

## **‘Writing Your Thesis from Back to Front.’**

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**Abstract:** *This paper suggests that just as many examiners and reviewers read theses from the back to the front, from the references to the abstract; then it might make some sort of sense for the doctoral candidate or academic writer to work from back to front also. The paper is presented as a split or parallel text, where the ‘bricolography’ – the synthetic text that is constructed entirely from the titles of the texts contained within the author’s doctoral bibliography – is spliced together with commentary on the process of assembling this bricolography, together with thoughts as to what light this inquiry might shine into the power that conventions of referencing exercise upon the academic writing process. It problematizes the process of constructing a bibliography, asking questions as to who is writing the PhD; the author or her sources? It inquires into the extent to which authors construct their texts with the gaze of this back-to-front reader in mind; and the impact that the wish to satisfy the examiners gaze may have upon the author’s freedom to engage with critical thinking and original expression. This paper also challenges the assumptions that underlie the construction of abstracts; this abstract you are reading right now could well be the troubled child of an extended abstract that is offered herein.*

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### **I. Introduction**

*I am writing my dissertation in fifteen minutes a day. On the way to becoming a person I am focussed on developing the reflective practitioner. Please note that I am composing a life on the fields of play while constructing an academic life. This requires that research be seen as a personal process, refracted through the ethnographic eye. The fear is that it may become ‘death by chocolate’, an example of comfort thinking and sublimated passion, of self-indulgence or something more, which as we well know ‘writing as inquiry’ and autoethnography can become if allowed to develop unconstrained. The challenge is to front up to the taboo against knowing who you really are, which may well need the support of conversations with god: all of that wondering, pondering and trying to get it right. It is a narrative of me and other more important matters.*

And so begins my bricolography, a hybrid term, a portmanteau word incorporating elements of bibliography and bricolage. I gift it this name not only because it is fashionably post-modern to invent neologisms or new words that will excite envy in your colleagues but also because that is what this paper is, a piece of bricolage, a random textual confection constructed from all of the titles contained in my bibliography, scattered around my attic of references. It is no more or less than that. Go on, you can check for yourself if you don’t believe me. The bibliography of my thesis is at the back of this paper. My bricolography is also an abstract, a condensation of all that is contained in the thesis which is at some level all that is contained in the references from which it is drawn. That is not to say that a thesis is nothing more than the sum of the wisdom contained in the writing upon which it is built. But some might see it so.

*My wish is to allow the releasing of the social science imagination through living a story and storying a life. This requires seeing the participant observer as a human being, while making observations on the personal aspects of fieldwork. It should create a little black book of stories, gained from living among the cultural creatives, through talking to a small sample of these 50 million people who are changing the world. This could mean taking a narrative turn or a blind alley.*

This project began when I was confronted with the daunting prospect of building a bibliography for this PhD, a task which I could no longer postpone if I were ever to gain the degree. I know, I know I was told, I was even instructed very early on that I should use Endnote or Reference Manager or any one of those clever pieces of software that organise your literature while you sleep. I was sternly warned that otherwise, without that electronic assistance I would find myself, in three years time, in dire trouble. But I didn’t. And I was. I even invested £100 on Reference Manager but stopped using it after about three weeks. That moment of digital abandonment coincided with the point when I started writing and stopped reading, at least for a while. I thought it was a temporary abandonment of the software, but it was to prove to be permanent. And meanwhile the writing flowed on unopposed by too much interference from others’ sedulously written ideas.

*Making it happen could land me in the swamplands of the soul, in search of new life in dismal places, where the academic tourist meets the velveteen rabbit. This creates the venue to meet the selves within you, even the Steppenwolf or the dice man. From this learning from experience we move from individual discovery to meta-dialogue via the evolution of transitional myths. We move from rut to river in co-creating a possible future,*

*navigating though predictable crises of adult life. Along the way there are experiences of ordinary ecstasy, seeing humanistic psychology in action through trauma and the construction of meaning through a gathering of selves, a gathering of those sub-personalities inside us.*

So without an electronic index I was faced with the dreaded prospect of hunting down my sources, rustling up my references, chivvying my citations, without signpost or guidance. This was back breaking work. I remember well being torn between painstakingly tracking down long lost books – in part I confess that I was motivated as much by the need to bulk up what I was sure would be my thin bibliography as by any great affection for some of their contents – and just wanting to chuck out or ignore those I could not find, even if they were central to my argument. I inwardly cursed the system that demanded that I source all citations, and crucify them into lifelessness via the Harvard method of classification. I longed for a good day to bury orphaned citations, perhaps when academia was awaiting the results of the Research Assessment Exercise.

*We feel the presence of the past presaging fear and trembling and sickness unto death, fearing those final negotiations that may release a story of love, loss and chronic illness. Then we are shaken from our adult world and its roots in infancy to usher in the birth of the chaordic age; or is it merely life within the house of lies? Only language in relation to a unified theory of the structure of human behaviour will illumine.*

And yet as the process unfolded, and as I surrendered myself to this task, I began to notice how interestingly juxtaposed many of these authors and their titles were, one besides another. As I pulled the listings together, they did not fall into alphabetical order immediately. It required several iterations of temporary positioning before these volumes settled into their final placing, giving them each the opportunity to try out multiple proximities to other literatures. I say settle into their final positioning, but in truth some of these titles are yet to recover from the implicit violence of their respective alliances, a shock for some texts akin to the moment when one's box at Royal Ascot is invaded by the hoi polloi. Beware of the company you keep indeed.

*This is when managers become philosophers, integrating learning with sense making. We sense that narrating the organisation will reveal dramas of institutional identity, and that 'weaving' organisations will assist our understanding of the fabric of organisational life. The culture of narcissism and culture's consequence has undermined the wisdom of strategic learning. Yet no amount of gurus, hired guns and warm bodies - those itinerant experts in a knowledge economy - can engineer participation as a means of organizational control. They do not have the secret of management teams, or of why they succeed or fail.*

I amused myself with the diversion of this random literary dating game. I played god, enjoying the matches made in heaven, while commiserating those pairings still facing down the shotgun. I was their matchmaker and they knew I held the cards, as they perched precariously on the edge of their stools, wishing only that they could go back home to the safety of their familiar shelves. As the matching became more complex, and as the listing moved towards exhausted completion, I decided that I would cut and paste the titles onto one page, and to see how they would play together through a process of free association. They stayed together in this way for several weeks. I would occasionally look at this collection; sometimes using it as a memory aid to see if I could recall the author that matched the title. Sometimes I used it to afford a big picture of the whole project, to have a glimpse of how the totality of my PhD looked when the rest of me was buried in the detail of page 241, and needed to be dragged away. For sure this was not the total totality, but then again I was grateful for any representation of the same, given the overwhelming nature of such projects. As I surveyed my bricolage for far above I observed that many of these couplings were still in increasingly deep and often strident conversation with each other. While they jostled on the page, so too did they jostle in my head, banging without consideration against the inside of my cranium, often disturbing synaptic associations and connections I had previously believed were firmly coupled in my intellectual universe.

*America's advance through twentieth-century Europe has created an irresistible empire, precipitating the rise and fall of the British manager, an event never mentioned in the Celestine prophecy. Post-capitalist society requires that you use your head - in the artist's way - in search of identity and the life cycle. This experience of being and nothingness could shed light on historical perspectives on fad adoption and abandonment, including where faking it within the dynamics of the middle group combats the benefits of the learning organization. Faking it demands rules of thumb for change agents to change the conversation in organisations through the arts and human development*

And then I could stand the indeterminacy no longer. I want to say that the titles themselves demanded that these accidental juxtapositions be consolidated into sentences, but I rather think that it was my need for coherence, for

order that was to drive me to put these together as sentences. At first I achieved this by joining the titles just as they lay on the page, with the minimum of non bibliography sourced conjunctions or joining verbs, to see how it would sit. And then later I was moved to craft some form of syntax out of this spastic prose. At one point my wife looked over my shoulder and asked 'is this some kind of joke?' Good question. I think I replied 'yes', guiltily hiding the draft somewhere deep in Windows where even Bill Gates could not get to it, while I returned to the serious business of theory building.

But this low priority bricolography re-emerged whenever I needed some light relief from the laborious process of writing-up, which was often. I was struck by how pompous and important was its self presentation, how strangely Victorian, with all of those Capitals that Decorated the Crammed together Titles Screaming from the Page. The removal of all this upper case toned things down a bit, and I began as I worked with the content to develop a wry attachment to this nonsense. A voice inside whispered that, after all, I had read less accessible or digestible academic abstracts in its time. I even wondered if a reader, if presented with this, would persist in attempting to make any sense of it. And my inner critic determined that in such a case that that reader would feel angry, duped that they had been asked to devote serious attention to this doodle, only to find it a trick. Especially if the reader were a stern examiner with little time to spare. They may even be scandalised by the sacrilegious treatment of revered works, and the implicit mockery represented therein. 'Writers sometimes attract fatwa through their irreverence, as we know', whispers my inner critic, somewhat melodramatically. But the point is well made.

*Managerialism combats the emergence of a new ideology of wholeness and the implicate order ushered in by the aesthetics of organization. What they don't teach you at the Harvard Business School gives pointers to values priorities in organisations, including the rejected values. Developing the developers is achieved in one way through bioenergetics, leading us to vibrant health beyond power: a place where women, men and morality meet the cult experience. We bear eyewitness to therapy via the gestalt approach, and on the way are even offered a glimpse of the Tao of physics*

Yet the same voice that allowed the thought that this might be a passable abstract was persistent, bypassing the critic for a while to suggest that this bricolography might well serve other purposes as well as masquerade as an abstract. For example the voice reminded me that any academic worth their salt will turn to the bibliography of any thesis or dissertation before they embark on reading the rest. The academics do this to ascertain the scholarly intent of the student, and also to divine which literatures, if any are being drawn upon. Following their example I too have developed this habit of previewing the bibliography in my reading of my student's dissertations, and find it illuminating. So the committing of the literatures to this one bricolography up front may prove of assistance, especially if in its construction the prologue conveys some sense of the piece itself, and of its intellectual underpinnings. Or absence thereof, it could well save the time pressed academic a lot of eye strain.

*Microserfs resist learning in order to think like the CEO of their own career. They sit close to the fire from within but avoid British management thought, given how the distance of that from the human side of enterprise. Meanwhile the democratic enterprise is liberating your business through freedom, flexibility and commitment, while life as narrative reveals strategy as structured chaos. These management gurus' narratives and the construction of managerial identity develop within Generation X a fear of freedom, living as they do within their bubble of an accelerated culture*

An associated thought runs that if the reader is in a hurry then this could well serve as a PhD in a sound bite. A PhD achieved though the extreme compression of its constituent parts. A PhD that is, if a definition of a PhD is one where the student strings together a series of publications and quotations from the same in a plausible order, as safely as they can, with minimum interruption to the predicable matching of which literature goes with which, accompanied by an accurate anticipation of where thoughts nest cosily together, neatly finishing with the artful flourish that is their contribution to knowledge. What matters is that it is recognisable, that it is joined up and that it all makes sense. And that if read as mediation, has a certain melodic lambency.

*The hungry spirit takes us beyond capitalism, in our quest for purpose in the modern world through the two models of consciousness and the two halves of the brain. The impostor phenomenon in high achieving women screams for living strategy that puts people at the heart of corporate purpose, wishing them to belong to the universe where they may conduct explorations on the frontiers of science and spirituality*

If I allow my inner critic to relax for a while, it may also be that the reader, should she be recklessly directed towards this Frankenstein text may enjoy the guessing game of essaying the source of the various embedded title

bites within this piece; maybe indulge in a play of 'spot the guru', or simply enjoy some of the moments where completely incompatible jigsaw pieces are jammed together in the one sentence. This bricolography will take you where it will. It is not serious. It is deadly serious too.

*The wounded storyteller speaks to aspects of the novel and in particular speaks to the French lieutenant's woman. The wounded story teller brings us back from the brink towards care of the soul, where we work the shadow side through taking ourselves seriously and getting it right.*

It is serious to me. I take it seriously that at some level my subconscious wants to push this piece of seditious writing up on stage, way up front at the beginning of the PhD where it cannot be ignored. Part of the reason for this recklessness may be because I am a contrarian, which is undoubtedly true. But I believe that there lies a deeper purpose to wishing to share this which relates to the surfacing of some of my doubts and shames attaching to the completion of this PhD. I suggest this possibility as this compression of the titles together raises questions as to the compatibility of these literatures, and points to the impossibility of combining classical social science with the language of the new age, of narrative inquiry with management speak, of life or death therapy with knock about soap box politics. This voice asks how I could imagine that these genres might ever be taken seriously, when coming together on the same page in these combinations. It says that these genres are not compatible, that genres are not built that way, to be forced together. Good fences make good neighbours. And anyway PhDs are about narrow and deep, more and more about less and less, not about spreading thin. And further, some of these facile genres have no place in a scholarly PhD anyway. They are unnecessary ballast in a makeweight project.

*This narrative concerns learning to feel and feeling to learn, about taking steps to ecology of mind within the individualized corporation which lies at the heart of enterprise. We seek the elevation of work; seek to initiate pastoral power and the new age work ethic. Yet at some level we ask ourselves the question 'Organisation development: is it just a case of the emperor's new clothes?', and then defeated implore 'Just tell me what to do' as we reflect on running self-development training programmes.*

And that same voice of shame says that I need to do penitence, I need to go to confession, where I will reveal the shallowness of my thinking, the laziness of the random synapses I jump, the sheer irremediable populism of my sources, where I will expose the sub journalism shakily supporting my argument. The joining of book titles may leak the revelation that that the titles are as far as my knowledge goes, that there is nothing beyond or behind the dust cover and the inside flap. And that sensational covers are privileged over more thoughtful ones.

*Yet we continue to take the consultants journey from outward bound to inward bound, listening as we go to the prophetic voices and discursive practices of spiritual management development. This is where the socially constructed organisation's fertile obsession with validity after post structuralism is mediated through a reading of Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance. The ascent of the mountain, through the flight of the dove inevitably liberates spiral dynamics, enabling the mastering of values, leadership and change.*

The voice says that if there redemption here then it lies in my ability to join things up, to create an illusion of coherence out of an ill assorted rag bag of staccato phrases and sound bites. But then this capacity for summary and synthesis may not be strength after all. It could be a bullying, a seduction, a snake charmer seeking control when he knows that there is no meaning in this; that the hypnotism is for no purpose beyond deflecting the reader from the hollowness. And if this is a joke, then perhaps it is a defence mechanism, getting the revenge in first, before the critics laugh at me. Should the critics be scornful, then I can deflect this by saying I was never serious in the first place. Look for example at my placing of this absurd bricolography right up front as evidence of my grip on post modern ironic usage.

*This act of creation will release the 'flow', unlocking the psychology of happiness. We may even enter a separate reality, where further conversations with Don Juan move us towards the farther reaches of human nature inhabited by the psychoanalytic movement. We will discover that working across the gap between death and dying is a process of planned and emergent learning, with consequences for development, bringing up the loose ends that demand strategy change yet presage defensive routines. The resolution to this is through bounded rationality and the engineering of choice, sailing between evangelism and complexity. At this point we visualise the initiation of the sorcerer's apprentice. Here the managed heart needs healing fiction, where women in search of the sacred discover their vein of gold.*

I emerge from this self-excoriation to suggest that perhaps if this bricolography has any virtue beyond casual entertainment - an amuse-bouche before the stolid main PhD meal - then it might lie in the unmasking of the respective sententiousness of the extremes of these genres. I notice that they often say of each other that they are narcissistic, that they are self referential, unable to see the other view. The wisdom of the bricolography may ask that I hold back from prematurely privileging one literature over another, or dismissing an attractive text on the grounds of shallowness or incompatibility. Benefits may well be gained from allowing them to play one with another for a while. It may question dependency on literature in general, suggesting instead that I clarify my own ideas, take the risk of allowing my insights a place on stage. The inclusion of this prologue may also flag that in all of this I am as much a legitimate target as anyone else. And that I am not without some perspective on my own vanities and conceits.

*We already know that putting the client before the horse is the best way of working with appreciative inquiry in a small business. But behind the inquiring mind there is a need to explore the transition from external to internal inquiry, to get inside the myths, magic and gobbledegook that obscure the rational aspects of the consultant's role.*

It may point to the dangers of the reductionist tendency, of the damage that is done through the dilution of the rich picture. It may contend that interesting marriages can be forged through aesthetic treatments that would never be considered through conventional treatments. It could argue that the literature does not stand alone, that the author is more than the wielder of the Meccano spanner, and that there is a strong role to be played in the release of the author's imagination. It may more encourage more such irreverent writing as inquiry.

*The consultant's calling is a matter of bringing who you are to what you do, of seeing systems and unlocking the mysteries of the rites and rituals of corporate life. Games people play need not lead to thought reform and the psychology of totalism or to the teaching of the pedagogy of the oppressed. What is needed is attention and interpretation; serendipity and agency in narratives of transition, especially for young adult women and their careers. The socially constructed organisation brings news of the universe in the ages of Gaia. A biography of our ageing earth reveals adaptive instability threatening the inter-relationship of identity and image. The way of transition is the answer here, embracing life's most difficult moments through insight and responsibility while making sense of life's changes.*

What I believe I offer here is a mix of genres, a clash of ideologies, a collision of languages, a contradiction of codification systems that should never exist in the same universe yet in this piece do live together more and more, at least to my satisfaction. And where they don't they pose sometimes uncomfortable questions. The truth is that for now they have to find at least temporary amnesty with their neighbours. In any case these titles have no option as I have consigned them together on the same page, through my obsession with the narrative drive. The one title I missed from the final edit of this Prologue was 'Psychobabble'. There, now it is in.

*Yet we remain shackled to the wheel of time: the shamans of Mexico remind us of the irrelevance of American organizational sciences to the UK and Europe which relies instead on experience and its expressions. The shamans point us to actual minds; encourage us to inhabit possible worlds at the turning point. They question management speak, asking why we listen to what management gurus tell us. The presentation of self in everyday life has particular meaning to the new alchemists; those visionary people make something out of nothing on their consultant's journey. Synchronicity is the acausal connecting principle that leads them to the tipping point, where little things can make a difference.*

There goes another of those paragraphs drawn from my bricolography. I feel compelled to read it again and again. It makes no sense. It makes complete sense. It even seems to flow from and shape this parallel narrative of which it is a part. It makes complete sense to me because I know the origins of the texts that comprise this compendium. There is no good reason to believe that it might make sense to anyone else – but it might. I have no control over that. The swamplands of the soul is where I feel I am going now with this interruption of the textual flow I have worked so hard to create. But interrupt it I must with this parallel text device if I am to tell the story of creating this version of my thesis told from back to front as well as to tell the story itself.

*This is when giants learn to dance with eternal youths who are having their time again riding the waves of culture. They balance heaven and earth while singing over the bones to the tune of 'good-bye, command and control'. Their hearts are aroused by poetry and the preservation of the soul in the new workplace. They are living organisational life as spiritual practice. A reading of a diary of a change agent reveals the eagle's gift. We learn that 'the answer to how is yes'. This is achieved via flawless consulting and through the adopting of*

*the seven habits of highly effective people by the one minute manager. Alternatively it might require lifelong unlearning through managing in polychronic times, and through the exploring of individual creativity and performance in intellectually intensive organisations.*

This was assembled to be read as one piece; to flow, to take the reader to strange places, to make something shift inside with the strangeness of it all, or to recoil in irritation at its pretention. But now I see that breaking it up in parallel text form does different things, quite different things. I had not wanted to break it up but I know I had to, and it causes me to see this piece differently. For last year's conference I took the step of sharing the undiluted bibliography. While it sparked really interesting debate, the readers' advice was that it might be more digestible if some commentary were provided along the way. This advice I have taken with some interesting results.

*Sadly, a study of gurus reveals feet of clay, of mirrors and masks and a futile search for the ethics of authenticity. The embodied mind asks 'does god play dice?' The new mathematics of chaos interplay with the wisdom of crowds but the truth is that strength is ignorance and slavery is freedom.*

One effect of breaking this up into parallel text has been that I began to focus more on each the constituent paragraphs of this Frankenstein text. What I found was that I could read a paragraph such as the one above; meditate upon its meaning then find some new insight into the nature or my thesis. I have tried sharing them with others for reflection and comment and they have been able to make some sense of them, not always the sense that suggested itself to me. There is not the space in this paper to further deconstruct these paragraphs, but I am encouraged to attempt that close reading at a later date and see where it might lead me.

*What I most need now is a book of miracles containing a theory of everything, read by the quantum self in a room of ones own.*

This paragraph made me smile. How often does it seem – when reading a thesis – that the author would loved to have written 'a book of miracles containing a theory of everything?' And how often does it seem that the author has spent much time in an altered state and in a confined space; when they might have been better served socialising there ideas with like-minded others?

## **II. Bricology Workshops.**

One suggestion made at last years conference was that I or BAM or whatever agency might offer to academics the opportunity to participate in a Bricology Workshop. At this workshop they would have the opportunity to deconstruct their own reference listing; to play with different ways of combining and juxtaposing the title texts; then reflecting on the fresh perspective this might offer to their academic work. It might also open up some really interesting debate among participants on the role references and the compilation of the same might have affected or compromised their capacity for free and original thinking.

This paper has 500 plus references but in reality it has only one major citation, taken from Yiannis Gabriel's blog of 01 09 2014 entitled 'Bombardment by Reference.' It will allow Yiannis to speak for himself in full. When the paper was shared with Yiannis he suggested that this could be the creation of a new genre.

### **Yiannis Gabriel – Bombardment by Reference.**

'I have just finished reviewing an article for an academic journal. I feel like a ruined castle after a prolonged bombardment by heavy artillery. The cause? REFERENCES.

The facts. This was an article of 9 pages of text and 7 pages of references or 123 references to be precise. I mentioned 9 pages of text – but arguably if I remove the Harvard references from the text of the article itself, this would leave me with fewer than 5 pages of actual argument by the author.

Further facts. Scarcely a single sentence in the entire paper fails to be concluded with a tail-end litany of names (Bloggs and Blogger 2013, Sharp et al 2012, Smart 2007). Several of these include more than five different author names. There are paragraphs in which the same reference (Bloggs and Blogger 2013) feature two or even three times.

Now, I don't know how your mind works but I find that mine begins to crumble like a medieval castle under modern artillery. Instead of grasping the continuity of an argument, the constant bombardment of names, some familiar, some not, far from supporting the argument ends up turning the argument into a kind of Swiss cheese.

I have written before about some of the factors that have conspired to bring this about: the ridiculous ease of Endnote as a system for inserting references, the ruinous hegemony of the Harvard referencing system in management journals (it is by no means uncontested elsewhere), the ruthless game of impact factors and pre-emptive references to works by potential reviewers, the authors' desire to declare their friends (and more rarely foes), and so forth.

Journal editors must carry a substantial burden of the responsibility here (and I have suggested before that upon acceptance, nearly every article should be stripped of at least half its references).

I fear however that the surfeit of references is now becoming part of the 'education' of PhD students and would be prepared to wager a bet that younger academics use more references in their articles. It is the product of a generalized insecurity about saying anything that cannot be supported with one or more references – as if the references offer a safety net against the accusation of making 'unsubstantiated claims'.

As a reviewer and editor, I now find myself using my prerogative to ask authors to remove all unnecessary references. I really hope that some more of my colleagues do the same.

***Written remarks from reviewers from management journal, and author reflections on the same.***

Reviewer 1 R1: This paper is amusing and provocative and provides some interesting reflections, it is written in an interesting autoethnographic style.

Author: so the paper is provocative - which was clearly the intention. It was designed to subvert or at least question conventional wisdom regarding management PhDs. And it is of interesting (twice) and even amusing (satirical?) which would suggest that paper was accessible, legible, held the reader's interest. I note that one assessment criteria for reviewers is to decide whether this would be of interest. I read here that it would be. It also acknowledges methodology, and would seem to infer this is an acceptable example of that method.

RI Unfortunately its message is, in my view, rather risky. A PhD is supposed to be an apprenticeship in the process of becoming an academic and one of the first essentials is being able to demonstrate where you have relied on previous knowledge in order to demonstrate rigour in the thinking process, and demonstrate where you have taken existing knowledge and built from it to create a space for your own contribution.

Au: Now for the but.<sup>1</sup> Being risky<sup>1</sup>, even 'rather risky<sup>1</sup> is unfortunate<sup>1</sup>, which would be to say wrong. Papers to this journal should not provoke conventional wisdom, clearly. I am then treated to a normative lecture on what a PHD is supposed<sup>1</sup> to be. Interestingly the PhD in question was titled 'On becoming an academic,<sup>1</sup> which this (telepathic) reviewer could not have known, but it might suggest that I am aware of the rite of passage function of the PHD. Now this paper was not a PhD in itself but a critique of the lack of criticality that might ensue from following all the first essentials on the way to squeezing in your own contribution. What then if your own emergent contribution was to reflect upon and be critical of the doctoral process itself, including fetishizing of the ins and outs of building a bibliography?

R1: Fifteen pages of what are effectively random reflections (since anyone else could combine the references in an entirely different way) may be an interesting displacement exercise,

Au: I guess anyone could have put together the references in an entirely

different way. That is true. And it would read entirely differently. Of course it would. The point here could be that 'anyone' could digest the entirety of any PhD bibliography and come up with different conclusions. There is more randomness in the process than we might allow. The use of the term 'displacement exercise' fascinates; is there an extent to which much academic writing is displacing something that is more challenging to address, or embarrassing or taboo?

R1: but perhaps not something you want on your list of publications.

Au: I am not at all sure i need the 'publications list police' to be censoring my list in advance, or protecting me in advance from career suicide. This discouraging advice is hardly in service of encouraging pluralism.

R1: it is impossible to tell if the entire list of references are actually included in the musings in the text,

Au: Well they are, but surely by this point the reviewer might have understood that the whole idea of referencing was being ironized and that the writer may even enjoy being scolded for not obeying the reference rules? It is not though 'impossible to tell', though it would be arduous to do the reverse engineering on this, I admit. But if you do not trust me, then do the work before you point the finger of suspicion.

R1: or even whether they were the appropriate references for the topic you were actually researching,

AU: I do not think the appropriateness is the point, though again it could be that a different set of references might have served. Marvelous to have the 'appropriate' term jammed in there though -it gives me a happy shudder to know that the great catch-all for non-specific disapprobrium has been mobilized in this instance.

R1: Again this is questionable practice, because in writing a thesis you would not include references that have not been cited in the main body of the work.R1:

AU: All practices are questionable I would like to think, though it is not difficult to discern the implied gaze at this point.

R1: inventing new terms, is often frowned upon in academic work

AU:This criticism is rich indeed, coming from the neologism factory that is the management academy. This is coming from a reviewer that without a blink uses the term 'autoethnography' (a term not mentioned in my text) which is not exactly a term in common or ancient use. So who is it that is doing the 'frowning?' Who decides all of these rules and who is it that hides behind anonymity to police them?

***Reviewer 2 – same journal***

R2: The paper reads more like an essay in english literature than a paper for a Management conference.

Au: Oh so management has it is own pure intellectual tradition then and does not seek to draw upon diverse strands to feed its jackal tendencies when it comes to appropriating theory or tradition? Clearly this reviewer has a view of what a paper for should

look like but does not share it with me. I am not aware of clear guidelines from this body regarding who a conference paper should read; and I think wise that they choose not to publish such guidelines. It would seem from this that other intellectual traditions are acceptable - perhaps sociology, economics, psychology - but not dear old English (or 'english' as the reviewer would have the diminished version of the same, and on St George's Day too.) I am not actually sure what the criticism is. I would not describe this piece as an essay in the classical sense.

R2: There is no serious attempt at building a theoretical structure

Au: So do papers to \*\*\* need to build theoretical structures? Did the paper claim to be building theoretical structures? The reviewer guidelines ask for comment on 'potential' theory contributions. Why not critique it also for its lack of evidence base, for its failure to identify a control group or to pass reliability tests? There is no serious attempt at meeting these silent criteria either. No attempt is made to meet this paper on its own terms and see the potential theory that might be gleaming amid the ironizing.

R2: or of giving any real insights to knowledge and learning in a Management domain.

Au: I fully accept that the paper did not provide this reviewer with any real or even false directly signposted insights into K & L in a Management domain. In defence I would say that this paper never claimed to be seeking this a goal - the paper was submitted to the Open but \*\*\* chose to move it to K & L, though perhaps the reviewer did not know that. I could see an argument that would say it does make an contribution to K & L, in that it challenges many of the assumptions driving PhD construction, which then go on to shape that persons future academic practice, and collectively socially construct the academy.

Author email response to \*\*\*

This sounds like the slamming of a door - tight shut. I am curious as to whether this reviewer has read the theme; but then perhaps they have read the blurb but understand 'pluralism' in a way that defies dialogue. I read from the \*\*\* call for papers that make a case for or evidence pluralism .

\*\*\* thus 'While such pluralism has contributed greatly to advancing management research, education, and practice, there have been institutional pressures towards greater homogenization. Measurement and evaluation systems which are applied to research, funding, learning and teaching may, perhaps inadvertently, reward conformity rather than recognising excellent work in its own terms. . Thus, the benefits of a pluralistic approach, enabling dialogue between positions of difference, incorporating systematic, radical and interpretivist approaches (amongst others) is worthy of attention and debate. The dynamics towards diversity on the one hand and inclusivity on the other raise a series of questions that should be of interest to \*\*\* delegates:

- € What are the advantages and disadvantages of a pluralistic orientation to management research?
- € How might management knowledge and education be developed through pedagogical and theoretical debates?
- € How can context-specificity and difference be incorporated into

- recognised practices of management?

All of that resonates with me. My paper was designed to provoke dialogue around the forces that drive conformity in the management academy. It is clearly interpretivist, and to some extent radical. It asks to be judged in its own terms. It invites dialogue and it rejoices in its own diversity. Yet in your response we have a couple of reviewers flying in the face of the conference theme by unequivocally rejecting a different sort of contribution, that is different for a reason, and that is to challenge conventional thinking and mimetic isomorphism, if I may use a fashionably obscure portmanteau word, without provoking frowns.

I

In the \*\*\* flyer \*\*\* describes itself as 'friendly and inclusive.' I do not find these reviews to be such, not is the unceremonious way you have shuffled this feedback to me without comment edifying either. I am not even sure that you read the comments, never mind the piece. Given that this is a rejection - which is always emotionally loaded -then the cursory second review is just plain rude. These is not a single formative piece of feedback to work on in any of it, simply the message that my work is not up to snuff against the criteria of \*\*\*, of which this reviewer is an important representative. I know a few years ago when +++ was running K & L that there was disquiet expressed regarding the disparate quality of blind review or peer review. I do not feel that I am being treated as a peer by these blind reviewers, and it concerns me that previous concerns expressed regarding reviewer quality and manners have not been addressed.

You may want to look into this assessment and reconsider your decision in the light of this feedback, or not. I am dismayed by the tone of these reviews and the assumptions that lie behind them. I would be happy to share the feedback directly with the anonymous reviewers if they are up to it. I will certainly work up this paper further to reference these priceless reviews which echo precisely the mindset that the paper challenges, so in one sense their reviews are a confirmative gift.

Your guidelines do say that reviewers are invited to 'consider the quality of ideas, methodology, (potential) theoretical contribution, clarity of presentation, and potential interest to other participants. They will be judged against the norms of the category in which they are submitted.' I am not at all sure if these are the guidelines that these reviewers were following, nor do I know what these norms are.

Yiannis Gabriel in a recent blog wrote a polemic on the tendency of reviewers to review all papers as if they were a mini-PhD rather than to judge the paper according to it own terms. I feel that this is the treatment that is being meted out by your reviewers. I feel scolded for not knowing what a proper Management PhD should be about, when I do in fact hold such a credential from a Russell Group university.

I think all of this matters, at a contextual level, though maybe you do not. I am not at all sure now that I wish to gift \*\*\* the fee for the conference if this is the exclusive mindset that drives it. I have been to seven \*\*\* conferences over the past ten years but i am not all sure if I will go to another. based on this.

I would be happy to develop this paper further to include this review feedback, and the process followed. I think there is scope for revision prior to re-submission within \*\*\* guidelines

Please feel free to share this with whomever you will

best regards

Author