Conclusion: Culture Participation and CME

The coherence of the training project passes through the connection between didactics (interpretative cooperation and the *practice-based learning*) and pedagogy (the CME). The conceptual category of the *participatory culture* renders this connection. In the interpretative cooperation *à la* Eco the existence of the text postulates the cooperation of the Reader (of the student) as the interpretative initiative is an integral part of the textual strategy of the Author (of the teacher): if this condition is valid for the text "produced by the class" (Author and Reader share the story plan); this same condition becomes decisive for "interpreting" the text "produced for the class", putting into play the *students' media skills* dealing with video materials, the stories they tell, the story "told in the classroom". Teacher and students produce their "meta-text" together, share the structures of the narrative text which, in its inside, inevitably alludes to that "text" through which the fact of entering into a relationship with the categories and properties that characterize the *knowledge-based* "rereading" of the management theories becomes possible.

New Media Literacies (NMLs) and participatory culture. James P. Gee (2004) suggests that «people do not just read and write texts; *they do things with them*, things that often involve more than just reading and writing» (p. 36). In linguistics studies the *New Literacies Studies-NLS*, compared to traditional psychological approaches, investigate the phenomenon of language skills as "a social and cultural achievement centered in social and cultural practices" (Gee, Hayes 2011). By introducing digital technologies, this perspective suggests an interesting connection between *media studies* and *pedagogical research*:

«the *NLS* views different digital tools as technology for giving and getting meaning, just like language (...). The *NLS* also argues that the meanings to which these technologies give rise are determined by the social, cultural, historical, and institutional practices of different groups of people. And these practices almost always involve more than just using a digital tool - they involve, as well, ways of acting, interacting, valuing, believing, and knowing, as well as using other sorts of tools and technologies, including very often oral and written language» (p. 44).

Among the various studies of *media education*, Table 1 reproduces the specific research conducted by Henry Jenkins and his collaborators for the *MacArthur Foundation* (Jenkins *et al.* 2009). Jenkins defines the *participatory culture* framework in educational contexts on the basis of the practices of "interpretative cooperation" which are typical of the phenomenon of *convergence*

culture (2006), “where *old and new media* collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (p. 260). Likewise, “*old and new education* collide” coexisting in educational (more or less conventional) institutions. *NMLs* (tab. 1) are transversal skills: students can handle them even outside the classroom, sometimes unconsciously, and make them available to the group as an individual experience, however contributing to interpretative cooperation. Many young people are already part of the *participatory culture* defined by Jenkins (2009) in terms of *affiliations*, *expressions*, *collaborative problem solving* and *circulation*: but these skills can be further developed as a result of the educational practices that involve the students themselves.

Tab. 1: *New media literacies, participatory culture e sfide pedagogiche*

New Media Literacies	Definitions:	Forms of Participatory Culture:	Policy and pedagogical interventions:
<i>Play</i>	the capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem-solving	<p>Affiliations: memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media</p> <p>Espressions: producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videomaking, fan fiction writing, zines, mash-ups</p> <p>Collaborative problem-solving: working together in teams, formal and informal, to complete tasks and develop new knowledge</p> <p>Circulations: shaping the flow of media (such as podcasting, blogging)</p>	<p>A. The Participation Gap: the unequal access to the opportunities, experiences, skills, and knowledge that will prepare youth for full participation in the world of tomorrow</p> <p>B. The Transparency Problem: The challenges young people face in learning to see clearly the ways that media shape perceptions of the world</p> <p>C. The Ethics Challenge: The breakdown of traditional forms of professional training and socialization that might prepare young people for their increasingly roles as media makers and community participants</p>
<i>Simulation</i>	the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real world processes		
<i>Performance</i>	the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery		
<i>Appropriation</i>	the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content		
<i>Multi-tasking</i>	the ability to scan one’s environment and shift focus onto salient details on an ad hoc basis		
<i>Distributed cognition</i>	the ability to interact meaningfully with tools that expand our mental capacities		
<i>Collective intelligence</i>	the ability to pool knowledge and compare notes with others towards a common goal		
<i>Judgement</i>	the ability to evaluate the reliability and credibility of different information sources		
<i>Transmedia navigation</i>	the ability to deal with the flow of stories and information across multiple modalities		
<i>Networking</i>	the ability to search for, synthesize, and disseminate information		
<i>Negotiation</i>	the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative sets of norms		

Source: Jenkins et al. 2009

In the project described in this work, the *dialogue* between text produced “by the class” and “for the class” allows students to experience what surrounds them in the form of *dynamic problem solving*. Educational processes do not take place only within the classroom and in the space/time “institutionally” dedicated to teaching; and the educational dimension of the game goes beyond adopting a tool to motivate children to master a certain content. *Play* and *performance*, can, in this case, literally concern the “acting” and “staging”, through narration, the historical events (Steinberg, Down 2020): both to discover directly applications of old concepts to “new contexts of use”; and to freely explore new concepts by interpreting and building real processes in the logic of learning by *trial and error*.

Furthermore, the evolution of the stories and the partial space-time overlap of the events they tell, allow to “mix different media contents” (*simulation* and *appropriation*), attributing meaning to new paths connected with the topics covered (e.g.: the *social movements*, the *community* or the *feminist thought*). In a first approximation, using different stories and recognizing their contact

points (*transmedia navigation*), it becomes possible for students to produce articulated comments, deal with similar problems in different historical periods, refine the *multitasking* ability to “scan real environments” paying attention to salient details, producing information flows around significant changes thanks to the ability to support multiple stimuli.

The ability to integrate the proposed stories (and to consider experiences in a “cumulative” way) poses the need to “know how to think” *with* and *through* the available narrative tools. An artifact connects to institutions and people, to specific space-time relationships, for example by problematizing the relationship between technology and society, marking the evolution of different epistemological and theoretical perspectives (*distributed cognition* and *collective intelligence*).

The “dialogical teaching” is not a simple conversation and constitutes a challenge for students and teachers: the latter cannot remain “neutral” and is not a simple “facilitator” (Freire, Macedo 1995; Giroux 2011; Melling, Pilkington 2018). By contrast, the “student’s voice” in the classroom context should not be linked to “formal” adherence to an apparent democracy: it is the whole class that should remain “epistemologically curious” (Freire 1972). This involves sharing knowledge and comparing experiences and opinions, fuelling the critical sense and ability to evaluate the reliability of information and emerging points of view (*judgement*). Finally, the interlaced materials allows to “discipline” and “control” the sources that fuel the discussion, highlighting the collective dimension of *problem solving* (*networking*) and to critically evaluate the arguments produced, confronting communities with different systems of values and multiple analysis perspectives, up to being able to recognize if a topic is actually significant (*negotiation*).

CME between emancipation and activism. The three pedagogical challenges mentioned in table 1 and the participatory culture suggest the connection between didactics (*practice-based learning*) and pedagogy (CME). With the warning that «the association with critique and critical thinking is not the monopoly of something called ‘CME’», Alessia Contu points out that: «the family of CME is distinctive in subjecting management practice and management knowledge to critical scrutiny and in attempting to develop and engender a critical pedagogy in the curriculum, its design, educative process, and method» (2009, p. 537). Burgoyne and Reynolds (1997), identify the common points of a critical reflection in the ME (p. 107): “it is concerned with questioning assumptions”; “its focus is social rather than individual”; “it pays particular attention to the analysis of power relations”; “it is concerned with emancipation” (Alvesson, Willmott 1992; Grey *et al.* 1996; Adler *et al.* 2007; Boje, Al Avkoubi 2009; Perriton, Reynolds 2004, 2018). In critical pedagogy, the reference to the “socialization” of the student and the concept of emancipation is inevitable (Harley 2007; Knights 2008; Contu 2009; Reynolds, Vince 2019). The Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire points out that: «(...) the oppressed need to develop the necessary critical tools that will enable them to read their world so they can apprehend the globality of their reality and choose what world they want for themselves» (Freire, Macedo 1995: p. 389). In the current debate on ME, it seems easy to identify who the “new oppressed” are (e.g., on the business school: Gioia, Corley 2002; Grey 2004; Harley 2007; Knights 2008; Berti *et al.* 2018; Butler *et al.* 2017; Contu 2018, 2019).

Conclusions and implications. This work suggests that the tension between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge in management studies may be favoured by inattention to the pedagogical dimension in ME. By introducing a *practice-based learning* approach, the participatory mechanism of learning processes not only describes didactic choices, but also represents a concrete manifestation of (or a sign of absence of attention for) “intellectual activism” and “cultural emancipation and responsibility” in pedagogical terms (in this case declined in a CME perspective). In ME, the short circuit between theory and practice seems to be triggered precisely in university and business school classrooms, that is, in places where such knowledge should be “reflexively” produced and validated through learning processes. In other words, a debate is fundamental in order to deal with the relationship between *theoretical knowledge* and *practical knowledge* in management studies, which debate, for example, does not dwell on the sterile question of how to make the *curricula* of business schools more permeable to “experience, action, and multidisciplinary” (Harney 2007; Contu 2009); so much so that teachers should ask themselves

«what kinds of social engagement and material setting provide the proper context for knowing, working, learning and innovating» (Gherardi, in Kennedy *et al.* 2015, pp. 177). Roy Bhaskar suggests requirements and programmes to be associated with an educational theory (*tout court*):

“intentionality, agential capacity, structures of agency, materialism, reflexivity, the possibility of describing and changing the world, progression, education and the lifecourse, essentialism and human nature, pedagogy, knowledge and knowledge-development, truth criteria, the formation of the self, curricular aims and objectives, being with other people, learning, the self in the learning process, the relationship between the self (or agency) and the environment, stratification, emergence, representation and its different modes, structures and mechanisms, the dialectic, and criticality” (Scott, Bhaskar 2015, p. 9).

CME activism consists precisely in subverting those positions that decline these aspects in a superficial or ephemeral way, and attributes an “ideological role” to education and to the process of emancipation of students: “what is undeniable is that *educating* is minimally a complex practice and in CME education there are a number of practical suggestions on how to develop such practice” (Contu 2009, p. 543). *De te fabula narratur*.

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