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Responsible Management: Engaging Moral Reflexive Practice Through Threshold Concepts

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Abstract In this conceptual paper we argue that, to date, principles of responsible management have not impacted practice as anticipated because of a disconnect between knowledge and practice. This disconnect means that an awareness of ethical concerns, by itself, does not help students take personal responsibility for their actions. We suggest that an abstract knowledge of principles has to be supplemented by an engaged understanding of the responsibility of managers and leaders to actively challenge irresponsible practices. We argue that a form of moral reflexive practice drawing on an understanding of threshold concepts is central to responsible management, and provides a gateway to transformative learning. Our conceptual argument leads to implications for management and professional education.

Keywords Responsibility · Reflexivity · Threshold concepts

Introduction

The stream of ethical scandals on a global level has raised an important challenge for business schools across the world—*how to develop ethically responsible, caring leaders and managers* (Osiemo 2012; Segal 2011). The latest scandal, the death of over 370 Bangladeshi garment workers in a factory collapse, illustrates what can happen when 'irresponsible' managers focus purely on the bottom line: cracks had appeared in the building the day before, yet workers were forced back to work because managers wanted to meet production schedules. It is not our intention here to review the criticisms and challenges of current research and teaching of business ethics, because this has been done very capably by others (e.g., Blackman et al. 2012; Petrick et al. 2011), but to supplement existing ideas by offering a way of helping business students develop responsible and ethical management practice.

We agree with Segal (2011) that packaged case studies and theories do not encourage managers to become open to, and engaged in, the nuances of lived experience. But what might? We argue that helping students engage in moral reflexive practice offers one way of helping them become responsible managers and leaders. Part of this practice entails facilitating learning from what can be troublesome situations and experiences. We suggest that threshold concepts provide a way of framing and understanding the required learning process. Meyer and Land (2003, 2005, 2006b), describe threshold concepts as central ideas that can change the way we engage with our knowledge. Thus engagement with important threshold concepts can offer a way in which business ethics teachers can sensitize students to their ethical responsibilities.

To develop our argument, we will begin by contrasting irresponsible and responsible leadership and management. We then go on to define moral reflexive practice and threshold concepts, before establishing the relationship between these theoretical areas. While these two sections of the paper are conceptual, we use selected quotations from student papers as potent illustrations of the themes

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that we discuss. The papers were produced as part of a required assignment during a class in which executive MBA students explored management practice from a range of critical theoretical perspectives.[1] The assignment consisted of writing about how any of the perspectives had made them view their past experience, or current management context, differently. After presenting our central argument and the illustrative quotations, we conclude by developing implications for business ethics education for students and educators.

Irresponsible and Responsible Leadership and Management

> "I gossiped with the "right" people about the "wrong" people. I complained about suppliers and contractors behind their backs, while playing the charming client to their faces. I sneered at those who did not conform to the cultural norms of what was expected of high achievers within the organization. I did all this, and was not concerned by my behavior, after all, I was, I thought, very effective in my role… One of the main points which has since struck me about my past performance was my lack of self-awareness. I was so focused on my performance being culturally acceptable to those in positions of influence, that I did not consider the wider implications of my actions. […] I was further struck by the intolerance I showed for the peers and team members who were not like me."
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> *Team Manager, Financial Services Company, and Executive MBA Student*

This excerpt from a student's paper is relevant to our argument in two main ways: it is illustrative of what the student now recognizes as irresponsible management practice and indicative of a self-reflexive questioning of her past actions. Her comments are suggestive of a shift in her understanding as she realizes that what is "culturally acceptable" is not necessarily morally responsible: that culture can foster ethical and unethical behaviors (Gunia et al. 2012). Importantly, she also recognizes that her own participation in these practices and ways of interacting have disempowered and excluded others. This has led to her realization that she needs to consider the wider implications of her behavior and take responsibility for her actions. Such responsibility means not only recognizing "…right-wrong decisions, that pit a moral value (e.g., honesty) against basic self interest (e.g., lying to get ahead)" (Gunia et al. 2012, p. 14), but also doing what is right.

Irresponsible actions in organizations are not uncommon. Over the last 10 years we have seen a plethora of ethical scandals, along with financial crises and leadership controversies. It seems that little has occurred to change ethical management practice, even though work on the social responsibility of business has been ongoing since the 1950s (see Carroll 1999 for a review). Perhaps part of the problem is that differentiating and understanding irresponsible and responsible actions is not a simple task. Lange and Washburn (2012, p. 308) elaborate by suggesting that irresponsible action has three main aspects: the effects are undesirable; the actor is culpable; and affected parties suffering the undesirable effects are non-complicit. Thus irresponsibility involves actions that demonstrate a lack of respect and concern for the wellbeing of others at both individual and collective levels. While this may conceptually seem self-evident, it is not always practiced, as we have seen in the garment factory scandal in Bangladesh.

So how can we define responsible management and leadership? Early work centered around the idea that responsible leadership is value-based, encompassing shared ideals of societal wellbeing, moral decision-making, and a sense of accountability to others (Doh and Stumpf 2005; Pless and Maak 2011). Responsible leaders cultivate "sustainable relationships with stakeholders … to achieve mutually shared objectives based on a vision of business as a force of good for the many, and not just a few (shareholders, managers)" (Maak 2007, p. 331). In addition, there are those who argue that because responsible leadership means standing up for what you believe is right, we therefore cannot ignore virtue and character as they are exhibited within relationships. Osiemo (2012) for example, identifies fortitude, prudence, temperance, and acting justly as being crucial ethical virtues. While these studies offer an idea of what responsibility might look like, and most authors agree that responsibility involves relationships, ideas about the nature of these relationships varies from a stakeholder-orientation (e.g., Maak and Pless 2006) to an interpersonal-orientation, where 'responsible' is associated with 'responsiveness'—being accountable to others in our everyday interactions with them (Cunliffe 2009). We suggest that in educating students we need to address both.

There have also been broader initiatives addressing the importance of management education in promoting responsible management. The United Nation's *Principles for Responsible Management Education* (PRME) launched in 2007 is a key example. PRME draws attention to the need to orient business education curricula and teaching practice to the international values of human rights, environmental responsibility, labor rights, and anti-corruption. Yet given ongoing scandals, we suggest PRME does not go far enough in operationalizing these principles. There is

[1] For example: critical perspectives on leadership and teamwork, along with particular critical lenses (such as feminism) through which any aspect of organizational life could be viewed differently.

still a theory–practice gap. Indeed, Alcaraz and Thiruvattal (2010) agree, arguing that calls for more responsible management are often only "'beautiful words,' lacking the necessary critical view to address real changes." (p. 542). In their interview with Manuel Escudero, Head of PRME Secretariat, Escudero argues that we need to build on the PRME framework for curriculum change by introducing new topics and by incorporating experiential learning as a means of gaining a deeper knowledge of the issues.

However, while such programs increase knowledge, they do not necessarily lead to a corresponding commitment to act. For example, in reporting the learning outcomes of the PricewaterhouseCoopers' service learning program, Pless et al. (2011) found that while 95 % of participants increased their knowledge of responsibility issues and 91 % were able to reflect on this, only 35 % felt the need to act on that knowledge. This disconnect between knowledge and practice is reinforced by Wilson (2007), who argues that organizations struggle to put into practice the principles of corporate responsibility.[2] We concur; knowledge of principles is inadequate unless we understand our own role in maintaining irresponsible practice and our ability to act differently in order to change the situation. This leads us to ask: *how can we offer our students a way of challenging the irresponsibilities inherent in both their own management and their organization's practices, provide some resources that they can use to challenge those taken-for-granted actions, and connect responsible principles to practice?*

We address this question by advocating moral reflexive practice combined with an understanding of threshold concepts. We will explain and explore these terms in depth a little later in the paper, but for the present we will focus on what they 'do' and the value that they offer in encouraging students to be responsible managers. Each has something to offer separately, but together they offer an enriched understanding of responsible management practice.

By itself, reflexivity, which is fundamentally concerned with questioning the assumptions and practices of ourselves and others (Cunliffe 2009), is a means by which students can question taken-for-granted practices and understand aspects of their experience that they find worrisome. But it does not necessarily offer a way of processing *why* they find such experiences worrisome, nor does it always lead to clear alternatives. Thus, students need a process for dealing with reflexivity and the challenges it poses. As Easterby-Smith and Malina (1999, p. 77) put it, "reflexivity is more than merely reflecting on what has taken place: it involves actively considering the implications of what has been observed for the observer's own practice." Putting reflexive insights into practice is not a simple question of correction or optimization because such insights often involve uncomfortable realizations, new understandings and shifts in thinking about our and others practices:

> Becoming a reflexive practitioner can hurt your head. Normally, you fit a concept into what you already know. It is also an easy operation, what you are good at, and what you try first. But if the new concept is supposed to modify and replace the structure of what you already know, that's when it hurts (Myers 2010, p. 19).

Educators need to be able to recognize the "pain" associated with questioning habitual ways of thinking and acting and understand how to facilitate a shift in thinking. It is here that the notion of *threshold concepts* (Meyer and Land 2003) can add value as a pedagogical resource. A threshold concept is "a particular basis for differentiating between core learning outcomes that represent 'seeing things in a new way' and those that do not." (p. 412). In relation to the student's comments at the beginning of this section, we suggest that the key concern or unresolved issue at the heart of her anxiety—the threshold concept—is signaled by her articulation of her intolerance and lack of concern for others. It is this *troublesome encounter* (Yip and Raelin 2011) with, or what Moore (2013, p. 7) terms a skeptical attitude toward, her own actions that is likely to lead to a more responsible way of thinking and acting. Also, by understanding the characteristics of specific threshold concepts, students can more fully explicate the potential reasons for their discomfort and their responsibility for acting on that discomfort.

Thus, we believe that integrating moral reflexive practice with an understanding of threshold concepts offers a way of highlighting irresponsible actions and the need for responsible management, by keeping alive the need to ask questions of ourselves and others. We develop this argument below by briefly defining moral reflexive practice and threshold concepts, and then move on to explicate the relationship between them.

Defining Moral Reflexive Practice and Threshold Concepts

Moral Reflexive Practice

Reflexivity draws on a social constructionist perspective to firmly place people within a situation as active constructors of, and participants in, social and organizational realities. While a number of scholars have identified various definitions, approaches, and concerns of reflexivity (e.g. Archer 2007; Bleakley 1999; Doane 2003; Easterby-Smith and Malina 1999; Giddens 1990; Hardy and Clegg 1997;

[2] The knowledge–practice disconnect is not limited to corporate or social responsibility issues: see Baldwin et al. (2011).

Hibbert et al. 2010), we wish to focus on reflexivity as it relates to responsible practice. Accordingly, we will offer a basic definition followed by an explanation of moral reflexive practice.

Reflexivity is a means of interrogating our taken-for-granted experience by questioning our relationship with our social world and the ways in which we account for our experience. This involves considering the "ongoing accomplishments of organized artful practices of everyday life" (Garfinkel 1967, p. 10) in which we are always in relation to others. We see how this takes place in the quotation from the student (above) in that her observations relate not only to herself, but how she acts in relation to other people. We argue that reflexivity involves understanding each situation or problem in such a way that we can "…'go on' with the others and otherness around us in our practical affairs" (Shotter 2006, p. 587), while recognizing that our understandings are still contextually embedded within our interactions. Thus, *going on* always involves multiple interpretations, plausible meanings, and competing interests. Moral reflexive practice, therefore, is a way of being that involves questioning who we are in the world and how we can act in responsible and ethical ways (Cunliffe 2009). A distinction has been made between critical and self-reflexivity where being *self-reflexive* involves questioning our own ways of being, relating, and acting, and being *critically-reflexive* means examining and unsettling the assumptions underlying social and organizational practices as a means of building responsible management (Cunliffe 2013). While self- and critical-reflexivity should go hand in hand—because we always act within, and simultaneously shape, the context—each merits further examination.

A self-reflexive individual is "a self that is capable of relating to others" (Garrety 2008, p. 94), someone who is able to see what is wrong or injurious in her actions, for herself or others, and thereby desires to change her practice (Hartman 2006; Moore 2013). It requires engaging with the world around us and recognizing that feelings of discomfort and anxiety can offer opportunities to open up our actions and behaviors to reflexive examination (Segal 2011). Indeed, Gunia et al. (2012) found that slowing down the pace of decision making—and allowing for contemplation and moral conversation—resulted in more responsible decisions that were less self-interested and more ethical.[3] Critical-reflexivity requires us to be ready to question the social practices, organizational policies and procedures that we are involved in creating: to identify, advocate, and support necessary changes in situations that promote harmful values (Giacalone and Thompson 2006).

We therefore argue that responsible management entails moral agency and the realization that we shape our lives with others; therefore, in shaping our lives we need to be attuned to and critically examine the circumstances of such relationships. That is, we need to engage in both self and critical reflexivity because we cannot detach ourselves from the context in which we act. As Painter-Morland (2006, p. 90) points out, moral agency "is a thoroughly relational affair": in facilitating social change we change ourselves and others—and vice versa. Moral reflexive practice is a cornerstone of responsible management because it helps individuals engage with, develop, and promote new understandings that lead to transformational action. However, to do so, responsible managers require some way of identifying specifically what is troublesome within their own practice and then what they can do about it. We suggest that an engagement with threshold concepts (Meyer and Land 2003) offers a way forward. We will explore this relationship after briefly defining threshold concepts.

Threshold Concepts

The pedagogic notion of threshold concepts has been developed within the field of education and applied to a diverse range of disciplines from mathematics to cultural studies, but has yet to significantly impact the field of management education. For that reason, it is important to explain in some detail what is meant by the term. Meyer and Land (2003, 2005, 2006b), the originators of the term, describe it as a concept that alters the way we think about knowledge that is central to understanding a discipline.

Meyer and Land (2003) argue that there are five key characteristics of threshold concepts: unfamiliar, counter-intuitive *troublesome knowledge*; *integrative effects* which lead to new patterns being discerned in the field of interest; *irreversibility*, in that a retreat to simpler understandings becomes impossible; they enable *transformation* in patterns of action; and they *establish the boundaries* of a particular area of knowledge. Meyer and Land (2003) recognize that threshold concepts are performative in that they can have a practical outcome, for example they say that an understanding of feminist analysis could lead to a transformation of identity, but they do not explore the practical implications of this. We extend their idea of a threshold concept from one that is transformational within an academic discipline, to a threshold concept that is transformational within learning and practice. We do so by connecting

[3] We follow Gunia et al (2012, p. 14) in understanding ethical to be an evaluative term "…to describe decisions that are normatively appropriate (with its opposite being "unethical")", although we recognize that what is regarded as normative is socially constructed and varies with time and community (as do Lange and Washburn 2012). Moreover, we also recognize that there are always outlier individuals who are quite content to behave irresponsibly without regard to others. Nevertheless we are encouraged by Gunia's et al (2012) results, which indicate that for most people this is not the case.

moral reflexive practice with the notion of threshold concepts.

The Relationship Between Threshold Concepts and Moral Reflexive Practice

Having defined moral reflexive practice and threshold concepts, we will now go on to explicate the relationship between them using the five characteristics outlined earlier. We do so with a question in mind about how the process of learning and reflexive practice may start. While an accidental encounter with troublesome knowledge might kick-start the process, as management educators, we need to be able to lead learners toward more deliberate practice. We argue that the transformative journey occurring through the five aspects of engagement with threshold concepts provides a way of bridging the knowledge-practice gap in relation to responsible management. Accordingly it is necessary to show in careful detail how educational practices help to support reflexive practice—and how this is related to engagement with threshold concepts as gateways to transformative learning. We address this step-wise below.

Identifying Troublesome Knowledge

The first element of threshold concepts is troublesome knowledge: that which appears to be illogical, unfamiliar, or alien because it does not fit well with existing knowledge. The reflexive educator has two key actions that can facilitate these encounters. The first action is to help students to engage with concepts in unfamiliar ways, by encouraging different and challenging perspectives: through classroom dialogue (Cunliffe 2009); using media such as film (Champoux 2006); and engaging students in storytelling as a means of "liberate(ing) participants from the requirements of factual accuracy, allowing them to address potentially embarrassing, dangerous, or taboo topics" (Gabriel and Connell 2010, p. 508). Recently, Taylor (2011) has united the use of film with storytelling through making videonarratives to potentiate doctoral students' reflexivity. She found that for her students "videonarratives can facilitate the unfolding of the depth and complexity of their journeys" (p. 445), and it allowed them to challenge conventional accounts and expectations of these journeys.

The second action is to recognize when students have begun to connect troublesome concepts with their own experiences, whether this is through the educator's provocations or not, and help them to capture the moment for later thought. The initial signals of student engagement with troublesome concepts in their own experience may well look very similar to emotional trajectories that lead to "non-learning" (Elliot 2008). For this reason, it is important to establish space for emotion and confusion within a climate of risk taking, of allowing the exploration of uncertainties within the classroom (Vince 2011). As active learners, management students may be resistant to this kind of exploration; as Sinclair (2007) has suggested they may object to slow, ambiguous processes that do not lead to obvious outcomes or instrumental benefits. Thus educators need to carefully facilitate the process—in safe spaces—to allow a sense that it will lead to progression and potentially changed action, while resisting the temptation to sell it to students. In such cases, the educator's role is to help the student keep the question alive by encouraging the capture of such concepts and feelings through the use of reflexive papers or journals (e.g., Cunliffe 2009) or by peer feedback (e.g., Yip and Raelin 2011). In this way, students are able to consider concepts, ideas, and practices that are difficult to grasp (Cousins 2006; McCormick 2008; Perkins 1999), but can complete their thinking at a later time away from the classroom context where issues of embarrassment and exposure are reduced.

Allowing for delay in the realization of learning about a threshold concept is important. Although such concepts lead to significant transformation, the change begins with disruption as students encounter unsettling feelings of confusion, doubt, and frustration as they struggle at the edge of old and new understandings. This often occurs before one passes through the threshold (Meyer and Land 2006a; Trafford 2008; Van Gennep 2004). Furthermore, there may be other painful experiences when the concept casts a new, unflattering light on our experiences.

When recognizing the irresponsibility of our action, just as the student in our opening quotation did, we not only question those actions but also our understanding of who we are, what we value, and how we relate to others. Because this can be a very emotional encounter—it hurts—it is tempting to put it aside. This is where the educator can help the student search for new meanings, both personal (self-reflexivity) and organizational (critical-reflexivity), and can promote risk-taking through active inquiry (Mack 2012; Yip and Raelin 2011).

Similarly, both critical and self-reflexivity can begin with an uncomfortable experience of feeling on the edge of understanding. This involves being struck by the unfamiliar, of being unsettled by noticing something in a new way, yet not being quite sure what it may be (Cunliffe 2002a; Shotter 2005). Reflexive practice seeks to be open to this kind troublesome knowledge in two ways. First it encompasses an openness to, and engagement with, the views of the 'other'. We have suggested earlier how such encounters can be enabled and supported by educators.

Second, a critical comparison of these views can enable one to evaluate innate irresponsibilities and reveal nascent possibilities (Easterby-Smith and Malina 1999). Reflexive practice looks for disconfirmation and disturbance in the comparison between the familiar and unfamiliar, and sees this disturbance as an invitation toward new understandings. In this way, the individual who is open to the feeling of being struck is also open to an emotionally unsettling encounter with troublesome knowledge (Perkins 1999) and to the transformative potential offered by threshold concepts. Threshold concepts can therefore bridge the knowledge-practice gap when students see them as invitations to learning and change rather than simply uncomfortable experiences.

Our opening example illustrates this process: the student's unsettling experience of being struck by her past (irresponsible) behavior led to her realization that here is something that she does not understand—or has understood wrongly—that represents a learning challenge. For this student, the threshold concept was one of intolerance: as she says, "*I was further struck by the intolerance I showed for the peers and team members who were not like me*"—a troublesome feeling that can potentiate ethical behavior (Gooty et al. 2010). This troublesome feeling not only involves a "careful and sensitive reading" (Moore 2013, p 9) of our actions, but also judgements about what is right and wrong, good and bad (p. 6).

For us, even this basic realization that there are always meanings and implications to be explored in our experiences is essential for responsible management practice. However, the learning process around a particular threshold concept needs to move beyond the level of disturbance, doubt, and evolving (always contingent) understanding. We need to put the jigsaw back together in a new way that connects knowledge and practice, and leads to a commitment to act. That is, the process of marking out the new threshold concept needs to be re-integrative.

Identifying Integrative Effects

The second aspect of threshold concepts is that they are integrative (Meyer and Land 2005, 2006b; Perkins 2006, 2008). This means that crossing the threshold should bring new ideas and ways of thinking into view which, when integrated into a worldview highlight the importance of new insights and diminish the importance of old understandings. When people connect up their knowledge and experience in new ways, they begin to value things differently. For example, in relation to the concept of responsibility, a reflexive manager might begin to transform his/her practice by asking: What assumptions am I making in relation to this person? How might those assumptions impact my behavior and their response? Am I giving that person voice? She or he may then begin to see that valuing people becomes more salient than organizational rules and routines. So, by introducing moral reflexive practice as a response to troublesome knowledge, we begin to make new connections in our relationships with others and the situation at hand.

Helping students to engage with reflexive practice that involve questions about relationships with others is a key role for educators. Fortunately, we have a range of resources at our disposal that lead to these kinds of questions. In particular, we have a range of theoretical views that can be shared with students, which can help them question taken-for-granted practices (their own and the organization's) and emphasize their responsibility by helping them see how they are partners in socially-constructing organizational life. What we find particularly useful are critically-reflexive writings that offer different perspectives. Adler's paper on leadership as a commitment to beauty is a great example. Her paper ends with this comment: "Perhaps our most fundamental role as artists, and in this sense, each of us is an artist, whether we label ourselves as one or not, is to "out" our own humanity and that of the people we have the privilege to work with…" (2011, p. 217).

Theoretical resources can also help us to critique not just structures and systems (critical-reflexivity), but our own role in maintaining these (self-reflexivity). For example, Bell (2010, p. 430) poses hard questions for critical management studies (CMS) scholars: "if the purpose of CMS is to raise awareness of power, inequality, and exploitation in other organizations, we suggest it is necessary to explore what may be excluded, effaced, or damaged through the culture's own power relationships". She goes on to develop a powerful critique of dominant masculine practices within what ought to be an inclusive and diverse academic community. These kinds of resources expose our own complicity, as scholars and educators, in the construction of oppression. They also ignite a helpful attitude of suspicion in students, who are thus forced to make up their own minds when we offer them different worldviews. We would like to introduce a second quotation from a student here, which helps to illustrate the impact of these kinds of interventions, when students apply these kinds of ideas to their own experiences:

> "Both my company and my tribe share a unique feature that women have secondary roles, they are not involved in general and public issues and their voices are barely heard. [My company] claim they support women's rights and encourage them to take active roles. Personally, I did not see that since the majority of the women are working as secretaries, receptionists,

> and nurses but almost no one is handling a critical leadership role. As a father of four girls, this brings many questions, what the future of my daughters will be, what type of life roles they will play, will they be active members of the society? This definitely causes me to spare no effort to educate them and give them [more] room to express their thoughts and ideas."
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> *Engineering Manager, Middle-East based oil company, and Executive MBA student*

The student's new connections regarding gender offer a richer picture of his relationship with his organization, culture, and family. He previously saw work life and family as separate, but by integrating them he now understands how the different interests of people had previously been hidden. By engaging with the threshold concept of equality, he sees new connections and patterns that link organizational practices to family life and social opportunity. In doing so he is able to critically compare reassuring but empty corporate statements about equality—statements he previously did not question—with the dearth of opportunities for women.

Importantly, this also shows how the re-integrative effects of reflexive practice inform threshold concepts in two ways. First, there is the re-integrated view of his practice and the new responsibilities this may bring, for example, in educating his daughters. Second, there is a critically-reflexive integrated understanding of the concept itself; the notion of equality was already on the table for our student, but until this became 'personal' he did not realize how this might challenge his knowledge and experience of management and organizational life. We argue that when a moral reflexive questioning of experience and assumptions (e.g., about managements actions or organizational practices) reveal a threshold concept (e.g., equality), then new understandings about the need for responsible management come sharply into focus.

Establishing Irreversibility

The third aspect of threshold concepts is that the change in understanding is not reversible. Once the genie is out of the bottle and new patterns and connections have been discerned and integrated around a particular threshold concept, then a retreat into earlier patterns of understanding becomes extremely difficult, especially when even more sophisticated, complex, and demanding conceptualizations are engaged with in the future (Adams 2003, 2006; Cunliffe 2003; Trafford 2008). In the case of the student quoted above, he sees and feels the disadvantaged position of women clearly and cannot now pretend that it does not exist. Furthermore, it is made all the more demanding and powerful by his connection to his daughters. This leads him on to further questions and concern in relation to how he might create opportunities for them.

More generally, we are driven to ever more complex understandings by keeping the questions alive through ongoing reflexive practice and honest engagement with others. For example, one student suggested that reflexive practice:

> "…caused me to question some of the broader issues involved in this situation. First, […] to question the effectiveness of the current management style and its effect on employee development. Second, is it ethical for a manager to control his subordinates and manipulate them to his advantage to achieve his personal goals? […]"
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> *IT Company Manager, based in Australia, and Executive MBA student*

To draw out a general principle, one can say that reflexive practice leads toward new patterns of understanding via new, relationally informed understandings of social and organizational experience. Importantly, this keeps us in an attitude of inquiry, since we have become aware of the contingent and situated nature of our understandings, and an acceptance that we live with the ambiguity and ongoing uncertainty this entails (Cunliffe 2003, 2009). We are always driven on to new, contingent understandings—we cannot go back.

The irreversibility aspect of engagement with a threshold concept follows from the first two steps, and reflexive educators do not necessarily have a specific role in this aspect of the process. However, there are three things that can make this easier. First, making a safe space in the learning process for more and deeper questioning of offered concepts and theories by students. Second, allowing experience to have a "voice" in the classroom as a counterpart to theoretical material. Third, developing a pattern of dialogue that allows the first two kinds of student interventions to be seen as generative, as leading to new and better lines of inquiry and action.

Supporting Transformation in Action

The fourth aspect of threshold concepts is that they are transformational. If the world is seen anew and that new perspective is permanent, the way in which one should think and act must also change (Meyer et al. 2008; Mezirow 2000). It is here that we really begin to see how reflexive practice—through engagement with threshold concepts—brings about a transformation that bridges the knowledge-practice gap. An example from one of our students illustrates a clear move from knowledge to action:

> "I did complete the report by working through the entire Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, working through the

> nights, and submitted the report. In this incident, my family members were all upset […] Essentially, there was no life other than work. I believe it was this deprivation of what I used to value in life [that was] the root cause to disillusionment in my job that I had been experiencing. […] This realization has set me to consciously make time for people that I love and things that matter to me […] God, family, friends and work."
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> *South-East Asia based Marketing Manager and Executive MBA student*

Thus the individual who recognizes irresponsibility and really *gets* the concept of responsibility will have a different set of values and priorities—particularly in relation to the people her practice impacts upon—than her un-reconstructed colleague. As Solbrekke and Englund (2011) have argued, responsible practice is pro-active. There was nothing ethically objectionable about the report that our student had to prepare over a holiday season, of itself. Yet she recognized that even doing "a good job", for which she was later praised, had unfortunate outcomes for herself and others. This connects with our previous example of the student from the Middle-East, who also took steps to transform his new knowledge into action:

> "I started thinking of [how] I can change our symbols—Company logo, office decoration, people's dress, etc.—to be in agreement with our culture and reflect our values and beliefs. Could I do something in my level to add more soul to our rigid and inflexible procedures? How can I increase women's role in the whole organization? Could I not create our own reward system that will be based on our own culture?"
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> *Engineering Manager, Middle-East based oil company, and Executive MBA student*

The examples we have used to illustrate threshold concepts and their steps, indicate that it is a mistake to think of moral reflexive practice as purely some anodyne and cerebral activity, it involves *real engagement* in a transformative learning experience and critical action (Moore 2013): recognizing the irresponsible ways in which we engage with others (inter)actively and taking responsibility for changing relationships, behavior, organizational practices, and policies. We need to be open to questioning the practices and adopting the insights of the different communities that we encounter (Archer 2007).

Enabling transformation in the classroom means that reflexive educators have to let their control of the educational process go: to facilitate a collaborative learning community that is "democratically governed", rather than a flock that is led from a lectern. Moral reflexive inquiry, engagement with threshold concepts, and possibilities for transformative action should all be matters for collective input. This puts the engagement between everyone inside the classroom on an equal footing, and models the relational transformation that is being encouraged outside of the classroom. This relational transformation enables moral agency and responsible management, but it is not for the fainthearted!

Establishing the Boundaries

The final stage is when threshold concepts mark out the boundaries between different disciplines (Meyer and Land 2003). For example, in economics the principle of individual self-interest is foundational, whereas in the discipline of management the central principle is that the individual acts on behalf of the interests of others. What is open to question, is who those "others" are—shareholders, customers, community members, etc. In terms of responsible management, responsibility can be seen as a threshold concept that helps establish the boundaries of the discipline of management in two ways. First, the scope of responsible management has to be seen as societal not organizational, because organizations are embedded in society and the environment. Second, the expertise or knowledge content of responsible management is continually developed in the reflexive dialogue of management educators and practitioners (Cunliffe 2002b, 2004). Collective input to the reflexive learning process and the need to give more space for deep questioning enables students to take responsibility for their responsibility, and to be reflexive about their reflexivity.

Reflexive students accept their responsibility for ethical action. They will be aware that theory develops in practice and is always a contingent understanding, affected by where they are and whom they are with. The following comment from one of our students helps to illustrate why this an enabling realization:

> "…by drawing upon this practice I am empowered by the knowledge that there are no easy answers. In other words, there is a certain liberation to be had from understanding that the theories are by their very nature, a work in progress."
>
> *Marketing Team Manager, based in the UK, and Executive MBA student*

As this student emphasizes, there is no standard model to apply and no "easy answers"—there are only hard choices, unavoidable responsibilities, and inescapable consequences. We suggest that by defining the boundaries of responsible management in this way, the knowledge-practice gap will be eroded.

Implications and Conclusions

What we offer here, in the shape of moral reflexive practice incorporating threshold concepts, is a form of learning: an

"acquisition process(es) … rooted within quite specific study contexts" (Moore 2013, p. 15). This form of learning provides a basis for an authentic consideration of the interests of others, (indeed, a new awareness of, and respect for, "the other" per se (Arvay 2003)—an authentic consideration both on the part of the student and teacher. Both teachers and students, especially students who are or will become managers, bear a responsibility for how they put their understandings into practice. In other words, morally reflexive individuals question practices (their own and others) and understand the responsibility this brings in terms of acting to change situations (Cunliffe 2009, 2013). In this part of the paper, we address the implications of this understanding for management education.

These implications are twofold. First, that as responsible educators we should offer students the choice of whether to engage in the process of moral reflexive practice and develop an understanding of threshold concepts and their implications. Second, that educators need to understand the possibilities and limitations of their role in stimulating this somewhat painful process. The following discussion in this approach is based on our (separate) involvement to learn for a number of years at graduate and undergraduate levels (see Cunliffe 2002b), on required and elective courses in different institutions in the US and UK, and in class sizes ranging from 10 to 50 students. In each case, a reflexive paper has been a required assignment, but as may be imagined, this can be a lot of work with a large class.

Issues to Consider Regarding Student Engagement with Moral Reflexive Practice

We cannot insist (nor would we wish to) that students accept our approach unquestioningly. To teach moral reflexivity and responsible management means being responsible educators: we need to emulate the values we espouse (Osiemo 2012). Encouraging students to be reflexive therefore entails giving them the right to accept or refuse the theories and concepts that are presented to them—including ours. We offer the students the choice of writing a reflexive paper or an alternative such as a reflective paper, with the latter being less personally challenging in that it requires a straightforward application of theory to an analysis of practice. For example a student may apply a threshold concept that resonated with them to a generalized management practice. In our experience, around two-thirds of the students will choose the reflexive option, recognizing the value of the challenge to personal development. If they do choose to accept a pedagogy of moral reflexive practice, there are ways in which learning processes can facilitate responsible management, as we have discussed in the preceding section of the paper.

Since reflexive practice involves individuals engaging with their own unique experience in a critical way, it is not something that can be easily demonstrated or taught. Examples and exercises do not have the same feel because they lack the disturbing, almost visceral feeling of "being struck" that signifies an encounter with troublesome knowledge when *oneself* is put into question (Cunliffe 2002a; Ziegenfuss 2010). Thus reflexive practice is developed through guided experiential learning, dialogue, and discussion, rather than instruction. While this form of learning can be liberating, the emotions set in train in the process of unsettling can make a student feel vulnerable. Such emotions can be difficult to deal with:

- guilt and regret may occur when experience is re-examined through the perspective of the other and one realizes that one's actions are suspect
- anger might arise as new, unsettling viewpoints are offered (and perhaps rejected)
- students may experience feelings of insecurity as they begin to realize former 'secure' ways of thinking and acting are now questionable
- and even though students may abandon their formerly unchallenged, perhaps morally suspect organization-centered world view, they may still struggle to translate their new perspective into something that is enactable.

In essence, reflexive practice may carry the risk of turning confident individuals—at least for a time—into "fractured reflexives" whose attempts to resolve the contradictions of their situation only results in further anguish (Archer 2007).

Furthermore, there are good reasons why students might not choose not to engage in reflexive practice at work, since it does not offer them any instrumental outcomes or advantages in their careers. Students may feel that if they act differently—more responsibly—then other organizational members will take advantage of them. As one Executive MBA student put it, *"This isn't how my organization sees leadership—you have to be a hard ass in my company—so why should I be [reflexive] different?"* Furthermore, dissonance between individual and perceived organizational perspectives has been argued to militate against responsible action (Blackman et al. 2012). For this reason, the path toward responsible management may come with the burden of additional complexity as students seek to encourage others to become morally reflexive.

Enabling Moral Reflexive Practice: The Educator's Perspective

Ashcraft and Allen (2009) state that educators themselves become vulnerable as they switch from rational dialogue to the tensions associated with what Ellsworth (1989) calls a

pedagogy of the unknowable; a pedagogy in which we can never fully know ourselves, our experience, others, nor the impact of our actions. Indeed, part of the cost of facilitating moral reflexive practice is the painful knowledge that some students will reject it—and must be allowed to do so, if we are true to the principles we advocate. For that reason, reflexive educators will also need space for their own emotional experiences. This is because, as students express their own emotions, confusion, and perhaps resistance in the process of engagement, educators are likely be faced with a set of class signals that would normally suggest that the educational process is not working out. Thus the period of student struggle will also feel unsettling and risky to educators, since the initial evidence for learning reflexivity will be profoundly counter-intuitive.

However difficult and uncomfortable it may be, a failure to practice what we preach is likely to exacerbate resistance to the emotional struggle that reflexive practice can entail. Thus, it becomes clear that the process of learning intrinsic to the development of reflexive practice, and the exploration and possible adoption of new and alternative perspectives, needs to be *modelled* by educators, not simply encouraged. However, Malkki and Lindblom-Ylanne (2012) found that educators were not likely to engage in this kind of practice and are prone to avoiding new concepts and prefer straightforward action that gets the job done, because of the influence of institutional constraints and concerns about negative student reactions. Consequently, those seeking to be reflexive educators will be challenged by the possibility that they will be dislodged from an implicit position of mastery, and have to encounter difference and diversity in ways that have significant implications for their own future practice.

First, during class discussions reflexive educators need to share their own (warts-and-all) experiences of organizations, in order to encourage others to share their experiences if they felt comfortable to do so. Second, whatever the class size, dialogue, and discussion is key, so that theoretical input takes the form of prior class readings, a delivery of a minimum of initial theoretical content, and short theoretical inputs as required in response to issues that emerge in discussion. The insights identified by students in the excerpts we offer are therefore not in response to an intervention on our part, but to their individual encounters with 'troublesome knowledge' that emerged from readings or class discussion.

Bearing in mind the temptation to "just get the job done" that we have described earlier, we nevertheless encourage educators to engage directly with the concepts and processes described in this essay, rather than reframing them in different terms that rob them of their challenge. Reflexive practice—for educators and students—is about breaking frames and accepting new and contingent directions, rather than inchwise progress in familiar terrain. But for many, the notion of inchwise progress somehow feels less disturbing and more scientific. For that reason, Myers (2010, p. 40) expresses the way in which people resist the challenge of reflexive practice in this way:

> "A cherished image of engineers is building an airplane while flying it. The image is often invoked when claiming the impossibility of doing what is asked. But it is also an excuse to proceed just the way one wants, to stop changing, or to stop flying […] Science was offered as a relief from unchanging tradition, and it is ironic now that it keeps us not merely rigorous, but in rigor."

We are thus calling for educators to allow themselves—or even seek—to be more unsettled. But we also expect this process to be unsettling for students, and this can lead them into a sense of dependency on the guiding educator. This is especially the case when (or if) the process leads them to consider radical changes in perspective and action. This could lead educators into different and ongoing roles—such as coach, mentor or wise counsel—that raise serious questions. Are we trained for this? How, and when, should we disengage? These are questions that every reflexive educator must answer in their own context, as the answers are dependent on particular relationships and possibilities. However, it is quite possible to develop a fantasy picture of the scale of one's influence. The shadow-side of (too much) care and concern for guiding students through the difficult, confusing, and emotional process of engaging with reflexive practice can be an inflated sense of one's own importance and impact.

Finally, reflexive educators are aware that learning experiences have complex effects on the life and actions of their students, and take thoughtful responsibility in relation to that. This includes being aware of the inevitable limits of their own understanding, and being prepared to really respect the experience and insights of students. The aim is to transform the classroom from the place where learning is completed, to the place where learning occurs through dialogue, and where reflexive practice begins. There is, therefore, no prescription for teaching reflexivity, it is rather a case of understanding how reflexive practice occurs and facilitating and being responsive to the process. Finally—in the spirit of reflexive practice—we encourage further dialogue about the ideas that we have offered here, and to welcome the questions that always must arise if we remain committed to the process.

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