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Meandering as Method for Conversational Learning and Collaborative Inquiry

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Abstract

Collaborative inquiry and conversational learning are approaches to management education and learning in which participants construct knowledge together through dialogue. Both approaches advocate letting go of control to allow insight to emerge through free-flowing conversation, but little has been written about how to accomplish this. Furthermore, these approaches contradict expectations about learning among both teachers and students and raise fears of discussion degenerating into pointlessness. This paper presents the idea of “meandering” - wandering causally without urgent destination - as a way of framing a conversation process that can help management educators loosen control without being out of control. It is based on a case of group learning generated by the six authors at the 2019 Research in Management Learning and Education (RMLE) Unconference. Our conversational learning process, which we described as meandering, was not only pleasant and rewarding, but also led to a concrete action plan and research agenda. In this paper we demonstrate and discuss the highly relational, embodied, and contextual nature of meandering and propose a research agenda for generating more knowledge about this method and how to put it into practice in management learning and education.

Meandering as Method for Conversational Learning and Collaborative Inquiry

In the context of management education, collaborative inquiry and conversational learning can be utilized as processes whereby students and their teachers construct knowledge by talking together. Collaborative inquiry is designed to bring together differing perspectives to research (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006) and has been applied to management education – as students and teachers learning together through dialogue (Hay & Samra-Frederiks, 2019). Conversational learning is a "process whereby learners construct new meaning and transform their collective experiences into knowledge through their conversations" (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002, p. 412).

Both approaches imply a radical restructuring of the idea of teaching and learning as knowledge transfer rather than knowledge creation (Hay & Samra-Frederiks, 2019; Neville, 2008). Instead, educators incorporating approach may view students and teachers as partners whose expertise and experience are equally important (Baker et al, 2002; Hay & Samra-Frederiks, 2019). An obstacle to adopting conversational approaches is the need for teachers to let go of control (Baker et al., 2002; Dawson, 2013; Sense, 2005), which can generate anxiety in both teachers and students. Advocates of conversational learning point out that it requires creating a safe conversational space (Kisfalvi & Oliver, 2005), which does not imply “an ‘anything goes’ approach”, but rather holding “the potentially creative tension of letting go while simultaneously guiding the conversation just enough to increase psychological safety and learning” (Baker, 2004, p. 697). It is less clear, however, what it means to hold this creative tension in practice.

In this paper, we present the idea of “meandering” as a way of helping management educators simultaneously let go and guide. We respond to Hay and Samra-Frederiks’ (2019, p. 77) call for “research to expand and deepen our understanding of collaborative inquiry” and draw on a case of a group learning process generated at the 2019 RMLE Unconference.

We came to see this process as meandering, defined as “follow(ing) a winding or intricate course” or “wander(ing) aimlessly or casually without urgent destination” (Merriam-Webster on-line dictionary) or “moving slowly with no particular direction or with no clear purpose” (Cambridge on-line dictionary).

Our meandering was productive, leading to important insights and concrete action points including this current paper, a paper on restorative spaces and faculty well-being, and proposed ‘meanders’ as PDWs at international conferences. At the same time, our meander was pleasant and liberating and created strong interpersonal connections. Our goal here is to inquire into the puzzle: *how did we get to where we wanted to go while moving slowly through a winding and intricate course with no particular direction or clear purpose?* We aim to provide management educators with a frame for experimenting with and further researching the merits of meandering as a process of conversational learning within management education.

Method

We start by illustrating our meandering in action through a case, which we then analyze to draw out our lessons and directions for future work. We reconstructed our meander based on the second author’s transcribed conference notes. What is presented in the below case is a transcribed and heavily edited version of these notes, which has been added to by all authors/group members’ recollections, thus producing an agreed and negotiated collaborative group-ethnography (Campbell & Lassiter, 2010). We believe that this rich, fine-grained ethnographic writing suits our subject matter and the experience we wish to share.

Given length restrictions, we present an abridged version of three group discussion sessions and three plenary ‘ideas sharing’ sessions on Day 1. Author 2’s ‘reflections at the time’ are written in the present tense, whereas the ‘recollections’ are written in the past tense. In our analysis, we show how meandering facilitates knowledge creation, by looking at our

experience through three metaphorical lenses: a) a physical pattern of river formation (e.g. Fredsøe, 1978), b) a cognitive mental process (e.g. Manaster, 1988), and c) an approach used by researchers (e.g. Gomez, 1995).

The Case

Prologue

Author 2: I arrive late from another conference, mind is full of this and other “busynesses”. The next morning on opening the shutters...I am in a special, beautiful place, the bay gleams as trying to focus on the day ahead, I open my laptop with trepidation...

Author 5: Like Author 2, I arrived straight from another conference, but also at the tail end of two months of international travel. My mind was already well on its way back across the Atlantic...

Author 4: ... I chose [my] hotel as it embodied elements that are individually restorative, being located directly on the coast as it offered a sensual experience... my hope for the Unconference was that it may prove different to other conferences in terms of the way it engages people...

Day 1

Author 2: After the introduction the newly formed groups spill out of the room towards the round tables provided. Our small group hesitates where to go ...the tables look too big for us – “Shall we go outside?”... We establish ourselves under a tree which provides some shade.

Group Session 1:

Author 2: Author 1 starts...He talks about the boundaries of conferences, of his proposal to do an alternative session rejected by a conference...Somebody makes the connection to the Unconference being outside the norms and we start talking about spaces for learning, ...disconnections and connections...the Slow Professor (Berg and Seeber, 2016) ...cutting the stuff that we do, gathering low hanging fruit. ... engaging with communities and the

environment around us and taking time to go fishing... We talk metaphors (a lot!) the university as a studio vs. an incubator... We imagine the biopolitics of the 'beautiful university'. ...What are the academic survival tactics? (Bristow, Robinson and Ratle, 2017). We share examples of groups coming together for mutual support...the slow swimming club (Jones 2018). Disconnecting in order to reconnect.

Author 4: Spaces of escape can be much more...if we can eventually collectively act and contest. Much of the slow swimming club was about the act of not being judged based on spurious criteria...fostering an ethic of care for each ...this temporal, spatial, political and cultural disconnection seems crucial for people to connect on a human, vulnerable level (Smith and Ulus 2019).

Author 5: Author 4's mention of *The Slow Professor* resonated. Berg and Seeber (2016) focus explicitly on pleasure, emotion, and academic community building. Theirs is a work of resistance and restoration, and Author 4's description of his slow swimming club focused my thinking on these themes.

Author 2: ...During this process we move round the tree, I'm touched how the others are aware of my need for shade.

Author 1: ...Our group was...unfocused and we all seemed to enjoy it. None of us were anxious to structure, or set goals...There was a tacit agreement to let things emerge – and to have fun.

Ideas Sharing 1:

Author 2: I can't remember much about what we said... We all went up together.

Author 1: We did not prepare a presentation or use a flip chart. We just spoke randomly about our discussion. It felt playful and a bit irreverent.

Author 4: ...We fed back– in much more relational, reflective way – other presentations felt quite like bullet points...

Author 3: At this point I became aware of the group. I spoke with Dave on the way out, and we noted thematic similarities in what I'd presented for my group, when I returned to my group, discussion had shifted away from my own thinking... I felt a sense of disloyalty as I was about to get up and move on.

Group Session 2:

Author 2: We decide to stay inside as the sun has become too strong. We hesitate about taking part of a round table, but instead create our own space appropriating a smaller table at the side...

Author 2: Author 6 joins us - Author 3 comes across - We talk about the differences between space, place, and spacing. Author 1 talks of social space and the field theory of Lewin, Cassirer and Bourdieu, of substantialist and relational views of the world...How is the space I am in shaping my action? How is my thinking and action shaping the space/field?

Author 1: Social space and field theory are my "baby" I wanted to share them with the group – kind of a gift...

Author 2: Author 4 talks of spacing and placing...of crafting space (Jones, 2014). We talk about students and time – are their concepts of time different from ours?

Author 3: I remember presenting my ideas on busyness, the fetishisation of busyness in academic life... (Martell 2014).

Author 2: We talk of wellbeing and spaces of being well. Author 5 talks about rest (Pang 2018) and of renting a cottage in Ireland...of not being connected to the outside world, of resting and of working on his own terms.

Author 5: In many academic circles, detailing how you escaped for 11 nights to sleep and read and rest, and, yes, work, might well lead to derision. I recall a sense of relief in myself and the others that we could candidly discuss such things.

Author 6: I found this discussion useful and pertinent to our profession – faculty and student space, self and space, colleagues and space – I’m intrigued by this – how we not only “craft our space” but how our space crafts us, defines us, influences us (Vesala and Tuomivaara, 2018). I remarked on how different a person I am in these different spaces.

Author 2: We talk about travel and change of place... about Dubrovnik and cruise ships the disturbance they create... about carbon footprints, and international travel. Author 3 talks of the Ephemera Journal’s train conference from Moscow to Beijing (Virtanen and Böhm 2006)

Author 3: I remember thinking how well the group was discussing, swapping ideas, building on each other’s thoughts, and how all contributed ...the group felt very egalitarian.

Author 6: I was reflecting here on how, in occupying new and unfamiliar spaces, we develop some heightened sense of “empathy” and understanding of the “other” I experience this when I visit the borrowers in my microfinance program living in dire poverty.

Author 2: Travel creating opportunities for learning... learning hubs – new connections ...Universities can be isolated and isolating ... (Knights and Clarke 2014).

Author 1: We were free associating, but there was a pattern emerging...At one pole we were talking about **learning and social and physical spaces**. At the other, we were talking about **the darker sides of academic life**.

Author 2: We discuss professionalism and being a student. Developing reflexive spaces for students – doing ‘deepwork’. How do you develop students? Opening up spaces of freedom for themselves. Spaces of activism. Just before the break, Author 5 mentions the Special Issue on student and faculty mental health in JME.

Idea Sharing 2:

Author 2: I talk about learning, travelling and the Dubrovnik cruise ships.

Group Discussion 3:

Author 2: Author 1 announces he is leaving to join another group ...but maybe will be back.

Author 1: It was a real conflict for me. During the idea sharing session, I heard another group talk about creating social spaces and I felt like it was a good opportunity to share my ideas.

But I was really enjoying our group...then wondered if it weren't a bit too comfortable.

Author 2: We talk about the JME SI call and developing a paper consisting of vignettes about our individual restorative spaces. Author 3 talks about his "marking holiday" in Spain...defensive selfcare – the everyday things you do that you don't share.

Author 3: It was nice to find my own story, it came very naturally, it seemed so for us all.

Author 6: I had no idea of what my restorative space was. It dawned on me as we talked... that is was my music, my choral group, and my evolving response to that music over time. This was a bit of an epiphany for me – getting clarity around what I value...

Author 2: ...Spaces of compensation. Everyday practices of selfcare. Conferences not restorative but exhausting (!) (Bell and King 2010)

Author 5: I recall being reassured that others, too, felt conferences as depleting experiences.

Author 2: At that point that we decide we are all exhausted, we need air and decide to meander outside. The idea is to go for a walk...we walk 200 yards to my hotel and install ourselves at a shady table on the bar terrace.

Author 3: ...yes it felt like a drift, to use walking and shifting social spaces to help elicit creative discussion.

Author 6: Being outside was liberating. Even though this is an "unconference" it takes place in a conference-like space familiar to us all...We continued to share stories, but we also started to make commitments to proceeding with this work academically. Maybe having an impact on others?

Author 4: Meandering made a difference... we started to crystallise our identity work (Bristow et al 2017) as a group... it had a great impact – the hotel, drinking and chats felt

much more liberating as it was crafted by ourselves...people started to show their generosity to the group – Author 2 buying the drinks - this is what people wanted rather than what they were expected to do.

Idea Sharing 3:

Author 2: (To the Plenary) We have been talking about the need for restorative spaces given the pressures of our work. Having explored different types of self and peer care– we are working towards a submission to a JME SI on Mental Health and Wellbeing.

Author 2: Our report back sounds very efficient and to the point – we have a mission and we are not giving too much away – it’s ours and we are becoming protective of it 😊

Author 5: While I had found the conversations enjoyable and affirming, I found it difficult to be content with conversation. Perhaps this is the influence of our corporate academy’s focus on productivity and measurable outcomes (Butler & Spoelstra, 2012). I was glad that the conversation turned here toward a plan to produce. I now lament rushing that transition.

Analysis

In the case, the first reference to “meandering” arose in relation to the decision to leave the conference venue and wander a bit. However, this term captures many features of the inquiry process from beginning to end. Three meander metaphors provide lessons here. First, the term “meander” derives from the Meander River in Turkey meaning: “a series of regular sinuous curves, bends, loops, turns, or windings in the channel of a...watercourse.” (Wikipedia, 2019) (see Fig. 1). The metaphor fits our discussion, which flowed as the contribution of one member stimulated a thought or feeling in another. We were “tributaries” whose experience, thinking, and feeling ran together to into a free-flowing, dynamic discussion which twisted and turned but also grew, gaining a stronger current over the two days. This strength, based on shared values, concerns, and empathy, has facilitated our virtual ‘re-meetings’ and the progress towards concrete outputs, including this paper.

*****INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE*****

There was also constant physical meandering. When we encountered the large tables, we set up our chairs outside. We rotated around the tree, we set up a smaller table, we decided to leave the conference venue. The physical, embodied nature of meandering enabled us to spontaneously create learning spaces that suited the size and nature of the group and accommodated individual needs. It also enriched both the discourse and the developing relationships amongst us. These practices also resonated strongly with the first of our emergent discussion themes: **learning and social and physical spaces**.

In a simulation study employing chaos theory, Stølum (1996) found that river meandering was a self-organizing process which, over time, continually oscillated between chaos and order (see Figure 2).

*****INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE*****

This suggests that conversational learning as meandering can be envisioned as a self-organizing dialectical process moving back and forth between chaos and order. Thus, it was through the group's journey out of the conference venue that it moved towards a concrete task, yet it did not end the meandering as the discussion continued to twist and turn, sometimes chaotically, until the Unconference end.

As a second metaphor, mental meandering, also known as mind-wandering or day-dreaming, provides another lens through which we can observe our group process at the Unconference. Building on a classic article on doodling by the psychoanalyst Alfred Adler, Manaster (1988) concluded that "doodling" and mental meanderings assert the individual's being in a setting where open expression is stifled. This interpretation of our meandering seems strange, given that we were at an unconference, which itself is an attempt to break out of the constraints of traditional conferences. And, yet, Authors 2, 4, and 5 all began their accounts of the group process with some sense of doubt or ambivalence. Perhaps past

experiences and the busyness we brought with us made it difficult to appreciate the beautiful setting and free(er) space of the unconference. Acknowledging these distractions and vulnerabilities led to our second major discussion theme: **the darker sides of academic life**, specifically the lack of faculty well-being and the need ‘to put our own oxygen masks on before helping others,’ (Author 5). Skovholt and Trotter-Mathison (2016), claim that “‘psychological wellness’ is ‘an ethical imperative’ (p. 166) for those in helping professions: ‘self-care is not an indulgence., but as an essential part of our professional identities.’” Our constant use of metaphor could represent a mental doodling/meandering which helped us to explore our academic identities in terms of where we were and where we wanted to be and helped in revealing our vulnerabilities (Knights & Clarke, 2014). Our choice to meander may have reflected a common desire to break out of the normative constraints imposed by conferences and academia in general (Bell & King, 2010; Butler & Spoelstra, 2012).

Cognitive studies of mind-wandering show that “mental time travel (MTT)” makes it possible to revisit the past and experience the future in ways that enhance decision-making and behavioral selection (Miles et al., 2010, p. 1). In our meandering we continually travelled through time going back and forth between stories of our restorative spaces and plans for future collaborations and activities. When people travel mentally, their bodies move in the same direction (Miles, 2010). The embodied nature of our meandering was clearly reflected in the decision of the group to get up and leave the conference venue.

As a third metaphor, meandering as a research approach is particularly relevant here. Our urge to be constantly mobile may have also reflected and/or stimulated the complexity of the subject matter we were engaging with. Through a Google Scholar search, we discovered a plethora of academic papers with titles using the term “meandering/s” to describe a particular approach to inquiry, e.g. *Unspoken paradigms: Meanderings through the metaphors of a field* (Gomez, 1995). Such papers address extremely complex issues that cannot be easily be

bounded or mapped (Gomez, 1995; Hughes, 2002; Tandon et al., 2011) from a variety of perspectives (Ashbolt, 2007; Edwards & Ribbens, 2016). This use of meander suggests that these papers reflect the idea of collaborative inquiry in which “academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to coproduce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world” (Van de Ven & Johnson, 2006, p. 810). Our ways of discussing our two complex emergent themes, illustrated in the case, resonate with this definition.

Discussion and Research Agenda

In response to our research question, our analysis suggests that there is a method to meandering, as a group experience, that can contribute to the facilitation of collaborative inquiry and conversational learning. Meandering *loosens the constraints of the formal setting and frees people to be themselves and to bring their selves and their experience into the conversation*. Meandering enables each participant to be a source that directs a conversation that winds back and forth, through time and space, taking shape through a dialectic between chaos and order.

Our meandering was produced spontaneously in a peer group without formal facilitation. The elements which made our meandering work were shared values, empathy, close listening, the sharing of vulnerabilities, use of metaphors (as verbal doodling), generosity, and a shared willingness to (re)shape our learning spaces to suit our own needs and preferences. Meandering was also well suited to our emergent, complex theme of faculty wellbeing and the need for restoration (Smith & Ulus, 2019) in order to a) continue as good educators (Skovholt & Trotter-Mathison, 2016) and b) to mirror such practices to our students as current/future organizational employees. Accordingly we would encourage management educators to develop self-reflective meandering groups as part of their continuing professional development and own self-care and restoration (Cochran-Smith &

Lytle, 2009). We suggest that meandering is well suited for the discussion of complex work-based issues and propose that meandering could work well with post work experience students and in executive education.

Meandering as a method of collaborative inquiry also has important implications for business education, not simply as an alternative management teaching practice at the undergraduate and Masters levels, but also for generating knowledge, fostering identity work, and aiding survival among doctoral students and early career academics. As Hay & Samra-Frederiks (2019, p. 59) pointed out, the need is to prepare doctoral students who have the skill to generate knowledge both through connectedness and detached observation.

Meandering offers a collective method for opening spaces of spontaneity, creativity, relationality and restoration that are often stifled in academic systems focused heavily on individual performance, objectivity, structure, planning and fixed outcomes. The self-reflection and community building that meandering offers could be a significant factor in developing active agency, responsibility, and mutual support among young academics.

Walker et al. (2008) echoed this sentiment in a study aimed at rethinking doctoral education for the 21st Century. They stressed the importance of fostering intellectual communities that provide opportunities for experimentation, risk taking, making mistakes, and testing inchoate ideas not simply to create more convivial academic environments, but also to improve their knowledge-creating capacities. Whether or not meandering can provide these benefits needs to be tested and shown through research and evaluation over time.

So how can meandering be transported to the classroom as a useful frame for helping management educators create a conversational space and guide conversation without controlling it? To enable the exploration of this question we offer a research agenda consisting of five propositions for researchers to explore, test, and refine into actionable knowledge:

1. *Explicitly framing and explaining conversational learning as meandering will generate psychological safety* so that students and faculty begin experimenting with bringing themselves more fully into the conversation (Ramsey & Fitzgibbons, 2005).
2. *The embodied nature of meandering is very important to the learning process.* Future research should experiment with different physical settings for conversation and allowing students choice in shaping or changing the setting.
3. *Meandering offers a liberating alternative from the highly pressured focus of management education. Casualness and a lack of urgency will enable group members to listen, examine, and appreciate differences* (Conklin, 2012; Dawson, 2013). Research should explore how facilitators generate an atmosphere of casualness and how this affects conversation.
4. *Meandering is characterized as a highly relational type of learning through which people share vulnerabilities and develop enhanced connection, empathy, and understanding of each other and our shared contexts, producing what Hay and Samra-Fredericks (2019, p. 71) call a “more heartfelt and soulful management practice.”* Research is needed into how such practices could be replicated in the classroom through teachers and students opening up and the challenges and risks as well as affordances such practices may create.
5. *Meandering emerged at the RMLE Unconference, an open, alternative space, or “enclave”* (Friedman, Sykes, & Strauch, 2018), *within the normative, regimented space of academic conferences.* Research needs to explore how courses or programs could provide enclaves in which teachers can safely experiment with meandering and develop their facilitation skills with minimum risk and anxiety.

In conclusion, through our brief case and analysis, we suggest that meandering could be employed as a method for facilitating conversational learning and collaborative inquiry and deserves further attention by management educators. Our experiences show that meandering,

while seemingly chaotic, can lead not only to insights about complex topics but also to concrete outputs. Meandering shares many characteristics of good conversation, which generally begin without a clear goal and take shape spontaneously. They are deeply engaging, relaxed, and pleasurable, and they also lead to learning. For management educators, the trick is learning how we can step back to allow and support such meandering.

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Figure 1. The Wood River, Oregon, US (Meyers, 2019)



Figure 2. Meandering as oscillation between chaos and order (Stølum, 1996).

