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Interspace for empathy: engaging with work-related uncertainty through artistic intervention in management education

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ABSTRACT

How can artistic intervention facilitate empathic engagement with work-related uncertainty in postgraduate management education? To examine this, we theorize artistic intervention as creating an interspace of temporarily suspended organizational norms through which empathy as relational knowing can emerge between participants. Drawing on an ethnographic study entitled *Becoming in Academia*, a nine-month artistic intervention conducted by a group of doctoral students in a Nordic business school (NBS), this paper highlights how an interspace for empathic engagement with work-related uncertainty was created by the participants through three intervention activities: *aligning oneself to the other*, *narrating a collective validation*, and *acknowledging the agency of the other*. In contributing to arts-based management education research, the paper theorizes and empirically elaborates on empathic knowing as emerging from activities of artistic intervention, opening an interspace, and providing new insight into arts-based methods as means for engaging with uncertainty within management education.

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Introduction

To drop the tools of rationality is to gain access to lightness in the form of intuitions, feelings, stories, improvisation, experience, imagination, active listening, awareness in the moment, novel words, and empathy. All of these nonlogical activities enable people to solve problems and enact their potential. (Weick 2007, 15)

Scholars have recently argued that arts-based teaching and learning methods (i.e. pedagogical techniques and procedures that are based on using various branches of the arts) (Nissley 2010) can offer a range of promising tools for rethinking management learning and education (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015; Chemi and Du 2017; Darsø 2016; Kostera and Wozniak 2020; Taylor and Ladkin 2009). Arts-based methods are seen to help us think and see differently from 'a fresh perspective' and to evade 'our old habits of mind' that tend to orient us toward 'stock responses' (Eisner 2008, 11). Furthermore, by engaging our senses in different ways, arts-based methods activate the many embodied and emotional dimensions of learning, thereby inviting multiple ways of knowing (Kostera and Wozniak 2020; Strati 2007). Art and arts-based methods, thus, are argued to not only help us learn and gain knowledge beyond the logico-rational, narrowly defined boundaries of the field of management education but also unlock and enact the full range of our potential as

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‘whole human beings’ (Darsø 2016, 22; Kostera and Wozniak 2020; Otto and Strauß 2019; Springborg 2010).

In much of the existing research on management education, the value of arts-based methods is discussed in relation to the increasingly complex, if not chaotic, nature of organizational environments (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015; Kostera and Wozniak 2020; Ladkin and Taylor 2010; Taylor and Ladkin 2009) and work-related uncertainty (Otto and Strauß 2019) in which many business school graduates, including doctoral students, currently operate. In contemporary society, it is argued that managers, entrepreneurs, and other business professionals often grapple with ‘the unstable, the unknowable, and the unpredictable’ (Weick 2007, 15), trying to make sense of ambiguity, uncertainty, and ill-defined problems that are not amenable to linear thinking and the traditional tools of logico-rational decision making that still dominate the field of management education (Moisander and Stenfors 2009). Artistic methods and variations of ‘artful learning’ (Darsø 2016, 30) are proposed as helpful tools for navigating these complex and uncertain territories (Ladkin and Taylor 2010; Taylor and Ladkin 2009) as they can be deployed to mobilize what Weick (2007) calls ‘nonlogical activities’ or modes of knowing. What is more, as Kostera and Wozniak (2020) have argued, engaging with arts may help us not only navigate and cope with uncertainty and not-knowing but also recognize the full worth of the complexity of human existence and organizational life.

In this paper, our aim is to contribute to the further development of this field of research by examining how arts-based methods can facilitate empathic engagement with work-related uncertainty within postgraduate management education. While scholars have shown that arts-based methods can cultivate empathy (Eisner 2008; Taylor and Ladkin 2009; van den Akker 2014), what is missing from their accounts is an empirically well-grounded explication of how empathy as a mode of knowing (Campelia 2017) arises in and through artistic intervention, and how it can help learners engage with their lived experience of work-related ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty in new, transformative ways. Focusing on this question is important as it can help us better understand the possibilities, difficulties, and limitations of navigating uncertainties in the increasingly competitive, neoliberal (Bristow, Robinson, and Ratle 2017; Fleming 2020) environments of management education.

We build on the work of Campelia (2017), who conceptualizes empathy as a relational practice of knowing aimed at achieving knowledge of how another feels that is formed and confirmed with others. We theorize that artistic intervention in management education can facilitate empathy and empathic engagement with work-related uncertainty by creating an ‘interspace.’ Berthoin Antal and Strauß (2015) suggest that interspace is created with artistic intervention and that it suspends the norms and routines of the organization where it unfolds, opening the possibility of thinking and acting differently. It is a social space of ‘co-creative interactions’ (Chemi and Du 2017, 329) and ‘constructive disturbance’ (Darsø 2016, 22). Thus, this perspective invites us to explore how the participants of artistic intervention within the management education context co-creatively accomplish an interspace for empathic, rather than logico-rational, engagement with experiences of work-related uncertainty – the feeling of being stuck in uncertain work arrangements and a state of permanent temporariness (Otto and Strauß 2019).

Empirically, this paper is grounded in an ethnographic study – *Becoming in Academia* – a nine-month artistic intervention carried out in an NBS. Organized by two doctoral students, the first and fourth authors of this paper, the intervention consisted of various workshops and collaborative activities targeted especially at doctoral students in business and management. Rather than being designed to solve any predefined problem, the purpose of the intervention was to create an open space where doctoral students could share and reflect on their experiences of working in a competitive and performance-oriented environment. Our analysis of the empirical materials shows how the intervention created an interspace in which the participants were able to engage with work-related uncertainties through empathic knowing. Specifically, we identified three activities through which this interspace was created. In *aligning oneself with the other*, the participants attuned to work-related uncertainty by constructing a unifying story that brought their experiences

together; in *narrating a collective validation*, they specified details of uncertainty by narrating each other's experiences through metaphorical descriptions; and in *acknowledging the agency of the other*, the participants created new ways of relating to work-related uncertainty in management education by affirming each other's experiences with others.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. Next, we detail our theoretical framework, focusing on empathic knowing and arts-based methods, and develop the idea of interspace as a source of knowing in an empathic manner within the context of management education. We then introduce our ethnographic data and analyses. We offer our key findings, discuss our contributions, and provide ideas for future research.

A relational perspective on knowing, empathy, and artistic interventions

Our theoretical perspective is rooted in the premise that human beings exist in relation to others (Fotaki, Kenny, and Vachhani 2017) and are thus neither isolated nor independent entities (Bell and Vachhani 2020). From this perspective, knowing is an ongoing process shaped by humans (peers, educators, authors, academic communities, friends, etc.) and more-than-humans (e.g. computers, weather, books, viruses, government bans, stories, trees, dogs, etc.) that are constantly connecting in different ways (Meriläinen, Salmela, and Valtonen 2021; Otto and Strauß 2019). Therefore, recognizing that knowledge is co-produced through these 'entangled' encounters – of human bodies, objects, and discourses – shifts the emphasis from information-based impersonal epistemic practices toward open-ended and relational processes of knowing (Ashcraft 2017; Katila, Kuismin, and Valtonen 2019; Stewart 2007). We suggest that approaching empathy from this perspective has the potential to disrupt conventional ways of learning and knowing in the context of management education.

Empathic knowing

In our theoretical perspective on empathy as a relational way of knowing, we draw on the work of Campelia (2017), who theorizes empathy as a social epistemic practice and a particular way of embodied knowing. While much of the existing management literature discusses empathy as a cognitive-emotional skill that can be important for understanding other people's minds and behaviors (Ashforth and Humphrey 1995; King 2011), we propose that empathy can be understood as a relational practice and a mode of knowing in itself. From this perspective, empathy is not something that triggers or enhances knowing and learning; rather, it is a 'kind of knowledge' (Campelia 2017, 531) and a particular, embodied way of knowing – 'knowing how another feels' (Campelia 2017, 532) – that ensues from interpersonal engagement. Specifically, we conceptualize empathy as a relational epistemic practice that relies on an interdependent and interpersonal process of knowing together with others; it aims to both cognitively and affectively understand and learn from others' emotional experiences. The emphasis is not on 'gaining information' but rather on the process of attuning to the nuances of the other's perspective to gain a 'deeper sense of the agency of the other person' and to grasp the particularities of their emotional experiences and beliefs (Campelia 2017, 539).

According to Campelia (2017), empathic knowing involves elements of becoming other-oriented, becoming receptive to others' emotions, becoming nonjudgmental, and communicating back understandings about other people's emotions and experiences to confirm reliability. It requires the knower to direct his or her attention toward the other and to maintain 'some sense of distinction between self and other' (Hoffman 2000; Slote 2016, in Campelia 2017, 537). Since the epistemic aim of empathy is to 'achieve knowledge about how another feels that may not be available through other means' (2017, 541), empathy requires that the knowers affectively attune to another through a relational process. To be attuned to another is to share a certain rhythm by 'picking up' a feeling, thus picking 'each other up' (Ahmed 2014b, 17). Rather than self-projecting, empathic knowing is about staying open to another's perspective(s), verbal and nonverbal expressions, and

mirroring them back to communicate what we perceive to confirm the reliability of our understanding.

The empathic practice requires that the knowers reflect on their emotions and experiences, guard against false empathy, and maintain appropriate sensitivity toward understanding others' situations (Campelia 2017). It is worth noting that phenomena present in emotional engagements, such as emotional contagion, emotional sharing, and mimicry, are not epistemic in themselves but may be part of the practice of knowing (Campelia 2017, 537). Since this practice is relational and interdependent, instead of a dualistic one-way interaction, the knower and the other are not fixed exclusive categories. This means that empathic knowing may involve the knower simultaneously knowing and understanding the other and feeling understood or known by the other. Furthermore, suspending preconceived, fixed ideas of how some particular experience feels allows for new understanding.

Empathic knowing thus enables us to relate and respond differently. Instead of emphasizing the product or object of knowing, it focuses on the relational, processual, and perhaps surprising emergence of knowing as an empathic accomplishment. Thus, to relate in an empathic way is to accept the uncertainty of knowing, since 'there are ways in which one cannot fully know how another feels' (Campelia 2017, 541). Such realization is important in itself and becomes an approach to proceed with caution and rectify injustices. This way of knowing requires us to accept vulnerability as part of staying open and receptive (Bell et al. 2020). This is congruent with feminist epistemologies that attend to situated lived experience as a valid site of theorization by 'making sense of what is happening around, and to us' (Bell et al. 2020, 10; Hooks 1991). Therefore, empathic practice is a legitimate way of creating knowledge about the self, as well as the other, through and with others. The epistemic process can result in different degrees of cognitive and emotional understanding (Campelia 2017). Furthermore, the possibility of relating in new ways to our own experience and feeling understood can bring emotional relief.

The relevance of empathic knowing has been empirically demonstrated in medical contexts. For example, Campelia (2017) foregrounds the importance of dialogically confirming the understanding and insights of how a patient feels beyond gathering only standard medical information. Hence, empathic knowing unfolding between a nurse and a patient allows for new insights and a better understanding of the patient's condition. In this paper, we are interested in how the relational practice of empathic knowing of work-related uncertainty becomes possible through artistic intervention in the context of management education. Specifically, we examine how the exchange can expand beyond standard conversations when engaging in poetic and playful ways of communicating. In the following section, we elaborate on the affective possibilities that art brings to (empathic) knowing.

Engaging the arts for relational knowing in organizations

In the context of organization and management studies, arts, and arts-based methods have been explored as ways to acknowledge the embodied character of learning and knowing (Berthoin Antal 2014; Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015; Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2013). In particular, we build on studies that understand art not merely as 'a new instrument for achieving corporate ends' (Sköldberg, Woodilla, and Antal 2015, 9) or a tool for enhancing cognitive learning processes. Rather, we see art as a destabilizing and disturbing force that enables affective experiences and transformative possibilities of knowing (Berthoin Antal 2014; Berthoin Antal, Taylor, and Ladkin 2014; Kostera and Wozniak 2020). For example, scholars have shown how performative arts, such as theater, provide poetic moments that emphasize the embodied and physical motion of norms, roles, and structures (Moriceau and Letiche 2018), confront us by making the familiar strange (Beyes and Steyaert 2021; Brecht 1976), and enable possibilities for emancipatory experiences (Kostera and Wozniak 2020; Steyaert, Beyes, and Parker 2016). Furthermore, scholars suggest that arts-based methods can help individuals develop the capacity to navigate

uncertainties in creative ways by tapping into embodied knowledge, such as gut feelings and creativity (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015). Moreover, we argue that arts-based methods also enable empathy as a relational way of knowing. In the following section, we elaborate on how art, particularly artistic interventions, can become a powerful force in supporting empathic knowing in management education.

Interspace and artistic interventions

We understand artistic intervention as a co-creative transformative process that opens up a particular social space, an *interspace* in which the customary norms embedded in the organizational culture are temporarily suspended to enable experimentation (Berthoin Antal 2019; Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015). Interspace is a 'temporary social space' (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015, 39) within which learners engage with the potential of uncertainty in a generative way (Chemi and Du 2017) as emotions and energy are allowed to flow in ways that otherwise would not be possible in the organization (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015). Learners also benefit from different perspectives and the tensions between artistic and rational logic that feed innovation and creativity (Darsø 2016). Furthermore, artistic interventions are practical and imaginative processes in which educators and learners engage with school-or work-related questions (Kostera and Wozniak 2020) by reimagining 'what seemed immutable,' thus creating new perspectives (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015, 4). The capacity for wonder 'opens up a collective space' for the surprise of what can happen in a given encounter; thus, it 'involves a reorientation of one's relation to the world' (Ahmed 2014a, 183). The spilling of these effects outside of interspace may also have 'unintended positive impacts' on the rest of the organization (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015, 38), for example, concerning cooperation and solidarity among individuals.

From this perspective, an interspace is initiated when learners, educators, and artists join together to unfold the uncertain creative process of artistic intervention. Even if it may at times be frightening or surprising, it is a safe space for exploration (Chemi and Du 2017). The prevailing organizational norms are suspended and preceded by agreed-upon norms among the participants of the artistic intervention, generating a sense of togetherness and complicity. The artist(s) as facilitator and provocateur engage the participants in practical, imaginative activities and steer the process in a certain direction (Kostera and Wozniak 2020). The 'thirdness' of the interspace, a meeting place of education and art, makes it an 'empty space' (Brook 1996; in Steyaert, Hoyer, and Resch 2016, 344) for playing and experimentation, beyond the rational-logical approach of problem-solving. The artistic provocations, or 'constructive disturbances,' aim to 'defamiliarize the familiar' (Darsø 2016, 24) and activate sensemaking through emotions (Eisner 2008) and embodied senses (Springborg 2012). Hence, such interactions foster different ways for educators and learners to 'experience new ways of seeing, thinking, and doing' regarding their work and also add 'value for them personally' (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015, 39).

Artistic interspace for empathic knowing

The literature on relational knowing recognizes the epistemic capacity of empathy as a social practice that enables one to relate differently by being open to the affective nature of interpersonal exchanges. This makes it possible to gain deeper knowledge about the self and the other. The literature further shows that artistic interventions foster affective transformative possibilities to relate in different ways and to gain new insights into work-related issues. These approaches lend themselves well to reimagining how management education could better acknowledge various forms of learning and knowing, and to challenging the ideological and rationalistic premises underlying management education (Kostera and Wozniak 2020; Steyaert, Beyes, and Parker 2016). To achieve these ends, scholars point to the importance of 'ending the body-mind divide in management practice and reflection' (Kostera and Wozniak 2020, 5; Linstead and Höpfl 2000). This entails recognizing

learning and knowing not only as cognitive but also as embodied and emotional processes embedded in cultural dynamics (Kostera and Wozniak 2020).

From this perspective, we theorize that artistic interventions as activities can facilitate empathic knowing by creating temporary interspaces that not only disrupt the dominant logico-rational ways of knowing, that are characteristic of management education, but also open new relational, open-ended, and more empathic ways of knowing. We argue, in particular, that artistic interventions can foster affective conditions that provide participants with an opportunity to engage with various issues, such as feelings of isolation and not-knowing, through empathic practice with and through others. In the sections that follow, we further elaborate on this theorization through an empirical study of a specific artistic intervention.

Artistic intervention

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of a nine-month-long artistic intervention called *Becoming in Academia* (2020). The intervention took place in the context of the NBS and was targeted at doctoral students. The purpose of the intervention was to create an open, noncurricular space where doctoral students could share and reflect on their experiences of working at an NBS with the help of arts-based methods. The first and fourth authors, who also work as doctoral students and have experience in arts-based methods, initiated the artistic intervention and conducted the ethnographic study.

Becoming in Academia is an illuminating example of artistic intervention in a contemporary, competitive, and performance-oriented management education context. In such a context, doctoral students often face high levels of uncertainty, loneliness, self-doubt (Prasad 2016), and institutional pressures (Katila et al. 2020; Pagan 2019; Wegener, Meier, and Ingerslev 2016), encouraging them to instrumentalize their passions (Kiriakos and Tienari 2018; Lund and Tienari 2019). The working culture of the NBS deems the 'ideal academic' as someone self-sufficient who can produce 'world-class' research at a fast pace, evoking various uncertainties. Instead of imposing these uncertainties, however, the *Becoming in Academia* intervention sought to make space for the participants' lived experiences.

The intervention consisted of three phases. In the first phase, the participants were recruited through an email invitation sent to all registered doctoral students at an NBS. Those interested in participating joined an information session in which the first and fourth authors introduced themselves and explained the intervention and their interest in conducting ethnographic research. After the session, 14 doctoral students volunteered to participate in the intervention. Over the following weeks of spring 2020, the participants were interviewed in pairs. This round of interviews served as a starting point for the intervention, setting its tone and helping recognize commonalities and differences between the doctoral students' experiences.

In the second phase, the first and fourth authors divided the participants into two groups (eight and six participants in each group). The groups agreed on ground rules, agreeing to be responsible for themselves and the other participants. Both groups then attended 6 working sessions separately (12 sessions in total), organized every second or third week. In the sessions, the participants came together and explored a range of themes related to their doctoral studies through facilitated arts-based exercises. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown and social distancing measures, 9 out of 12 working sessions were organized as Zoom video conferences. Throughout the working sessions, confidentiality was important not only as an ethical requirement from a research perspective but also among the participants. In this paper, we use pseudonyms to protect the participants' anonymity.

In the working sessions, the participants selected and agreed on the themes they wanted to explore together (e.g. balance, managing myself, control/lack of control, anxiety, self-confidence, curiosity, my path, and uncertainty). After selecting the themes, they arranged them to create a visual map. One of the visualizations had the shape of a tree and focused on work-related

uncertainty. This visualization later served as a grounding tool to start many of the working sessions. Each participant drew a mark on the visualization to indicate what specific topic they wanted to focus on. Thus, the intervention emphasized attending to what was emerging in the group and embracing the changing moods and needs.

The third phase of the intervention was aimed at closing the experience. It took place in the form of hybrid interviews in small groups, with some participants attending in person and others attending video conferences. In these interviews, the participants reflected on the intervention and what it meant for them. It turned out that the encounters within the working sessions were among only a few social interactions many of the participants had during the first weeks of the COVID-19 lockdown. More broadly, this period of isolation and uncertainty increased general anxiety and a sense of unproductivity among academics (Plotnikof et al. 2020). Thus, the intervention served as a safe meeting point to talk about how they were coping with the disruption of their academic work and personal lives in a vulnerable way.

The arts-based methods employed in the 6 working sessions with the 2 groups emphasized storytelling and metaphoric description. The first and fourth authors chose these methods because they have projective qualities that allow for the illustration of complex understandings (Taylor and Ladkin 2009). Further, they lend themselves well to tapping into the aesthetic and emotional quality of feeling, translating such felt experience into poetic and symbolic concepts, and making sense of the self and others in an iterative mediation between verbal and preverbal imaginative synthesis (Eisner 2008; Lakoff and Johnson 1999; Leavy 2017). In the working sessions, different activities, improvisation techniques, and props (e.g. illustrations, objects, and imaginary scenes) were further used to elicit spontaneity and creativity between the participants.

Ethnographic materials and analysis

The first and fourth authors used an ethnographic approach to document and study the Becoming in Academia intervention they initiated. As a research approach, ethnography requires researchers to immerse themselves in the research setting and become open and sensitive to the context, actors, and interactions taking place (Ybema et al. 2009). This means incorporating diverse methods of fieldwork and embodied knowing to understand the often-hidden aspects of organization and culture (Yanow, Ybema, and Van Hulst 2012). Hence, the ethnographic approach is neither subjective nor objective; rather, it is an interpretative act of social reality (Gaggiotti, Kostera, and Krzyworzeka 2017).

Following these principles, the first and fourth authors acknowledge their own active role in both the artistic intervention and the ethnographic study of it. They were unavoidably 'affecting and affected by' (Gherardi 2019, 754; Pink 2015; Stewart 2007) these entangled processes. Analytically, this means that their embodied situated experiences should be seen in connection with and 'becoming-with' a multiplicity of other materialities and discourses involved, which intentionally or unintentionally affect (Gherardi 2019, 754) how things develop through the ongoing process of research. Acknowledging this favors creative methods that embrace the unknown. Hence, art and aesthetics are suitable for investigating the 'production of knowledge in action' (Gherardi 2019, 752) and have the emancipatory potential for imagining other ways of organizing.

The ethnographic data generated during the artistic intervention consisted of video and audio recordings, field notes, and documents generated while planning, facilitating, and participating in the intervention. The data also included photographs and participants' reflections during the working sessions. Altogether, the first and fourth authors conducted 12 in-depth group interviews (60–120 min each) and recorded 12 sessions, 2.5 h each (6 working sessions x 2 groups). During the intervention, the authors alternated the roles of a working session facilitator and participant-observer. The insider position as a fellow doctoral student allowed them to connect personally with the participants. This experience became a relevant data source for analyzing the embodied understanding of the empathic practice and affective relations.

The analysis of our empirical materials was an abductive and iterative process (Van Maanen, Sørensen, and Mitchell 2007). During the fieldwork, the first and fourth authors observed how the participants recursively shared personal struggles related to their work with each other, often acknowledging how ‘they were not alone.’ Inspired by this observation, they went through their field notes, video recordings, and interview materials to look for interactive episodes in which these exchanges took place. Themes such as affective metaphor, tensions, struggles, uncertainty, and reframing emerged as codes for these episodes. They further recognized that the participants often referred to specific meaningful encounters during the working sessions, encounters that somehow stood out for them as emotionally significant. Many of these encounters were connected to facilitated working sessions in which storytelling as an arts-based method was used. The first and fourth authors revisited the data to identify these episodes of meaningful encounters. Codes such as narrating the other and collective validation were developed to refer to these episodes.

At this point, the second and third authors joined the team. As a team of four authors, we started to experiment iteratively with how to theorize the initial findings. We organized collaborative meetings, engaged with the literature on arts-based methods, and read the key episodes (of sharing personal struggles and of meaningful encounters) through the notion of interspace. This analysis revealed how empathy and empathic engagement with work-related uncertainty became possible within the physical, virtual, and metaphorical space of the intervention. Inspired by this finding, we engaged with Campelia’s (2017) work on empathy as an epistemic practice. We again revisited our analysis, this time paying attention to how the participants related to their own and each other’s uncertainties during the intervention. This analysis revealed three activities in and through which empathic engagement with work-related uncertainty became possible within the interspace of the intervention: *aligning oneself to the other*, *narrating a collective validation*, and *acknowledging the agency of the other*. In the following section, we will focus on these activities, and how they created an interspace for empathic knowing in our case, in more detail.

It is important to point out that in our study, doctoral students do not represent a broad sample category of (precarious) management education professionals, and that our aim is not to offer any statistically generalizable knowledge. In choosing to conduct an artistic intervention with a group of doctoral students, our aim was to create an open space for them to explore their shared reflections and experiences of work-related uncertainty. Thus, the conversations and collective reflections we recorded during the intervention for this paper provided us with an opportunity to learn about the possibilities of arts-based methods for mobilizing empathy as a specific form of knowing, and how empathy can help learners engage with their lived experience of work-related uncertainty in new, transformative ways.

Creating an interspace for empathic knowing

In this section, we will focus on the key activities of the Becoming in Academia intervention in and through which emerged an interspace, opening the possibility for empathic engagement with work-related uncertainty: *aligning oneself to the other*, *narrating collective validation*, and *acknowledging the agency of the other*. We will express these activities in the form of dialogues between ethnographic vignettes and analytical notes highlighting the key insights (Katila, Kuismin, and Valtonen 2019). Each of the sub-sections below then focuses on one activity and consists of one vignette that is ‘paused’ by several analytic notes.

Aligning oneself to the other

The first ethnographic vignette demonstrates how the intervention created an interspace that disrupted the temporal dimensions and practices of ‘normal’ work for the participants (Berthoin Antal 2019; Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015) and created an opportunity for them to align themselves to the other through co-creating a story using images as a reference.

Ethnographic vignette 1

During the first encounter, the researchers meet two participants for an interview. Instead of asking questions and soliciting answers, the researchers pour wooden square pieces on the table.

"Are we going to play?" asks a participant, their curiosity piqued.
The other participant laughs.

"You will take turns telling a story about the adventures of a Ph.D. student. The trick is to build on each other's accounts, inspired by turning over the wood pieces and uncovering illustrations as you go," explains one of the researchers.

First, the arts-based approach is an alternative to the logico-rational approach toward interviewing by enabling an open-ended exchange. The materiality of the old wooden pieces brought reminiscences of childhood board games and shifted the approach to a playful tone.

The participants shuffle the pieces. Amelia starts by flipping a piece—a dragon.

"Once upon a time, there was a Ph.D. student who came to the campus, felt very displaced, and wanted to burn down existing structures."

Ben then picks a piece—a sailboat.

"Instead, she sailed away in search of inspiration ... "

As the story continues, they place the images next to each other on the table – a bird represents feeling free, a book represents curiosity, an umbrella represents confusion, a castle represents interesting places to explore, and a kite represents confidence.

The playful moment allowed participants to express their embodied experiences of being doctoral students; for example, by creating associations with images – a dragon, sailboat, and bird – they could express metaphors of 'feeling free' or wanting to 'look for inspiration' or 'burn down' structures. The connection to spontaneous and playful exchange emphasized that there was no urgency to achieve any productive goals or provide analytical answers. Thus, the interspace that emerged through this silly, playful exchange is what Derrida called *useless* (Derrida 2001); the aim is to listen to others and express yourself imaginatively without pressure or a practical, goal-oriented purpose.

Once the story is over, everyone stares at the sequence of the images [Figure 1].

Amelia breaks the silence, "Gosh, I think we all share the same kind of path."

We laugh.

"Is this how it goes?" We ponder.

Amelia muses, "I think it describes my path. Now, I'm between the swan and the castle. It's a stage where I know what I'm doing, and there's not as much insecurity as at the beginning of my Ph.D."

Ben points at the umbrella and says, "I'm still here. Reading a lot, searching for something, not knowing what to do, or how it will end. It is not a very happy place but one with ups and downs."

The graphic story works as a symbolic reference and entry point for participants to talk about their personal experiences while recognizing similarities and differences. The vignette shows how the 'constructive disturbance' (Darsø 2016, 24) of co-creating a story enabled participants to attune to each other by paying attention to the images, others' accounts, and their own interpretations. This resulted in an engaging conversation in which participants could disclose struggles related to work and personal life – struggles that they encountered during their Ph.D. journeys but would not share with their supervisors or other senior academics. The conversation also made them realize that they were 'not alone' in their experiences, as some participants put it.



Figure 1. The images that inspired the story.

The interspace, thus, emerged as a temporal space where ‘new ways of collaborating and interacting between people’ (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015, 45) shifted from impersonal rational logic to affective interdependence with others. For example, by co-creating a story from images, the activity oriented the encounter among strangers to become other-oriented by ensuring that participants remained receptive to the unfolding exchange with *the other* (Campelia 2017). The vignette illustrates how *aligning oneself with the other* in an empathic encounter enabled participants to be vulnerable rather than analytical. In this case, interspace emerged as a safe space for expressing oneself and staying open to others. Furthermore, a sense of togetherness emerged as a result of

aligning oneself with the other. The participants left the first session with a collective feeling: 'I'm not alone in this struggle.' Some of them indicated that it was the first time they discussed certain Ph.D. struggles with their peers. Thus, by 'suspending the norms,' the interspace enabled the unfolding of trust and openness among participants, where different perspectives were respected and their experiences were validated.

Narrating collective validation

The next ethnographic vignette shifts our analytical attention to a second key aspect of empathic knowing: attuning oneself to the other sets the groundwork for collective validation. In our case, the participants expressed feelings of uncertainty by narrating their experiences through metaphoric descriptions.

Ethnographic vignette 2

Due to pandemic-related government mandated lockdowns, the ability to meet at the university was curtailed. Following the first week of lockdown, the first online session was conducted. Participants are attempting to adapt to this new situation.

Someone addresses the issue, 'It just adds a lot of uncertainty to the uncertainty we already have.'

There is silence and tension.

The facilitator asks, 'Who else shares this experience?' And everyone nods or raises their hand. The facilitator suggests, '... if you could imagine yourself in a landscape ... what does the not-knowing look like? What do you see?'

By narrating their feelings of not-knowing in an aesthetic way, it became possible to understand how the others felt. The vignette thus highlights how metaphoric description allowed the participants to express how uncertainty and not-knowing feel by describing the experience of being in certain physical landscapes. The activity of defamiliarizing the familiar refers to the capacity to engage with what seems immutable and find a new perspective (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2014).

Claudia indicates that, for her, not-knowing is akin to being at the top of a foggy mountain, unable to see the path she should follow to get down.

Daniel continues with the image of a foggy place, but for him, it is a swamp where he cannot see the peak. He keeps moving without a clear destination—essentially going in circles.

Vera elaborates on the idea of the swamp, exclaiming, 'My feet are sticky, I can't! The struggle is real!' She gestures with her arms as if trying to move forward.

Leo, in contrast, imagines the landscape as a huge river that rushes down the mountain, and the only way to cross the river is by stepping on stones. He is unsure if the stones will hold him or if he is going to be washed away, so he feels a sense of urgency to rush to get across. Hugh ends the discussion by describing a dark rainy forest, like a maze, where he is cold and cannot find his way out.

This part of the vignette shows how expressing physical sensations aesthetically and poetically enabled empathic knowing to unfold between the participants by activating the affective 'sensing' of the landscapes instead of making sense through analysis (Chemi and Du 2017). The vignette also shows how the facilitator and the participants remained open to shifts in the ongoing process of understanding each other in an empathetic manner. For example, the activity was not planned, but the facilitator was receptive to the participants' expressions of emotions and needs, and she acted upon them to reorient the session to address the tensions caused by uncertainty.

The facilitator acknowledges with a smile how dramatic the landscapes are. 'It is like being in a dream where you try to find your way, but it is very challenging.'

Hugh adds that the whole situation feels like a movie. 'If a month ago someone had told me there would be a virus and that I would be stuck inside ... yet here we are!'

The facilitator then suggests that 'this calls for serious grounding'—everyone nods in agreement—'because it takes a lot of energy to stay in this state.'

The part of the vignette above shows how, by acknowledging the emotions surrounding the experience of uncertainty, the facilitator and participants held space to express uncomfortable feelings and thus validate the collective ongoing experience. Without such acknowledgment, the flow of energy and emotions might need to be 'contained' and not expressed in organizational settings. The urgent need to share these uncomfortable feelings in a collective setting made it very engaging, despite the exchange being mediated by a video call.

The activity of *narrating collective validation* through artistic activity, such as metaphoric descriptions, thus shows how empathic understandings may not only bring relief but may also be transformative. Interestingly, collectively attending to other's narrations allowed the participants to distance themselves from their experiences of uncertainty by imaging themselves in other's landscapes of uncertainty that are foggy, sticky (preventing movement), unstable, risks to be washed away, marked by darkness and coldness without a way out, and where they cannot see the path.

Moreover, the experiences of uncertainty described by the narratives of the participants are of being alone amid adversity. A metaphor that resonated effectively with the participants was a bonfire fire that provided light and warmth. The metaphor allows for the possibility of sitting and collecting oneself, shifting the embodied sensation of anxiety to one of calm by gathering with others. Hence, through the interspace, the doctoral students' experiences of uncertainty could be validated not in conventional professional ways but in emotional and personal ones. The activity of *narrating collective validation* shows how the empathic practice becomes an end in itself by expressing and listening to others' verbal and nonverbal communication. Moreover, this exercise transformed the individual and isolating experience of uncertainty into a shared one.

Acknowledging the agency of the other

The third vignette illustrates how storytelling can be used to facilitate an affective exchange between participants in an artistic intervention that allows them to acknowledge and gain a deep sense of the agency of the other person (Campelia 2017, 539). This acknowledgment does not involve an assessment of the life of the other; rather, it entails a simple yet powerful recognition of the agency of the other person 'as it is with dispositions of character and personality, and with a conception of oneself as having a past and a future in light of which decisions and choices are made ...' (Coplan 2014, 317; in Campelia 2017, 539). And always taking in consideration that such knowledge is incomplete since we can't fully know the other.

Ethnographic vignette 3

An image of a bonfire appears on the shared screen. "Imagine we are about to tell stories," instructs one of the researchers.

Participants work in pairs where they each share an account of their path and curiosity. One participant discusses her life-changing decision of quitting her job because she did not feel at home; she applied for a new position and jumped in feet first.

The other participant listens without interrupting and prepares to improvise a magic tale based on the other participant's account.

First, empathic knowing unfolds by embodying different affective positions that are reciprocal. For the listener, this means being attentive while being trusted with someone's personal account. For the person sharing, this means disclosing a personal experience while being uninterrupted and listened to.

The listener takes on the role of storyteller, and her posture and voice change.

"This story is about the adventures of a girl with a magic compass ... " It is a tale full of details for her co-participant to absorb; her storytelling is passionate and captivating.

Second, the affective positions change to improvising a tale for and about the other participant and receiving the spontaneously created story. In this case, the ongoing relational exchange is organized around creating a tale. It becomes a way of attuning to the other and following one's intuition playfully.

Linda [the participant telling the story] emphasizes gesticulations and funny voices. The story takes the main character "up mountains and down dark paths" through "unexpected turns" until she finds a place where "she feels at home." The story ends. The partner seems touched, and observes a moment of silence with a smile. "Thank you. I really like adventures ... I feel you described me."

Third, through the tale, it is possible to communicate understanding gained by attentive listening to verbal and nonverbal expressions. Hence, the tale offers affective metaphors expressed in a poetic way that enables further discussion. For example, the 'magic compass' in the story highlights the intuition and agency that the participant grasps based on their partner's account. The vignette shows how the activity of 'confirming' the other's experience in a creative story became a meaningful way to communicate such understandings. Therefore, recognizing the other as a whole person trying to make their way through life based on their own perspectives, beliefs, and choices is part of empathic practice (Campelia 2017).

They [the participants] share the improvised stories once again but now with the whole group. There is a feeling of excitement and togetherness. They listen attentively to each story, and at the end, there is time to share which parts they resonated with. For example, "The girl keeps going, even if there is uncertainty, she doesn't get unmotivated," a participant says.

"I admire the perseverance," another participant acknowledges. "I wish I had a magic compass, too."

Another replies, "Oh! You do have one; everyone does!"

The vignette shows how storytelling facilitated expressing the experiences of others at the same time as one's own by allowing new aspects and interpretations to emerge. The empathic practice enabled participants to recognize tensions and integrate them as part of the learning process. Since the tales are not addressed specifically by someone's name, but rather by 'the boy' or 'the girl,' it elevates each story so that others can see it in another dimension from a distance. These stories become affective metaphors for what it means to be a doctoral student, and they enable validation in a collective setting.

Engaging with issues through empathic knowing is a process of adjusting understanding to guard 'against the stereotypes ... and false empathy' (Campelia 2017, 541), bringing the opportunity for the other to correct or validate your understanding. The vignette shows how the tale creates opportunities to recognize aspects of the participants' experiences in a new light, for example, the relationship with intuition and emotions while making decisions. This emphasizes that relational and interdependent empathic knowing is not only toward the other and about the other, as in 'gaining information,' but also about the self through the other. Hence, empathic knowing creates a sense of recognition that is affective, not only on a professional level but also on personal and vulnerable levels.

Overall, we find that the interspace created through the nine-month artistic intervention enabled the participants, who were strangers at the beginning of the intervention, to relate differently by directing attention to the other without forgetting the self. Thus, it became possible to discuss difficult things in vulnerable ways rather than having impersonal exchanges, which are common organizational practices. Moreover, the participants interpreted their experiences through one another to create new insights and understanding by validating emotions (Campelia 2017) and poetic expressions as a legitimate source of knowledge.

We recognized the limits of how much one can know about the other (Pedwell 2012). In this sense, the epistemic practice is not for the sake of information per se but rather to relate to others' stories and one's own through a new lens. At the end of the intervention, some participants referred to the experience as a relevant peer support group that was needed during the pandemic's social isolation period. They expressed that this type of emotional support was not available to them through other spaces in the organization.

Discussion

In this paper, we have examined how artistic intervention can facilitate empathic engagement with work-related uncertainty within postgraduate management education. We theorized that empathy as a form of relational knowing emerges in an interspace that is created by artistic intervention, a space in which a multiplicity of possibilities for engaging with ideas, humans, and non-humans are exposed. Through an ethnographic study – *Becoming in Academia*, a nine-month artistic intervention conducted with a group of doctoral students – we highlighted three activities through which this interspace was accomplished, opening the possibility for empathic knowing of work-related uncertainty. In *aligning oneself to the other*, the intervention's participants attuned to work-related uncertainty by constructing a unifying story that brought together various experiences. In *narrating a collective validation*, the participants specified details of this uncertainty by narrating each other's experiences. Finally, in *acknowledging the agency of the other*, the participants developed new ways of relating to work-related uncertainties by collectively affirming each other's experiences.

Our analysis demonstrates how the intervention invited or even forced the participants to distance themselves from the logico-rational knowing that is dominant in the management education context. Instead of engaging with work-related uncertainty through, for example, goal-oriented supervision practices, the participants worked with peer doctoral students through arts-based methods that highlighted playfulness and open-endedness. As we have shown above, participating in this exercise was not effortless for the participants or the facilitators. Instead, it required them to pay considerable attention to silence, tension, and moment-to-moment emotional, rhythmic, and energetic changes. It was, however, exactly these surprising, and at times uncomfortable, moments in the interspace of *Becoming in Academia* that gave rise to empathic knowing of work-related uncertainty. We have highlighted, for example, how narrating a collective validation emerged from a moment of silence after a participant shared her anxiety about working within the pandemic context. Overall, our analysis emphasizes how shifts in knowing related to work-related uncertainty are connected to the effects of bringing arts-based methods into postgraduate management education by peer doctoral students.

We offer two contributions to the literature on arts-based management education. First, while several studies have highlighted the potential of arts-based teaching and learning methods for enhancing collaboration and interaction among organizational members (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015; Kostera and Wozniak 2020; Steyaert, Beyes, and Parker 2016; Taylor and Ladkin 2009) relatively little attention has been paid to the activities of artistic intervention in and through which a space for empathy can be created. Through our study, we contribute to this line of scholarship by theorizing and empirically illustrating how an artistic intervention can open up an interspace (Berthoin Antal and Strauß 2015) with the possibility of enacting empathy as a particular form of knowing. Through the empirical vignettes and analysis, we illustrated how the *Becoming in Academia* intervention created this interspace through three main activities that, among other things, introduced a temporal order where the 'doing' was part of the 'ends' rather than the means. As we have highlighted, this allowed the participants to be open and vulnerable and to engage collaboratively and playfully with work-related uncertainties.

Importantly, the interspace we examined enabled the participants to share their experiences without the pressure of producing a predefined outcome, measuring it, or performing in professional

academic ways. Rather than providing a particular framework for *how and what* to know or learn, the activities we examined contribute to the importance of open-ended knowing with multiple others (Steyaert, Beyes, and Parker 2016). For example, participating in the Becoming in Academia intervention meant different things for different participants. While some of our participants made sense of it as a process of inspiration, others saw it as a support group, an opportunity to witness others' professional development, and an anchor point during an uncertain time. Overall, the creation of an interspace space through the activities of the artistic intervention allowed the participants to both listen and be listened to in various ways that were different from those in everyday management education.

Second, while existing studies have discussed arts-based methods in management education as a way to explore and reflect on the affective and embodied experience of learning (Leavy 2017; Mack 2013; Wicks and Rippin 2010), relatively little attention has been paid to the relationships between artistic intervention and work-related uncertainty (Otto and Strauß 2019). We contribute to this stream of research by showing how an artistic intervention, through the interspace it creates, can enable participants to rethink such uncertainty. This finding enriches the previous literature as it elucidates the capacity of artistic intervention to open new, yet ephemeral, possibilities for engaging with and unpacking uncertainty related to work. As we have shown above, arts-based methods such as storytelling and metaphoric description can contribute to such engagement, as they offer creative, playful approaches that can help the participants recognize both their personal and collective agency amid pressures. Our analysis further highlights that the participants expressed a strong commitment to exploring and investigating these uncertainties beyond or outside academic goal-driven practices. As expressed by our participants, this was fostered by the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to the blurring of the distinctions between personal and work life, making even more evident the need to reconsider how uncertainty can(not) be expressed and validated within the management education context. Overall, the intervention allowed the participants to share what they would not have otherwise disclosed in the workspace.

Our argument has limitations. The findings from the Becoming in Academia intervention may be specific to the rather small group of committed intervention participants, their shared condition as early career scholars, and the facilitation of the intervention by peer doctoral students. While much of the postgraduate management education highlights independent work and the development of independent thinking under a high level of uncertainty, the participants in our study committed to a nine-month intervention with a group of fellow doctoral students. They had the resources to meet with each other regularly and to develop their understanding of uncertainties related to their academic journeys together. In many other uncertain work settings, such as platform-based work where individuals typically do short-term work and where interactions with peers are limited (Moi-sander, Groß, and Eräranta 2018), the formation of this kind of relationship can be much more difficult. Our analysis may also be specific to the relatively small group of intervention participants (14). We believe that working with a much larger group of students, which is increasingly common in neoliberal universities that are turning into 'edu-factories' where students are seen as costumers (Fleming 2020, 1307), would have had a significant effect on the trust and openness that emerged between the participants of our study. Finally, our findings may have been shaped by the character of the artistic intervention we studied. Instead of being another managerial wellness program that stabilized dominant power relations, the Becoming in Academia intervention was initiated by peers and colleagues who had experience with arts-based methods. This allowed for creating a space where the dominant power relations were temporarily disrupted; it was the doctoral students' voices that were raised and heard instead of those of management.

Conclusion

Painful paradoxes and not-knowing are part of life and participation in management education, such as business school doctoral training. To engage with the challenges they present us, scholars suggest

that it is important to increase our sensitivity to them (Bohm and Peat 2000; Dey and Steyaert 2007; Gherardi 1999) to gain a deep understanding of the complexity, power relations, and ambiguity that are characteristic of contemporary society (Kostera and Wozniak 2020). Our study highlights how an artistic intervention can help in this endeavor, as it can create an interspace in which empathic knowing of work-related uncertainties becomes possible. Within such interspace, embodied experiences of uncertainty, self-doubt, shame, fear, and guilt become knowable through care and empathy instead of rejection or silencing. Thus, our study calls for critical scholarly attention to how arts-based methods can confront the dominant ways of feeling and experiencing in competitive educational and organizational settings by making them strange or approachable in novel ways. To this end, future research can benefit by drawing from approaches used in studies of theater, including Brecht's work on alienation. Overall, more research is needed to better understand the (im)possibilities of artistic interventions within management education contexts to unlock not-yet-actualized ways of knowing, feeling, and relating.

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