



Power, politics and improvisation: Learning during a prolonged crisis

Management Learning

1–21

© The Author(s) 2022

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/13505076221119033

journals.sagepub.com/home/mlq



Stefan Meisiek 
and Bonnie Rose Stanway 
The University of Sydney Business School, Australia

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caught most organizations off guard. They have had to adapt their operations rapidly, and with the pandemic persisting, continuously improvise. While such an external jolt to organizations might unsettle operations, it does not remove the fact that organizations are sites of power relations and political activity. In this article, we examine the influence of power and politics on learning from improvisation, through a qualitative longitudinal case study of an Australian university during COVID-19. We trace improvisations with the use of the social media platform WeChat, which was eventually adopted, after several changes in forms of improvisation, as part of the response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Our study contributes to the literature on learning from improvisation, and explains how different forms of improvisation morph into one another under the simultaneous influence of power relations and learning.

Keywords

Case study, improvisation, learning theory, organizational learning, power

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic caused considerable stress for organizations, many of which found themselves scrambling to maintain operations (Rouleau et al., 2021). The shifting and prolonged nature of the pandemic made a return to ‘business as usual’ elusive. In addition, the external jolt and the continuous need to improvise upset organizational power dynamics. Management alternatively asked staff to problem-solve on the fly and vied to regain control during the search for a new normal. Cunha et al. (2014, 2015) have argued that power, politics and learning from improvisation influence one another during a crisis. Power might enable or hinder learning from improvisation (Collien, 2017), it might cause different forms of improvisation to morph into one another (Cunha et al., 2015), and it might introduce structures that institutionalize what has been learned (Lawrence et al., 2005). The purpose of this article is to explore power, politics and learning from improvisation during a prolonged crisis.

Corresponding author:

Bonnie Rose Stanway, Strategy, Innovation and Entrepreneurship Discipline, The University of Sydney Business School, Sydney, NSW 2006, Australia.

Email: bonnie.stanway@sydney.edu.au

Improvisation, the extemporaneous making do with at-hand resources in the absence of planning (Hadida et al., 2015), has made a remarkable comeback in management research and practice over the past decades. It morphed from a phenomenon that management theories described as a ‘diehard menace’ to well-structured and perfectly aligned corporations, to something that helps organizations face unexpected events and adapt to continuously changing environments (Cunha et al., 1999). Improvisation solves unfamiliar problems or takes advantage of unexpected opportunities (Cunha et al., 2014).

Yet, empirical evidence for learning from improvisation remains scarce. One reason for the scarcity might be that studying improvisations and learning in situ proves difficult (Vendelo, 2009), which has led many researchers to conduct retrospective studies concentrating on successful or unsuccessful improvisations, rather than the subsequent learning derived from these (e.g. Rerup, 2001; Weick, 1993; Wiedemann et al., 2021). Ethnographic studies, which provide rich in situ data of improvisations and learning, have predominantly focused on organizations where improvisations are critical and par for the course, such as emergency responders or innovation teams (Batista et al., 2016; Bechky and Okhuysen, 2011; Faraj and Xiao, 2006; Miner et al., 2001). Because improvisations are expected to occur in these extreme contexts, learning from improvisation involves routine debriefs or retrospectives, followed by training or adjustments that inform the next mission or project (Bechky and Okhuysen, 2011; Hallgren et al., 2016). The drawback of these notable studies is their limited concern for power and politics, and that ordinary organizations are unlikely to have such learning-from-improvisation routines for prolonged crises, like the COVID-19 pandemic.

During a prolonged crisis, ordinary organizations are likely to produce various forms of improvisation, which might follow one another in the search for a new normal (Cunha et al., 2014). Forms of improvisation can be distinguished using criteria such as learning characteristics (Chelariu et al., 2002), degrees of impact (Weick, 1998), organizational levels (Hadida et al., 2015; Moorman and Miner, 1998), or influence of power (Cunha et al., 2015). From this perspective, improvisation is not a singular process, but depends on its organizational embeddedness and contextual sensitivity. Cunha et al. (2015) speculate that ‘one improvisational form may [gradually] metamorphose into another one, namely via the effect of learning’ (p. 515). This might happen slowly, or it might be spurred on by crises. Theory on power and learning (Lawrence et al., 2005), however, suggests that it is power dynamics, rather than learning, that might cause one form of improvisation to morph into another one. Our research question is as follows: How do forms of improvisation morph through power, politics and learning?

To answer our research question, we carried out a longitudinal study of improvisations with the social media app WeChat by the teaching faculty, student support, and recruitment/onboarding staff of an Australian university. What started as local improvisations with WeChat before 2020, turned into desired improvisational activity in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, because the university was struggling to maintain contact with its numerous continuing and commencing Chinese students who were stranded in their home country, and who used WeChat as their main means of communication. Once the improvisations with WeChat showed promising results, university management provided resources and direction for continuous improvisational activity.

The article continues with a review of the literature on learning from improvisation, with special attention paid to forms of improvisation and the influence of power and politics on them. Then, we present the setting of our case study, and the ‘grounded theory’ methodology we employed to study it. In the ‘Findings’ section, we describe how external events and internal power relations caused forms of improvisation to enter into a sequence that began before the COVID-19 pandemic, extended through the early stages of the pandemic and continued into the months afterwards, operating under pandemic conditions. Based on these findings, we refine theories on learning from

improvisation. Specifically, we explain how empowering organizational members to improvise in the face of a deepening crisis leads to learning, but also to tensions in power relations. Furthermore, we describe how learning from improvisations in one form builds upon learning achieved in the preceding form; cumulating, refining and spreading while passing from form to form. Finally, we identify changes in power and politics, and not learning, as the cause for one improvisational form to morph into another during a prolonged crisis.

Learning from improvisation

Improvisation's contribution to processes of organizing is its connection to learning (Barrett, 1998; Cunha et al., 2015; Moorman and Miner, 1998; Vendelo, 2009). Ciborra (1999) notes that breaking with rules, routines and plans in light of the unexpected allows tapping into resourceful domains of experience and memory by moving from 'clock time' to 'being present in the moment'. Time pressure and uncertainty will determine if organizations engage in a slow-paced discovery, half-hearted embellishments or improvisation; each with consequences for the ability to learn from the experience (Crossan et al., 2005).

An overarching concern for research on learning from improvisation has been to clarify why and how some outcomes are taken up and become part of the organization, while others fade (Cunha et al., 2015; Hadida et al., 2015). Miner and colleagues' (2001) study of product development looked at how improvisation compares to, and funnels into, more planned and detailed forms of exploration. Similarly, Bingham and Davis' (2012) study of small business ventures indicated that learning from improvisation is highly contextual, is influenced by management and forms part of repeated learning sequences, in which improvisations would purposefully alternate with experimentation and trial-and-error.

If organizations learn from improvisations, they learn gradually by either routinizing the actions discovered through improvisation, drawing on new knowledge gained for related problem solving, or further exploring newly discovered options (Vendelo, 2009). Furthermore, the capability to continuously improvise can be a learning outcome in and of itself (Vera and Crossan, 2005).

Power and learning

Learning from improvisation depends, however, not only on the quality of the improvisation, but also on prevailing power relations and politics (Cunha et al., 2015). Power and politics can enable and hinder learning processes in organizations (Collien, 2017), because learning is situated in the practices and identities of individuals and groups (Contu and Willmott, 2003; Hong and Fiona, 2009). Power is 'a resource to get things done through other people, to achieve certain goals that may be shared or contested' (Fleming and Spicer, 2014: 239) and politics are 'the tactics and strategies actors use to articulate this power or attempt to resist it, especially when goals and interests in the organization are conflicted' (Fleming and Spicer, 2014: 238).

Lawrence et al. (2005) suggest that two modes of power explain how politics influence learning: episodic and systemic power. They draw this distinction from well-established definitions of power in organizations (Clegg, 1989; Fleming and Spicer, 2014). Lawrence et al. (2005) define episodic power as discrete, strategic political acts to influence organizational decision-making, and systemic power as the influence of constitutive social systems on organizational members, for example, through socialization, accreditations or technology. As regards learning, episodic power denotes the ability of actors to influence or force others into adopting new interpretations and to integrate new ideas, insights or solutions into their work. Influencing contains a range of tactics, such as negotiation, persuasion, ingratiation or exchange. Using force means restricting the options

available to organizational members through tactics like banning alternative practices, excluding options from agendas and discussions, or removing unwilling staff. Systemic power, in turn, serves to harness the learning of individuals and groups through embedding the new interpretations and ideas in the structures of organizational life, until they are taken for granted. This happens through discipline or domination. Discipline means altering the costs and benefits associated with the actions available to organizational members. Domination sets pathways and boundaries that support certain patterns of practice in an ongoing way, while not seeking to alter the beliefs or preferences of organizational members. Lawrence et al. (2005) suggest that both episodic and systemic power are needed for organizations to learn. They disagree with the negative views that regularly accompany discussion of power and politics in organizations (Bristow et al., 2021).

Forms of improvisation

To consider the influence of power and politics on learning from improvisation, it is necessary to move beyond the analogies of improv theatre and jazz music (Barrett, 1998; Hatch, 1999; Kamoche and Cunha, 2001; Vera and Crossan, 2004). While the analogies provide conceptual understanding of the innovation processes, they give insufficient regard to the organizational context in which improvisations occur (Kamoche et al., 2003). Research on episodic and systemic power spans individual, group and organizational levels, making it necessary to identify different forms of improvisation in organizations to trace the relationship (Cunha et al., 2014, 2015).

The first attempts at differentiating between improvisations used notions of degree and level. Weick (1998) notes that there might be different degrees of improvisations in organizations, and hints at possible connections between these, depending on context. His degrees reach from mere interpretation of rules, routines and plans, through their embellishment through creative rephrasing, to variation by inserting novel elements, and finally on to improvisation, which includes a departure from the rules, routines and plans altogether. Recognizing the difficulties in determining the transitions between these degrees, Moorman and Miner (1998) suggest levels that could be combined, such as individual and collective, outcome and process, and action and interpretation. Unfortunately, neither degrees nor levels by themselves are sufficient to describe improvisation as an organizational construct (Cunha et al., 1999).

To amend this, Hadida et al. (2015) follow the convention in the organizational learning literature and offer a typology of improvisation combining degrees and levels into a 3×3 matrix. In terms of degrees, they distinguish between minor, bounded and structural improvisations, and in terms of levels, they distinguish between individual, interpersonal and organizational. Hadida and colleagues then set out to organize the research outcomes of the field of organizational improvisation accordingly. With their typology of improvisational forms, they hope to reconcile contradicting views in the literature concerning whether improvisation should be regarded as inherently contained in organizations, or inherently uncontained. Their typology allows for the understanding that it is both.

The typology brought some clarity to what is often considered a fuzzy concept, up to a point. While it offers conceptual correspondence of improvisation to power, politics and learning research, it does not address either of these constructs. It also leaves it open what might move individuals, groups or organizations from one form of improvisation to another across degrees and levels (Hadida et al., 2015).

Power and improvisation

Implicitly building upon ideas of degrees and levels, Cunha et al. (2015) develop a theory of resistive, subversive, episodic and semi-structured improvisational forms that relate concepts of power

and learning from improvisation. They are distinguishing between formal and informal improvisations, as well as between improvisations that are desired and not desired by management. They also emphasize that some contexts and management actions might favour one form over another. The three forms that are most relevant to our study of the effects of COVID-19 upon learning from improvisation are resistive, episodic and semi-structured improvisations. However, for the purposes of this article, we call episodic improvisations 'responsive' because it is otherwise easy to confuse it with episodic power. Furthermore, we will not address subversive improvisations, which aim to disrupt the status quo and invent substitutes to replace it, because, by definition, it assumes an internal impulse to change, and no imminent external crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic. We will briefly discuss how Cunha and colleagues' (2015) resistive, responsive and semi-structured forms relate to the influence of power and politics on learning.

Resistive improvisations indicate goal conflicts between individuals and their organization. To evade the pressure to align with formal procedures, employees improvise and hide their actions and results. Such behaviour precludes improvisations from being taken up by the organization widely, and they remain in the local domain. Here, employees take advantage of opportunities that present themselves, or they solve problems in unconventional ways that are not endorsed by management. Managers might not notice that the results they are presented with are the outcome of improvisations. Resistance is often described as the antagonist of discipline and domination (Lawrence et al., 2005) in that organizational members look for creative ways to question and circumvent what is taken for granted, and develop solutions that serve their interests. These improvised solutions then offer opportunities for local learning. When management notices resistive improvisations, they need to assess if resorting to force would be warranted to prevent the improvisations, or if it would be better to ignore it. In Hadida et al.'s (2015) typology, resistive improvisations would correspond to minor improvisations, at either individual or group levels.

Responsive improvisations are initiated when organizations meet unforeseen events that upend normal operations, such as in times of crisis, as a reaction to accidents or in other instances when plans are not unfolding as predicted. Improvisations end when the event has passed, and matters settle back into 'business as usual'. Often organizations learn little from responsive improvisation because the actions are seen as motivated and legitimized by the event, and are of little relevance in business-as-usual times (Cunha et al., 2015). Management is likely to show that they are open to improvisation, or even mandate it, making this form desired, but informal. They may alter aspects of domination and discipline in order to empower organizational members to improvise continuously in response to the unforeseen event (Baarle et al., 2021). However, empowerment usually also creates tensions between those currently in power and those striving for more power, which can lead to the opposite of the intended effect. Although responsive improvisation usually leaves few traces, this might change if the crisis moves from a disruption to a continuous state of volatility in which organizations either need to make improvisation the rule of working, or find other ways to respond flexibly. In Hadida et al. (2015) typology, responsive improvisations would correspond to structural improvisations at the group level, where management temporarily enables improvisations through reducing control.

Semi-structured improvisation denotes organizational designs that leave space for improvisation (Batista et al., 2016). For example, Faraj and Xiao (2006) studied an intensive care unit and found that formal and improvisational processes were equally emphasized, although the latter had potential downsides for doctors and nurses. Management creates semi-structures through influence and force, and thus endorses resulting improvisations as formal and desired (Lawrence et al., 2005). As Kamoche and Cunha (2001) explain, such semi-structures allow for a certain measure of predictability and standardization, while at the same time, denoting a space for play, exploration and local learning. In Hadida et al. (2015) typology, semi-structured improvisations would

correspond to bounded improvisations at the organizational level. The use of influence and force to create the space for semi-structured improvisations would gradually give way to domination and discipline, making semi-structured improvisation a taken-for-granted activity in the organization.

Equipped with these concepts, we set out to analyse our case of an organization in the COVID-19 pandemic to answer the question how forms of improvisation morph through power, politics and learning.

Methods

We carried out a qualitative case study (Yin, 1994) at an Australian university spanning the years 2017–2020. Adopting a longitudinal study design provided empirical insights into how learning from improvisation emerges and develops over time (Langley et al., 2013).

Case context

Universities have undergone changes, which make them a suitable case to study power, politics and learning from improvisation in response to a global crisis. The adoption of ‘New Public Management’ (NPM) caused universities to become ‘business-like’, introducing performance management based on quantitative financial targets, quality assurance and excellence frameworks (Fleming, 2020; Vos and Page, 2020). This instrumental managerial approach to academic labour and student revenue led to an increasing commercialisation of university teaching and research. The accompanying need for control has university administrators ‘curbing resistance, closing down democratic channels and recasting the “reality” of the university’s nature and culture in managerialist terms’ (Jones et al., 2020: 367). This provoked staff responses of solidarity and resistance, some open and some concealed (Bowes-Catton et al., 2020). University staff have found ways to abide outwardly by the image of neo-liberal universities, while at the same time, creatively and improvisationally using its symbols and processes to resist (Bristow et al., 2017; Dean et al., 2020).

The organization selected for this case study is a prominent Australian research university with about 60,000 students, 4000 academics and 5000 administrative staff, organized in eight faculties. Regulatory changes and financial pressure following the global financial crisis in 2007–2008 led to changes not only in university management, but also in the composition of the student body. Today, a significant proportion is full-fee paying international students, and 24% of the total are Chinese students.

The rise in international student numbers has challenged the university to reconsider its traditional format for delivering education. Specifically, this included the language the organization used to communicate with international students (predominantly English), and the tools they used for that communication (predominantly proprietary platforms). While many Chinese students were active users of a popular Chinese social media platform, WeChat, they were considerably less active on the university-provided communication channels, such as email or the learning management system.

Although WeChat was not a sanctioned channel, some academics responsible for teaching Chinese international students started to use it in their communication with students. It was also tentatively being used in other functions of the university, including various student support services, as well as recruiting and onboarding new Chinese international students into the university way of life. In these WeChat groups, organizational members interacted with students for work-related purposes. They would post information to students and prospective students regarding studying at the university.

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally interrupted university operations. In the search for quick solutions, improvisations with WeChat were becoming critical for the organization in reaching their Chinese international students who were stranded abroad. The crisis brought about a change in terms of the language and tools used to communicate. For example, the university recorded video messages in Mandarin from a high-ranking staff member who was a fluent speaker.

Data collection

We collected data across 4 years (2017–2020), the last 12 months of which happened to coincide with the COVID pandemic. We commenced data collection in 2017 concerning the improvisational use of WeChat in the university, starting with one faculty where there was a high concentration of Chinese international students. By the end of the data collection, we had expanded to different faculties, functions and hierarchies in the organization. Data sources included interviews conducted in 2020, as well as online posts and documents which were collected from 2017 to 2020.

The second author was a staff member and a student at the university, and subsequently acted as an interviewer regarding all WeChat improvisations noted. Insider research requires minimizing the potential for implicit coercion of the participants, ensuring knowledge, views and assumptions are not taken for granted, and being aware of potential conflicts of interest stemming from being an academic and researcher within the same context. To ensure this, data collection occurred strictly in accordance with an approval from the university's research ethics committee. The initial intent of the study was to understand more about how universities were engaging with Chinese international students using WeChat, which involved both students and staff as participants. Through the course of the study, the ethics application was modified three times to reflect the evolving case, a refined research design and an increasing focus on what was happening at the organization. The first two ethics modifications expanded the data collection to reflect and capture more of the WeChat activity at the university; online posts in more WeChat channels, and interviews with more staff who were involved. The final modification in 2020 was to replace intended focus groups with Zoom interviews, given face-to-face data collection was not possible during the pandemic. In the informed consent forms, all participants were guaranteed anonymity. Participation was voluntary, and any abstention or retraction would have no negative consequences. All participant names were replaced with aliases to ensure that responses remained anonymous for the recording and publication of data. To protect participants in the study, only those researchers listed on the ethics approval have had access to the raw data. During data collection, the authors regularly met to discuss the emerging findings, with the first author taking on the role of a critical other, which offered opportunities for reflection on possible biases.

We conducted 31 interviews with organizational members across different functions and hierarchies within the organization, through the early and later stages of the crisis. Snowball sampling was employed to find any members of the organization who had considered the use of WeChat in their work at the university at any point in time. These semi-structured interviews varied in length from 15 to 72 minutes, and were conducted using Zoom. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Table 1 provides a list of the 29 interviewees and the organizational function and position that their work contributed to (including a follow-up interview with two interviewees).

The questions in the semi-structured interviews were designed to allow the interviewees to reflect on what was important to them, rather than the researcher taking the interview in a narrow direction (Alvesson, 2010). Given that the interviews were taking place during the pandemic, the topic of COVID-19 in the context of work was raised first as a relatable and relevant issue, allowing the interviewee to share anything at the top of their mind. WeChat was raised as a subject for discussion later in the interview if the interviewee had not brought it up themselves.

Table 1. List of interviewees with attributes.

Interviewee	Broad organizational function			Organizational actors		Number of interviews	
	Teaching	Recruitment and onboarding		Team member	Management		
		Support	Recruitment and onboarding				Support
01 Teaching team member	x				x		1
02 Teaching management	x					x	1
03 Support team member				x			1
04 Teaching team member	x				x		1
05 External partnerships (outsider)							1
06 Recruitment and onboarding management			x			x	1
07 Teaching team member	x				x		1
08 Teaching team member	x				x		1
09 Teaching management	x					x	1
10 Recruitment and onboarding team member			x		x		1
11 Recruitment and onboarding and support management			x			x	1
12 Recruitment and onboarding team member			x				1
13 Support management						x	1
14 Recruitment and onboarding team member			x				1
15 Teaching management	x						1
16 Support team member					x		1
17 Recruitment and onboarding and support team member			x		x		1
18 Recruitment and onboarding and support team member			x		x		1
19 Recruitment and onboarding and support team member			x		x		2
20 Recruitment and onboarding and support team member			x		x		2
21 Recruitment and onboarding and support management			x			x	1
22 Support management						x	1
23 Teaching management	x					x	1
24 Recruitment and onboarding and support team member			x			x	1
25 Teaching team member	x				x		1
26 Recruitment and onboarding and support management			x			x	1
27 Support team member					x		1
28 Support team member					x		1
29 Recruitment and onboarding and support management			x			x	1

As well as providing real-time insights, the interviews during the 2020 pandemic provided reflections on experiences before the pandemic. These reflections were reviewed alongside data collected longitudinally, including online posts of organizational members working within the WeChat platform from 2017 to 2020. These data were collected through reviewing the organization's presence on WeChat, and chat histories in WeChat groups established by organizational members. Additional background and reference material helped to supplement the online posts and interview data such as strategies, proposals, evaluations, project documentation, conference material, emails and teaching material. In total, we received 38 documents from interviewees, totalling 412 pages, as well as three short videos (maximum 6 minutes duration).

Data analysis

We turned to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to ensure validity and robustness in our analysis, which afforded us to stay open to new discoveries and surprises, as well as theorize from the empirics (Timmermans and Tavory, 2012).

Advancing with our field work, we noticed how the pandemic was affecting the organization that we studied. In our case narrative, we identified WeChat-related improvisations in three functions of the university; teaching, student support and the onboarding/recruitment of students. These three functions of the university helped to determine key differences between how the improvisations were conducted and received in the organization. In total, we identified 14 different improvisations using WeChat. Table 2 shows which broad organizational functions these relate to, as well as which WeChat feature was being utilized.

Given the longitudinal nature of the data, we next created temporal brackets of key events for the period of interest to understand '... how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time' (Langley et al., 2013: 1; cf. Meyer et al., 2005). It led us to the following three distinct phases: pre-crisis (2017–2019), early-crisis (early 2020) and later-crisis (mid 2020 onwards). To support our interpretation of the observed improvisations in the collected chat histories, we turned to the interview data. The two data sources complemented each other, one picking up and filling in where the other left off, providing a finer grained longitudinal picture (cf. Kan and Parry, 2004). The WeChat data, documents and informal conversations provided us with data over the years, while the interview data told of the power, politics and learning that were involved. The temporal bracketing allowed us to review activity across successive time periods, and analyse the relationships between power, politics, improvisations and learning.

Following the improvisations across the time brackets, we discovered how the crisis-context was affecting the organizational power relations, how this in turn led organizational members to change the way they were improvising, and how and what the organization learned as a result. The discovery came about through using ATLAS.ti software as a data repository for transcripts and for conducting initial, focused and axial coding (Charmaz, 2006). Questions inspired by Charmaz were as follows: What are these data a study of? What does the data suggest? From whose point of view? It was from comparing and collating the resultant codes that it became evident that this was a case of learning from improvisation during a prolonged crisis. Moving abductively between our codes and theory, we created memos of the research process, diagrammed and mind-mapped, thus capturing reflections of the development of theorizing and the interpretation of data.

Findings

From 2017 to 2020, the university gradually learned how to overcome the challenge of communicating with their Chinese international students. In this timeframe, 2020 stands out, because the

Table 2. Instances of WeChat improvisations by function and feature.

Improvisation	Broad organizational function			WeChat feature			
	Teaching	Recruitment and onboarding	Support	Chat	Subscription	Official account	Mini programme
Business analytics	x			x			
Business writing chat			x	x			
Centralized official account		x				x	
Alumni official account		x				x	
Alumni mini programme		x					x
China pre-arrival chat		x	x				x
China pre-arrival mini programme		x	x	x			
Library subscription			x		x		
Peer tuition chat			x	x			
English tuition chat			x	x			
Peer support chat			x	x			
Business leadership chat	x			x			
Arts chat	x			x			
Centralized mini programme		x	x				x

Table 3. Three phases of learning from improvisation.

	Phase 1: Resisting	Phase 2: Responding	Phase 3: Semi-structuring
Power	Domination and discipline – WeChat as foreign, unsafe, uncontrollable, private	Empowerment – WeChat as improvisational answer to loss of contact to students	Influence and force – WeChat as mission critical. Handing control over WeChat to CRB
Politics	Local social media policies Team managers turn a blind eye Any use is at staff's own risk	Release control, fast tracking approvals De-prioritizing risk management	WeChat adopted, but CRB to vet content and to post, consolidating and reducing number of posts
Improvisational activity	Spontaneous practice in response to surreptitious opportunities	Drawing on local solutions, dormant projects, stalled ideas in response to crisis	Bound through structure and management-selected improvisations
Learning	Personal witnessing, discoveries and experience	Expanding upon ongoing resistive WeChat practices and residues of past improvisations	Improvisational variation as normal and strategic practice

COVID-19 pandemic created an impetus for action, when Chinese students were stranded in their home country and behind their country's Internet firewall.

In this 'Findings' section, we report how the unfolding crisis was marked by changes in power relations, politics and learning from improvisation. The changes are described in the following three phases: Resisting (2017–2019), responding (early 2020) and semi-structuring (late 2020). During the resisting phase, we observed improvisations with WeChat in courses, at the library, in alumni relations and in the China student recruitment programmes. In the responding phase, a number of these improvisations were taken up and a peer support chat, a business leadership and an arts chat, and a WeChat mini programme were added. In the semi-structuring phase, many of the previous chats were consolidated in the hands of a Chinese representative body of the university, which also continued to improvise using the WeChat mini programme. While the jolt of the pandemic and a bid for a new normal marked the transitions between the phases, it was power relations that influenced how the organization learned from improvisation in each phase, building each time upon the previous improvisations. Subtle differences between the areas of teaching, student support and recruiting/onboarding in the university serve to illuminate each phase, and the transitions between them. The three phases are summarized in Table 3.

An example of these phases was the initiative to set up an official university presence on WeChat through a 'WeChat Mini Program'. Originally, this Mini Programme was the outcome of a resistive improvisation, which was discontinued because it was developed in isolation. When COVID-19 hit, organizational members returned to the idea of a WeChat Mini Programme for their responsive improvisations, empowered to find new solutions. As the crisis extended, the Mini Programme was pulled into existing approval pathways and risk management. There was some light development of manuals, evaluations and risk registers functioning as a semi-structure to improvise continuously in response to the pandemic:

Then we ran through it [the Mini Program] with [lawyers], got their sign-off, got the sponsor's sign-off. And what we're going to do is we've basically had to take a bit of a fluid approach. So that's the best we can do right now. We've all agreed that we're happy with the risk mitigation put in place, but it will need ongoing management. (19 Recruitment and Onboarding and Support Team Member)

Resisting

From 2017 until 2019, WeChat was suppressed through domination and discipline in the university. It was taken for granted that the university was an English language institution and that it had to have full control over the online systems it used to communicate with its students, even though 24% of students hailed from China, and in postgraduate courses often formed the majority in the classroom. WeChat, the app of choice of the Chinese students, was portrayed as foreign and fraught with privacy, security and intellectual property risks. While staff regularly encountered problems in reaching Chinese international students through the university systems, domination kept most of them from considering alternatives.

The use of WeChat was, however, not explicitly forbidden, and a social media policy created by one faculty, for example, listed it alongside Western platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook or LinkedIn, albeit with specific warnings regarding language and safety. When university management noticed improvisation with WeChat, they did not employ force to prevent it, but neither did they formally approve it. Instead, they turned a blind eye:

So, yes, people are technically breaching policy if they're using it. People are. People do it all the time. That's not an excuse to keep doing it. But I think it's an acknowledgement that people are innovating and that the laws, so to speak, need to catch up. (09 Teaching Management)

The systemic power of discipline meant that organizational members had to evaluate the costs and benefits of using WeChat. They had to manage and mitigate risks and challenges personally. They dealt with the resulting technical issues, such as having to undertake laborious manual authentication processes to ensure only enrolled students were in the WeChat groups. Also, they often had to use their personal devices, and sometimes personal profiles, for their professional use of WeChat. For some, these were reasons to give up:

Team Social Media, who were doing the day-to-day running [of WeChat] had found it so frustrating to manage. They just didn't want to do it anymore. They wanted to focus their time on Facebook. (22 Support Management)

Yet, some teaching faculty, student support and recruitment/onboarding staff continued to improvise resistively with WeChat to establish how best to reach Chinese international students. Teaching faculty had noticed the ubiquitous use of WeChat among their Chinese international students, so they improvised with using WeChat as a complementary communications platform alongside face-to-face lectures, tutorials and the online learning platform. In other functions of the organization, staff was improvising with WeChat for student support, alumni communication, as well as for the recruitment and onboarding of new students. The international student team was opening a WeChat channel alongside face-to-face onboarding sessions in China for commencing students:

. . . it wasn't like a kind of pedagogic decision or, or management decision . . . It felt a bit more like the reason someone might get involved in . . . let's say, Instagram . . . Oh, I've noticed everyone using it. I've checked it out. Hey, it's pretty cool. Um, let's give it a try. (01 Teaching Team Member)

The resistive improvisations were local and disparate. Organizational members solved problems that they encountered in their work, or they acted upon opportunities that presented themselves. They improvised informally, and with minimal documentation and resources. Programme and team managers rarely wanted to know exactly what they were doing. They also did not try and convince those around them to use it and they were not vocal about their successes or failures with

WeChat. While this worked well in teaching, where faculty had discretion how to deliver their courses in detail, it regularly ran into problems in student support and recruitment/onboarding, because of the structural interrelatedness of their activities. Without additional support and resources from management, several improvisations ran into dead ends:

. . . somebody attempted to develop a mini program within the university without talking to us . . . And I said, but this doesn't work. You can't just develop this and tell us to bolt it on . . . I just said, forget it. (29 Recruitment and Onboarding and Support Management)

The resistive improvisations with WeChat made it possible for organizational members to learn from personal witnessing and discoveries made by using the platform. Some staff had firsthand experience using the platform in a personal context, and built on this for their resistive improvisations. Others just encountered WeChat by chance. Below, an interviewee reflects on the dilemma on whether or not to improvise with an unsanctioned platform, comparing the existing university-provided communication channel, after they had chanced upon the social media platform:

I was noticing that [the WeChat] ecosystem was way more rich, interactive. It was more heavily patronized, and it was the, frankly, it was the preferred method for many of the students I work with . . . just undeniable, it was like the thousand-pound gorilla in the room. And at that point I had to make a decision whether I thought it was appropriate for us to start dipping our toes into that pre-existing rich and engaging ecosystem that came with its own sort of risks and concerns, or whether we would just ignore it. (01 Teaching Team Member)

Those staff members that engaged with WeChat learned what worked and what did not work in communicating through WeChat with Chinese international students. They also learned to resist dominance and discipline, to overcome the shortcomings of existing university systems, and to offer, in their view, a more inclusive university experience.

Responding

In early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic was an external shock to the university. One of the main impacts was that the majority of the enrolled international students were unable to travel to Australia and attend onboarding sessions, lectures, tutorials and events on campus as per usual. Given the changing and volatile nature of the pandemic in the early months, there was no time for the organization to prepare a formalized and cohesive response, so organizational members worked on the fly. At the threat of losing a significant portion of international students, and therefore fee income, organizational members reported that university management, as well as their programme and team managers, asked them to respond in real time – to take action as things unfolded, and achieve their intended work outcomes by any means necessary.

Improvisations were desired, yet informal. Empowering organizational members to improvise meant that managers had to lift structural boundaries across the university and to endorse proposals and activities in an informal, fast-tracked and sporadic manner, rather than through regular approval channels:

. . . because of COVID . . . it [WeChat] became the priority of the university, so we did actually push it through quite quickly because of the endorsement from the, from the Deputy Director as well. So that all helps . . . it was kind of a high priority . . . so it happened really quickly. (10 Recruitment and Onboarding Team Member)

Furthermore, risk management was deprioritized in the early crisis in favour of meeting more pressing issues:

I think that there maybe is warranted suspicion about WeChat, I guess, in terms of data privacy and everything, but as there is with every social media, maybe with WeChat for a different, at a different level, for sure. But I was just like we need to connect with students, and this is the best way. So, data privacy is like a secondary concern right now. (04 Teaching Team Member)

Empowerment changed the power relations in the university. Teaching, support and recruitment/onboarding staff were partially freed from the domination experienced before. Ongoing politics involved debates of what to keep rather than what to bring in. There was a notable difference in how teaching faculty and professional staff reacted to empowerment. For instance, a faculty member who had improvised with WeChat several times before decided to stop using it, to prevent being seen as giving a platform to students' discontent with being banned from entering the country to start or continue their studies. Professional staff in student support and recruitment/onboarding, in contrast, with support from their team managers, embraced the opportunity to improvise with WeChat to connect with Chinese Students.

With the empowerment, the different functions of the organization rallied to react quickly and spontaneously to the COVID-19 crisis, including looking at what resources they had readily available. Improvisations were built on outcomes from earlier experiences with WeChat, from terminated and dormant projects, from failed experiments and stalled ideas. In all of the improvisations, organizational members responded to the acute crisis by cobbling together those existing, previously undervalued resources. This included organizational members who had already improvised by using WeChat before the crisis. We saw that responsive improvisations upended further resistive improvisations, because the need for local and hidden improvisations dissipated:

It has always been, you know, like kind of like in the backburner that we always think about, WeChat. Yes, so COVID that gave us the opportunity to actually try trial it. (10 Recruitment and Onboarding Team Member)

An example of this is an instance of an improvisation in the recruitment and onboarding space, whereby the organizational members facilitated student-to-student support in Mandarin in WeChat for those Chinese international students who were in China:

We were handed this idea from management saying, we need some way to reach these students in a peer-to-peer sort of way. And we can leverage these 41 peer support advisors. You need to come up with a way that we can use – get these peer support advisors to talking to these students and enable that peer-to-peer interaction. (14 Recruitment and Onboarding Team Member)

This was a shift away from the English language centric communications approach as well as a move away from using only university-provided platforms. As part of this improvisation, the university hired Mandarin speakers, who were current students, to field questions in WeChat with commencing and continuing students who were in China. Two such improvisations were also evident in the teaching space, where teaching faculty used WeChat to meet their changing communication needs as a result of the crisis. They set up WeChat group chats with the students in their courses to offer pastoral care through the crisis, and also used WeChat video calls to bring students from China into the lectures and tutorials in Australia.

Organizational members drew upon resources at hand and tried unusual and novel approaches to solve pressing problems, including learning from and building upon the insights and outcomes

of resistive improvisations that preceded the crisis. The knowledge and experiences with WeChat derived from the resistive improvisation phase spread throughout the organization. The widespread improvisations across teaching, support and recruitment/onboarding showed a large variety, each developed for the specific needs of that moment for that part of the organization. It did not form a unified knowledge base on how to use WeChat, but a loose cluster of improvised solutions.

Semi-structuring

In late 2020, further into the pandemic, university management began to build structures around improvisation. In an exercise of force, they moved all administration of the university's WeChat channels and Mini Programme under the remit of the wholly owned Chinese representative body of the university (CRB) in Shanghai. The CRB worked with external parties, among them a Chinese advertising agency, to design the university's presence on WeChat deliberately and strategically, in order to be effective in the Chinese market.

For university management, this was an issue of reaffirming power over the organization while also establishing a more structured approach to improvisation. There were increasing concerns that if staff persisted in improvising with WeChat to contact Chinese students, there was lack of control and oversight, and a danger of security and privacy breaches, and mixed messaging. While teaching faculty could continue to use their own WeChat channels, student services and recruiting/onboarding lost direct access to theirs, much to the dismay of the team managers and members. If they wanted to post on WeChat, they had to request it from the CRB, who vetted the content and posted or rejected it as they saw fit.

The use of force took power away from student services and recruiting/onboarding and handed it to the CRB. While the CRB became the designated place for continued improvisations with WeChat, neither was it able to improvise as it pleased. CRB management reintroduced approval processes that were paused during the early-crisis period, and required more documentation on WeChat-related work. Initial planning for future work with WeChat was evidenced through teams producing business cases, establishing contracts and recruiting new hires. Yet, dedicated staff and peer advisors continued to improvise, to react to opportunities and to solve unforeseen problems, as the university's use of WeChat continued to take shape:

So, the peer support advisors have now been doing this for like eight months and know WeChat inside out. So, we've kind of given them creative license to extend. (20 Recruitment and Onboarding and Support Team Member)

Furthermore, university management selected certain improvisations with WeChat from the previous phase and designated them as a targets for continued semi-structured improvisations, such as the Peer Support WeChat and the Centralized WeChat Mini Programme. Semi-structured improvisations were desired and formal:

There's been pre-COVID a varied, fragmented use of WeChat. I think with COVID, as an organization, the initiatives that we had underway have really, we've consolidated the benefits of what we had done pre-COVID, and are using WeChat more strategically and more effectively with the Chinese market, and also at a personal level with Chinese students. (29 Recruitment and Onboarding and Support Management)

Handing WeChat to the CRB shifted the politics, too. Creating a semi-structured improvisational space meant that certain solutions and systems choices were now off-limits to further improvisations. Organizational members in support and recruitment/onboarding, who initially had the ability

to communicate directly with Chinese students through discrete and disparate WeChat channels, now had to vie for limited spots in the university's official WeChat streams:

I would say that my understanding of it is very limited, but I do see how great it is to engage our students. And for that reason, it's extremely frustrating that we don't have direct access to it. □ (12 Recruitment and Onboarding Team Member)

In frustration, staff members would look for other platforms and ways to reach Chinese and other students, turning to opportunities presenting themselves in other student communication platforms. While semi-structured improvisational practice had become part of practice in the CRB, those forced out of improvising with WeChat looked for opportunities for resistive improvisations. The renewed resistance was a reaction to the domination and discipline that were to institutionalize the forced changes.

At this point, the university had learned to communicate with its Chinese international students in Mandarin Chinese and through WeChat. Learning from improvisations continued to build upon selected outcomes from the response to the crisis, with the intention to maintain a flexible and adaptive presence on WeChat characterized by continuous improvement. The CRB was chosen as the locus of future WeChat improvisations, and as such also as the place for continued learning from improvisations. Student services and recruiting had also learned from the response to the crisis and strove to learn continuously from improvisation on platforms other than WeChat.

Discussion

Our study produced the following three main findings: (a) changes in power and politics, not learning, cause one improvisational form to morph into another; (b) learning from improvisations in one form builds upon lessons learnt in the preceding form; accumulating, refining and spreading while passing from form to form; and (c) empowerment to improvise in the face of a deepening crisis reveals a temporary rupture in how episodic and systemic power influence learning.

To determine why some discoveries made during improvisations are kept while others are cast aside, organization scholars have predominantly looked at single improvisations, and examined the resulting outcomes and learning that might be achieved (Vendelo, 2009). Our study suggests, however, that organizational learning is unlikely to arise from a singular improvisation. Instead, several improvisational forms, bound together into a sequence, shape organizational learning. It confirms earlier findings (Bingham and Davis, 2012; Miner et al., 2001) that learning from improvisation needs follow up, with the difference that the follow up can also be another form of improvisation instead of trial-and-error, experimentation or vicarious learning. This difference might be explained through the unfolding crisis context of our study, where volatility persisted, a return to 'business as usual' was elusive, and the organization found itself relying continuously on improvisations.

COVID-19 created a specific sequence of forms of improvisations, which is likely to resemble what happened at other universities and possibly private sector organizations over that time. However, we need to recognize that our study only showed one of many possible sequences. Beyond COVID-19, and based upon the typologies reviewed (Cunha et al., 2015; Hadida et al., 2015), a large number of sequences are theoretically possible. Comparing across organizations, it is also likely that there are patterns of sequences depending on power, politics, learning, as well as the embeddedness and contextual sensitivity of improvisations. Research on learning from improvisation would benefit from using the typologies that accommodate research on singular improvisations to investigate the conditions under which, and in which order, organizations pass through sequences of improvisational forms.

According to our empirical results, how improvisations morph from form to form is determined more by changes in the power relations in response to external events or the tensions inherent in empowerment than by the kind or quality of learning in any individual form of improvisation. We conclude that power and politics are the driving force in morphing one improvisational form into another, either directly through response or semi-structuring, or indirectly through evoking resistive improvisations to domination and discipline. For research on learning from improvisation, this suggests that power relations need to be taken into account continuously to explain the longer term learning outcomes of improvisations. More specifically, systemic power hinders widespread learning from improvisation through domination and discipline, while provoking pockets of resistance, where local learning from improvisation happens. The reduction of systemic power through empowerment enables widespread learning from improvisation, but may lead to a backlash through increasing tensions in power relations. Finally, episodic power semi-structures learning from improvisation through influence and force, giving it a place in the organization's response to ongoing volatility. Yet, in continuously institutionalizing it, it also may lead to renewed learning from resistive improvisations.

While changes in power relations drive the morphing of one improvisational form into another, we noticed that learning did not start anew in each form. Organizational members picked up on what was learned in the previous form. Responsive improvisations built upon, extended and spread what had been learned during resistive improvisations. WeChat was ready to hand because of the years of resistive improvisations with it that had preceded the crisis. Later, semi-structured improvisations picked up from the responsive improvisations during the early COVID-19 phase. Management selected which improvisational beginnings should become the focus of continued improvisations. At the same time, some used what they had learned during resistive and responsive improvisation to engage in renewed resistive improvisations. This suggests, while not the driver, learning facilitates the morphing of one improvisational form into another, bringing learning from individual to group and to organizational levels, and from minor and bounded to structural degrees (cf. Hadida et al., 2015). Improvisation is more than a form of problem solving or opportunity taking, and also plays a role in facilitating organizational transformation through learning.

Notable are the transitions between the phases. The first transition was caused by the external jolt of the pandemic to the university, and the second transition was caused by internal considerations regarding structuring the solutions found. Lawrence et al. (2005) theorize the influences of episodic and systemic power on learning for innovative ideas, concluding that episodic power furthers the development and adoption of ideas, while systemic power secures their institutionalization. Pockets of resistive improvisations might challenge the domination and discipline of systemic power, but are unlikely to upset the direction (Cunha et al., 2015). In the context of a global pandemic, however, this dynamic is disrupted by the urgent need to respond to the crisis. Power over the organization, inherent in domination and discipline, can be used to give power to organizational members to improvise as needed (Baarle et al., 2021). Yet, even if the crisis does not end, as in the case of COVID-19, the tensions inherent in empowerment are likely to lead powerful self-interested actors sooner or later to employ influence and force of episodic power to exercise control and semi-structure improvisational activity. This might be followed by dominance and discipline to institutionalize the semi-structured approach to learning from improvisation. In this way, power can enable and hinder learning from improvisations, even as organizational actors achieve establishing improvisation as a continuous activity to respond to ongoing volatility.

Contributing to the literature on power and learning, we can speculate that improvisation, depending on the forms involved, may either further, temporarily redirect, or counter the influence of episodic and systemic power on learning. It also suggests that improvisation might play a larger role in organizational learning than hitherto assumed. Connecting the latter observation to the

wider literature on power and learning opens for studying learning from improvisation through the lenses of dialectics (Bristow et al., 2021) and practice (Collien, 2017; Contu and Willmott, 2003). Specifically, it adds the effect of empowerment to the model that Lawrence et al. (2005) have drawn of the relationship between power and learning. Accommodating empowerment in this model allows accounting for learning from improvisation. It produces a model in which power and politics are not only used by management to influence learning, but also countered by organizational members through improvisation.

This implies that learning is not limited to the activities and outcomes of improvisations, but extends to the organizational capability to continuously improvise (Vera and Crossan, 2005). Improvisations build upon previously gained knowledge and shared understanding in organizations (Bechky and Okhuysen, 2011). Through considering the influence of power on learning, however, we can identify how learning from improvisations remains focused on a specific tool and gradually makes the use of this tool, WeChat in our case, a critical element of operations through resistive, responsive and semi-structured improvisations. Based on the finding that the outcomes of one form of improvisation facilitate the improvisations in the following form, we can speculate that residues of previous improvisation are stored in the organizational memory. They might be dormant until power or context recall them. In the fashion of a 'garbage can model' (Cohen et al., 1972), organizations store solutions, ideas, approaches resulting from previous improvisational forms that might find their revival and place in new improvisations when power and politics move the organization towards it.

The neo-liberal university proved a rich context for studying the influence of power and politics on learning from improvisation in response to a crisis. The corporatization of education (Jones et al., 2020) and the need to secure student revenue characterized how systemic and episodic power enabled and hindered learning from improvisation during COVID-19. Improvisation in a highly standardized and tightly managed context such as the neo-liberal university provide staff with an opportunity to attend to momentary needs and to show sensibility towards students and staff as they navigate norms, rules and routines. Yet, it has also been pointed out that improvising under episodic and systemic power might expose an organization to a 'dark side', precluding learning and causing accidents. Giustiniano et al. (2016a, 2016b) showed for the case of the sinking of the Costa Concordia cruise ship how making activities undetectable, and a context of semi-structured improvisations, enabled excessive risk taking. It includes the possibility that improvisations not only lead the way, but also can lead an organization astray during a prolonged crisis.

Limitations and future research

While the prolonged severe crisis that triggered the responding improvisations enabled us to observe the phenomenon in a longitudinal way, we cannot say with certainty if lesser events would show the same effects. There could well be external or organizational conditions that produce similar or different sequences of improvisational forms (Rouleau et al., 2021). With this, it is entirely possible that forms of improvisation could morph in any way (Cunha et al., 2015). Future studies could uncover different sequences of forms under different circumstances, which provide a richer picture of the influence of power on learning from improvisations.

Furthermore, although our focus was on forms of improvisations with WeChat, there might have been other forms of learning going on in the organization at the same time. There is the possibility that improvisations were leading to trial-and-error learning, or to development of a hypothesis for an experiment (Miner et al., 2001). It is therefore possible that forms of improvisation overlap or alternate with other forms of learning in organizations, forms that are always formal and

desired (Bingham and Davis, 2012). This appears as a valuable avenue for further research, and it would expand the power and learning perspective to include other forms of learning.

We also saw that where management reduced improvisational freedoms and structures became overly constraining as a result, organizational members were likely to respond by finding hidden avenues for improvising in the organization. When looking beyond a single issue, such as the adoption of WeChat, we would probably notice several forms of improvisation existing concurrently and at times overlapping, possibly leading to paradoxes of organizing that disempower some organizational actors, leaving them no option other than resistive improvisations (Berti and Simpson, 2021). This further points to considerations that the outcomes of improvisation are not necessarily positive, worth repeating or worth learning from (Giustiniano et al., 2016a, 2016b), which reward further investigation in the light of our findings on power, improvisation and learning.

From these limitations springs an opportunity for continued research in the influence of power and politics upon learning from improvisation. We would encourage studies to focus on prolonged crises that have their origin in market forces or inside organizations, such as obsolescence of an organization's offering due to technological innovation, or ongoing power struggles in family businesses.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic created conditions for continuous improvisations. In our study of a university, we discovered how power and politics morphed forms of improvisation into one another, how organizational members gradually learned from the different forms of improvisation that succeeded one another, how management created a semi-structured place for continuous improvisations, and how this changed the way the university was communicating with their international students. While COVID-19 might be a 'once in a hundred years' event, it offered an opportunity to learn more about how organizations learn from improvisation. With no lack of sources for future prolonged crises on the horizon, such as climate change, diminishing natural resources and human conflict, the need to learn from improvisation will endure.

Authors' Note

The order of authorship is alphabetical. Both authors have contributed in equal parts to this publication.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

ORCID iDs

Stefan Meisiek  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4968-5437>

Bonnie Rose Stanway  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8893-9535>

References

- Alvesson M (2010) *Interpreting Interviews*. London: SAGE.
- Baarle S, Dolmans SAM, Bobelyn ASA, et al. (2021) Beyond command and control: Tensions arising from empowerment initiatives. *Organization Studies* 42(4): 531–553.
- Barrett F (1998) Creativity and improvisation in jazz and organizations: Implications for organizational learning. *Organization Science* 9(5): 605–622.

- Batista MDG, Clegg S, Cunha MP, et al. (2016) Improvising prescription: Evidence from the emergency room. *British Journal of Management* 27(2): 406–425.
- Bechky BA and Okhuysen GA (2011) Expecting the unexpected? How SWAT officers and film crews handle surprises. *Academy of Management Journal* 54(2): 239–261.
- Berti M and Simpson AV (2021) The dark side of organizational paradoxes: The dynamics of disempowerment. *Academy of Management Review* 46(2): 252–274.
- Bingham CB and Davis JP (2012) Learning sequences: Their existence, effect, and evolution. *Academy of Management Journal* 55(3): 611–641.
- Bowes-Catton H, Brewis J, Clarke C, et al. (2020) Talkin’ ‘bout a revolution? From quiescence to resistance in contemporary university. *Management Learning* 51(4): 378–397.
- Bristow A, Robinson S and Ratle O (2017) Being an early-career CMS academic in the context of insecurity and ‘excellence’: The dialectics of resistance and compliance. *Organization Studies* 38(9): 1185–1207.
- Bristow A, Tomkins L and Hartley J (2021) A dialectical approach to the politics of learning in a major city police organization. *Management Learning* 53(2): 223–248.
- Charmaz K (2006) *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. London: SAGE.
- Chelariu C, Johnston WJ and Young L (2002) Learning to improvise, improvising to learn: A process of responding to complex environments. *Journal of Business Research* 55(2): 141–147.
- Ciborra CU (1999) Notes on improvisation and time in organizations. *Accounting Management and Information Technologies* 9(2): 77–94.
- Clegg S (1989) *Frameworks of Power*. London: SAGE.
- Cohen MD, March JG and Olsen JP (1972) A garbage can model of organizational choice. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 17(1): 1–25.
- Collien I (2017) Critical-reflexive-political: Dismantling the reproduction of dominance in organizational learning processes. *Management Learning* 49(2): 131–149.
- Contu A and Willmott H (2003) Re-embedding situatedness: The importance of power relations in learning theory. *Organization Science* 14(3): 283–296.
- Crossan M, Pina e Cunha M, Vera D, et al. (2005) Time and organizational improvisation. *Academy of Management Review* 30: 129–145.
- Cunha MP, Clegg S, Rego A, et al. (2014) Organizational improvisation: From the constraint of strict tempo to the power of the Avant-Garde. *Organizational Improvisation* 23(4): 359–373.
- Cunha MP, Cunha JV and Kamoche K (1999) Organizational improvisation: What, when, how and why. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 1(3): 299–341.
- Cunha MP, Neves P, Clegg SR, et al. (2015) Tales of the unexpected: Discussing improvisational learning. *Management Learning* 46(5): 511–529.
- Dean KL, Fornaciari C, Bento R, et al. (2020) Premises, promises, and perils of the academic Potemkin village. *Management Learning* 51(4): 491–510.
- Faraj S and Xiao Y (2006) Coordination in fast-response organizations. *Management Science* 52(8): 1155–1169.
- Fleming P (2020) Dark academia: Despair in the neoliberal business school. *Journal of Management Studies* 57(6): 1305–1311.
- Fleming P and Spicer A (2014) Power in management and organization studies. *Academy of Management Annals* 8(1): 237–298.
- Giustiniano L, Cunha MP and Clegg S (2016a) Organizational zemblanity. *European Management Journal* 34(1): 7–21.
- Giustiniano L, Cunha MP and Clegg S (2016b) The dark side of organizational improvisation: Lessons from the sinking of Costa Concordia. *Business Horizons* 59(2): 223–232.
- Hadida AL, Tarvainen W and Rose J (2015) Organizational improvisation: A consolidating review and framework. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 17(4): 437–459.
- Hallgren M, Rouleau L and De Rond M (2016) A matter of life and death: How extreme context research matters for management and organization studies. *Academy of Management Annals* 12(1): 111–153.

- Hatch MJ (1999) Exploring the empty spaces of organizing: How improvisational jazz helps redescribe organizational structure. *Organization Studies* 20(1): 75–100.
- Hong JF and Fiona KH (2009) Conflicting identities and power between communities of practice: The case of IT outsourcing. *Management Learning* 40(3): 311–326.
- Jones DR, Visser M, Stokes P, et al. (2020) The performative university: ‘Targets’, ‘terror’ and ‘taking back freedom’ in academia. *Management Learning* 51(4): 363–377.
- Kamoche K and Cunha MP (2001) Minimal structures: From jazz improvisation to product innovation. *Organization Studies* 22(5): 733–764.
- Kamoche K, Cunha MP and Cunha JV (2003) Towards a theory of organizational improvisation: Looking beyond the jazz metaphor. *Journal of Management Studies* 40(8): 2023–2051.
- Kan M and Parry KW (2004) Identifying paradox: A grounded theory of leadership in overcoming resistance to change. *The Leadership Quarterly* 15(4): 467–491.
- Langley A, Smallman C, Tsoukas H, et al. (2013) Process studies of change in organization and management: Unveiling temporality, activity, and flow. *Academy of Management Journal* 56(1): 1–13.
- Lawrence TB, Mauws MK, Dyck B, et al. (2005) The politics of organizational learning: Integrating power into the 4I framework. *Academy of Management Review* 30(1): 180–191.
- Meyer AD, Gaba V and Colwell KA (2005) Organizing far from equilibrium: Nonlinear change in organizational fields. *Organization Science* 16(5): 456–473.
- Miner AS, Bassoff P and Moorman C (2001) Organizational improvisation and learning: A field study. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 46(2): 304–337.
- Moorman C and Miner AS (1998) Organizational improvisation and organizational memory. *Academy of Management Review* 23(4): 698–723.
- Rerup C (2001) ‘Houston, we have a problem’: Anticipation and improvisation as sources of organizational resilience. *Comportamento Organizacional e Gestão* 7(1): 21–44.
- Rouleau L, Hallgren M and De Rond M (2021) Covid-19 and our understanding of risk, emergencies, and crisis. *Journal of Management Studies* 58(1): 243–246.
- Strauss A and Corbin JM (1990) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Timmermans S and Tavory I (2012) Theory construction in qualitative research: From grounded theory to abductive analysis. *Sociological Theory* 30(3): 167–186.
- Vendelo MT (2009) Improvisation and learning in organizations – An opportunity for future empirical research. *Management Learning* 40(4): 449–456.
- Vera D and Crossan M (2004) Theatrical improvisation: Lessons for Organizations. *Organization Studies* 25(5): 727–749.
- Vera D and Crossan M (2005) Improvisation and innovative performance in teams. *Organization Science* 16(3): 203–224.
- Vos L and Page SJ (2020) Marketization, performative environments, and the impact of organizational climate on teaching practice in business schools. *Academy of Management Learning & Education* 19(1): 59–80.
- Weick KE (1993) The collapse of sensemaking in organizations: The Mann Gulch disaster. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 38(4): 628–652.
- Weick KE (1998) Improvisation as a mindset for organizational analysis. *Organization Science* 9(5): 543–555.
- Wiedemann NJB, Cunha MP and Clegg SR (2021) Rethinking resistance as an act of improvisation: Lessons from the 1914 Christmas truce. *Organization Studies* 42(4): 615–635.
- Yin RK (1994) *Case Study Research Design and Methods*. Beverly Hills: Sage.