

Expanded abstract

Social Economy, Critical Management Studies, and University: A case study of the Social Economy Lab

Objectives

The field of Critical Management Studies (CMS) emerged in the early 1990s as an intellectual movement that advocates the generation of critical thinking about organization and management with a view to radically transforming management practice. However, some scholars have recently highlighted the failure of CMS to engage with the business reality and to encourage emancipatory actions that allow transforming the daily practice of management in organizations and companies. Indeed, a growing stream of research within CMS has emerged around the concept of ‘critical performativity’ (Spicer, Alvesson & Kärreman, 2009). This stream argues for the need to ensure that the intellectual production generated around CMS actively and pragmatically influences conventional management discourses and practices, and contributes to generating alternative forms of organization and management that prioritize democracy, social justice and environmental sustainability.

While scholarship has explored several ways to put the concept of critical performativity to work (Huault et al., 2017), an under-researched avenue for advancing the critical performativity of CMS lies in the role that higher education institutions can play. In fact, some scholars have stressed the importance of investigating the relationship between education and critical performativity (Contu, 2009; Fleming & Banerjee, 2016), that is, how subversive interventions in real organizational life can be enacted from educational spaces, particularly through the study of alternative organizations (Reedy & Learmonth 2009).

Design and methods

To address our research goal, this paper provides a case study of the Social Economy Lab (LAB_ES), a space created in 2017 at the Faculty of Economics and Business of the University of Zaragoza with the aim of enabling the university community to experiment with projects organized around the Social Economy principles and values. We argue that education and training in Social Economy is relevant to advance the critical performativity of the CMS because Social Economy enterprises represent ‘alternative organizations’ that are based on organizational principles different from those of the capitalist enterprise, such as the primacy of people and of the social objective over capital, democratic control by the membership, and the application of the principles of solidarity and responsibility.

The study largely relies on the authors' own experiences and perspectives as members of the LAB_ES, as well as on the reflections from our daily work and conversations with the various actors who have been involved in the LAB_ES activities (students, teaching staff, practitioners, and policy-makers). In addition, the study was significantly enriched by the use of archival data collected by the LAB_ES team as a whole. Specifically, we used the LAB_ES annual reports published in 2018, 2019 and 2020, the documents and posters used for the dissemination of the LAB_ES activities among the university community, the minutes of monthly LAB_ES team meetings (all recorded and transcribed), and the emails exchanged between the LAB_ES members.

Results

The study contributes to the literature by examining three key lines of action to promote the critical performativity of CMS from higher education spaces. The first line of action lies in promoting the visibility of the Social Economy among the university community. This is essential not only to question capitalist principles and values such as individualism, profit maximization and competitiveness, but also to reveal the viability and social impact of alternative forms of organization and management that are more democratic, humanist, emancipatory, and responsible in social and environmental terms. The second line of action consists of developing a closer collaboration between academics, students, Social Economy practitioners, and policy makers, with the aim of co-generating knowledge that is useful for transforming management practice and fostering sustainable local development. The direct involvement of students in real projects organized around the Social Economy principles is the third line of action. Such involvement is not only crucial to foster critical thinking among students, but also to provide them with tools and skills to undertake alternative organizational and management initiatives outside the university.

Practical implications

Although some recent studies have highlighted the growing consolidation of the Social Economy in the undergraduate and postgraduate courses offered by Spanish universities, as well as the quality of Social Economy training programs and research structures, it is evident that the Social Economy still suffers from a certain marginalization within the official curricula and research centers of Spanish higher education institutions. Taking into account the importance of education in ethics and social values in the areas of economics and business management, this study shows the potential of creating alternative spaces, such as the LAB_ES, to promote education and training in social entrepreneurship within the walls of the University, but organized outside its institutional and bureaucratic rigidity.

Limitations and future research

An important limitation lies in the methodological approach of the research, based primarily on the authors' lived experience and perspectives as members of the LAB_ES and on archival

data collected from activity reports and other sources. In the future, the contribution of the LAB_ES to the transformation of the University of Zaragoza and the environment could be evaluated more specifically. From a qualitative perspective, in-depth interviews could be carried out with the various stakeholders who have participated in the LAB_ES actions (teaching staff, students, Social Economy practitioners, and local policy-makers), with the aim of understanding in greater detail how cooperation between different agents within the LAB_ES has contributed to transforming management practice. From a more quantitative perspective, social impact measurement tools could be applied to assess more precisely the degree of achievement of the LAB_ES objectives and the social changes generated.