**Something in the Air: Atmospheric Attunement in Management Education**

**Abstract**

The study of atmospheres has recently drawn the attention of scholars in organization studies with implications for management education. From an aesthetic perspective, atmospheres communicate a mood or quality of feeling that materializes from the co-presence of subjects, objects and environments. If you have ever entered a room and felt ‘something in the air’ then you know that atmospheres matter. This session introduces the concept of atmospheres and its connections with pedagogic practices. Participants are also invited to engage in dialogue surrounding atmospheric attunement and the development of atmospheric sensitivities within the study and practice of management education.

**Keywords**

Atmospheres, aesthetics, attunement

**Introduction**

Have you ever walked into a classroom and immediately felt something in the air? The concept of atmospherics, once overshadowed by the field of marketing (Kotler, 1973), has recently captured the attention of scholars in management and organization studies in efforts to re-think relationships between aesthetics, materiality, space, embodiment and affect. Following the pioneering works of aesthetic philosopher Gernot Böhme, atmospheres are said to emerge as an experiential co-presence between people, materials and environments imbuing an overall impression, mood, ambience and quality of feeling that radiates and potentially affects how participants experience and interpret organization places and spaces. Since atmospheres are considered as ‘auras of indeterminacy’ (Böhme, 2017), attuning to atmospherics in management education requires us to risk something of ourselves by engaging with a concept that is both conceptually indeterminate and experientially complicated (Bille, Bjerregaard & Sørenson, 2015). On the other hand, the conceptual vagueness surrounding atmospheres invites possibilities for imaginative explorations.

Atmospheric attunement involves paying attention to multi-sensory ‘happenings’ (Stewart, 2011) connecting people and things (Ingold, 2015) in particular environments. Aesthetic atmospheres can only be experienced and felt by those who are sensuously engaged and attuned (Gherardi, 2017a). Everyday atmospheres may be sensed differently and at the same time, atmospheres themselves may be experienced and shared as qualitatively different (Pallasmaa, 2016). Certain atmospheres may heighten sensory experience while others may anesthetize or dull the senses (Strati, 1999; Julmi, 2016).

Aesthetic atmospheric perspectives take into account both the reception side and the production side of aesthetic atmospheres (Böhme, 2017). This involves embodied sensory engagement and attunement to atmospheres as both experienced and generated (Pink, Mackley & Morosanu, 2014). Atmospheric ‘staging’ (Bille, et. al., 2015) thus relies on the senses of sight, sound, smell, taste and touch according to aesthetic tastes and preferences. ‘Atmospheric arrangements’ (Edensor, 2015) may invite a range of moods such as festive or gloomy; each with their own odors, lights, sounds, colors, shapes, hues and tones. Atmospheres also include a spatial-temporal dynamic which is subject to shifting and changing moods. Since aesthetic atmospheres are deemed actively present and central to organizational experience (Borch, 2010), it is suggested that they are also central to teaching and learning experiences in management education. For example, Michels and Beyes (2016) describe how aesthetic interventions may be designed to affect atmospheres in management education.

Their seminal research considers three distinct pedagogic-atmospheric practices: a) bringing things into the classroom; b) re-configuring classroom spaces and c) moving out of the classroom. Grasping the atmospherics related to these aesthetic interventions further entails tuning into co-shared moods and contagious aspects of atmospheres, as well as their contrasts. Building on Michels and Beyes’ framework this session introduces the concept of atmospheres; briefly describing examples of both instructor and student-generated aesthetic interventions. Following the introduction, this session engages participants in dialogue surrounding atmospheric attunement and the development of atmospheric sensitivities in the context of management education. The proposed session is applicable to both undergraduate and graduate management courses.

**Theoretical Foundations/Teaching Implications**

As stated above, my current atmospheric research builds on Böhme’s (2017) philosophical aesthetics of atmospheres and draws from organizational studies by focusing on contributions from organizational aesthetics (Julmi, 2016; Michels and Beyes, 2016; Strati, 1999; 2009), organizational atmospheres (Borch, 2010) and practice-based knowing (Gherardi, 2017a; 2017b). I also consider scholarship from interdisciplinary fields such as anthropology (Bille, et. al., 2015; Ingold, 2015; Stewart, 2011), geography (Edensor, 2015), architecture (Pallasmaa, 2016) and visual studies (Pink, et.al, 2014).

As Michels and Beyes (2016:324) point out, intellectual development becomes entangled with the atmospherics of specific learning environments’; developing students’ aesthetic-atmospheric sensitivities affords critical reflection about power relationships and ‘atmospheric management’. This involves critical attunement to how atmospheres affect participants and how participants affect aesthetic atmospheres in both expected and surprising ways. Michels and Beyes suggest that attuning to pedagogic atmospheres opens up reflection about the creative potential of learning spaces and places in management education. It is further suggested that pedagogic atmospheres are important to the extent that they are sensed and felt within specific management education practices and co-shaped by atmospherically attuned students and teachers in particular places and spaces. As scholar-teachers, we are not outside of any given aesthetic atmosphere but part of it. Atmospherics further affords opportunities for management educators to consider new arenas of content in management and organization courses.

**Session Description**

This session begins with a 15 minute introduction to the concept of atmospheres including examples from my own management education practices. Participants will then be invited to engage in dialogue about their own sensory experiences, aesthetic tastes and preferences surrounding atmospheric ‘happenings’ in management education. The importance of developing atmospheric sensitivities and atmospheric attunement for teaching and learning will also be addressed.

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