social sciences

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Article

On Your Mind, Not in Your Face: Encouraging Heterodoxy with Subtle Ubiquity in Business and Management Schools

Matthew Wilson [1], Daniel Sage [2,*], Jennifer Robinson [2] and Sean Farmelo [3]

[1] School of Management, Swansea University, Swansea SA1 8EN, UK; matthew.wilson@swansea.ac.uk
[2] Loughborough Business School, Loughborough University, Loughborough LE11 3TU, UK; j.h.robinson@lboro.ac.uk
[3] Business School, Birmingham City University, Birmingham B4 7BD, UK; sean.farmelo@mail.bcu.ac.uk
* Correspondence: d.j.sage@lboro.ac.uk

Abstract

In this mostly conceptual article, we address calls to promote heterodox thinking within business schools to develop alternative approaches to management, alternative economies and organizations that can better address societal-level 'grand challenges' from social justice to ecological sustainability. We illustrate our thinking by discussing the ideas behind a project: Re-Organise. Drawing on the work of Sara Ahmed, we consider the performative dimensions of introducing critical ideas in business and management schools; we argue that students will often have an affective form of resistance to new and challenging ideas, not because of their content per se, but because they are unknown and therefore experienced as challenging. To counter this resistance, we suggest there is value in introducing heterodox ideas in low-level but widespread ways in order to acclimatize students to them. We explain how within Re-Organise we have started developing this approach in three universities in the UK, by asking lecturers and professional services staff to introduce references to heterodox ideas such as cooperatives—into their work. Put simply, we want to expose students to these ideas as frequently as possible, even if this often means only superficial engagement. Whilst this approach is not intended to replace the more far-reaching change in business school pedagogy which we believe is necessary, we think that working towards what we call subtle ubiquity can help slowly produce more positive affective responses.

Keywords: critical performativity; affect; cooperatives; subtle ubiquity; heterodox economics; critical pedagogy; critical management studies; positive performativity

1. Introduction

There is a growing concern amongst some academics that business and management schools (BMSs) need to be doing much more to engage students with questions of sustainability and issues such as social justice (Cavalcanti and Silva 2024; Ndofirepi 2023; Parker 2018). Certainly, the last few years have seen a considerable increase in the number of critical articles addressing this need (e.g., Kitchener and Delbridge 2020; Colombo 2023; Mason et al. 2024). Agreeing with the view that the 'narrow forms of management education currently adopted by most business and management schools cannot produce the graduate competences needed to lead a world out of crisis' (Mason et al. 2024, p. 4), we want to consider one of the many reasons why the scale of change is not happening despite the growing recognition for this need.

Within this conceptual article, we propose that heterodox thinking and learning opportunities within BMSs are one way of responding to this lack. This is empirically illustrated

Academic Editor: Antonella Rocca

Received: 22 March 2026
Revised: 1 May 2026
Accepted: 6 May 2026
Published: 8 May 2026

by a project—[anonymized project]—developed by academics at three UK universities (Re-Organise 2026), which aimed to promote heterodox economic and organizational ideas into the participating universities, and particularly within the pedagogical provisions in the BMSs. Rather than outline the practical implementation of the project itself, however, our intention here is to discuss our conceptual thinking behind it. In doing so this paper contributes to the growing literature in Management and Organization Studies (MOS) on 'critical performativity', understood as a form of affirmative critique (King 2015; Spicer et al. 2009) that goes beyond favoured negative criticism and 'anti-performativity' of early Critical Management Studies (CMS) (Alvesson and Wilmott 1992; Fournier and Grey 2000), to develop new potentials for action (as in performativity). In particular, we contribute to the literature by addressing a problem not often recognized, let alone addressed, within wide-ranging debates on critical performativity: how do we engage students (and colleagues) in heterodox thinking as a form of critical performativity when unfamiliar ideas are experienced negatively simply because they are unfamiliar?

To theorize this challenge, we turn to Sara Ahmed's work on performativity and affect (Ahmed 2004, 2014) to propose a new tactic to counter student resistance to heterodox thinking within business and management education. Whilst efforts at promoting heterodox thinking in response to such resistance understandably seek to be increasingly visible within the BMS environment, such attempts for intentional visibility stand in stark contrast to what we consider to be the 'subtle ubiquity' of neoliberalism in some BMS contexts, such as the United Kingdom. Such conflicting messages, we argue, can generate defensiveness against heterodox ideas, in students and academics. Indeed, while talking to some students about their perceptions of sustainable business recently, the lead author was struck by the strength of feeling on display. It was not, however, feelings of commitment to sustainability that are so often considered representative of the younger generation. Rather, the students expressed how pedagogical offerings surrounding sustainable business incited feelings of being told how to behave. This was despite their recognition that thinking about sustainability was important, and their desire to make ethical choices. Such an interaction is significant, because it highlights the complex, and at times contradictory, relationship to discourses of sustainability held by students. That is, they want to be informed about the sustainability of business and the products they consume, but at the same time they do not want to feel like they are being pressured 'to do the right thing'. Towards the end of the discussion, one of the students summed up the feelings about the promotion of sustainability in the room perfectly: 'it needs to be on your mind, not in your face'.

We do not suggest BMS should abandon attempts to create a 'comprehensive 'whole' portfolio of programmes' explicitly intended to challenge conventional ways of thinking about business (Mason et al. 2024, p. 544). However, in light of conversations with students such as the above, we argue that there is also value in developing a more diffuse and subtle (but not covert) promotion of heterodox thinking. This is because its subtle introduction and inclusion are more likely to be received in a manner that does not provoke the same resistance met by more visible and 'comprehensive' endeavours. This is not to say that this paper, and the project it discusses, should be read as critiques of the diverse forms of engagement and critical performativity already being pursued within BMS environments (e.g., Cavalcanti and Silva 2024; Hietanen and Mohammed 2024; King and Griffin 2023; Leca and Cruz 2021). However, too little has been said within the growing literature on critical performativity (e.g., Cabantous et al. 2016; Huault et al. 2017; Just et al. 2021) about the kinds of cultural resistance to heterodox teaching which we see evidenced in the above students' discussion and a concomitant lack of reflection on how we might navigate such resistance.

Thus, our article explores the following question: if we want to teach students challenging, critical, heterodox and maybe even radical ideas about business and management, how do we do so in such a way that what we offer is not experienced as being in students' faces? Such a question is especially pertinent in relation to the teaching of subjects such as business ethics and corporate social responsibility, which, if experienced as being in the 'face of' students, may serve to inadvertently cause students to become more resistant to the consideration of heterodox ideas.

This article is developed as follows: we begin with a brief overview of the BMS landscape, in terms of its problems and some proposed solutions, particularly those within debates around critical performativity, and introduce the outline of our own project. We then turn to our reading of performativity, and how we connect it to broader questions of cultural (re)production, introducing Ahmed's concept of 'sticky words' (Ahmed 2004, p. 89). We then go on to advance an argument as to how this reading of (critical) performativity opens up some unexpected avenues for critical management education, in theory, and then in the practice of our current project. We conclude by discussing how our thinking contributes to existing debates around critical performativity in MOS.

2. The Problem with BMS and the Turn to Critical Performativity

Movement away from the prevalent normative discourses is far from one-directional. For example, the once famously critical Business School in Leicester, referenced in J.K Gibson-Graham's updated edition of their seminal *The End of Capitalism* (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. vii) as evidence of a certain progress in academic thinking, is now the infamous site of heterodox approaches being ruthlessly crushed by neoliberal university management (Burrell et al. 2024). Other comprehensive shifts are hard to come by; Cardiff's claim to be the world's first (and only?) public values business school is hard to quantify—a meaningful change, more greenwash, or a complex mix of the two? Either way, it took many years to develop and has since experienced numerous setbacks (Kitchener and Delbridge 2020). What these examples point to is that, for anyone who recognizes the scale of the crises facing humanity, and however morally necessary challenging dominant normative thinking may be, any far-reaching attempts to 'adapt the curriculum to local and global challenges and to change the syllabus to enhance critical and systemic thinking' (Colombo 2023, p. 142) are 'extremely difficult' (p. 143). Put differently, BMSs typically remain 'a place where competition, self-interest, greed, and short-termism are not only accepted but also normalized and extensively recreated' (Colombo 2023, p. 132).

Short of 'developing an alternative business school' (Kitchener and Delbridge 2020, p. 312), or shutting them down entirely (Parker 2018), we are left with piecemeal and ad hoc interventions that are organized by concerned individuals both formally and informally through academic networks, conferences, and journal Special Issues (e.g., Cabantous et al. 2016; Huault et al. 2017; Just et al. 2021) rather than university or even school-wide initiatives. Despite their piecemeal nature, the interventions mentioned above indicate that heterodox thinking and ideas are percolating within BMS contexts. Indeed, academics concerned by the dominance of neoliberalism within BMSs are increasingly vocal about its political, social and ecological consequences, and many are now taking these concerns into the classroom. What this points to is that BMS constitutes a powerful space of resistance and change nestled within the available 'openings and fissures' of dominant capitalist approaches (Gibson-Graham 2006, p. 135). But in neoliberal BMS contexts, such as the United Kingdom, such initiatives remain very much at the fringe within an overarching BMS discourse remaining steadfastly neoliberal (Colombo 2023; Fleming 2020; Vianna et al. 2025), and entrenched in an extractive, ecologically destructive, and self-maximizing form of capitalism (Parker 2018). Although there has undoubtedly been a rise in talk of

sustainability, circular economies, business ethics and so on (Lacerda and Sadeghi 2026; Ramboarisata and Champion 2025), BMSs in neoliberal institutional contexts also remain places of 'overt commercialization . . . replete with management hierarchies, customers (i.e., students, industry clients, etc.), cut-throat careerism and a myopic focus on 'outputs' and KPIs' (Fleming 2020, p. 1305).

Unsatisfactory as this situation is, our response is to openly acknowledge this, and to consider how we might turn what is an evident weakness into something of a strategic virtue. In particular, one significant development toward this end is MOS work on critical performativity. Premised as a response to the limitations of earlier forms of CMS (Alvesson and Wilmott 1992; Fournier and Grey 2000)—and particularly its critical antagonism with management practitioners and lack of alternative normative plan for action (or 'performativity')—critical performativity is proposed as an 'active and subversive intervention into managerial discourses and practices . . . achieved through affirmation, care, pragmatism, engagement with potentialities, and a normative orientation' (Spicer et al. 2009, p. 538). Inspired by various performative onto-epistemologies (e.g., those of John Austin, Judith Butler, Michel Callon, John Law), the wide-ranging literature (c.f. Cabantous et al. 2016; Huault et al. 2017; Just et al. 2021; Learmonth et al. 2016; Ouahab and Maclouf 2019; Parker and Parker 2017; Roscoe and Chillas 2014; Sage et al. 2013; Spicer et al. 2009; Van Baarle et al. 2024; Wickert and Schaefer 2015) has proposed various interventions for how 'critical scholars should seek engagement with organizations and not shy away from producing performative knowledge, albeit a critical version of it' (Just et al. 2021, p. 91). However, notions of critical performativity have also been subjected to repeated criticism across three main areas. First, there are criticisms that researchers misread performative onto-epistemologies, such as those of Austin and Butler, by equating performativity purely with the spoken discourse of managers (e.g., Wickert and Schaefer 2015). Nullifying the political potential of performativity, such scholarship can be seen to ignore the deeper epistemic discourses (e.g., exponential growth) and social–material arrangements sustaining subject positions and power within organizations (Cabantous et al. 2016; Fleming and Banerjee 2016; Gond et al. 2016). Second, there are accusations of a lack of practical guidance for how to bring about transformative change in complex and resistant contexts; thus, interventions appear naively heroic and readily co-opted and degraded (Butler et al. 2018; Fleming and Banerjee 2016; Kavanagh and Cusack 2021; King 2015; King and Griffin 2023; Leca et al. 2014; Van Baarle et al. 2024). And third, the potential of academic activism within universities, particularly critical pedagogy, is often overlooked (Contu 2020; Fleming and Banerjee 2016).

In response to these concerns there have been various useful insights into how critically minded MOS scholars might engage more relationally and democratically (not heroically and hierarchically) with practitioners to support alternatives (King and Griffin 2023; Kavanagh and Cusack 2021; Reedy and King 2019), as well as studies of how academics might influence the deeper socio-material arrangements in which alternatives can prosper (e.g., Leca and Cruz 2021). However, one area that has been much less explored is how critically minded academics might interact with passively disengaged or openly resistant students and colleagues within BMS environments. That is, how can academics respond to students and colleagues who are intentionally resistant to, or who are more or less intentionally disengaged from, heterodox thinking? In our experience this is a curious omission because, as critical management educators working in neoliberal institutional contexts, we have regularly experienced resistance and disinterest when trying to encourage alternatives to mainstream business and management thinking. We are certain we are not alone. Various recent studies have also evidenced active resistance and apathetic disengagement towards heterodox thinking, in both existing universities at large (Stacey

et al. 2025) and BMS contexts in particular (Lacerda and Sadeghi 2026; Ramboarisata and Champion 2025). Some of these responses have also been shaped, if not inspired, by the anti-science and anti-woke backlash in American right-wing populist politics (McCambly et al. 2026). A less hostile challenge in the BMS context is that the opportunities, resources, and time to transformatively co-produce ideas and projects with students and staff (as per King and Griffin 2023) are often few and far between. Indeed, life in higher education is often constrained by programme timetables, pre-structured module and programme specifications, managed meeting agendas, deadlines, workload models, central marketing plans, and various other 'top down' rule-governed processes and systems, within which everybody struggles with the pressure of fulfilling competing objectives. This towering scaffold of socio-material arrangements is difficult to even comprehend let alone change in the way proposed by Leca and Cruz (2021).

We propose, therefore, that what is required are approaches that are subtle. Such approaches refuse the perennial debate between critical performativity as radically transformative/incremental (Hietanen and Mohammed 2024; Shanahan 2024; Wickert and Schaefer 2015) or relational/institutional (Cabantous et al. 2016; Fleming and Banerjee 2016; Leca and Cruz 2021). Rather, subtle approaches involve developing efficient interventions that require minimal effort to insert into campus life, and which are capable at the same time of maximally shifting the background commonsense norms and socio-material arrangements that constitute the subject positions and way of knowing available to students and colleagues in neoliberal BMS contexts (Fleming and Banerjee 2016). Such subtle interventions are at once radical and incremental, relational and institutional. As such, they can gently and cumulatively respond to the pressurized and constrained reality of life for staff and students within contemporary neoliberal BMS contexts.

Subtly Reorganizing the Business School

> 'It is a less spectacular, more understated and oblique strategic approach that appears to be more compatible with the attainment of longer-lasting success—one in which seemingly insignificant small gestures, which often go unnoticed, are recognized for the overall effect they eventually produce'. (Chia and Holt 2009, p. xi)

In navigating our own responses to challenging the status quo of the BMS environment, we initially began with a productive but standard intervention; we developed a project, funded by [anonymized university], to bring together academics and cooperative development workers to produce resources tailored towards people working in value-driven, democratic organizations. As the project developed, we wanted to connect this work more directly to the university itself and began asking ourselves how we might get more engagement from other lecturers (and thus students). Initially, our biggest concern was that, although the world might be on the brink of ecological collapse and BMSs might be playing their part in sending us ever closer to the edge (Parker 2018), lecturers are busy people. Asking them to incorporate heterodox economic and organizational thinking into their teaching or dialogic critical pedagogy (Freire 2021) when they had little to no knowledge about these issues and methods themselves might be negatively received due to the time and energy such provisions would require. We thus decided that we would start by simply contacting module convenors to ask them if they would be interested in mentioning cooperatives or other heterodox economic approaches and offer what help we could if they agreed. What started out as being the best we could do under the circumstances started to appear over time, however, as strategically advantageous. Increasingly convinced that there was a great deal to be said for 'the subtlety and cumulative efficacy of small gestures' (Chia and Holt 2009, p. xi), we began to see how we could mimic, in form if not in scale,

the performative construction of our current social order through such an approach. As such, the theoretical lens we present in this article developed synchronistically. While we will return to the practicalities of our [anonymized project] project in more detail below, what follows is consideration of the development of our project's strategy in line with how performativity plays a role in the construction of the social world.

3. Performing Cultures with Subtlety

The theoretical approach we adopted toward performativity within the [anonymized project] project is a flexible and explicitly strategic one. At its broadest, we are informed by Stuart Hall's (1990) understanding of 'politics as a production' whereby the discursive framing and making of the social world is always the site of political struggle, and therefore part of any viable political strategy. More specifically, we follow Sara Ahmed's reading of performativity as having a strong affective dimension; we adopt her view that there are certain 'sticky' words (Ahmed 2004, p. 92) which produce strong affective relations, but we develop a layer of further complexity to this by considering two other categories—'spiky', and 'slippery' words. It is not our intention here to outline a strong theoretical position on performativity. Although this could be considered to omit from our research appreciation of some foundational works (Gond et al. 2016, p. 458), this decision is justified by the fact that performativity is now a rich and varied concept. Furthermore, whilst Hall and Ahmed provide key points of analysis for us, it is strategically important to stress that our starting point is commensurate with a broad spectrum of theories which understand language as one part of a rich and diverse tapestry of mechanisms which help produce and reproduce the social world. In this paper we seek, therefore, to strategically embrace the 'heuristic value' in the various 're-appropriations' and 'redefinition[s]' of the initial idea (Gond et al. 2016, p. 440).

With this in mind, we adopt the position that production of the social world happens in infinitely complex ways and on limitless social registers—from the (re)production of individual subjectivities to the framings of entire societies, and almost everywhere in between. Pertinent to our discussion here is that we can consider how 'the economy' itself is performatively constructed as a particular social field supposedly distinct from (amongst other things) the sphere of the political (Callon 2010). Similarly, on the level of the individual, we can see the construction of certain 'economic subjectivities'—consumer, worker, entrepreneur, boss—produces a series of performative roles and identities that reinforce and reproduce the taken-for-granted social world of 'the economy' (Gibson-Graham et al. 2013). The same is also true for the language of 'management', 'business', and 'innovation', which reinforces, produces, and describes certain practices in a manner that imbues seemingly neutral, technical language with normative, ideological weight.

Such examples serve to illustrate the 'articulatory principle' of capitalism (Laclau and Mouffe 2001), which articulates a diversity of economic, political, cultural and ethical positions into a performatively designated unity where a diversity of economic praxis is subsumed into a singular 'capitalism'. What we are interested in is how the (re)production of social realities framed around 'the economy' results in a broad and overarching discursive landscape and 'tacit normativity that governs the social game' (Butler 1999, p. 115). Again, we think it is useful to acknowledge that we can think of this dominant social reality in numerous ways: as a hegemonic bloc, as master frames, as doxa, as a structure of feeling, or simply as a culture. What matters for our purposes is that, despite the diversity and conflict found within them, all societies have dominant positions—a common sense—which come to be seen by most people as normal and inevitable.

From here, two distinct but related sides to this process become apparent. Firstly, the production of this taken-for-granted, 'common-sense' social reality does not, for the most

part, result from clear and explicit ideological indoctrination. Rather, it is the infinite and diffuse mechanisms of language, in conjunction with the material worlds we navigate, which come to shape our relationship to the dominant economic social world. For example, we hear certain words—the market, innovation, entrepreneur—on an almost daily basis. While there is often a specific and shared meaning associated with these terms that reflect the dominant economic social world in a particular way, their specific use is rarely clearly defined or defended. Rather, we encounter them laden with a long list of implicit and complex (and at times contradictory) assumptions that invite and inspire a particular set of behaviours, attitudes and actions that reinforce the status quo. Put differently, like gendered pronouns, these words are weighted toward particular ideological ends, but we tend to fail to recognize this underneath their ubiquitous and banal, daily enunciations. Secondly then, we are interested in the ways in which performativity and the creation of a certain common-sense social reality erect certain barriers to engagement that function to form a line of unacknowledged defence against discourses which might otherwise challenge this established and unquestioned dominant and normative view of the world. We now turn to look at this process in a little more detail.

3.1. A Sticking Point

> Perverting the language is the way the Left exercises its bogus moral superiority and controls the national discourse. This has been going on for decades, but has escalated alarmingly in recent years, as we have been told not just how to speak but how we must think. (Littlejohn 2022)

If performativity functions to produce certain discourses and certain identities, then clearly it also works to limit them in some way by closing them off to other potential constructions. Language thus aids not only the production but the normalization of certain discursive positions that enables the stabilization of contingent and shifting social conjunctures. Giving rise to 'common-sense' attitudes, understandings and perspectives, it is this process of normalization and naturalization that provides a remarkably effective defence against heterodox discourses, which, directly and/or indirectly, challenge what is perceived as normal.

One of the most powerful examples of the performative construction of neoliberalism is 'the market'. On one level, 'the market' represents an ideological position and organising principle that is commonly used as an implicit synonym for capitalism in toto. That is, the implicit assumptions that underpin the use of 'the market' performatively function to close off alternative constructs of what 'the market' could be. More than this, however, 'the market' is also presented as a force of nature beyond not only politics, but also our control. The opening lines from an article in the *Guardian* newspaper, chosen randomly from an endless array of examples, demonstrate this performative manoeuvre: 'Financial markets fear the world's leading central banks are risking "economic disaster" by misjudging the threat of rising inflation' (Farrer 2021). Not only is the power of the performative function of 'the market' merely ideological, therefore. The normalization and naturalization of this term also effectively remove the need for human agency from 'the market', which responds to 'banks' with seemingly no human involvement (even whilst the article deploys the curiously emotive notion of 'fear').

The issue of normalization is also visible in the fractious arena of culture wars, and particularly through the notion of political correctness. What is so interesting about this 'war' is the extent to which the social construction of reality—the question of performativity—is so virulently denied and/or misunderstood. Indeed, as Norman Fairclough argues (Fairclough 2003), the right has been far more active, and thus successful, in the political battle over language and culture. And yet, it is the left that is widely seen as the active

player in this field. This is arguably because the right attacks the strategy of political correctness—such as less racist or sexist language—rather than condemning its intentions. Such an approach is, as Hall argued (Hall 1990), a finely executed piece of hegemonic politics, simultaneously presenting as natural the right's contingent, subjective politics, whilst dismissing its adversaries as acting politically, and thereby as a threat to the natural freedom we are told we (should) have. It is precisely this sophisticated use of language wherein the power of such an approach lies, for language is at 'its most performative when its performativity is least explicit' (Sedgwick 2004, p. 6). To be successfully accepted as the dominant hegemonic then, a politics of culture must successfully hide its own performativity whilst at the same time exposing (and ideally exaggerating and distorting) the performative nature of its adversary. Fundamental to such a process is repetition of this mechanism and its claims to legitimacy as the normal and natural position for 'it is the through the repetition of norms that worlds materialize' (Ahmed 2014, p. 12). But once again, this repetition must go unnoticed, as 'norms appear as forms of life only through the concealment of the work of this repetition' (Ahmed 2014, p. 12). In a paradox which continues to allude many, we thus feel we are being 'told how to speak' only and precisely when we are in fact asked to consciously and critically reflect on our language, rather than simply accept the language we unwittingly inherited from birth.

Sara Ahmed's work helps us to further understand this process in terms of the individual and their relationship with the social world and its performative construction. Asking why 'relations of power [are] so intractable and enduring, even in the face of collective forms of resistance' (Ahmed 2014, p. 12), Ahmed (2014) suggests that an affective theory of performativity shows how 'we become invested in social norms' (p. 1) by making us more or less receptive to different ideas. Referring to her earlier work (Ahmed 2000) in which she tried to understand 'the techniques [. . .] whereby some bodies are recognized as strangers [. . .] as bodies out of place [. . .] 'in an instant' judged as suspicious, or dangerous, as objects to be feared' (Ahmed 2014, p. 211, emphasis in the original), Ahmed (2014) considers the performative dimension in this process. One element of this is captured through her earlier discussions of what she calls 'sticky' words (Ahmed 2004, pp. 89–92). These are words that by virtue of their past histories, and encounters with other sticky words, have accumulated an affectively charged capacity to block movement between new words and objects and/or bind together other words and objects. Although some sticky words can serve positive relations such as friendship bonds, many sustain fear, disgust and hate but in ways that conceal such affective attachments. Ahmed provides the example of the word 'Paki' which in the UK has accumulated a binding stickiness to a plethora of hateful racist insults, while also blocking non-hateful meanings from developing; this word can also render certain bodies sticky, rendering some bodies more prone to be feared than others (Ahmed 2004, p. 92).

As Ahmed (2004) explains, 'sticky' words function differently on and for different individuals, but within a given hegemonic culture, certain words take on particular powers that are able to produce responses far beyond the consciously acknowledged or recognized meaning of the word itself. Whilst Ahmed (2004) certainly does not suggest words that stick do so because of necessarily positive associations, we find it useful to consider sticky words as signs which are received openly and unproblematically, offering an affectively charged semiotic shorthand, and thus will often stick to dominant normative or empirical assumptions about the world.

In contrast to these sticky words, we have come to recognize the existence of what we call 'spiky' and 'slippery' words. We have developed these categories for their heuristic value, to help us think through the work of more subtly promoting heterodox ideas. These categories of words do not constitute a typological classification of actual phrases. Rather,

these categories relate to a specific institutional context or socio-material arrangement: specific words can move between functioning as sticky and spiky words, or straddle the two, depending on this context. Spiky words produce the opposite affective response of sticky words; they are experienced negatively, at times because the ideas they represent are consciously, if vaguely, rejected, but also because they are experienced, and thus perceived as out-of-place and unusual. Quite simply, slippery words are words whose meaning is more fluid and interchangeable than sticky and spiky words and which, therefore, fall between the gaps, are stripped of, or have never been saturated with, affect. Table 1 below compares and provides examples of these different types of words:

Table 1. Comparison of 'sticky', 'spiky', and 'slippery' words.

Type of Word	'Sticky'	'Spiky'	'Slippery'
Definition	Words that accumulate meanings to block movement between new words/objects and bind together other words/objects (cf. Ahmed 2004)	Words experienced negatively because the ideas they represent are consciously, if vaguely, rejected, but also because they are experienced as out-of-place and unusual.	Words that are stripped or almost devoid of meaning and can be interpreted as either 'stick' or 'spiky' depending on context.
Affective force	Positive	Negative	Vacillating (positive/negative affect, neutral)
Political effect	Reinforcing existing norms (stereotypes, social norms, codes of conduct and behaviour, prejudices)	Challenging existing social norms.	No effect or may reinforce and/or challenge existing social norms
Examples	Racialized or gendered slurs, terms of affection and nicknames, 'us vs. them' (as in nations), 'family', 'marriage', 'community', 'business', 'market'	'cooperative' or 'solidarity' in an MBA class, 'return on investment' or 'enterprise' in a union representative meeting.	'culture', 'society', 'circular economy', 'donut economics', 'wellbeing', 'resilience'.

Importantly, much of the language necessary for thinking about—and therefore teaching—heterodox economic discourse seems to us to fit into these categories. Thinking this way has pushed us to consider two distinct but related features of how we engage students, and how we foster a more critical pedagogical environment amongst ourselves as educators. Which ideas introduced in our teaching might be sticky, spiky, or slippery? And what could we do to promote spiky or slippery ideas without diluting their challenging content? As has long been recognized, the discursive landscape of BMSs is often, though certainly not always, orientated towards neoliberal discourse (Colombo 2023; Fleming 2020; Parker 2018; Vianna et al. 2025). This is both a reflection of, and plays a role in, the wider neoliberal hegemony which exists throughout society (Harvey 2005). Students arrive at their given BMS already profoundly shaped by neoliberalism, and this dynamic is entrenched further throughout their study. Whilst there is clearly considerable diversity within any student population, we think it is important to acknowledge this overarching dynamic, and what it means for any performative engagement with heterodox ideas; the context of the BMS environment might be obviously infelicitous (Cabantous et al. 2016), but Ahmed's work suggests we also consider the context of students minds, and how receptive they may be to heterodox ideas.

From here, it is clear that certain words are easily and commonly stuck within a neoliberal framing. 'Innovation' would be a good example; in our current context, innovation

evidently does more than describe a neutral form of thinking. Rather, it is 'saturated' with positive normative ideals, with ideas about the economy and the individual, and with values such as freedom, success, and inspiration. Its stickiness to the economic status quo is also exclusive; innovation is something that happens naturally and efficiently under capitalism, not socialism. Both 'business' and 'management' are similarly stuck with certain assumptions: 'businesses' are organizations whose aim is the generation of profit, and it is only when a business is not-for-profit that any clarification is deemed necessary. Management is hierarchical, and, again, aimed primarily at the pursuit of profit; again, qualifications are only needed when we discuss heterodox forms of management.

The introduction of heterodox thinking entails the use of any number of a long list of words liable to be spiky, or slippery. Socialism is evidently a spiky word, which will often bring to mind very particular and powerful images of authoritarian dictatorship, of cumbersome and even brutal bureaucracy, of a lack of freedom, and, indeed, a lack of innovation. There are also a growing number of economic ideas and theories which are more likely to be slippery, such as donut economics, the circular economy, the foundational economy, and so on; these terms are unlikely to generate the powerful reaction that socialism can inspire. However, they can still be readily dismissed as fringe ideas that do not need to be engaged with. The situation is not helped by the fact that there are so many heterodox ideas which we might want to inform our students about. One of the characteristics of sticky words is their capacity to infer specifics whilst appearing to represent the general, even universal (Ahmed 2004). A not-for-profit worker-owned cooperative is a 'business', but 'a business' without qualification is never a not-for-profit worker-owned cooperative.

In an ideal world, the response to this problem would be those 'wholesale' changes to BMS pedagogy that a growing number of academics are calling for (Cavalcanti and Silva 2024; Parker 2018). We want to join and reiterate such calls, but we are also interested in knowing how we get to such a point, and what we might do in the meantime. How can we apply the lessons gleaned from Ahmed within our universities? In the next section, we consider how we have started to think about promoting heterodox thinking in relation to our understanding of performativity and affect.

3.2. Becoming Unstuck: Subtle Ubiquity as a Logic of [Anonymized Project]

We should begin by stressing that we by no means want to suggest that resistance to heterodox ideas is by any means absolute or uniform. Just as the workings of performatives are extremely complex and contingent, so too are the ways in which the normalization of certain discourses comes to erect barriers against competing ideas. Students who understand, and perhaps agree, with criticisms of neoliberalism may find it is words like 'cooperation' and 'solidarity' which stick in their minds. Yet our own experience as teachers tells us that when students are presented with unconventional ideas, they are often resistant to engaging with them (we might add that our experience as human beings tells us this about all humans, ourselves included). At times, this resistance comes in the form we highlighted at the beginning of this paper: that heterodox ideas are experienced by students as an alternative ideological perspective that is thrust 'in their faces' rather than as neutral facts—which is how most BMS pedagogy is presented to them. At other times, resistance transpires as indifference whereby new terminologies go, to use another bodily metaphor, 'in one ear and out the other'. Of course, the ambivalence of students is by no means limited to this sphere of pedagogy, but it seems to us that it is worth considering these additional barriers and reflecting on how we might more successfully navigate them.

What we propose to navigate these barriers of engagement is what we call 'subtle ubiquity'. If the standard response of critical scholars to neoliberal hegemony is to try to give their students as much in the way of heterodox information as possible, or else to engage in

open dialogue with students to support their own curiosity of their own oppression (Freire 2021), subtle ubiquity suggests finding ways to gradually reduce resistance to heterodox thinking and, over time, allow students to become accustomed to such ideas. Our subtle approach does not aim to have the transformative impact of a pedagogy of 'threshold concepts' (Meyer and Land 2005), like a full explanation of the concept of hegemony, nor does it imply covert indoctrination. Rather, it simply means that references to alternative discourses are mixed in here and there alongside conventional material and not delivered as competing, contrasting and/or conflicting perspectives.

There are insightful parallels between our approach and Meyerson and Scully's (1995) analyses of how 'tempered radicals'—those who are committed to an organization but also committed to ideas at odds with their organization—deploy language to speak to multiple audiences at once to resist being coopted by dominant ideas. For example, tempered radicals may deploy 'rationalizing' to engage businesses and 'social justice' for community activists (Meyerson and Scully 1995, p. 597). What distinguishes our subtle ubiquity approach is that we propose specific categories of affectively charged words not to resist dominant ideas per se and engage new allies, but to engage audiences who are already unfamiliar, and somewhat resistant, to those ideas. That is, instead of presenting a diversity of words to inspire audiences already familiar with those ideas, we propose subtle ubiquity as a heuristic device to encourage heterodoxy in thinking among groups not often exposed to, or resistant to, such ideas.

It is also instructive to compare our approach to the critical pedagogy of Freire (2021) and his exponents in MOS and beyond (Cavalcanti and Silva 2024). At first glance it might seem that our approach is the opposite of Freirean critical pedagogy with its rejection of authoritarian indoctrination and emphasis on agency and dialogue to raise educands' consciousness of their own social conditioning (Biesta 2019; Giroux 2021, pp. 8–9). The idea of gently introducing new terms and words to students might appear to serve radical indoctrination and impoverish agency. But, as with Freire, our critical pedagogy is not intended to tell students what to do, but rather 'to bring out the fact that there are other "readings of the world"' (Freire 2021, p. 117). We propose subtle ubiquity as a way of gently and openly encouraging student curiosity about alternatives and '"refusing to apply the brakes" to the educand's ability to think' (Freire 2021, p. 122). The difference is that Freire's approach stems from a certain socio-institutional context, namely colonial struggles in Brazil, where Freire found institutional space and resources to support the oppressed in developing open-ended investigations and fieldwork to tackle their own oppression. In contrast, our approach is intended to modestly open up heterodox thinking among colleagues and students in pressurized neoliberal institutional contexts. These contexts, are, in our experience, often less than receptive and conducive to facilitating the sorts of investigations demanded by Freirean approaches (Cavalcanti and Silva 2024). For example, at our institutions the Freirean insistence that educators do not impose their own theoretical framework, knowledge or views on educands (Cavalcanti and Silva 2024; Freire 2021) is difficult for colleagues to sustain alongside institutional environments demanding more didactic approaches to education through pre-structured slides, pre-defined learning objectives and outcomes, extremely large cohort sizes, and tiered lecture theatres. We do of course see immense value in combining both approaches where possible. But we propose and define subtle ubiquity as an alternative pedagogical tactic to promote heterodoxy in BMS contexts based on the idea of repetition and dispersed exposure.

For our approach to have any real impact, it must be both subtle and ubiquitous, forming small parts of every possible learning experience, and being included in other elements of university life—most obviously, in careers advice and other aspects of student services. Our proposal is that we should endeavour to offer multiple opportunities for

much more superficial engagement earlier on in their curriculum to mitigate the experience of feeling affronted and confronted by heterodox ideas within critical pedagogical spaces later during their degree. In doing so, heterodox ideas are likely to become not only less 'thrust in their faces' but increasingly legitimate when they are received through various platforms and from multiple individuals. We think, in another words, that what many concerned academics may see as an unsatisfactory sprinkling of radical ideas within a mass of conventional thinking can actually be part of a wider strategy for lessening resistance and generating interest.

Whilst we have so far focused on students' reception to heterodox thinking, we also believe that this approach responds to the problem of fostering more critical pedagogy amongst academics in two ways. Firstly, it is clear that the resistance we have so far considered amongst students is no less prevalent—arguably even more so—amongst academics. If this were not the case, then we wouldn't have a problem to solve. And yet, whilst there will clearly be some academics who will remain entirely wedded to neoliberal thinking, we believe that many more are open to the idea that business-as-usual is no longer sustainable.

This openness, however, often fails to manifest in any real change, in thinking or pedagogical content. Recognising the problem is not, however, the same as being able to cut through our cultural learning and consider challenging, heterodox alternatives. In other words, a certain receptiveness to spiky ideas will often be followed by a return to sticky solutions: powerfully embedded into our affective selves, orthodoxy sticks even when we try to move beyond it. Added to this ideologically constraining dynamic is the more functional issue of capacity. Banal as it might sound when we are facing ecological collapse, any wholesale change in the BMS terrain would require huge amounts of work. How many lecture notes must be abandoned? How many new ones written? Even on a practical level it should be clear that generating widespread buy-in from lecturers to develop entire lectures about heterodox economics is unlikely; asking lecturers to simply make a reference or two to alternative perspectives appears much more viable. Likewise, asking employability teams, careers advisors, and so on, to develop independent workshops, courses, etc., to introduce students to the possibility of setting up a cooperative rather than a conventional business (for example) is asking for more than we can often expect; asking them to include a slide or two about cooperatives in a more general talk about employment opportunities is far more realistic. At root, we are simply asking people to openly introduce heterodox terminology—if not the in-depth knowledge—of alternatives into their work.

4. Re-Organise Practice

It will not come as a surprise to many readers that [anonymized project] is an under-funded project, relying on the part-time work of one PhD student and of two lecturers who put in what work they can alongside other commitments. Recognizing that our limitations are shared by everyone else, we are developing [anonymized project] to have low commitment but high uptake.

Our process started by looking at the modules throughout the universities, then narrowing down a list of those which suggested an opening for heterodox economic and organizational thinking. Within the BMS context, this meant almost everything being taught. We then contacted module convenors, explained that we were interested in promoting cooperatives and other alternative forms of organizing in the curriculum, and asked whether they would be interested in introducing some of these ideas into the module. Two things were important to stress at this stage: firstly, that we were able to help with creation of content, but that, secondly, we were not asking for any substantial engagement. Without giving a full theoretical account behind the project, we would explain our belief that there

is value in simply introducing some heterodox ideas, or even just the terminology of some alternative perspectives, into as many spaces as possible, however superficially. Our aim was to simply produce as much of that subtle ubiquity as possible.

To further enact subtle ubiquity, we are developing a library of resources and helping individuals (lecturers and academic services) to develop content (from an entire lecture to one or two slides). Contacting a large number of academics also means we are building up a network of individuals who want to help further develop our work. Additionally, we are developing a database so that we can match individuals up by virtue of their discipline or university. These are organized so that different forms on our website allow individuals to either request, or offer, help. So far, our efforts have produced a high proportion of positive responses, with both lecturers and academic services keen to engage with this low-level demand. We also hope to inspire more engaged academics to get involved in this idea, encouraging other academics in their departments and schools to take those smaller steps. We see scope for this project to be extended throughout the university sector, with academics either connecting with us directly, or taking the basic idea and developing their own process to suit their specific needs.

Whilst we clearly need profound cultural change, within BMSs, and throughout society, we see a performative—and not just pragmatic—value in this light-touch approach. Slowly exposing students to alternative perspectives through multiple channels and from various academics within the 'safe' spaces of conventional, hegemonic discourse constitutes a powerful way to introduce less instinctively critical students to ideas which they may reject or resist if they believed they were being 'told what to think'. We imagine the gradual development of a criss-crossing process of performativity, where students hear brief mention of heterodox ideas in one lecture, then in another, then in a presentation by their careers team, on the 'enterprise hub' website. In doing so, we believe that, slowly but surely, students being exposed to these ideas with very little effort on the part of any individual academic and academic services staff will make heterodox thinking less 'thrust in their faces' and more a valid perspective through which to view the dominant, normative economic social reality.

We also see potential for this process to develop its own internal performative mechanisms. As students begin to develop an awareness of alternatives, they also begin to share that with their friends, and if their friend has experienced a similar level of exposure, they suddenly have a common sense, however limited, from which to proceed. This shared understanding, we believe, is hugely powerful in developing a sense of normalization, even when that understanding is superficial; as these perspectives become more normalized, further encounters with these discourses are more likely to be positively received.

5. Ubiquity Versus Diversity

We have, however, one as-yet unresolved question. In order to reproduce some significant level of ubiquity, we need to consider which words, terms and ideas are promoted. Contrary to the Thatcherite dictum that 'there is no alternative', heterodox economic and organizational discourse is over-flowing with a diversity of theory and practice (Gibson-Graham 2008). Whilst this diversity is celebrated by critics of capitalism, it adds an additional challenge to the promotion of heterodox ideas. If sticky words become sticky through their widespread repetition (Ahmed 2004), then recreating that becomes harder if there are many alternatives to promote. Our response has been to foreground the core principle of 'cooperation'; often, this translates into those organizations formally designated as cooperatives, but we are also seeking to promote the broader idea of a cooperative economy and cooperative praxis (Vieta 2010). We have opted for this because cooperatives are already a substantial, if mostly invisible, part of most economies; this means it is relatively

easy to find appropriate case studies for particular lessons, and easy to mention an example of a cooperative in a particular industry or sector. Cooperatives, as functioning businesses which vary hugely in scale and form, and which exist in almost every industry, also connect easily to a wide spectrum of content covered within BMSs—start-ups, entrepreneurialism, leadership, HR, regulation, to name just a few. Most importantly, whilst most people are unfamiliar with what cooperatives are, the word cooperation itself already has a certain stickiness.

In the context of our own project, the promotion of cooperation makes sense, and has worked well so far. It is not clear whether any stickiness produced will be passed on if and when students encounter other forms of heterodox thinking which is not explicitly linked to cooperatives. Will mention of 'degrowth' or 'municipalism' or even 'socialism' be softened by previous encounters with 'cooperation'—or vice versa? It seems to us that we are dealing with a few small pieces of an infinitely complex puzzle; the more pieces we can assemble, and the closer they are to one another, the greater our chances of changing the over-all picture. Ultimately, if we can make one heterodox idea stick, then that is a start.

6. Concluding Discussion

We end by discussing the contributions of our approach to broader debates on critical performativity, areas for further research, and reflecting on the potential for subtle ubiquity.

Our subtle ubiquity approach makes two important contributions to the existing MOS literature on critical performativity. First, our approach also contributes by recognizing that the implementation of critical performativity within the environment of BMSs is even more fragile than is usually discussed. That is, there is a range of ways far beyond active resistance and open hostility, including passive disinterest underpinned by institutional pressures and constraints, through which any critical performativity project within higher education can fail not only to accomplish its aims (Butler et al. 2018; Fleming and Banerjee 2016; Shanahan 2024) but even to materialize at all. What is required are interventions that can not only work within but with the pressurized and constrictive environment that typifies life in a BMS. We offer subtle ubiquity as one such modality. We do not propose our approach as a replacement for existing methods of intervention but rather as a complementary tactic. Indeed, we would hope that subtle ubiquity can perhaps help fertilize the 'soil' for more engaged, resourced and directed projects and initiatives to grow (e.g., Cavalcanti and Silva 2024; Hietanen and Mohammed 2024; King and Griffin 2023; Leca and Cruz 2021). Table 2 below further specifies the contributions of our approach by comparing and contrasting it to two existing approaches to critical education:

Second, our approaches also address and mitigate tensions in existing research and practices of critical performativity around oppositions between incremental/radical (Hietanen and Mohammed 2024; Shanahan 2024; Wickert and Schaefer 2015) and relational/institutional (Cabantous et al. 2016; Fleming and Banerjee 2016; Leca and Cruz 2021) approaches. Although these tensions appear intuitive there are methods—such as the use of slippery, or even spiky, words in classroom—that can at once engage relational and institutional change by subtly altering the background of available norms and subject positions (cf. Cabantous et al. 2016; Fleming and Banerjee 2016) in ways that borrow from the efficiency of incremental interventions (Wickert and Schaefer 2015) and the maximal impact of more radical efforts (Contu 2020).

We must also recognize that subtle ubiquity is not without its own limitations, and further empirical study will be required to explore and address these. Future empirical work developing our subtle ubiquity approach could include comparative case study analysis across different modules and higher education contexts, as well as longitudinal qualitative study and evaluations focusing on outcomes. Indeed, what is missing from

our analysis presented here is an understanding of how generalizable subtle ubiquity is across different national institutional contexts (particularly those less wedded to Western neoliberalism), types of university, disciplines and student demographics. Our experience so far informs us that students and staff exposed to our project are generally more receptive to the approaches discussed here than more engaged, resourced and directed projects but more empirical research is required. Another important issue to consider is how we might measure or trace change resulting from subtle ubiquity. Within many critical performativity projects, success is measured using indicators of participation and engagement in a project (e.g., King 2015; King and Griffin 2023) or institutional change (Leca and Cruz 2021). These measures are not available to such a diffuse project as [anonymized project]. But ultimately, we are still looking to be confident that our initiatives are making a difference to bring into being more heterodox thinking. One way of tracing such change would be to engage students in longitudinal interviews over the course of their studies to explore ideological shifts in the meaning they give to work and different forms of organizations and organising. We have already started to explore such methods.

Table 2. Comparison of subtle ubiquity and other approaches to critical education.

Approach	Teacher-Centred Critical Education	Freirean Critical Pedagogy	Subtle Ubiquity
Definition	Teaching that challenges the students existing worldview through the explanation of critical theories	Education that encourages dialectical dialogue between the educator and educand with the aim of developing an investigation to raise the educands' awareness of their own oppression and their curiosity to tackle that oppression	A pedagogic tactic that deploys 'sticky', 'spiky' and 'slippery' words through repeated and dispersed exposure to gently open up students to alternatives ideas alongside existing ideas
Key methods	Didactics, systematic approach, ideological lessons, slogans, teacher-centred with occasional class interactions, threshold concepts are presented didactically	open-ended raising of views, possibility to debate and reject purpose of investigation, collection of data in the field, no imposition of theory or aggrandizing of a 'teacher' as purveyor of knowledge, raises centrality of indigenous knowledge and shares these with a wider academic audience, delivers socio-political change	The inclusion of 'sticky', 'spiky' and 'slippery' words in teaching to encourage alternative ideas (e.g., cooperatives, circular economy) alongside existing ideas (profit maximization, shareholder primacy)
Strengths	Compatible with programmes and modules demanding pre-existing learning aims and outcomes and large cohort sizes.	Capable of delivering social change beyond the classroom, respects indigenous knowledges	Compatible with programmes and modules demanding pre-existing learning aims and outcomes and large cohort sizes, can be mobilized by lectures lacking strong expertise in critical education and theories
Weaknesses	Poor student engagement, risks curtailing or removing student curiosity, disempowers students, does not encourage new thinking, moderately resource intensive to recruit lectures with relevant expertise	Not compatible with programmes and courses where looser delivery structures (e.g., no pre-defined learning aims and outcomes) and field work are not possible, challenging to deliver with larger cohort sizes, more resource intensive to implement	Risk of indoctrination if only a narrow set of ideas are chosen, can present difficulties if students expose a lack of knowledge from lectures

We are dealing with complex cultural questions, and it is obvious to us that no one can ever be sure of how best to change the world; if we knew that, we wouldn't be writing these words or facing ecological collapse. Acting in this piece-meal, low-key fashion may seem counter-intuitive, given the scale and immediacy of the multiple crises we face. However, we want to stress again that the subtle ubiquity we propose does not equal small-scale (cf. Sage 2024). Whilst any individual element of our approach is a drop in the ocean, the ubiquity of such drops allows space for students to open up to new cultures of political and economic organization. The success of this particular project is dependent on multiple factors, such that the theory behind it has only limited causal power.

Our premise may well be an exemplary piece of performative activism in theory, but our project may fall on infelicitous ground, be ignored by other academics, or struggle to maintain energy. It may also be that our premise may be fundamentally flawed from a theoretical perspective (in ways we cannot yet imagine), yet thousands of academics may be blinded, like us, to its potential, becoming involved and making the project a success. There is, in other words, an obviously performative dimension inherent in such a project itself, where success secures yet more success, or failure, more failure: as Hall often said with reference to hegemonic political struggles, you win because you win because you win (Hall 1990).

We move forward in the hope of navigating the extremes of naïvely believing, on the one hand, that university management will soon enough wake up and radically alter their approach, and, on the other, assuming that the ideological common-sense which dominates the discourse of the university (and everything else) is the only space of power or action. We can see both the immense struggle in breaking through the hegemonic barriers, and the glimpse of possibility of doing so. We think that our approach can work where other, more engaged, more demanding, highly resourced, or 'in-your-face' strategies (e.g., Cavalcanti and Silva 2024; Hietanen and Mohammed 2024; King and Griffin 2023; Leca and Cruz 2021) cannot take hold, ideally opening up space for these deeper approaches in the not-too-distant future. Inspired by recent decolonizing initiatives (Schildermans 2021) which have gathered very significant momentum, we see the potential for small individual steps to generate much larger social change. Time will tell, but we do not have much left; in such circumstances, we hope others will recognize the possibilities of subtle ubiquity in the hope of one day re-organizing the business school.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, M.W., D.S. and S.F.; methodology, M.W. and D.S.; formal analysis, M.W., D.S., J.R. and S.F.; investigation, M.W., D.S., J.R. and S.F.; writing—original draft preparation, M.W., D.S. and J.R.; writing—review and editing, M.W., D.S. and J.R. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: This study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Ethics Review Sub-Committee of [Loughborough University] (protocol code 22468 and 1 May 2025).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in this study.

Data Availability Statement: No new data has been created.

Acknowledgments: We are extremely grateful to the students, colleagues and practitioners who have contributed to the Re-Organise project.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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