

# Artfulness in the organizational playground

---

*An invitation to contribute for a special edition of the Action Research Journal*

---



There is light on the children, yet shadow in the corners and on the building centre stage: fun, creativity, oppression, we do not know. The children are playing, are they talking to each other or far away in their thoughts? From left to right there is a fence, to keep people in or out, or highlighting the paradox that light and dark are dependent upon each other?<sup>1</sup>

## An Invitation

Organizational life plays a vital role in creating and nurturing regenerative and sustainable societies (Bradbury et al. 2019). We bring our entire selves to our organizational work, not only the rational and logical parts of who we are, but also our artistic abilities in their many forms.

We invite contributions that explore the artistry of organizational life in its broadest sense. Art is both an artefact (for example the painting, piece of music or even a project) and the processes we use (for example how we work with others in an organization or in creating art); and both influence each other.

We are interested in what Heron and Reason call 'wider ways of knowing' (Heron & Reason 2008) under the banner of being *artful* in organizational life. Chris Seeley and Ellen Thornhill capture this in

---

<sup>1</sup> Picture Credit: On and On, 1951 (serigraph), Gershgoren, Milton (1909-89) / Dallas Museum of Art, Texas, USA / Tom Gooch Memorial Prize (Dallas Print Society, Dallas Art Association and Leon A. Harris, Jr.), 1st Annual Dallas National Print Exhibition, 1953 / Bridgeman Images

# Artfulness in the organizational playground

---

*An invitation to contribute for a special edition of the Action Research Journal*

---

their publication the *Artful Organisation* when they pose the broad question of ‘how we come to know, how we cultivate our imaginative and perceptual capacities and what we allow to inform our decision-making in pursuit of creating more sustainable systems, structures and organizations?’ (Seeley & Thornhill 2014, p7). That is not to say that our creations are always sustainable or good, and there too we can have a debate particularly around the ethics of our choices.

In the organizational playground what if we were to see the participants’ practices as a form of artistry? The term playground is used to illustrate the point that organizations for example are not entirely rational places (Flyvbjerg 1998) driven by logic. On the one hand they can be creative, imaginative and childlike places, but for some it might bring memories of coercion, oppression and power.

There are a number of connecting facets to this invitation to explore and show; these include:

- How can our organizational life be influenced and understood by our appreciation and creation of paintings, music, sculpture and other art; also how we can use our understanding of organizational life to influence art (Klee 1925; Taylor 2004; Becker 2008).
- How we bring our entire selves to the work that we do, when we enter a room and strike up a conversation, in short ourselves as an instrument of our artful practice with others (Sennett 2008).
- How we pay attention beyond the purely logical and rational, for example fear, hope, excitement. They too are a part of what it is to be human (Samra-Fredericks 2004; Smollan et al. 2010; Bloch 2013).
- How we can pay attention to different facets of artful knowing beyond episteme of scientific knowledge for example delicate empiricism, phronesis, metis, abduction, tacit knowing, withness (Shotter 2005; Shotter 2005; Hahn & Vignon 2019; Letiche & Statler 2005; Mullins 2002; Polanyi 1958). For example, how we pause and to create space for conversations that might not otherwise happen and to notice their effects.
- And, as a meta theme, how our reflexive choices that come to influence thought and practice come to influence our declarations of truth (Cunliffe 2009; Cunliffe 2016; Johnson & Duberley 2003).

We are sure that these points will create further questions. We want to keep those questions alive and open for contributors to explore. Even the term *art* or *artful* is a broad canvas of interpretation. For example, in an early version of this call for papers one reviewer drew a number of connections including art in terms of: rhetoric, its relation to scientific thinking; performance, in connection with politics; aesthetics. These, and others, offer fruitful areas for exploration. As a further avenue of investigation as researchers we too are artists both of our methods (Fisher & Phelps 2006) and of our own organizing.

# Artfulness in the organizational playground

---

*An invitation to contribute for a special edition of the Action Research Journal*

---

The aim is not only to create knowledge, it also to provide gifts of insights that can bring about positive change in a world that is facing urgent challenges. Contributors should be aware of the editors focused energy to refresh action research and are encouraged to refer to the seven choice points that will be used in assessing the quality of papers (Bradbury et al. 2019). Although we are keen to draw on the canon of action research literature, we excited by the prospect of exploring other sources of insight and knowledge.

## The editorial team

With all the benefits of a diverse editorial team, bringing many voices and perspectives, to both the process and the outcome of this project we are recruiting a diverse team. In supporting and nurturing authors, the editorial team will be drawn from diverse geography (including the global south), experiences, ethnicities and skills in art and organizational life. The team will include:

- James Traeger<sup>2</sup>
- Rob Warwick<sup>2</sup>
- Hilary Bradbury
- Catherine Etmanski
- Steve Marshall

Editorial Board has yet to be fully recruited for which more diverse representation is being sought This list will develop further.

## Timetable

- Papers to be received by 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020
- Publication anticipated Spring 2021

## References

- Becker, H., 2008. *Art Worlds - Updated and Expanded 25th Anniv.*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Bloch, M., 2013. Types of Shared Doubt in the Flow of Discussion. In M. Pelkmans, ed. *Ethnographies of Doubt - Faith and Uncertainty in Contemporary Societies*. London: I.B. Tauris & co.
- Bradbury, H. et al., 2019. What is good action research: Quality choice points with a refreshed urgency. *Action Research*, 17(1), pp.14–18.
- Cunliffe, A.L., 2016. On becoming a critically reflexive practitioner. *Journal of Management*

---

<sup>2</sup> Corresponding authors: Rob Warwick – [r.warwick@chi.ac.uk](mailto:r.warwick@chi.ac.uk) and James Traeger - [james.traeger@mayvin.co.uk](mailto:james.traeger@mayvin.co.uk)

# Artfulness in the organizational playground

---

*An invitation to contribute for a special edition of the Action Research Journal*

---

*Education*, 28(4), pp.407–426.

- Cunliffe, A.L., 2009. The philosopher leader: on relationalism, ethics and reflexivity-a critical perspective to teaching leadership. *Management Learning*, 40(1), pp.87–101.
- Fisher, K. & Phelps, R., 2006. Recipe or performing art? *Action Research*, 4(2), pp.143–164.
- Flyvbjerg, B., 1998. *Rationality and Power - Democracy in Practice*, Chicago: Chicago University University.
- Hahn, C. & Vignon, C., 2019. Management education from episteme to phronesis: The contribution of French didactic theory. *Management Learning*, pp.1–18.
- Heron, J. & Reason, P., 2008. Extending epistemology within a co-operative inquiry. In P. Reason & H. Bradbury, eds. *Handbook of Action Research*. Sage Publications.
- Johnson, P. & Duberley, J., 2003. Reflexivity in Management Research. *Journal of Management Studies*, 40(5), pp.022-2380.
- Klee, P., 1925. *Pedagogical Sketchbook*, London: Faber and Faber.
- Letiche, H. & Statler, M., 2005. Evoking Metis: Questioning the logics of change, responsiveness, meaning and action in organizations. *Culture and Organization*, 11(1), pp.1–16.
- Mullins, P., 2002. Peirce's Abduction and Polanyi's Tacit Knowing. *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy*, 16(3), pp.198–224.
- Polanyi, M., 1958. *Personal Knowledge - Towards a Post - Critical Philosophy*, Chicago: Chicago University University.
- Samra-Fredericks, D., 2004. *Managerial elites making rhetorical and linguistic "moves" for a moving (emotional) display*,
- Seeley, C. & Thornhill, E., 2014. *Artful Organisation*, Berkhamsted: Ashridge Business School.
- Sennett, R., 2008. *The Craftman*, London: Penguin.
- Shotter, J., 2005. Goethe and the Refiguring of Intellectual Inquiry : From ' Aboutness ' -Thinking to ' Witness ' -Thinking in Everyday Life. *Janus Head*, 8(1), pp.132–158.
- Shotter, J., 2005. Understanding Process From Within: An Argument for 'Witness'-Thinking. *Organization Studies*, 27(4), pp.585–604.
- Smollan, R.K., Sayers, J.G. & Matheny, J.A., 2010. Emotional Responses to the Speed, Frequency and Timing of Organizational Change. *Time & Society*, 19(1), pp.28–53.
- Taylor, S.S., 2004. Presentational Form in First Person Research. *Action Research*, 2(1), pp.71–88.