Metalogue: Trying to talk about (un)sustainability – a reflection on experience

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Abstract

This paper considers dilemmas for organization and management scholars studying and writing about environmental sustainability. It suggests that sustainability requires new ways of thinking which in turn require new forms of representation to help foster their emergence. Consequently, the paper partly takes the experimental form of a 'metalogue' (Bateson, 1972), in which the structure of the conversation between the authors is intended to be reflective of the content of the problematic subject discussed, in this case their experiences of trying to raise critical questions about scholarship for sustainability. This experimental form, which invites the reader to eschew expectations of typical points of orientation, enables an appreciation of how forms of argument seem to replicate epistemological challenges in the sustainability field. The paper shows how metaloguing becomes not only an alternative form but also an inquiry process for considering sustainability that can support embodied reflexivity, critical questioning and appreciation of entanglements of people-scholars.

Finding our voices

In this paper we review our attempts to speak about environmental sustainability. We have written an article on frames for thinking about sustainability in management and organizational studies and submitted versions to two management journals. The article has so far been rejected. Whilst this is perhaps not an uncommon experience these days, the writing and reviewing processes have seemed to us to reflect the scholarly issues and material we are working with and we have thus chosen to review our experiences and 'go backstage' to consider how in management and organizational studies we can talk, research and write about sustainability. So that we can speak freely and richly explore the issues and questions that we find ourselves amongst, we have chosen a form of both exploration and representation called metalogue, used especially by Gregory Bateson (1972). By experimenting through writing, as others have done (e.g. Grey & Sinclair,

2006; Learmonth & Humphreys, 2012), this paper is also intended as an invitation, to hear if you recognise the tensions and dilemmas we experience.

We are two scholars at different career stages who share puzzlements about the current state of academia. Stephen has a range of organizational and academic experience, and in 2012 completed his PhD which explores how managers make sense of sustainability. Judi has spent the last 30 years involved in management education and research related to sustainability and is now on the verge of retirement. Our core question for this piece is how management and organizational academia is and could be working with issues of environmental sustainability and climate change, which we consider critical but relatively neglected.

Our concerns about sustainability stem from our perception of the current challenges of planetary unsustainability, which are depicted, for example, in scientific analyses of climate change (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2014), of how we are currently close to or exceeding planetary boundaries in terms of a 'safe operating space for humanity' (Steffen et al., 2015) and of escalating loss of species and biodiversity (Hooper et al., 2012). There are also associated social, economic and material inequalities that contribute to instabilities in global society, for example expressed through climate change negotiations (Banerjee, 2012). 'Sustainability' is, thus, a big, ambiguous, ambitious term, not easily boundaried or delineated, so if we shrink it down to fit within conventional forms of academic discourse it can become reduced in scope, 'tamed' as a potential problem (Rittel & Webber, 1973). More challenging meanings and languages of sustainability seem often now to be being taken over and populated by short term, 'business-as-usual', economic concerns or potentially formulaic notions of corporate responsibility (Banerjee, 2008). We therefore think it pressing that we find appropriate and generative ways to think, talk and act in relation to environmental sustainability.

Our earlier draft article, which prompted our experimentation here, questioned how, as academics, we are framing sustainability. It offered four constellations of ideas for understanding sustainability, derived from a cross disciplinary review. We suggested that adequate management and organizational theorising in relation to sustainability would need to: recognise complexity, including appreciating how business is embedded in society, and society in nature; heed principles of ecology; work at and understand appropriate scale; and, as core, appreciate the social construction and politicisation of knowledge. Each theme was traced through relevant literatures, spanning disciplines. We then proposed that management and organizational studies take this integrated array of considerations into account in order to think adequately about sustainability. A core argument was that this would suggest more conditional and careful forms of sense-making, tentative perhaps, but also embodied and appreciative of our entanglements as academics in issues of sustainability and un-sustainability. We recognise that some publications meet the exacting requirements for considering (un)sustainability that we set out from our review, especially in appreciating it as complex (for example, Starik & Kanashiro (2013), Whiteman et al. (2013), Shrivastava (2010)). But we think these relatively scarce and do not see their influence in mainstream management and organizational studies. It was not our purpose in the earlier article and is not here to audit this literature. Our interest is in *how* we think and talk about sustainability and what forms this might need to take, especially to be aware of the politicisation of knowledge by which we mean, for example, how forms of thinking become approved or disapproved, how boundaries of what is considered legitimate are drawn. The current paper pursues these agendas of appropriate forms of sense-making, seeking to approach from a form that is suitable to the conditionality and breadth we are advocating.

Entanglement and its repercussions for the complexities of scholarship are key ideas that we want to appreciate in this paper. Human entanglement in issues of environmental sustainability can be considered in terms of 'matter' – constituted by the biological and planetary systems in which our bodies are part – and 'meaning' – the ways we go about making sense of sustainability and the human values that we inscribe into the associated challenges (Barad, 2007). As entangled academics, for example, we are employed by universities where pedagogical approaches are embedded within what is socially and politically valued; business education tends to conform to a worldview that increasing the financial profitability of organizations is the 'centre of the universe' (Giacalone & Thompson, 2006). To help respond to the material challenges of environmental sustainability we want to develop appreciation of the co-constructing interrelationships between meaning and matter through exploring and developing alternative ways of writing. These proposed sensibilities for appreciating entanglement resonate with the work of Gregory Bateson who proposed that sustainability and related ecological crises are bound up in crises of mind – habits of thought and action which foster dis-engagement from our relations with biological and planetary systems (Bateson, 1972, 1979). Bateson proposed an expanded idea of mind, whereby he conceptualised the living world as 'a vast collection of minds or mental processes' (Charlton, 2008, p. 43), human identity inseparably entangled with environment. Associated with opening up possibilities

for respecting how human knowing is embedded within patterns of relationship and conversation, Bateson used the approach of metalogue to experiment with more multi-dimensional forms of thinking. We understand that dwelling with and exploring the meanings and implications of entanglement requires us to be humble, as Bateson suggests "tempered by the dignity or joy of being part of something much bigger" (2000, p. 468).

Metalogue is "a conversation about some problematic subject" in which "not only do the participants discuss the problem but the structure of the conversation as a whole is also relevant to the same subject" (Bateson, 2000, p. 1). Bateson used this method of reasoning, depicting conversations between father and daughter, to explore the nature of knowing. Titles of his metalogues include "Why do things get in a muddle?" (Bateson, 2000, pp. 3–8) and "Why do things have outlines?" (Bateson, 2000, pp. 27–32). For us, adopting metalogue as an approach was an intuitive move, seeking freedom to explore in ways that might bypass our increasingly stilted senses of trying to write in a more formal journal voice about important, to us, issues of environmental sustainability.

There are a few examples of metalogue in different disciplines. In communication studies Dumitrica (2010) uses metalogue to generate a fictionalised projected conversation between student and supervisor about the suitability of autoethnography as a PhD research method. In science education Tobin and Roth suggest metalogue is a "very flexible form of representing ideas because it always moves between intellect and emotion, intersubjectivity and subjectivity, accepted knowledge and personal experience" (Tobin & Roth, 2002, p. 269). They believe that a key benefit of metalogue is its potential for taking previous texts or conversations and analysing them at a 'new meta-level', which they see as constituting a practice of reflexivity (Roth & Tobin, 2001, p. xxiii). In social work, by using metalogue to deconstruct a journal review process, Staller suggests that it could serve as "a method of inquiry that would allow us to unpack the social reality that creates, generates, and sustains boundaries of scholarship" (Staller, 2007, p. 155). We connect closely with these scholars' understanding of the possibilities for metalogue to offer alternative ways of researching. Also, because it has not been used that much it has not become conventionalised as an inquiry and representational approach. By adopting and developing this form we see its potential as a way of inquiring and of writing to blend careful reflexive appreciation of our entanglement in (un)sustainability with an academic voice that can permit us to speak assertively about matters that concern us, including questioning the legitimacy and boundaries of scholarship.

By metaloguing we are working in proximity to other genres of research such as autoethnography, "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Such texts appear in a variety of forms (e.g. poetry, fiction) where the intention is to invite readers to experience *with* the writer by "evok[ing]... a feeling that the experience described is life-like, believable, and possible" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 751). This is achieved by connecting "the personal to the cultural through a 'peeling back' of multiple layers of consciousness, thoughts, feelings and beliefs" (Boyle & Parry, 2007, p. 185). Metalogue shares characteristics with autoethnography, in particular a desire to offer an embodied sense of authorship and to play with subject-object boundaries. However, an important distinguishing aspect of metalogue is the mirroring between topic and written form. It is also necessarily dialogic whereas much autoethnography is uni-vocal.

By taking metalogue as our approach we realise that we have to work with criticisms that such reflexive writing has the potential to create a mirage of authenticity (Seale, 1999). To pay attention to multiple, fragmented and often competing versions of self-identity, that challenge ideas about being authentic, we relate to the concept of 'subjective authenticity', helping take into account the limits of self-knowledge (Case, 2003). Subjective authenticity means that writers are "able in principle to be as truthful to themselves and as transparent about their research motives as it is possible at the time they commit themselves to writing" (Case, 2003, p. 169).

To adopt metalogue as an inquiry process we recorded three conversations over three months to see what would emerge from engaging in reflective dialogue. In our first conversation we began by speaking about the reviewers' comments we had received on our initial article, but we did not then follow any agreed plan about what we were going to discuss. We operated from a tentative respect for, and curiosity about, emergent process, akin to processes of writing as inquiry (Richardson, 2000). Respecting what emerged was one of our chosen methodological disciplines. Engaging in the metalogue thus became an inquiry process. We wondered if the form the metalogue took and its content might mirror each other, as in Bateson's original conception, but did not attempt to contrive this. As we review at the end of this article, we consider that this did happen.

In this article, the interrelationships of academic form and content in relation to sustainability, and the consequences of their potential incongruence, becomes a core topic of exploration.

We worked with transcripts of our conversations to arrive at a suitable analysis process. We read, re-read and discussed them, identifying recurring preoccupations and threads to which the conversations seemed to gravitate. Dilemmas of academic identity were a major concern, intersecting with senses of freedom, constraint or resistance in terms of what we saw as scholarly expectations and forms of representation. Connectedly, the interrelationships of academic form and content in relation to sustainability, and the consequences of their potential incongruence, becomes a key topic of exploration. We also moved back and forth through issues relating to writing and researching as reflexive processes, and the politics of how much of these to show. All these were predicated on our wish to speak freely about sustainability, which we have experienced as a marginalised, contentious and volatile topic in management and organizational studies. This discipline area was thus our initial base. We found that our conversations led us to then question the nature of scholarship more generally and its sustainability. These emergent interests are reflected in sections of metalogue represented below.

In analysing the transcripts we paid attention to the shape they took, to their emerging form, as well as their content. Here we experiment by representing our conversations as a form of metalogue. To develop this paper's themes, we want to *show* sections of them, and explore some of their textures. To achieve this, we have worked from the 20,765 words of our original three transcripts in an iterative analysis process, with multiple rounds of passing the documents between us and discussion, tracking and accepting changes. We sought to craft a succinct version to offer you here. We have reduced repetition, made amendments for clarity, and removed some of the conditionality of our speech patterns, arriving at a metalogue text of 3,581 words. We faced several dilemmas. We wanted to enact notions such as reflexivity, infused with subjective authenticity (Case, 2003), as much as we could, to 'show' them in action and explore the workings behind them. But we realised that we also need to explain some things in advance, 'telling' the reader enough to help orient them, appreciating that the dialogic text might lack familiar markers and apparent direction – hence this introduction. To balance tell and show, we have also interspersed the metalogue with explanatory and reflective comments about the themes we see arising. Whilst the themes outlined above appear more prominently at certain times, the three conversations are taken as a whole here (rather than each having a separate purpose) as they formed one emergent, iterative, exploration. Crucially we hope that we have kept this representational form open enough so that others can react to the metalogue.

Of the several threads running through our dialogues, we focus here on the persisting storyline that un-sustainability is complex and understanding it requires systemic thinking. Any scholar is thus entangled in the field(s) they wish to study, rather than apart from it (them). Consequently, scholarship for sustainability requires new ways of thinking which work with this entanglement, are reflexive, and are wary about creating inappropriate boundaries which interrupt significant systemic connections. We see conventional journal article formats, associated distanced scholarly voices and limited engagement with issues of (un)sustainability as highly inter-connected. New ways of thinking require new forms of scholarship – in terms of inquiry processes and forms of representation. This is our attempt here, and so we especially review the politicisation of scholarship through processes of reflexivity. Whilst we attempt to offer you as reader sufficient focus to share in this exploration, we also leave some sense-making open, as we consider this congruent with the argument we are offering.

In the next phase of the paper we offer sections of metalogue, amended as described above, and some ongoing sense-making commentary about content-form *in italics*. A closing section will review our experiment.

Metalogue as a process of inquiry

Conversation 1.

Questioning focus and distanced scholarship

Steve   In previous versions of this work, seeking to span across disciplinary boundaries, we lost a sense of the focus, and clearly we know focus and contribution are very much in the forefront of editors' minds. So there's that to maybe think about.

Judi   I'm ambivalent about that. Yes, we know 'focus' is what journals are looking for, but actually what we were trying to say is about complexity, humble sense making, slipperiness, realising that you might try to grasp at terms and they disappear off outside your reach. We are advocating noticing that, rather than bringing ideas to order. There was your lovely line in your PhD thesis when you were generating the four constellations of ideas [outlined above], about realising you could wrestle the material you were working with into repetitive categories,

disciplines mainly, but that doing so tamed them inappropriately, and you chose not to do that. You let the material sprawl, develop, shift around, and from that came the creativity of your sense-making.

Steve   Yes, the themes that then emerged were cross-disciplinary, but grounded in multiple ways in different disciplines. Whilst they might not seem stunning and very novel on the surface, it was interesting how that analysis gave us an interconnected array of provocative markers against which to judge the adequacy – inadequacy mostly, actually – of management studies to grapple with sustainability questions. One of the reviewers of that earlier article asked "Are you implying that what is sustained at the moment is the opposite of these four threads: realism, reductionism, linearity of scale effects and ignorance of the ecological?" That was encouraging – our message had been recognised. So did the earlier paper not really confront some of those questions?

Judi   That review comment was lovely. Well, yeah, I suppose actually that's what we were saying but we were trying to be…

Steve   Polite! (both laughing)

Judi   Yeah! But that sounds far too generalising and really quite a swipe at everybody else – and that's not what we intend. My brief answer is that I don't think authors who are taking a more complex, for shorthand, approach and their ways of seeing issues are yet mainstream. They may be important figures, like Mark Starik in the Academy of Management but sustainability could still be seen as a marginal field and these expressions are not picked up in mainstream theorising. So I think there's something about the processes of scholarship that we were also trying to get into. That was one of your early concerns. Do you remember when you came back from the Journal of Management Studies Conference on Foundations of Sustainability? You were asking whether such conferences and associated processes of journal publication would have any impact at all.

Steve   Yes, that conference was important in terms of getting a sense of what people were doing and saying about sustainability. When a top ranked journal calls in quite strong terms for people to talk about sustainability that *is* interesting, appealing. So what then struck me was that people *were* considering topics associated with sustainability, but most did so in a kind of detached way, so that they were not so at risk amongst their data and what they were finding. It seemed palatable for them, and other people, that they could find those things out from a distance. There was no sense that they were part of or entangled in the issues in any sense. That was what most alarmed me. Maybe that was based on who got to speak or who was invited, or who forms around those kinds of communities. Maybe people who might have done things very differently weren't there (laughs). But there seemed to be a few people who had been plugging away at some of these things for a fair time that were there.

Judi   And did those other people still adopt similar forms, or did they speak differently?

Steve   One person, Gail Whiteman, talking about ecological embeddedness, had a more engaged way of thinking, considering how we are situated and entangled in sustainability 'problems' (Whiteman & Cooper, 2000). Markus Milne did show pictures of his campus at Christchurch, New Zealand, wrecked by an earthquake. And there were a couple of others. Although things have probably shifted a bit over the last five years, the Goodall (2008) article in the Journal of Management Inquiry that said only nine articles out of 31,000 over the previous ten years in leading management journals had talked about climate change or global warming is probably still relevant, not that far off the mark. So, whilst reviewers might say people are working on this stuff, it's just strange that they're so very hard to find. I think it's fair to say that they and their ideas aren't really mainstream. Although it's great to see some recent special issues (Wittneben, Okereke, Banerjee, & Levy, 2012; Wright, Nyberg, De Cock, & Whiteman, 2013).

Focus and detachment, which we see as desired in mainstream scholarship, become key motifs for us. We both struggle to achieve them and strongly question their appropriateness in our aspirations for developing academic forms that are more suited to thinking and talking about sustainability. Our expanded model of an embodied scholarship endeavours to incorporate values, feelings and complexities. 'Going backstage' we surface multiple issues that we had to leave sitting behind the text in our earlier paper because it sought to match mainstream formats. The next section opens up various dimensions of the meanings and practices of academic knowledge production which to us, as entangled scholars addressing systemically connected issues, imply the need for an openly reflexive style, which our previous reviewers found uncomfortable. In brief, we take entanglement and complicity to mean that, in order to conform enough to warrant publication, we are generally expected to use forms of scholarship that are aspects of the problem of un-sustainability, that replicate distanced forms of knowing and separate scholar and other identities. Finding this approach hard to maintain, we seem drawn to cross potential boundaries (including those between academic territories, ways of knowing, personal identities), and so we explore what these boundaries seem to be.

Reflexivity in scholarship for sustainability

Judi   Your conference account opens up questions about ways of knowing which have preoccupied us all along. Where do academics who are concerned about climate change and want to call themselves scholars stand? There's recognising entanglement and seeing our own complicity. But people see environmental sustainability and social justice issues as values oriented. Speaking about them might imply I am *not* being academic in a more accepted, objective, sense. A leading UK climate scientist recently said at a public lecture that they try to speak with a steady voice, signalling 'this is science' rather than 'me as a person', so that what they say may not get discredited. So what kind of lexicon do academics like us speak in when we care about the subject but we also have disciplines of rigor, quality processes for knowing, our attempts at some forms of reflexivity? How can we speak and show our entanglement? What kinds of knowing can we bring into play? These seem significant issues. And we want to ask how we are all *acting*, including in our own organizations.

Steve   Some reviewers of the previous article challenged what they took as a confessional approach, talking about issues such as how we position ourselves.

Judi   That was one reason for trying a metalogue – because of the freshness, the sense of dialogue and openness. Previously we had tried to make the material fit within a more conventional article format and had not succeeded – for the audience, but also not that well for ourselves, because we thought we were making compromises. Experimenting with dialogue allows us to name some of the meta issues that crowded our minds when we were trying to write more conventionally, that had to be either set aside or given a lot of reflexive space. But then one reviewer thought there was too much of us. Whereas we were trying to show how we were aware of bridging the gap into the article. Another meta issue was trying to express how aware we are of our complicity as scholars helping to keep current ways of operating in society in place, at a time that is urgent environmentally. We're trying to offer, with some delicacy, things we think we have learnt about exploring sustainability, without either squashing or exaggerating them.

Steve   Compared to the academic detachment I experienced at the conference, it's more apparently the voice of a person in a metalogue and hopefully a more embodied sense of somebody being there. But one of the tricky issues for us is that we find sustainability a hugely important issue, which touches every aspect of the management and organizations discipline, whatever we want to call it, and we want to say that, but this requires a balancing between courage and humility, whilst not seeking to place other people as right or wrong, moralistically, but trying to open dialogue whilst acknowledging our location. We think management scholars need to *care* a lot more about the forms scholarship for sustainability takes.

Judi   Yeah.

Steve   One issue we're struggling with all the time is wanting to say things fall across boundaries and are ambiguous and it's complex, but at the same time advocating that just opening more conversation about that is of major importance. Some reviewers pushed back against this apparent assertiveness, for example saying there are people exploring these issues and you're not giving them full credit. We can say 'these are marginal voices', but then, is it us that's crafting them into marginal positions in the way we construct the subject and place them in relation to other sources or implied notions of legitimacy? It becomes quite difficult.

Judi   Yes, we are seeking to *show* reflexivity, the difficulties, to make apparent the detailed workings of academic creation processes as we experience them. We are suggesting, too that any sense of difficulty is inherent in the territory of seeking to develop scholarship adequate to address (un)sustainability. We favour facing the challenges, rather than collapsing the topic into something simpler. Some people may say we're just angst ridden academics and ask if that is of any use to anybody. But we are definitely concerned about consequences.

Steve   Yeah. So the metalogue is, hopefully, a way of coming back to talk with quality about the subject of sustainability and hopefully in a way that is… humble (laughs), or whatever it might be, is respectful, taking care, acknowledging the position you're coming from. But then, at some stage, you go back to saying "isn't it obvious that we are embedded in this wider ecology?" And if we do not appreciate the complex relationships and the systemic effects of that then, well, we're in big trouble. So that's the difficulty we've tried to work with – speaking politely, as it were, but assertively.

Judi   In this metalogue I think we're trying to breach a false boundary between scholar and 'private' identities. Other people do this, for example Learmonth and Humphreys (2012) have somehow gotten away with being highly reflexive about academia, labelling their approach in a genre that allows it – autoethnography. So that's interesting – you can mark territories and that becomes acceptable. But in our wish to be fleet of foot we're not trying to place ourselves so clearly. How different approaches become 'branded' and who decides on acceptability seems another layering of how come as scholars we are enacting a certain kind of world, one which for the most part does not want to fully engage with the extremely tricky topics associated with (un)sustainability.

   Our mood shifts slightly here from articulating what we think a broad spectrum intelligence model of sustainability requires to noting there are explicit disciplining messages about suitable formats for mainstream publications. We think these constraints are actively averse to the scholarship for sustainability we imagine, that they can narrow and distract our sensibilities. We begin to question the sustainability of scholarship, which subsequently becomes a significant theme. We are entangled and trying to find alternative spaces through experimenting with metalogue. In the next section we offer an image of how we see interconnectivities.

Steve   Yeah, well I think it is incredibly interesting, Mary Catherine Bateson said that Bateson didn't tend to read other people's work very much [Bateson and Bateson (1987)] and yet his work has become important for a lot of people and disciplines, helping develop cybernetics, complexity, systems thinking and more. With metalogue, he has created some potential space for us to operate in. Also, in terms of us each speaking from our different places, my approach developed off the back of reading John Law's book, *After Method* (2004) coming from Science and Technology Studies. It's about extending visibility, opening up plurality – which was something we also wanted to encourage in dialogue, particularly given that sustainability is a very ambitious kind of holder for lots of things. Putting poverty and climate change and bio-diversity issues together, for example, as 'sustainability' can just seem too much for people to bear, too challenging. It does raise questions about what we're trying to help extend visibility upon.

Judi   Yes! It is about extending visibility and getting into the interconnections. If you try to separate off any one of these kind of issues, you just pull and an inter-connected web of 'things' all come with it, like the potential gendering of sustainability issues too (Plumwood, 2002), so that you've got the whole world, all entangled.

Steve   Yes, like a tangled ball of wool, you can try to pull at a thread, but the others always start to shift as you do so, no piece wants to be separated out. Pretending we can disentangle all the issues associated with sustainability, and ourselves making sense amongst them, is ludicrous.

Judi   Our wish to explore ways of thinking about sustainability is trying to open up different territories like the nature of inter-connected environmental and social systems, and thus what we think is being left out. It takes me to our situated practices (Shove, 2010) as academics. Can we talk about our entanglements? But you can't see part of it alone, separately, as Bateson would say (1979), any perspective on the world is only partial, a transitory glimpse. But I'd like also for emergent thinking to have qualities of fire as well as humility.

In this phase of conversation we re-iterate a key concern, that we do not want to reduce an evolving web of interacting systemic patterns to simplified neatly packaged depictions by narrowing our view to be 'focused' about sustainability. Perhaps, as contribution, we can look at interconnections, although we recognise this as challenging. Thus the recorded metalogue takes us repeatedly to issues of the scholarship of sustainability and associated dilemmas of academic identity, as played out through the politicisation of accepted forms of representation.

In the second conversation we continue to explore metalogue's potential as an alternative academic form. Prominent strands of influence on the methodology are traced, building a matrix of possible reference points. The circumstances for imagining alternatives – stark, perhaps even stultifying, warnings about mounting environmental crises – are acknowledged as the indelible backdrop to our experimentation.

Conversation 2.

Possibilities for metalogue as alternative form

Judi   Through the notion of metalogue Bateson provides an interesting and expansive form. And it's congruent with a lot of people trying to address current world challenges who argue for dialogue – such as that based on Bohm's ideas (2004). Kuhn and Deetz (2008), for example, argue from communications theory that we need critical dialogue amongst diverse stakeholders in order to adequately pay more attention to environmental issues. Also, Bateson's (2000) systemic sensibilities inform why metalogue was an appropriate form for him, for example his critique of the limits of conscious purpose and his advocacy that we engage in multiple ways of knowing. And there's his understanding of the futility or potential damage of many linear change attempts in complex systems, which relates directly with our work.

Steve   Bateson's work also productively crosses lots of different debates in management studies and that's exactly what we want to do in trying to explore sustainability in ways that bring it into prominence rather than being peripheral. Particularly in avoiding mind-body dualisms and such questions, his approach just explodes all the stickiness and difficulty and emphasises that we need to think about these perceived conflicts in a totally different way. Such an approach is quite invigorating for this debate.

Judi   Yes, he offers a 'bigger' view, a potentially calmer, stiller place from which to contemplate these kinds of issues. As academics we're meant to locate ourselves and yet you and I don't really like the boundaried-ness of that and want to hold out for more diffuse, complex, interconnected, multi-causal qualities for the nature of relationships and influences.

Steve   Yeah, and for me it is also recognising elusivity, engaging in processes of thinking which generate constant unsettling, as a form of radical reflexivity (Pollner, 1991). Along with a sense of humility, that we aren't going to find a definitive answer here, but we can come up with better ways of making sense to, hopefully, move ourselves into a slightly better place. So for me that open-endedness is important, reaching for ways of sense-making that do more justice to ecological notions, and mirror complexity.

And that relates to our interest in speaking from values but then leaving space open for other voices. That comes back to the whole sense of embodiment – that we are embedded beings in a world where many of the natural systems in which our bodies are interconnected are being stressed to profound levels. We are damaging ourselves. So what we're trying to do with this metalogue is reflect upon our roles as academics. How does academia speak with an embodied voice, and how can that encourage greater dialogue? Those are really important issues for me in the intention of what we're offering.

Judi   Yeah, and academics need to find ways for their voices to be *amongst* the dialogue rather than superior to it. So there is this thread through our work about the tensions between assertiveness and humility – and what combining them means. That was contentious for some reviewers of the earlier paper. We are not sure they saw us, or our attempted crafts of scholarship, when we were being tentative.

Steve   Dvora Yanow's (2009) idea of passionate humility in terms of researching connects here. We talked about fire before and how can you work with potentially contradictory impulses of being passionate about sustainability and simultaneously humble in relation to our situatedness and partial view of the world.

Judi   Yes. If one finds oneself doing things without any associated sense of fire then the purposes of what you are doing, or the ways in which one's doing it, become suspect and need questioning. It seems we're both fundamentally suspicious of academic distance and what's done in its name. This relates to our preference for reflexivity as shown, rather than reflexivity as hidden. But some people, like Joanna Macy (Macy & Brown, 1998), would argue that what is happening at the moment is so scary that we cannot even behold it without encountering massive amounts of despair, grief and panic. So academic distance might be as likely as many other ways of not engaging with what is going on.

Steve   Yeah, it comes back to how intriguing it is that we've come together in this conversation, and are so interested in working so hard for this stuff, given that there's a reasonable sense, from various places, that these issues of environmental sustainability are beyond control (Rockström et al., 2009). Taking on board all the projections and predictions about climate change is overwhelming, and in a way that is inhibiting action. But are we playing to existing discourses? Are *we* replicating formats, instead of changing the posture of debates?

Judi   If I recognise that I'm overwhelmed with what's going on, but valiantly try to keep to ways of thinking that other people might see as reasonably sane or appropriate for my position, that is self-limited conformity. How then does one have any sense of grounding for future action that has integrity? Do we want to be rejected as crazy, marginal? We do want to get this published. *Why* do we want to get published?

Steve   We're trying to offer possibilities all the time, in the ways that we're trying to open up and look at things differently. I think as long as we're not just leaving it at a dead end, but actually trying to extend thinking and offer alternative perspectives – and take risks in how we're doing that, showing how these issues rest with and discomfort us – I think that's good.

Judi   One question we are posing is whether potentially different and radical ideas can be expressed in conventionalised forms. I do want to contribute our voices somehow, because these are important issues, which we do not think are receiving enough attention, *and* we do not think that the attention they're receiving is usually stark enough.

Steve   It is interesting for me, that having come in to do a PhD, my odd set of experiences – travelling, working on volunteer projects, sitting in salubrious corporate offices, and joining up what I felt the dots were – has taken me to agreeing with people who are towards the later stages of their academic careers. It seems as if some of these questions are too much for people to bear. Maybe a generational shift and quite pronounced? But it feels quite scary, almost, to lose a generation of academics that I connect with much more closely, who have been there,

lived through these debates over the years, show more fire in wanting to confront these challenges. I am not so sure that people in mid-career are willing often to take the risk of doing this.

The discussion about searching for alternative form looped back into wondering how we came to be in this conversation, coming together from our different career stages and life experiences. The sustainability of scholarship re-surfaces as a theme, this time in relation to what are perceived to be shifting characteristics between generations of academics, and apparently different values and expectations about what constitutes successful scholarly practice. The final section of metalogue below connects with earlier reviews of criteria from which our writing might be judged (especially that of whether it seems sufficiently 'focused' in relation to mainstream journal formats) and our preoccupation for being openly reflexive is reaffirmed.

Conversation 3.

Potential quality processes in metaloguing

Steve   Is this going to be coherent? Really what we want is to be subversive and push against conventional approaches, and we think that sustainability raises that inherently because of being a neglected area and we want to talk about that. Articles generally tidy things up and depersonalise and they give a coherent narrative. We're experimenting with not doing that, with sticking with ambiguity and multiple ways of knowing. Are we going to speak to the editors' needs?
What we're doing is we're partly stirring for action. I'm happy enough to have a stimulating conversation, but it feels as if the stirring for action is more important. We don't think in straight lines, we think in fragments, it's fleeting and we get along in the world. Why do we tidy up journal articles and make them more limited than they need to be? Why can't we have embodied voices that are risky and that are articulated as such?

Judi   If we think about this as a form, it feels as if we have elements of a discipline here, such as passing back through our intentions, as you have just done, checking what we're doing against the urgency and spirit of those intentions somehow.

Steve   So we're looping, reflecting back.

Judi   Systemic thinking, with its interest in relational pattern, invites us to be very aware of how we punctuate the world, how we draw boundaries round and thus create 'things'. In these conversations, I see a repeated concern about whether we are diverging off the focal territory we should be in, because we're bringing in other kinds of associations that arise for us. They are interesting in relation to what gets in and out of the frame. But we're talking about the politics of our entanglement in an academic publishing world which invites us to frame certain things as focal and other things as inconsequential. That's a key theme in this piece, one parallel between our conversations and their meandering quality and their subject of how we can talk appropriately about sustainability, how can we ensure that 'it' is richly inside the frame of consideration? How can we all ensure people pay appropriate attention? It feels as if, especially with economic crisis, attention has been pulling away.

In closing

What were our intentions?

In this paper we pondered the practices of scholarship in management and organizational studies, and why there is not more adequate consideration of (un)sustainability, given the urgency of us addressing these issues. We intentionally pursued an alternative form of inquiry and representation to challenge approaches which place the writer as detached and dis-embodied in relation to their research.

Our intention was to open up conceptual territory in which reflexivity and crossing boundaries between person and academic occur quite naturally, and become important aspects of scholarly quality processes and accountability. We hoped that through experimentation we might find a form that enabled us to approach sustainability with complexity and vitality, and that others would see as potent and provocative. We drew upon the form of metalogue to engage in this sort

of play, seeking ways to express and live engaged scholarship, and to show ourselves as people-scholars, interested in action in relation to sustainability too, as we are in our own institutions.

What did we do?

Through metalogue, we reached towards alternative scholarly forms and senses of voice in order to explore pressing issues of environmental sustainability and consider why they are not more figural in management and organizational studies. We attribute this in significant part to conventionalised academic writing forms and their not so hidden assumptions about the nature of the world, and what constitutes acceptable scholarship. We sought to perform as well as discuss these issues. We showed the tentativeness and conditionality in sense-making that we advocate, the search for reflexivity and critical questioning of scholarship, and due consideration of our entanglements as people-scholars. We noted some paradoxes of assertively advocating 'humble' sense-making. We worked alongside each other to fill out the textures of diffuse and multidimensional issues that appear just below the surface for us, but constrain what we can say and how we can say it. Thus, the connections between issues of academic identity and accepted, appropriate, forms of representation figured large. We experienced form as highly contextualised, suggesting one cannot *do* form without examining its hinterland and assumptions. For example, Bateson's ideas seem clues to a systemic sensibility that sits behind the potential of metalogue.

We are hesitant to claim that we consistently achieved the 'double format', the mutual relevance of form and subject, to which metalogue aspires. One feature that does appear through the conversations is repeatedly questioning what is important or a diversion, which we see as a potential parallel with what happens when we seek to make the ecological prominent in management and organizational studies. We propose that attending appropriately to (un)sustainability entails recognising complexity and drawing on multiple ways of knowing. We suggest that shifting the light in these ways, means what previously appeared marginal or ancillary is not, and that wanting research and writing to be focused in terms of topics and perspectives adopted could therefore limit our broad spectrum intelligence. The theme of academic distance versus entanglement was also prominent. By owning the latter, we think – and feel – we have put ourselves at risk here, with attendant senses of exposure and vulnerability. In these ways we have engaged with what we have called 'the politics of scholarship'. We think attention to these issues are necessary, and quite possibly aspects of quality processes, for the enhanced kinds of scholarship we advocate.

What did we learn?

Metaloguing was an inquiry process we adopted, and then a form of representation we aimed to achieve. It offered a process for finding our voices, and exploring potentially important nuances. We enjoyed the appreciative form of scholarship it offered, as we built on each other's ideas, whilst retaining our own textures of speech. These practices link to the processes of scholarship we advocate, which stand in contrast to processes that seemed stifled within the tidied up form we felt we were expected to adopt in our earlier paper. For example, we wonder how academic voices can be *amongst* debate, not dominating, and *provisional* not definitive. We do not see the humility we advocate as a 'diminished' position, but offer this as a potential practice for thinking and talking about sustainability, helping us find more engaged ways of relating with our environment and each other. Sustainability then becomes a process, incorporating academic dialoguing, rather than an idealised place.

Where do we go from here?

Our central argument has been that scholarship for sustainability requires new ways of thinking and therefore new forms of inquiry and representation. We especially suggest that because of our entanglement as scholars in the complex web of (un)sustainability, we need research approaches in which embodied reflexivity, and attending to values and emotions, are integral. With Roth and Tobin (2002) we see metaloguing as giving us potential to help enact and represent practices of reflexivity, and as Staller (2007) has argued it can support processes of inquiry which allow critical questioning of the boundaries of and possibilities for scholarship. We suggest that engaging in, and showing, reflexivity akin to metaloguing is not ancillary but core to arriving at insights into the topics explored. Such approaches offer bases for developing enhanced scholarly quality processes.

Metalogue is an example of the kind of extended scholarship we advocate and this experiment illustrates that it is not without its challenges. For example, we risk crafting ourselves into either marginal or heroic positions by wanting to offer

a 'different' perspective that challenges what we understand to be 'mainstream'. There are no formulae for fostering the embodied reflexivity that we seek to help promote through metalogue. However, we have found ourselves repeatedly excited by experimenting, wondering if the textures of metalogue can contribute to the sustainability of scholarship in management and organizations. We offer it tentatively, but with a hopeful enthusiasm that, as one of a myriad of possibilities, it could live up to some of the requirements of a scholarship fit for sustainability.

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