

# Communities of impact at the University of Chichester's Business School

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## Keywords

Action Learning, Community, Culture, Writing, Category Mistake, Knowledge

## Buildings or people?

Sadly, universities have become obsessed with three- and four-star journals so as to edge above each other in various league tables. These are what count, these win promotions, and in doing so they create corridors of narrow interest. Such attention neglects other forms of writing: do not even think about writing a book. Consequently, written outputs are often increasingly tightly-woven arguments, impenetrable to all but a few. However, those few power brokers are important: they are the reviewers and editors of privileged journals. As I explain to my students, this is a pity, as they exclude diverse voices that often have something very relevant to say. In this edition, we seek to make a small contribution to redressing this problem. We do so by considering the impact on communities, particularly within our own at the University. By paying attention to the stories of how people work together and how they create knowledge and impact, we are drawing on similar themes to those in the literature on communities of practice (Lave & Wenger 1991) and on communities of influence, as articulated by Dr Alison Donaldson, a long-time friend of this journal, and her colleagues (Donaldson et al. 2011). This human dimension is what a university, or any organisation for that matter, is about. Yet this poses a problem for policymakers: how do they express this human dimension in ways that can be taken up to enhance community and impact? I do not seek to answer this challenging question but here, with examples drawn from my colleagues' writing, I hope to shine new light on the question, and to give voice to what is of value, and to what can so easily be lost.

As I am writing this editorial, our Business School is in the process of moving from a lovely Georgian building (see Figure 1) to our new Tech Park home (see Figure 2). In drawing attention to our move, I am reminded of the work of Gilbert Ryle (Ryle 1949, p17), a mid-twentieth century British philosopher, who was influenced by Wittgenstein and interested in language and how we think. Ryle pointed out that it is a mistake to focus on buildings and on what we can touch and see when talking of an institution like a university. Instead, for Ryle, a university is its people, the conversations and a shared spirit of inquiry that we develop together. In fact, Ryle termed this often-unnoticed fixation on rigid form and reification - 'a Category Mistake', an idea I will conclude with.

**Figure 1: The Dome - our former home**



The contributions in this edition reflect a range of interests we have within the Business School. They illustrate how, over the course of nearly a year, we authors have worked together to share our enthusiasms, to get to know each other better, and to produce this special edition of AMED's journal [e-Organisations and People](#) (e-O&P).

This editorial is in two parts. Like a pair of bookends, I begin with some of the insights that this project has revealed to us, and in doing so I draw some wider thoughts on learning, knowledge and community in UK higher education. However, I tread very lightly as to what we actually did. This comes later, in the second part of the editorial, which you will find at the very end of this edition. This is because it felt right to come back to this idea of lightness after showcasing our work. In this second part, **Dr Bob MacKenzie** (MacKenzie 2019) delves into his practice and the theory of facilitating writing and research in a social space.

## Our context: small is beautiful

We are a small business school in a small university, and we work with small groups of students of up to twenty. Our focus is on teaching, and we do this very well. By the time they graduate, we get to know each student well - for student and lecturer alike, there is nowhere to hide. The shadow side of this approach is that research has often taken a back seat: we are educators first and foremost. However, now, for the first time, we are entering our department in the Government's Research Excellence Framework ([REF](#)) for 2021. So, for us this is a process of development, of understanding what we are good at and where we need to develop. The exercise in writing for publication in *e-O&P* is part of the process that will shape our research environment, and in doing so helps us to share, reflect together and to start to develop our confidence to showcase what we do best. It is an important form of rehearsal.

**Figure 2: The Tech Park – our new base**



## How we worked together: writing as rehearsal

Once a month, on a Wednesday afternoon during the 2018/19, academic year staff and some postgraduate student in the Business School were invited to come along to an action learning set (Revans 1998) *lightly* facilitated on a *pro bono* basis by Bob MacKenzie, who is commissioning editor of AMED's journal *e-Organisations and People*. I am going to dwell on the word 'lightly'. It does not mean omitted. There is a knack that Bob has of not saying much and of encouraging the voice of others with the use of explorative questions and listening. Bob's approach is influenced by principles of [critical friendship](#) (MacKenzie 2015) and by writing in a social space. We were creating impact by treading lightly. There were usually between five and eight of us present, typically lecturers, but occasionally PhD students as well as Barbara Hayes and colleagues from the local Quakers community, who had been working with us on a business ethics module.

Pressures of work, enthusiasm for our project, uncertainty about the relevance of this unusual approach, and/or teaching commitments variously motivated or discouraged participation. A typical session would begin with introductions, where we would share stories and experiences as to what has been happening with our research and writing; what had enabled and supported us, but more often about what had got in the way. Often, we would take seemingly tangential avenues, exploring possibilities for finding relevance in these new areas. More importantly, we would listen and support each other in those moments. We would also just sit and write together (it is surprising how powerful this can be) and then work in twos or threes to share our work. The session would end with some commitment to do some further writing. During the course of our time together, the idea of this special edition formed as a kind of project to lend focus to our respective research and writing interests. Commitments were made, most were met, some fell away.

So, what did people value about writing in a social space? A recent short survey identified that the following were important:

- The time to share experiences and ideas of writing;
- The group conversations, particularly getting into pairs as critical friends (qv);
- Getting to know each other, something as simple as that;
- Time out of a busy week just to write and think;
- And, a safe place to talk about the writing process.

### **Some lessons learnt**

Two thirds into this process, I made a mistake that underlined the benefit of this way of working. Anticipating time pressures from a typical academic routine, I shortened the sessions from three to 1.5 hours: I had not noticed at the time that the balance had been tipped, that people increasingly valued being together and working on their writing despite wider demands on their time. For me, this was a lesson learned.

It is interesting to reflect on what we did *not* do. There was no didactic 'teaching' about how to write or edit, or any subject matter content: these issues were explored between ourselves as they arose. What lessons would I draw? Firstly, allow people time together to talk, share experience and actually write and use this space to build a momentum and a shared understanding of each other. And secondly, draw upon people who are interested, even if they are beyond the strict definition of the intended 'academic' group. And thirdly, tread lightly with explorative questions, and practice the curiosity to listen.

For me the most surprising and rewarding benefit has been getting to know people better, just to have an excuse – and the satisfaction - to work on a project together. It was in this process that I have got to know my colleagues in International English, who are a part of the Business School. That might seem an odd thing to say – even a guilty admission for someone who has been working at the University for six years. It is easy for us to become focused on our own particular interests without appreciating who is around us and what they have to offer. The same goes for my colleagues Mustafa Ali (known to us as Ali) and Will Roberts who are

working on an EU funded [Interreg](#) project. In this way, the whole exercise of talking about our interests, sharing what was holding us back, and actually doing some writing, was an intensely social experience, a far cry from that of the solitary author in their garret.

The articles you see here were not commissioned or planned by me; instead, we invited people to write about something they were interested in or what they were doing. In this sense, what has emerged says something about us as a Business School and where our interests lie.

### Three prominent themes emerge in this writing project

In this project eight people have written the articles that you see, to each of them I say – thank you. For my colleagues, this was beyond what the day job demanded, and demonstrates the strength of interest for their subject and their commitment to learning and the wider community. All the articles reflect at least one of these three themes.

#### Commitment to learning

Here, learning is explored from a number of perspectives. However, one thing that brings them together is that learning is a social process of exploration and social endeavour. Take **David Goodman's** article on apprenticeships for example. We hear how David is coming to understand the practical implications of the Government's recent initiatives on the implementation of modern apprenticeships. Policy, funding streams, learning outcomes exist on one level; the experience of learning developed with students and course leader alike is another. It is this dynamic that creates the sense of culture and a learning community, a point that I too am drawn to in the spirit of Gilbert Ryle. Then there is **Heather Trencher**, who is keen to share her learning of Chinese with the Business School faculty as we prepare ourselves for increased number of Asian students. The point is that Heather is not sharing an expert knowledge of the Chinese language as such (her expertise is with other languages) but rather a curiosity that she is willing to share as part of our preparations.

Next, we hear from **Sue Lavender** in relation to developing English language provision. Although I have drawn three themes in this editorial, what comes across is how they blend together. For students to learn, there needs to be a learning community composed of the students, of those providing English support, and also of the wider academic team. Again on the theme of working with international students, there is an article from **Jo Blackwell**, who takes a personal perspective in discussing a form of learning that is often side-lined, that of small group teaching. Here, she explores the use of blended learning approaches with 'mini-groups' of about four students, and here again a sense of community shines through.

#### Passion for knowledge

Most of us researchers have an inherent curiosity of the world and a particular topic that we keep coming back to. With **Dawn Robins**, this relates to how we come to use our cars, and to what this says about how we view the world. For **Will Roberts**, this curiosity is brought to bear on a project that seeks to bring about practical benefit to the world, that of our work on Channel Payment for Eco Systems (CPES) to improve water quality by deterring pollution and how we work with stakeholders to achieve this.

## Strengthening the community

In this section, we have two articles. I cannot quite remember when I met **Barbara Hayes** and her colleagues from the Quakers. I have an interest in conscious business and ethics, and am lucky to teach a module on the subject for final year undergraduates. I am always keen to get visitors to provide a wider perspective, and the long tradition that the Quakers have on business, morality and ethics was perfect. In their session, I sensed that students were experiencing something quite different than that which is possible from a traditionally 'taught' session. And this was not only because, unusually, we started with five minutes of silence. It also related to being part of a wider web of a community, both meeting new people from different traditions and also showing this related over time and history. The second article on this theme is an account of **Lionel Bunting's** Marketing Forum initiative. In common with Barbara's, at its core this concerns having conversations with different people in a way that would not otherwise happen. In this case, people from the world of business share their practical insights about their wider communities and about how to create impact. The articles of Barbara and Lionel both illustrate how, reciprocally, the students and those from those wider communities come to see their world slightly differently through this interaction.

## A final thought

Coming back to Ryle's Category Mistake, it is important to ask the question: how do the various forms of measurement (National Student Survey, the Research Excellence Framework, the Teaching Excellence Framework, the Knowledge Excellence Framework, rate of employment of students after six months and so on) describe what is of value in a University? At best, they form a loose agenda that enables great work to happen. At worst, such forms of measurement and subsequent control neuter and stifles that sense of enquiring community, collective knowledge and what adds value to students. In the articles here, we can see that emergent nature of inquiry, a passion for knowledge and pointers to how we care for and develop our communities. So where does this leave our Category Mistake? Clearly creative work and that sense of learning and community are still vibrant. But it seems worryingly at risk. A question for the policymakers: how will you give increased voice to these fertile interactions that build knowledge and community, as a counterpoint to the attention paid to scores, league tables and mapped-out expectations?

## Glimpsing the future

Experience is an ongoing process, and where we draw beginnings and ends are just convenient constructs in our minds. Where this experiment will end I am not sure. Perhaps a better question to ask is how it will change and where will our energy take us? As we settle into our new home that we will be sharing with engineers, film-makers, sound-recordists, animators etc, I wonder what surprising new and exciting conversations and opportunities might arise?

## Acknowledgements

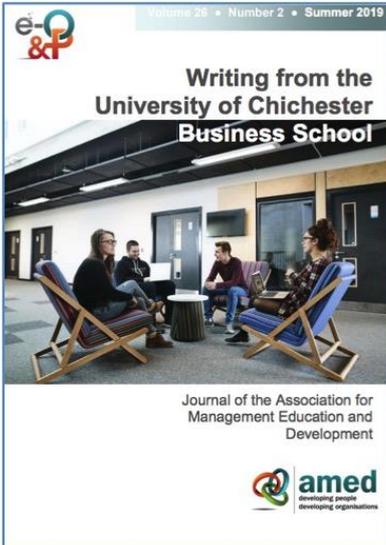
I would like to thank Professor **Bob MacKenzie** on a number of counts. Firstly, it was Bob's idea to have the showcase edition of this Journal. Not only is a thank you due in this regard, but also Bob's energy and enthusiasm for supporting my colleagues in their writing in his capacity as a critical friend. Secondly, I would like to thank Bob for his help, support, humour and advice over the last year in facilitating our Wednesday afternoon writing and research workshops. I would also like to thank **my colleagues at the Business School** who supported this project, many but not all of who contributed. I would also like to thank my colleague **Dawn Robins** for her cajoling and support in this project and for generally being just a great colleague over the last few years. And finally, to **David McAra** of AMED, who expertly assembled the journal that you are now reading.

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