



Original Article

Provocations: Who, what, where, why and how?

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Cara Reed 
Cardiff University, UK

Martyna Śliwa
Durham University, UK

Ajnesh Prasad 
Tecnologico de Monterrey, Mexico

The ‘Provocations Essay’, formerly ‘Provocations to Debate’, was a section of the journal conceived eight years ago, ‘. . . to provide a forum for essay-like, polemical writing on important and topical issues concerning management learning, education and knowledge in organisations’ (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 533). With new Editors-in-Chief and a new Provocations Editor coming on board since the publication of the last editorial on the ethos of this section, now is an opportune time to pause and reflect on what it has achieved, where it has evolved and the plans for its future direction.

What?

At the core of the Provocations Essay section has always been a desire to provide a space in the journal where a form of writing, different from what is found in traditional academic studies, can be pursued in order for critical reflection and argumentation on issues pertinent to the *Management Learning* community. This ambition has certainly been realised with a range of essays produced so far that encompass a variety of topics, ranging from reflexivity (Czarniawska, 2016) to artificial intelligence (Krammer, 2023) and collective leadership (Raelin, 2018) to becoming processual (de Vaujany and Introna, 2023). Engagements with grand challenges such as climate change have come to be featured more prominently (e.g. Arruda Fontenelle, 2023; Moratis and Melissen, 2022) in the section as well as deeper reflection on the community that we, as management and organisation studies (MOS) researchers and educators, belong to – whether that be in academic conferences (e.g. Etzion et al., 2022), management research-led teaching impact (Mitchell and Harvey, 2018) or predatory publishing (Dobusch and Heimstädt, 2019).

Corresponding author:

Cara Reed, Cardiff Business School, Cardiff University, Aberconway Building, Colum Drive, Cathays, Cardiff CF10 3EU, UK.

Email: reedcj1@cardiff.ac.uk

This impetus behind the section remains consistent going forward, where ultimately the aim is to provoke MOS scholars to think (and write) differently about matters relevant to MOS and management learning. The provocations can focus on research or teaching (or both) but should refrain from predicating their essay on purely a strawman argument, polemical speculation or an ideological diatribe. Instead, the provocation should either persuade the reader to consider a fresh perspective on a point of interest or concern that is familiar to the *Management Learning* community or it should introduce new topics and new ways of making sense of them that have not been considered sufficiently before.

Why?

With this broad aim in mind, previous provocations essays have pursued the section as an outlet to get the reader to think differently, either about themselves and/or their chosen subject. For instance, Arruda Fontenelle (2023) asks the reader to fundamentally re-think their conception of the Anthropocene in MOS. Alternatively, Thanem and Wallenberg (2021) argue that the field of MOS, in terms of both teaching and research, still has a lot to learn from the humanities in its 'rich portrayal of human lives' (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2021: 364). Meanwhile, Kroese (2024) encourages us to reconceive sex/gender inequality in management learning as violence towards women.

The journal has seen a substantial increase in volume and range of provocations essay proposals in the last couple of years. While we are pleased to see the growing interest in this section of the journal, we want to encourage prospective authors to really consider why they want to pursue a provocation. The argumentation or reflection presented in a provocation essay needs to be considered in terms of how it can push the reader to think differently about an issue pertinent to the readership of the journal – as this is, indeed, what this section is about. We often feel provoked and moved to share our views with others by events that have affected us personally. However, there is a fine line between drawing on one's experiences to say things and writing on topics of broader interest and using the provocations essay format to simply express one's thoughts, feelings and frustrations as they might do in a diary entry. To put it tersely, this section is not simply an outlet for an individual to 'rant' or to share their story.

Importantly, and in line with the previous editorial (Brewis and Bell, 2020), this section is not a space in which to 'fight over' ideas. This does not mean that issues cannot be debated. However, here again we ask prospective authors to consider the 'why' behind this counter response – why is this counter position important and how does it allow us to think differently? This question should always drive the provocations essay. Our predecessors proposed paired essays to negate the academic tradition of 'point scoring' in relation to someone else's work,

which is inclined toward a combative style of argumentation for its own sake, where one scholar seeks to dismantle or discredit the work of another author primarily as a means of enhancing the perceived legitimacy of their own intellectual position (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 535).

Unfortunately, this is an ambition that has so far not been realized, but we welcome consideration of this technique in which to outline a diverse range of views on a particular phenomenon.

Who?

Diversity among provocateurs was also a priority of this section from its outset, which was understood as offering a range of voices to provoke (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 535). To this end, the

evolution of the section has encouraged provocations from a more diverse range of scholars (e.g. Abdallah, 2024; Greedharry, 2021; Kroese, 2024), with more to come (as we are in a privileged position to know what is in the pipeline). However, in the wake of the continued preponderance of particular voices (namely white, male, senior academics) in essay, review or commentary sections of journals (including, to some degree, *Management Learning*) – especially when the topic under scrutiny focuses on our research community – ensuring a wider demographical and positional diversity of authors is an even more prescient need for the section’s future direction.

As such, and consistent with the priorities of the current Editors-in-Chief (Prasad and Śliwa, 2022), we strongly encourage scholars representing a range of seniority, genders and ethnicities and coming from different geographical regions to propose a provocation as we will be actively seeking to broaden the diversity of voices contributing to the section. Of course, if you are a senior, white male academic, then this does not preclude you from contributing to the section, but we would encourage you to consider whether you can collaborate with others on your provocation to diversify the voices that provoke. Likewise, a greater diversity of reviewers is also being pursued, trying to widen the pool of people being approached to gatekeep the provocations that make it into the journal – which we hope will be successful as provocation essays are shorter pieces to read and review than standard papers.

Where?

The journal has always tended to have an Anglo-European dominance, but this is changing, albeit slowly, with better geographical representation. For instance, we have witnessed greater inclusion of scholars from the Global South in the journal as reflected in the current makeup of its editorial board as well as its authors and reviewers. This phenomenon has also been reflected in the evolution of the Provocations Essay section with scholars from a broader range of geographies provoking the MOS community (e.g. Arruda Fontenelle, 2023; Barros and Alcadipani, 2023) and in the pipeline of essays the journal will shortly publish and from whom we have invited submissions. Nevertheless, for its future, this section will continue to seek a wider geography of the academe to be represented.

How?

When it comes to how to write the provocation, the section is also considered a place in which to write differently. This was evident in the section’s creation (Brewis and Bell, 2020), and thus far, essays have adopted poetry (Azevedo, 2023), literature extracts (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2021) and auto-ethnographic vignettes (Knights et al., 2022) in their efforts to provoke. Essays in the pipeline include visual materials and popular culture texts to help make their case. Again, the writing ultimately must aid in provoking the reader to think differently; although this core aim, coupled with the broader essay format, does provide an opportunity to pursue creative writing projects more readily. While academic writing continues to be accused of becoming more obtuse and formulaic (e.g. Gilmore et al., 2019), the Provocations Essay section remains an important space to protect; not just what one may write about, but how one may write about it.

Practically, we also draw readers’ attention, here, to how there is a slightly different submission process for a provocations essay as compared to a standard manuscript. For the former, we require prospective authors to submit a 300-word proposal to the journal’s designated email address. Following a review of a number of essay proposals submitted in a given time period, you will receive a decision from the Provocations Editor as to whether you are invited to pursue a full manuscript, which, once submitted, undergoes double-anonymous peer review. The initial

proposal element of the submission process allows editors to keep track of the range of provocations being offered and, thus, avoid redundancy or an over-emphasis in one particular area of interest or concern. Obviously, we are not able to accept all proposals, and therefore, not all authors will be invited to develop a full provocations essay. The Provocations Editor has the role and authority to choose those proposals which they deem to be the most interesting, timely and promising – based on each proposal’s own merits and in relation to other proposals submitted to *Management Learning*. We understand that it can be disappointing to receive a ‘no’ after you have submitted a proposal. But when it happens, please, do not put pressure on the Provocations Editor to change their decision or to provide you with detailed justification and feedback. We are all doing our best, and sometimes it simply is not possible to satisfy everyone. For more information on the submission process and examples of previous provocations essays, please visit the dedicated page on the *Management Learning* website <https://journals.sagepub.com/page/mlq/collections/provocations-to-debate>.

Conclusion

Since its inception, the Provocations Essay section has served as a valuable and innovative outlet in which researchers can consider new ways of thinking in established areas of MOS or, alternatively, expose uncharted territories that are relevant but have not yet had due consideration. Its success is reflected in the fact that more journals in our field have also followed suit and pursued an essay or commentary section in some form. Likewise, the range of ideas and scholars that have so far engaged with the Provocations Essay section is indicative of its enduring significance that we, as the current curators of the section, would like to see continue to evolve and develop. Going forward, greater diversity when it comes to the share of voice to provoke, the topics covered and the written (or visual) expression of the provocation will be strongly encouraged so that the section continues in its initial trajectory to be ‘a source of critical, reflexive insight and opportunity’ (Brewis and Bell, 2020: 533).

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ORCID iDs

Cara Reed  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1085-1661>

Ajnesh Prasad  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4368-1796>

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