



From ecological reflexivity to engaged practice: teaching and researching as strategic episodes in management education

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Résumé:

How to be a management scholar in the context of the urge for ecological transition? In this article, we address the question of reflexivity and engaged actions fostered by ecological preoccupations. We do so by using teaching and researching as strategic episodes (Hendry and Seidl, 2003) where scholars reflect and change practices towards more engagement. Based on 10 semi-constructed interviews with scholars in different institutions, we describe the reflexive process (Cunliffe, 2016) that led them to change and propose to enlarge our conceptions of strategic episodes to career development choices. In doing so, we contribute to the strategy-as-practice literature in unpacking the momentum of reflexive questioning explaining change of practice. This article also points out that the ecological reflexive process produces very engaged scholars who then send out again a reflexive strategic reply to the management board to alert them of the misalignment they perceive. Is it time for strategy-as-practice to overtake strategists?

Mots-clés: Sustainability, Strategic episodes, Reflexivity, Engaged practice



INTRODUCTION

Ecological transition is probably the most breath-taking issue our generation has to address that demands a deep reconsideration of our way to relate to the world around us: biodiversity, natural resources, or the impact of human activity on nature. In this research, we draw on three pillars to consider the strategic role of scholars in management towards the ecological transition.

First, ecological transition calls for reflexivity in its exact definition: rethinking how do we want to relate to the world around us and to others, what place do we want to give to ethics and the consequently questioning of our actions, leading to the last question: what kind of person do we want to be? Second, ecological transition is considered as a strategic issue and fosters strategic conversations that impact organizations and institutions (Penttilä, 2019). Third, literature about reflexivity calls for engaged practice (Cunliffe 2009, 2016, 2018, Allen et al. 2019) that fosters change and impact organizations.

However, ecological transition can be part of the organization's strategy, like sustainable development policies, but infuses also practices. And this is what interests us in this research: we wonder how practitioners tackle this issue and translate it in their activity. To investigate this question, we focus on scholars and professors in management, and wish to find answers to the following question: *How to be a management scholar in the context of the urge for ecological transition?* Business schools and management education has been targeted as core places to address those issues: students are asking for it when massively participating to walks for the climate, scholars support it when writing about engaged research (Allen et al, 2019, Cunliffe 2018) and the responsibilities of management education in building a more sustainable world (Kurucz and Colbert, 2013, Shrivastava, 2010).

To address this topic, we propose to consider teaching and researching as two types of strategic episodes in the sense of Hendry and Seidl (2003), as a sequence of reflexive communication that foster change. We will explore within the interviews of 10 professors in management in different institutions the practices that they deploy in those strategic episodes to foster change at two levels: a personal change produced by the reflexive process they engaged with during



those episodes or preparing for those episodes, and an external change provoked by the impact of those episodes on students and on their institution.

We end this paper with proposing a discussion about the contributions this research can make to both the issue of ecological transition in management education and the literature in strategy-as-practice by enlarging the concept of strategic episodes to teaching and research practices and by explicating the reflexive process in action during those strategic episodes.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

Literature in management education raises the question of the responsibilities that prevail to business schools and management education when it comes to promote a more sustainable society (Akrivou, 2015), and especially in the way schools and university tend to have taught management as an “a-moral” science (Cunliffe, 2009). The crisis of expertise and professionals that Schön analyses in his book “The reflective practitioner” (1983) also underlines the limit of this technicist way to teach management. Ecological transition calls for a change in the way of doing business, and probably in the concept of business itself or profit. It calls for more morally engaged students that will then be able to change the world for a more sustainable one, with more ethical practices (Akrivou, 2015). However, engaging in a reflexive process to shake the foundations of management education to integrate sustainability issues might have profound impact on professors’ practices and, we argue, their institutions.

1.1. WHAT IS STRATEGIC?

Since the strategy-as-practice turn (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994, Wooldridge et al, 2008, Rouleau and Balogun, 2011), it appeared that strategy is no longer exclusively situated at the top level of the organization. Middle managers integrate in their daily routines and actions elements that prove to be strategic and contribute to the operationalisation of the strategy. Decisions but also discourses, sensemaking and narrations contribute to making strategy



(Rouleau and Balogun, 2011, Brown and Thompson, 2013) as well as the ability to interpret the world or focus on certain resources rather than others (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1994). The development of the strategy as practice stream raises many different questions about what is strategy or strategic practices (Jarzabkowski et al, 2021) or the type of methodology that it demands to be investigated (Balogun et al, 2003). It surely folds the cards of how to consider strategy but it also contributes to very insightful reflections about the roots of the discipline (Jarzabkowski et al 2021). This reflexive move makes strategy as practice more than a conceptual framework or research stream : it becomes a research perspective itself (Wooldridge et al, 2008, Balogun et al, 2003, Rouleau, 2005).

In this article, we are willing to focus on the strategic impact of practices of professors integrating ecological transition issues in their teaching of management science. We propose to consider this as a practice that becomes strategic as it both reflects the position of the school or university towards those issues and the strategic impact of teaching this to students that will then develop more awareness on those subjects. Jarzabkowski et al (2021) reflect on what is strategic and proposes to consider strategy whether as a performance or a process. In our case, we consider integrating ecological transition in management education as a strategic process that will consequently affect the organisation by developing students' awareness and questioning the sustainability of the education given to them, in the same way that when considered, ecological topics find themselves deeply intertwined in organizations' strategy (Penttilä, 2019). In the case of management education, we can consider the two effects of teaching influencing the positions of students and their sharpened awareness translating into a strong demand toward the educating institutions to integrate these issues in their strategy.

We also propose to consider that this practice does not stand alone for when professors engage in changing their practices, they do it by questioning both their subject and their practice of teaching. They engage in a reflexive process that makes them question what was taken for granted and change their view and their practice. To go further, we propose to consider two different moments where this process of reflexivity and change happen: when teaching and when researching.



Teaching is defined in time and space: it begins and ends and we can consider that the professor gives a performance, endorses a certain role and enters in a communication practice. From this point of view, sequences of teaching can be considered as an “episode” from a first level of analysis. Now, considering teaching management in a situation where professors have to take into account ecological crisis and transition, teaching becomes an engaged practice socially situated, stimulating reflexivity and fostering change. Teaching becomes a strategic episode that impacts professors, students and the institution. We refer to the strategic episode defined by Hendry and Seidl (2003) who use Luhmann’s theory that considers an episode as a time where professors practice communication, that is socially situated and constructed, and that provokes a reflexive dynamique leading to change. *“Episodes provide opportunities for the normal constraints of communicative practice to be suspended and alternative communicative practices explored.”* (ibid. p.180)

Research takes more difficult the form of an episode, except if we consider it in its strategic dimensions as defined above: research takes different forms that correspond to different momentum anchored in time and space. When conducting interviews or observations on the field, when writing a paper and even when presenting it to an assembly of colleagues. We argue that each of those momentums can be considered in our case as strategic episodes where professors articulate their thoughts and practices towards something different than before entering in this episode and that this process impacts the intellectual production of the school seen as an organization.

We will therefore study what professors make during those episodes about ecological transition and management education. What reflexive questions arise and what types of changes happen? How do those strategic episodes impact schools and educational institutions?

1.2. WHAT IS REFLEXIVITY?

Reflexivity is a concept used in various fields, ranging from philosophy (Ricoeur, 1990), to sociology (Bourdieu, 2001), to social work (Fook, 2002), or more recently to management sciences (Cunliffe, 2018). The common point is that reflexivity is generally defined as an



internal process, taking place in the mind, between conscious and unconscious layers of our psyche. The starting point of the reflexive process is rooted in our actions in the real world and therefore transforms our responses (Schön, 1983). Fook (2007) describes the reflexive practitioners as *“researchers of their own practice”* (citing Ixer, 2010), as reflexivity is a practice of self-questioning about our actions and more-over the beliefs and underlying hypotheses behind. Pollner (1991, p.370) uses the term *“unsettling, i.e. an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality”*. Cunliffe (2016) writes that it involves questioning what is taken for granted, in three different levels: existential, relational and in terms of praxis.

At the existential level, the reflexive practitioner asks himself: *“who am I and what kind of person do I want to be?”* (Cunliffe, 2016, p.749). At a relational level, he will wonder: *“How do I relate to others and to the world around me?”* (ibid). And at a praxis level, reflexivity means *“the need for self-conscious and ethical action based on a critical questioning of past actions and of the future possibilities”* (Cunliffe 2016, citing Jun (1994), p.749)

Reflexivity is a posture that depends on the conscious will of the practitioner to question the interpretation of the experience as inevitably influenced by every individual's history, beliefs, assumptions, or education and thus being as such a social construct (Fook 2007, 2010). But it also is a engaged practice that drives beyond a simple questioning of our past actions. It involves a deep reflexion on our way to relate to the world and people around us. Consequently, we do not use reflexivity in the article as a *“technique”*, but as a *“philosophical-driven practice”* (Cunliffe, 2016, p.749).

Reflexivity creates *“a new knowledge”* that is *“evidenced, social, reactive and interactional”* (Ixer, 2011), which is different from deconstructionism (that focuses on the limiting impact of language), post-modernism (that challenges the linear thinking) and critical social theory (where individuals contribute to their own domination by maintaining certain beliefs). The interest of this classification is that it explains the reason why scholars use reflexivity in different meanings, because deconstructionism, post-modernism and critical social theory approaches are part of a reflexive process pursuing the same goal: the individual's emancipation



from external or interiorized limits to broaden the scope of possible answers or reactions. In this sense, reflexivity is a major vector to personal change.

Reflexivity as a “*practical consciousness*” (Young, 1990), also called “*reflection-in-action*” by Schön (1983). Schön makes the distinction between reflection-in and reflection-on-action. The latter one describes the use of a critical incident to generate new knowledge, whereas reflection-in-action refers to practitioners’ agility to instantaneously confront the gap between what was expected and what is happening. A dialog arises between the two, opening towards a new combination or knowledge.

In the literature about reflexivity, the link is then made clear between internal reflexivity and external action. Reflexivity takes its roots in action, questioning our way to relate to the external world and leads to a modification of our behaviours, thanks to an evolution of our beliefs. If then the specificity of the strategic episode is to foster a kind of reflexive questioning, we argue that it is all the more so that ecological transition induces a reflexive process itself, as it implies to question what is taken for granted. Business schools and universities hold a specific responsibility in this context, as they are considered to both replicate the capitalist system in their own functioning and in the values that they infuse to students, and to not educate students to ethos and morally engaged practice of management (Akrivou 2015). Seen as such, management education becomes a strategic domain to rethink our way to relate to the world and to integrate sustainability as a new paradigm (Kurucz and Colbert, 2013).

1.3. SUMMARY

We have started this research wondering and asking the following question: *How to be a management scholar in the context of the urge for ecological transition?* Our literature review showed that that we can consider teaching and researching as strategic episodes. This is particularly true, in a context where educational institutions ask management scholars to integrate more and more ecological transitions issues. After this literature review, we now propose to dig deeper into the reflexive process and inside those episodes to better understand the process leading to change. Additionally, we wish to explore the strategic dimension of



including ecological issues in management teaching and research. Therefore, our research question is: *In the ecological transition realm, how do reflexive processes unfold and how do they then impact practices?*

2. METHODOLOGY

To address our research question, we employ an ethnographic approach (Courpasson, 2020). We, the two researchers of this paper, have been working in different kinds of business schools and universities for 13 and 11 years respectively. We are both women with two children and at the end of their thirties. Our research question arose with an intrinsic motivation that something is happening in our respective institutions regarding “sustainability tensions” which we cannot grasp and which we felt a need to better understand to cope with these tensions. We started our research with pair-interviews (Gilmore & Kenny, 2015) to increase our self-reflexivity and then coupled our own experiences with 8 semi-structured interviews (conducted at the end of 2021) with professors, whether assistants, associates or full professors, of three different business schools and one university, all based in France. On average, the professors (2 men and 8 women) were employed by their current institution for 8 years (ranging from 1 to 28 years). All 10 interviews (2 pair-interviews and 8 semi-structured interviews), which lasted at average 59 minutes (ranging from 28 to 85 minutes), have been recorded, transcribed, read several times (Dumez, 2016) and discussed during research meetings. Table 1 summarizes our data and all the fictive names that we gave to our interviewees, that will be used and discussed in the results section.

Following the strategy-as-practice stream, we focused on the main episode of teaching, embodied in time and space during a course. We coded the interviews in different main themes that emerged (Ayache, Dumez, 2011). This allowed us to further grasp the “sustainability tensions”, but also to see more clearly the actions that we practice to handle and to overcome these constant tensions. The results will be presented in 3 sections: firstly, the results show that particular triggers enhance reflexive processes that allow taking into account ecological



transition in management education. Secondly, the results show how this reflexivity induces engaged practices that will impact professors' practices in teaching, researching and dealing with their careers. Thirdly, those changes of practices prove to become strategic because they impact the organization probably more than imagined.

Table 1: Data Set

Fictive names	Gender	Children	Age range	Main discipline	Length of Interview	Years in current institution
Barbara	W	Yes	30-40	Entrepreneurship	29	6
Brigitte	W	Yes	30-40	Management	85	5
Eva	W	Yes	30-40	Management	59	1
Jake	M	No	20-30	Marketing	73	1
Jane	W	Yes	30-40	Human Resources	49	4
Kathy	W	Yes	50-60	Marketing	62	28
Lucie	W	Yes	50-60	Entrepreneurship	75	5
Nora	F	No	20-30	Accounting	42	1
Peter	M	No	40-50	Information Management	68	13
Pia	W	Yes	40-50	Operations Management	47	17

3. RESULTS

Hereinafter we will present our results in three steps. First, we will present examples of how professors seem to enter into a reflexive process regarding the ecological transition (Step 1).



Second, we will show how these reflexive processes then lead to engaged actions during the strategic episodes of teaching and researching. It happened that during the results analysis, a third kind of strategic episode emerged: the career discussion. Decisions about scholarship careers involve different elements linked to ecology: travels, ethics, values defended by the institution. Even if it is not defined in time and space as teaching or researching, we consider internal conversations about career choices as possible strategic episodes. To illustrate this, we will present in this second part the changed practices professors infuse within their courses, their research or their career (Step 2). Third, we will show how this process leads them to profoundly question some of the cornerstones of management education more generally and business schools in particular, leading to strategic issues (Step 3).

3.1. STEP ONE: ENTERING IN A REFLEXIVE PROCESS

Most of our interviewees work for institutions where the official strategy pushes them towards embracing the ecological transition topic. However, when our interviewees described the strategy of the school and their personal actions, they rarely establish an explicit link between what was asked from them by their hierarchy and their actions. The first element that stood out from our data was that often a triggering moment pushes professors to start “*questioning what is taken for granted*” (Cunliffe, 2017). They recalled one particular moment that allowed them to enter into a reflexive process regarding their profession. For example, they are preparing a course, discussing issues with colleagues or friends, or participating at the Climate Collage and suddenly they have a sort of Eureka moment which makes them profoundly question what they are doing at work. This awakening moment makes it somehow not possible for them to continue business like usual.

For example, Lucie, an entrepreneurship scholar, had to prepare a new course and at the same time she was reading a call from 15000 scientists in *Le Monde*, which was sort of her awakening:



“[I was just preparing a new course and] at the same time, I read an article in Le Monde which was the call of the 15000 scientists for the planet. Until then, I had no knowledge of ecological issues, or let's say that it was very partial in my perception. I saw it as a political party like any other and without realizing that it could concern me. [...] I had to prepare a business plan class and [historically] the student projects were a little stupid. [...] So when I saw the call] from 15000 scientists, I said to myself: “Ooh, but this is serious. We really have to do something.” It was as if you see the climate change falling on me and I say to myself: “Oh dear, we're really going into the wall and the logic of management as well...which I was already seriously questioning. Now I'm really critical and I say to myself, it's not possible, we can't go on like this forever.”
(Lucie)

Or the experience of Kathy, a marketing scholar, who was draped at her place during the COVID crises, where one day she received an email from AirFrance in her inbox which made her seriously question her and her students' mode of consumption:

“Me, who was always traveling everywhere, I was stuck in my village. At that time, I received a message from Air France telling me that I had flown around the world 18 times just with them. I thought that was a lot. I thought that was too much, and so I said to myself, it is imperative to integrate [this in my courses]. So I started to develop these aspects in my international marketing course. Individual reflective notes. In order to make people aware of consumption in a very personal, very, very personal way. A personal work, no one can do it for you, there is no recipe, so we are obliged to work it out.” (Kathy)

These “awakening” moments somehow helped our interviewees to relate the ecological transition processes to their personal emotions and feelings which considerably helped them to start a reflexive process.

3.2. STEP 2: REFLEXIVE PROCESSES LEADING TO ENGAGED ACTIONS



Once our interviewees actively enter into a reflexive process they very consciously try to make little but also bigger changes regarding their courses (Examples 1), research (Examples 2) or even career choices (Examples 3). However, this process does not always go without tensions. First, this process is most of the time an individual endeavour and not necessarily shared and discussed at a larger collegial scale which makes some actors feel alone and/or invest a high amount of time to embrace this change. Second, sometimes this process is accompanied with difficult decisions to take, particularly when it concerns the research career of young scholars.

3.2.1. Examples 1: Engaged actions related to courses

For Pia, Peter or Nora the classroom is the place where they can be completely themselves, trying to embrace the ecological transition with new concepts and thoughts.

Peter, an information management scholar, has a very large interpretation of what sustainable transition means. For him a sustainable education embraces a strong humanistic focus and respect for others including topics like misogyny, homophobia, or misandry. For him, the fact that the school is now officially advertising a sustainable stance somehow protects him and the others to talk about these topics with serenity:

“I immediately insisted that there are things on diversity, on respect for others. It's true that I didn't do much on the ecological impact. It came later, I didn't have the space either, I must admit. But what is important for me is not only the ecological function but more the sustainable development perspective in the broadest sense, respect for diversity, that kind of thing. It's working on that, working on what's right, what's not right. I have always been very attentive in the classes [regarding] misogyny, homophobia, nor misandry. [...] At least now, this is the official position. So when I decide to spend an extra session or a whole session on things that are closely or legally related to sustainability, I can do it more comfortably because nobody can tell me anything. I would have done it before, but always with a little voice that "yes, okay, but that's your bias". Now the school is adhering, the school as an institution.” (Peter)



His strong focus on the human aspect of sustainability in his information system courses, makes him very sensible as well regarding the derives of his own institution regarding embracing the sustainability turn:

“[One of our departments] put a little sentence at the end of the emails: "There's no need to say thank you, we know you love us". They do this to avoid e-mail exchanges. These are measures that can be taken in an organization which you have to be careful of. If you don't move, if you don't say thank you, you have nothing left. You have to remember the human aspect of sustainable development. The idea is not that everyone works in his corner, minimizes interactions and does not share a little gratitude because otherwise we will have saved the planet, but then we will have 4 walls of depressives on it. In fact, it would be the invention of dehumanized humanism.” (Peter)

Also Nora, an accounting scholar, underlines, similar to Peter, the transversale and holistic nature of the ecological transition subject. That teaching ecological transition allows to embrace different types of topics that all point to the questioning of how to compete larger struggles:

“I feel completely at ease teaching in seminars like I did, where it's more oriented towards the ecological transition, but I even taught things on gender, on equality, on trade unionism, because for me there is an integrative side to struggles. At the end of the day, everything overlaps and teaching one is also a step towards the other. So I feel completely at ease with that. And personally I feel quite committed to the environment you know. We can always do more and clearly I don't do enough but it's important to me.” (Nora)

Pia, an operation management scholar, underlines as well her high gratification to integrate sustainability concepts in her courses. Even though it takes a considerable amount of time, it is the only place where she feels completely free from institutional burdens:

“Every year, I do a full day of strategy certificates [...] last year I did it for the first time, and [this week] I said to myself there's not enough of those [sustainable development] concepts and I added a lot. I spent the time it took to add it. I was happy



at the end of the day to have added it to my course. [...] So yes, I think that every little step counts. [...] In the classroom I feel completely free, I do what I want. That's for sure. I am much less free in the rest of my activity.” (Pia)

Also Kathy, a marketing scholar, underlines this big time investment to completely rethink the way she evaluates her courses by integrating more individual reflexive notes to increase awareness of consumption behaviour. However, at the same time, she finds it much more interesting:

“So it takes a lot of time, but is it more interesting, more challenging? Yes, it's more interesting of course, but it takes a lot of time, but it takes a lot of time.” (Kathy)

All these examples show that most of the scholars feel a sort of liberation by integrating sustainability topics in their courses. It seems to be a quite profound experience that suddenly leads them to having a larger sense and calling to their profession as management scholars. They feel like actively being a little brick that participates, thanks to their engaged actions, in “saving” the planet.

3.2.2. Examples 2: Engaged actions related to research

For some professors, the primary angle to embrace the sustainability topic is through their courses, as just discussed. For others, this process is mainly attached to their research endeavors by either launching completely new topics of interest to better grasp the profound nature of changes that are happening or by discovering, thanks to their reflexive process, that their research topics might actually be related in one way or the other to the bigger sustainability topic. However, this reflexive process pushes scholars as well to profoundly question how the research community is functioning, particularly regarding conferences and the carbon impact this represents.

Jane, a HR scholar, currently feels much more related to the sustainability topics via her newly launched research projects than via her teaching where she does not consider to do much:



“In teaching, I personally have the impression that I don't do much about the ecological transition. [...] [But] I have two research projects that are more or less closely related to these issues. [...] Paradoxically, through my research topics, I approach environmental subjects more than through my teaching. Maybe it will end up merging?”
(Jane)

Jake, a Marketing scholar, does a lot of research on sustainability transition and actively tries to reduce his carbon impact in his professional but also private life. As he profoundly wishes to change his practice, going to a conference generates very often a big investigation process and tensions in order to figure out how to handle this trip in a way that does not impact the planet:

“[My laboratory is willing to pay a boat ticket for me]. I had talked about it with [Adam] because the next congress of the French marketing association is in Tunis. That's why [Adam] and [Katharina], who is organizing the congress, argued about the fact that it was nonsense from an ecological point of view. [Adam] told her that he would not go to Tunis. [Katharina] replied: "You can just plant trees". Which was not the appropriate answer for [Adam], you can imagine (laughs). And so [Adam] had started to look into going by boat and I had found a comparison between a boat and a plane to make a Marseille-Tunis trip, which is more or less the same thing from a carbon point of view.” (Jake)

Investing in new research projects seems to be an important way for scholars to take hold of these new topics but also to legitimate their endeavours. It allows them to gain self confidence to address these topics in and outside the classroom but also to defend the importance of their respective disciplines in the sustainability turn. However, even though integrating the sustainability topics in their research process becomes strategic, living in accordance with these new insights, particularly regarding conference participation, seems to be more complicated.

3.2.3. Examples 3: Engaged actions related to career

Scholarship is a profession that probably does not have the worst carbon footprint compared to other professions : professors use computers and books, print papers for students but apart from



that, they do not consume or generate much carbonate activity. But they tend to travel a lot, especially when the summer comes and conferences are held around the world ... This travelling, even if it represents only a piece of their job - or maybe because it is not the core of it, appears to be questioned quite deeply. During the interviews, it came back quite often, as Jakes' expressed it earlier with dealing with going to Tunis by flight or boat. His laboratory for instance decided to boycott conferences where people cannot go without flying. This decision was not that easy to take, especially for young scholars who expect to publish in high ranked journals and feel it necessary to go to international conferences, especially in the United States. Jakes express it like that:

"You were talking about dissonance. I have two friends who are in the second year of their thesis who have been accepted at the American Marketing Association, which is perhaps one of the two or three biggest conferences in the world. It's in Las Vegas. So they go to Las Vegas. I know that from an ecological point of view, a city like Las Vegas is not necessarily my model of life, and Las Vegas does not make me dream... But I must say that the idea of going to a conference to meet my colleagues, and so on... in the United States... I have to admit that it makes me want to. Even though I know that it's, ... it's not a good thing and that we could do everything via zoom. But it makes me want to." (Jakes)

From another point of view, this care about ecological transition is also shown through career choices in terms of institution. This is what Eva explained when at the end of her PhD she hesitated between going to a business school or the university.

"Of course the salary of business schools are much higher than at the university. And the means to do your research as well. But you see, doing a Phd is already a second professional life. I don't want to make concessions about my values anymore and my experience is that in Uni you are freer to have a "different" view on capitalism... In my Uni, clearly, I'm one of the less critical! Everyone is so engaged." (Eva)



At this point it appears that scholarship might be a profession where people who want a certain freedom of thought and speech take over this freedom and use it to align their work and their values. From this point of view, scholarship appears as a wonderful profession to actually act in favor of the ecological transition. As Nora says:

“The problem is that, you see, I think it's very important individually that we are aware of our ecological footprint: at night I turn my heaters down to 17, I compost, I pay attention to what I eat, I try to eat local and organic, etc., but still, that's not going to change the world. I also think that the research for that has a greater impact than my individual actions, in the sense that I have seen that conducting my research on my field I have the impression that it has changed things on the field and much more than me talking alone with myself. I think that we have a power of action as researchers that is more important than individually. [...] clearly, I think I'm more useful when I'm helping to redesign a course to talk about unionism, about employees, about environmental costs. When I'm talking to 50 students, 60 students, well I don't have the same weight when I'm making my compost.” (Nora)

Doing research and teaching appear to be impactful activities where professors interviewed in this study create their own space of engaged action. Even if they don't act on each of those three items (teaching, research and career development), they do in at least one of them. And the way to share their engaged actions is full of emotion. It makes them feel impactful, acting for changing things and sometimes also resisting the established order. The classroom then becomes a space of emancipation, like for Pia or Nora. And research becomes a field of engagement.

Those results show a very positive aspect of engaged practices developed by professors to deal with ecological transition. But even if the course itself did not prove to be the only strategic episode, it appeared that professors embracing the transition issue engaged practices that impact the organization: by making students more aware of the ecological transition they also contribute to the more and more demanding claims of students to address this issue and may contribute to build new programs dedicated to this. It also influences the research agenda of



professors that colours the image of the institution and impacts the global research production. But the more professors engage in this, the more they raise consistency issues about their institution.

In Step 3, we will particularly concentrate on these rising tensions that go along with focusing on sustainability in the academic management realm.

3.3. STEP 3: REFLEXIVE PROCESSES THAT (MIGHT) PROVE TO BECOME STRATEGIC

Management education is currently taking a sustainability turn on the highest institutional levels. To stay competitive, management institutions embrace sustainability in their strategic orientations and push professors to integrate these new topics in their activities. Our results show that scholars seem to respond not directly to this general hierarchical push. They only actively enter this calling when they experience a certain emotional trigger moment that allows them to embrace a reflexive process regarding sustainability. These reflexive processes or episodes might lead to engaged and very liberating actions in the classroom, in their research or in their career. Suddenly they seem to have a broader calling to their profession and gain a greater feeling that what they are doing makes sense and will have an impact on the world. However, this time-intensive reflexive and engaged process also generates plenty of “side effects”. It is not only transforming their professional and private actions but also their outlook to the world. This newly gained outlook then seems to enter into conflict with the strategic functioning and worldview of their institutions, who have not necessarily engaged yet in this intensive reflexive process, as the following examples will illustrate.

For example, Jane underlines these rising tensions that exist in embracing the sustainability topic as a holistic issue that necessitates the integration and confrontation of different academic fields. The sustainability topic is a highly multidisciplinary topic, but current academic rules prevent this to happen. The management field is strongly departmentalised and in closed silos which hinders particularly young scholars to fully embrace such a multi-disciplinary path because it might hinder their career progression:

“We have one department who is quite committed to sustainability research. They



publish books on the subject. It's also one of the things that makes them quite criticized internally. These are researchers who don't publish much in the management sciences. There's one who positions himself as a philosopher, and the others don't necessarily see themselves in the field of management sciences. In a way, it's a richness because they're really on the multidisciplinary side, and on the other hand, internally, we have strong injunctions to publish in management. They don't publish in management because they want to be nourished by other disciplines, but it's not necessarily well recognized internally.” (Jane)

Jake, a marketing scholar, goes even one step further and asks if his discipline should maybe be dissolved and relaunched completely:

“The day before [we had a research seminar where we asked the question]: “Should marketing think about its own disappearance?” This is a subject that I find very interesting, it's up to marketing researchers to address it, at least in part. [...] And this capacity for self-criticism, and above all, it's not so much a question of capacity, it's a question of being able to question oneself and to say to oneself that, at a given moment, this self-criticism is going to be necessary. [...] What I think is not so much that the marketing discipline must disappear, but that we must make the operational marketing approach disappear and completely renew it. And in order to renew this approach to operational marketing, we need to question all the foundations [...]. Does marketing as a discipline have to think about its own disappearance? No, I don't think so.” (Jake)

For Peter on the other hand, the potential travel restrictions to conferences to reduce the school's carbon impact seems to be ridiculous when having a school with thousands of students that travel to different campuses over Europe every year. He is openly asking the impact the few professors have compared to the mass of students that are pushed to move between countries for their degrees:

“When they started to assess the travel of each professor, it becomes totally stupid for me. It doesn't make sense to have a multi-campus model and to have people coming



from all over the world and at the same time to prevent professors to go to conferences. The impact of the trip to the conference is going to be peanuts compared to everything that happens with our students.” (Peter)

For Lucie completely new areas of teaching might need to be integrated in business schools all together, which are quite far away from the profit driven paradigm that business schools embraced in the past:

“I have the impression that we need a spiritual answer, not necessarily a Christian one. I think it can be hooked to other spiritualities. How to face death? How to face loss and keep the desire to live, keep the hope at the bottom and to continue to live.” (Lucie)

In line with Lucie’s proposition, Jane also asks if we are not going too far by throwing very anxious material on them without properly taking care of their mental health, considering as well that they are paying so much money for their formation which they have to simply pay back in the end:

“I think that we have students who live in an ultra-anxiety environment. When Macron says it's not funny to be 20 years old in 2020, I still have the impression that it is really not funny right now. I'm not saying that I'm going to water down the teachings so as not to scare them [... but] in the short term, I think it's important to talk to them about it, to make them aware of it. It's true that I find it more difficult to envisage this in a fundamental course. These are students who pay a lot of money for their studies. I left school 13 years ago. Tuition costs were much lower. The salaries at the end were almost the same. Now they're paying a lot more for their education. The salaries haven't really gone up. There are big changes, there was the health crisis. I mean we have students who are not necessarily mentally very strong. [...] The mental health of students is something I'm very careful about. I think that it is something that we have to take into account, not to throw ultra-anxiety contents or workshops on them for which we have no answer.” (Jane)



Jake also questions how we might need to put ethics at the center of all this transformation and in which way we can stay neutral when embracing all these topics in business schools:

“What place do we give to ethics, what place do we give to discourse, not political commitment because I want to be neutral with my students, but at least my courses make them aware of citizenship and therefore open them up to a certain number of discourses that they will not have heard. For the moment, I really don't think that we should tell students what to say, what to do, what to think, but we really have this responsibility to make students aware that the discourse they have heard at school from their parents, in the media and even at university, is a discourse that is dominant [...] I, as a teacher, have to adopt a certain ideological neutrality and this ideological neutrality is incumbent upon me to not only, not tell students what to think, but to question the dominant discourse, which is an ideology, and that is something ... I'm sorry, but my father is a professor, and it's something we have a little trouble agreeing on, on the degree of... well, he sees it as an intervention, I see it as a disintervention.” (Jake).

Finally, Pia openly observes the dissonance between the strategy of the institution and the concrete actions:

“It's still a long way off [...], we're not greenwashing, but we're not very far from it. [...] Here are decisions that are not necessarily always totally consistent with this strategic objective. It must be said that the result, at least on paper, is the strategic plan [...], in other words, it has this sustainability dimension in it, not necessarily in a coherent way with many other things, but that's another debate. So we're still not at all in clear alignment but in any case we're making progress.” (Pia)

To sum up, the scholars we interviewed seem to enter in a very intensive reflexive process regarding their actions but once they pause for a moment in their engaged actions they realise that their newly gained awareness is somehow considerably misaligned with the strategy of their institutions. This reflexive process creates on the one hand liberating engaged actions and



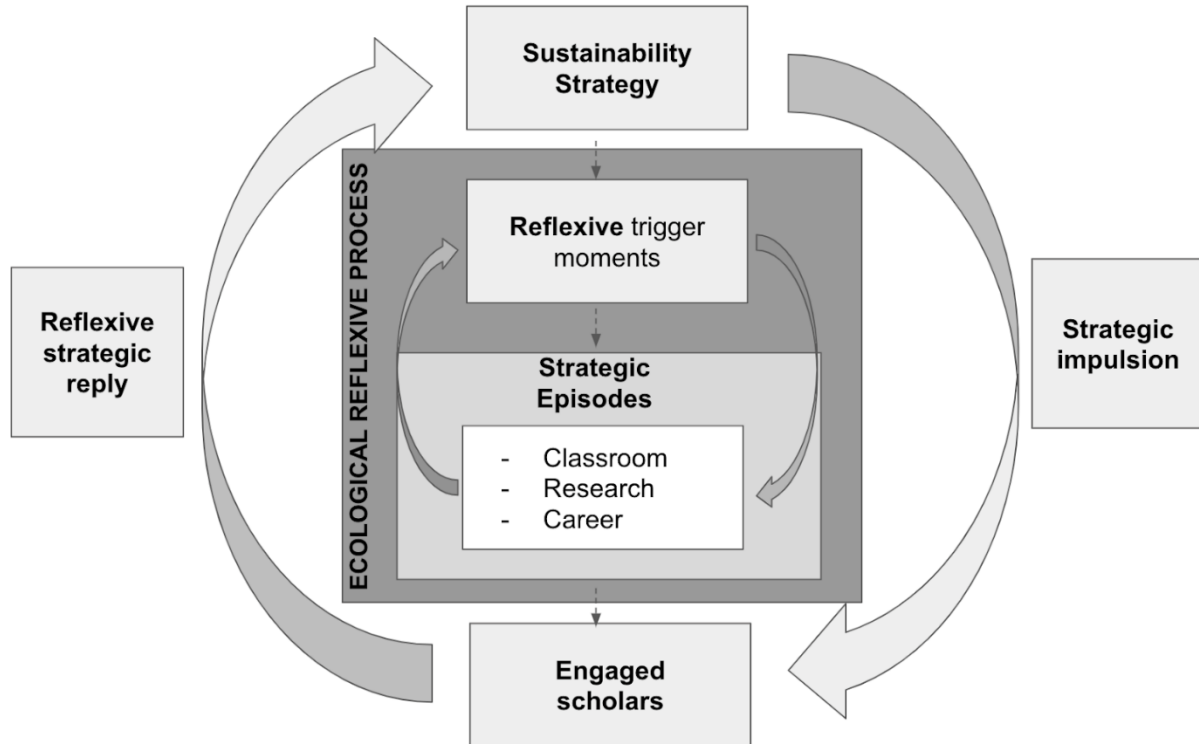
on the other hand considerable non-resolved tensions regarding their institutions which somehow pulled the initial trigger into these reflexive processes.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

To sum up the above detailed results, we presented the situations that put professors into a reflexive process regarding the ecological transition. Second, we detailed the different kinds of strategic episodes (teaching, researching and career development) and more precisely showed how these reflexive processes lead to engaged actions to change the situation. It happened that during the results analysis, a third kind of strategic episode emerged: the career discussion. Decisions about scholarship careers involve different elements linked to ecology: travels, ethics, values defended by the institution. Even if it is not defined in time and space as teaching or researching, we consider internal conversations about career choices as possible strategic episodes. To illustrate this, we presented in this second part the changed practices professors that infuse within their courses, their research or their career. Third, we showed how these processes led them to profoundly question some of the cornerstones of management education more generally and business schools in particular, leading to strategic issues. Finally, we tried to summarize our preliminary findings in a conceptual framework (Figure 1) that illustrates this process and shows how this might prove to become highly strategic for management education institutions.



Figure 1: Conceptual Framework of ecological reflexive process and strategic reply



As we can see in this framework (Figure 1), ecological sustainability policy sends out strategic impulsions to scholars. These strategic impulsions generate ecological reflexive processes that start with a trigger and then embrace a variety of episodes. These episodes are not only very time intensive for the scholars but touch them on a very emotional level. Their sense of working in the management field might even increase considerably as they suddenly perceive themselves much more intensively as playing an important role in changing (and maybe saving) the planet. This ecological reflexive process produces very engaged scholars who then send out again a reflexive strategic reply to the management board to alert them of the misalignment they perceive. If this dissonance is not heard and discussed further, an emotional rejection of the sustainability strategy or their engagement into this subject might occur. Which pushes the situation as quite unusual where a strategy on the top might bottom up stronger. More precisely, we can see that a sustainability strategy can stimulate reflexivity and deep questioning that will



lead professors to return the question of the “*raison d’être*” of business schools and management education in fields like marketing, human resources, accounting. Is it time for strategy-as-practice to overtake strategists?

The use of strategic episodes allows to achieve two goals: first in conceiving the momentum of reflexive questioning and change for more engaged practice, second in giving sustainability a strategic dimension that modifies practices. This research proposes also to unpack what happens in those strategic episodes in terms of reflexivity and proposes to enlarge the scope of what can be considered as strategic episodes.

To sum up we might question if these intensive ecological reflexive processes might push scholars and management institutions to more engaged and emotional experiences. Cunliffe (2018, p.14) underlines that “*reflexive and critical researchers who connect with the lived experiences and/or inequalities of their research participants accept that research is an engaged and emotional experience, carrying an ethical responsibility to participants and for articulating the position we take.*” Furthermore, scholars that dig into the ecological transition realm might be more than ever “*embracing alterity*” which Cunliffe (2018, p.20) defines as “*the spaces of unknowingness and betweenness where new possibilities, new questions, new ways of seeing, being and acting arise*”. If we allow ourselves to embrace alterity we “*come to know ourselves*” (Cunliffe, 2018, p.20).



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