The construction of meaning in leadership studies textbooks: Writing alternatives into the convention

Brigid Carroll, New Zealand Leadership Institute, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Josh Firth, New Zealand Leadership Institute, University of Auckland, New Zealand
Jackie Ford, University of Leeds, UK
Scott Taylor, University of Birmingham, UK

Abstract submitted to the 13th International Studying Leadership Conference ‘Relevance and Rigour in Leadership Research and Practice’, The Copenhagen Business School, Denmark, December 14-16 2014

The term textbook is a relatively recent coinage. It was introduced in the mid-18th century to describe classical works (such as Greek or Roman texts) printed with enough space between the lines for students to make notes – initially writing the critical interpretations their ‘masters’ dictated to them, and more recently to make their own notes during lectures and further reading. In other words, the printed material provided the -book, while educators and students provided the text-. During the 20th century the term came to indicate a rather large, very expensive, often dull, book that sought to summarise a research field. Although textbook sales are said to be declining, these texts are still culturally important as statements of truth and knowledge, a prominent presence in libraries, on student and educator bookshelves, and as the basis for module outlines.

Exactly twenty years ago, Fineman & Gabriel (1994) raised a series of questions about the representation of organization and behaviour in the introductory textbooks then available to management educators for courses in organizational behaviour (OB). They explored two important and still-relevant concerns: first, the (lack of) engagement with developments in social theory, and second, the epistemological, discursive, and stylistic assumptions that textbook authors then tended to reproduce. Fineman & Gabriel were especially keen to acknowledge the emergence of social constructionist, feminist, and postmodern (including poststructural) perspectives on organization in their reading of textbooks. They suggested that these then-new perspectives had, however, achieved little currency, such that organizations for most authors (and therefore students) were still presented as ‘square, solid, structured, objective and imposing’ (p376). As well as perspectives on organization and behaviour, content was also strikingly similar across texts. The analysis also extended to the book-as-object – most of the texts looked and felt alike as physical artefacts, to a remarkable level of detail (e.g. cover art).

There were, however, changes happening in the world of OB textbook writing then, to better reflect the wider range of epistemological and social theoretical resources available to researchers. Fineman & Gabriel were able to identify two important challenges to the functionalist hegemony, one explicitly poststructural (and hence an epistemological challenge) and one rather more subtly different (relying on stylistic challenge and appeals to often-unrecognised organizational experiences to introduce non-functionalist perspectives). Both, though, are characterised by departure from the conventional OB textbook structure of topics and representation of the field. This is, Fineman & Gabriel suggest, a decision with significant pedagogical implications, as well as a stylistic and epistemological choice. They conclude by presenting a brief argument in favour of pedagogy that is consistent with the alternative textbook rhetorics, such that the research field, its associated education, and the textbook as a category can be rethought.

This is, we think, a very important argument and set of implications, that deserves to be considered in relation to cognate fields, such as leadership studies. (It hasn’t, as far as we can tell,
surprisingly.

However, we propose an alternative to the proposal that the conventional textbook structure should be abandoned, for stylistic, pedagogic, or theoretical reasons. We argue that if we remain at least notionally within the world of the conventional structure, we are much better able to communicate functionalist perspectives on leadership – still, lest we forget, dominant both within our research community and central to the practitioner community. However, we are confident that through this, we can also communicate critical readings of functionalist approaches, to achieve ‘subversive functionalism’ (Hartmann, forthcoming), and introduce the alternative perspectives that Fineman & Gabriel suggest are inevitably excluded by the conventional textbook structure. A version of the conventional structure is, we suggest, a better arrangement for the research field, for the educator, and above all for the learner.

We also suggest this partly for three contextual reasons. First, sector: to take the UK as an exemplary setting – business and administrative studies is the largest subject area by student numbers, with 337,245 people registered across under- and post-graduate programmes in 2012-13 (HESA, 2014). Staff-student ratios are not available by subject area, but our experience suggests a figure of around 25:1 is not unusual – significantly higher than other disciplines, resulting in many groups of 300 and above for core course, and 100 or more for electives. In other words, as business school-based academics, we can expect to be engaging with large groups of students, at all levels, throughout degree programmes.

Second, discipline. Leadership studies has a relatively long history as a subject area, and there is therefore an established canon of research (whatever we might think of it). We think it is crucial to have a means of communicating that mechanical, sometimes mechanistic, knowledge to learners new to academic thinking about leadership, in order to better critique it. Third, workplaces. As noted above, functionalist and conventional thinking about leadership, crystallised in the well-worn classics such as trait theory or contingency theory, is a key resource for learners moving on into workplaces. If our students arrive in large, bureaucratic organizations, or even smaller, differently structured workplaces, with only alternative perspectives on leadership, we think they will be a) puzzled and b) less able to either enact or encourage the kinds of leadership we see represented through feminist or post-structural theories.

This is not to suggest that there is no place for the kind of book that Fineman & Gabriel made such an eloquent case for, or that we advocate a return to, or continuation of, the kind of dry textbook that can make hearts sink. Rather, we want to raise the possibility that the textbook, flawed as it undoubtedly is, can exist in a variety of forms, including with sufficient space between the conventional classical lines for critical interpretation by educators or students to be inserted. This kind of active reading can be encouraged by, for example, recognition of heterodox student identity and reasons for engagement with management education or leadership development; acknowledgement that knowledge comes in different forms, including the key category of not-knowing; imagination in content presentation; and openness to author involvement from the fringes of, or beyond, the established academy.

References

1 A citation search on Fineman & Gabriel's paper suggests the implications for management education (Sturdy, 2004), pedagogy (Dehler et al., 2001), and management itself (Harding, 2004) have been considered, but much less so for its core arguments about the textbook itself (although see Foster et al. [2014] and Bell & Taylor [2013] recently).
Hartmann, R. (forthcoming) ‘Subversive functionalism: For a less canonical critique in critical management studies’, Human Relations.