

DJ Encounter: Invitation to the aesthetic turn in management education

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This piece is inspired by aesthetic and arts-based practices in management education, a field which aims to deepen and broaden forms of knowing and knowledge beyond the theoretical. We propose, animate and offer the aesthetic metaphor of educators as ‘DJs’ using ‘DJ Sets’. Just as DJs master the adaptation of aspects of volume, tempo, resonance and variety of mixes on a turntable to co-create the musical experience with the crowd, educators use practices that layer and juxtapose different teaching methods allowing for *the educator's and student's intentions, beliefs, ideas and experiences to shape the learning experience directing them to underexplored, new places*. This piece introduces the ‘DJ metaphor’ for educators and provides examples as to how educationalists in business and management can create highly impactful teaching and learning spaces and practices, with a view of inviting the reader to embrace the aesthetic turn in their educational practice.

Theoretical foundations

Education in the field of business and management continues to be criticised for the forms of knowledge that it develops, often fragmented, disconnected, detached, objective, and apolitical by nature (see Pina, et al., 2024). The consequences of developing such forms of knowledge are often associated with behaviours which are antithetical to contemporary needs of thinking and acting that are required for ethical leadership and management conducive for sustainable development (see Mazutis, 2025). This is ever more important, not only because of concerns around teaching and learning environments of business schools, including the disassociated and disengaged behaviours of educationalists (Wall, et al., 2023) but also in light of the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of the pressing challenges which characterise the contemporary business and society landscape (Groschl, Pavie, 2020).

Within this context, arts-based practices have developed over time to reorient more holistic forms of knowing and knowledge which purposefully integrate the broader ‘sensual’ and ‘rational’ aspects of experience (Wall et al., 2019b), or “holistic, physical and emotional engagement with sustainability issues” (Shrivastava 2010, p 443). These arts-based practices include performance, drama and theatre genres of arts-based practices (Molthan-Hill, et al., 2020; Fries and Wall, 2023; Wall, et al., 2025), and are particularly strong at “(1) generating personal awareness in relation to sustainable development, (2) mobilising emotions and promoting sets of values aligned to responsibility and sustainable development, and (3) initiating and mobilizing action in relation to sustainable development” (Wall et al., 2019a:2).

Within this vein, we embrace the notion of ‘encountering’ (Jones’s 2018) as a holistic way of understanding how teaching practice (as an aesthetic performance) is experienced. As Jones (2018: 21) articulates:

The term “encountering” allows me to point to the situational as well as temporal and embodied/conceptual/emotional nature of how this kind of practice suggests modes of eventual change. We cannot plan or intend these moments... But we can open up (and open ourselves to) the possibility of their occurrence, experiencing this process with awareness. Encountering activates the where and when of art that matters. Encountering is the situation in which art might become (minor) event.

Empirical research affirms the pedagogical promise of aesthetic approaches in management and leadership education. Studies show that arts-based pedagogies heighten students’ emotional engagement, moral imagination, and reflective judgment—capacities central to responsible management education (Campbell et al., 2020; Dickinson & Hadjimichael, 2021; Martineau & Cyr, 2024; Molderez et al., 2021; Sutherland, 2013). Through theatre exercises, reflective writing, and creative projects, students develop deeper empathy, ethical sensitivity, and critical awareness. These outcomes demonstrate that aesthetic practice does more than enrich classroom experience—it actively shapes how learners feel, reflect, and act within ethical and organisational complexity. We therefore call for educationalists to embrace the aesthetic turn in business and management education, cultivating aesthetic sensibility as a form of imaginative empathy. Such sensibility foregrounds the emotional, embodied, and narrative dimensions of learning. This helps students confront the limits of judgment and moral ambiguity inherent in managerial life. This act of imagination is itself an aesthetic performance, opening a space for moral relationality in the classroom, echoing Jones’s (2018) notion of “encountering” as a temporally and emotionally charged moment of possibility.

Overview of a DJ Encounter ‘Turntable’ & ‘DJ Sets’

We conceptualise a metaphor of educators as ‘DJs’ using ‘DJ Sets’ that adapt aspects of *volume, tempo, and resonance* on a ‘turntable’ to create movement with their students. Inspired by the arts-based and aesthetic practices outlined above, this metaphor joins others who recognise the performance artistry in teaching and learning (Gallo et al, 2023; Wall, 2025). A DJ creates a ‘mix’ from diverse sonic sources; likewise, conceptualising the classroom and syllabus as a mix opens new pedagogical opportunities.

While rooted in aesthetic sensibility, the DJ metaphor also offers a practical framework for reimagining teaching practice. Educators can adapt it by experimenting with how they sequence, pace and connect classroom activities, much like in the DJ sets that follow. In an ethics module, this might mean alternating between structured debate and reflective dialogue to vary intensity and tempo; in a leadership course, layering narrative, discussion, and personal writing to create resonance. Such design choices allow teachers to craft learning moments that are emotionally engaging and ethically attuned.

Empirical research supports the promise of these adaptive, sensory approaches. Studies show that when educators experiment with rhythm, emotion, and multimodality in their teaching, students demonstrate greater reflective capacity, empathy, and sustained moral engagement (Heath & Tynan, 2023; Martikainen et al., 2021). The DJ metaphor, then, becomes not an abstract ideal but a replicable pedagogy for creating adaptive, affective, and relational learning encounters.

The DJ metaphor can represent the educator who does not follow a rigid, technical curriculum, but instead crafts context-sensitive, affective, and embodied teaching experiences. We outline four key aspects which, we argue, anchor the aesthetic learning and teaching spaces an educator acting as “DJ” works with:

- **Volume** represents the intensity or prominence of specific learning experiences. For example, increasing the volume might mean amplifying student voices, emotions, or ethical dilemmas. Solis (2019) refers to the concept of reciprocal teaching and how it requires demonstrating humility by setting aside personal biases and self-importance to invite and remain receptive to the student's views and experiences. Thus, the spirit of the DJ metaphor is collaborative, evocative, and honours student involvement and engagement, recognising that students have the capacity to invent solutions to problems that arise.
- **Tempo** reflects the rhythm or pacing of learning, when to linger on and emphasise and when to accelerate. Here we consider how a DJ generates audience engagement by sensing and responding to the energy of the crowd (e.g., in our case, maintaining student engagement). The teacher must feel the rhythm of the class and adapt accordingly, depending on the students' energy levels, knowledge, and capabilities (Wiley, 2005). Once the educator is in rhythm, in sync, with the class, they can use various approaches to increase or decrease energy levels. A DJ may, in a set, use a 'drop', an abrupt on-time transition between songs, to increase energy, e.g., through surprise or to connect songs with the audience. Likewise, a teacher can create these connections with the students by invoking different pedagogical aids (for example, audio/visual aids, interaction, provocation etc.) at various times to co-create a learning environment.
- **Resonance** echoes the idea of alignment and emotional impact, where a topic or method “lands” meaningfully with students, much like how music resonates with a crowd. We can consider the meaningful connections between the resources the educator chooses to employ. For example, a DJ may achieve this by maintaining the same beat, but switching from one tune to another. In this sense the educator maintains the underlying framework of the task that the student is able to understand and follow the logic of the activity. Some considerations here are the extent of educator's desire to create emotional connections or challenging values/beliefs (Jennings and Petchauer, 2017).

DJ Set 1: The 'Music' of Role Plays: Whose Responsibility is it?

In my ethics and corporate responsibility module, to draw attention to the multiplicity of voices, opinions and perspectives across identity, gender and locations, I use Role-Play in the classroom. I present a case of an accident/media exposé of working conditions - for example, the Rana Plaza Disaster which is regarded as the deadliest accident in the history of the fashion industry (CCC 2013), drawing attention to governance gaps in global supply chains. Students are divided into various stakeholder groups (brands, government, manufacturers, factory workers, etc.) and are required to 'discuss' responsibility. First, students work in their own groups and then convene in a plenary setting as a multi-stakeholder Task Force to determine penalties and action plans.

Each instance in which the role-play is enacted (the DJ set plays out) varies depending on the awareness, interest, time, level of study.

- 'Tempo' is adapted depending on the choice of aesthetics I invoke, ranging from visual images (of the accident) to video testimonials and documentaries to bring into the classroom. This also includes variation in what information is shared at what point (for instance, reports about the causes of accident) and extent, nature and type of provocations used during the discussion.
- 'Resonance' is varied from low to high by varying the extent to which the distance of the case and everyday decisions as consumers are discussed, debated and analysed - for instance, to what extent does the role of students themselves as consumers of fast fashion enables and accentuates the horrific consequences for those engaged in manufacturing the products we consume.
- Volume varies by deciding the duration and nature of discussion and reflection and by varying the length of the plenary discussions as students adopt and embody the various stakeholder positions. The longer the duration of discussion the 'louder' the tensions and dilemmas.

DJ Set 2: Leadership Through the Imaginative Lens

In this second DJ set, I use literature to explore how volume, tempo, and resonance can shape the moral experience of learning. I draw on narratives that foreground moral ambiguity and the emotional weight of leadership decisions, notably the Biblical story of Joseph and Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger*.

In the story of Joseph, the class works at a deliberately slow **tempo**. We read the text closely, line by line, as students practise moral imagination: asking what is meant, why it is said, and what might be felt. The slow pace invites curiosity and empathy before judgment. I then raise the **volume** by splitting the class into mixed groups representing Reuben's and Judah's camps.

Students use the text to justify their positions and respond to opposing interpretations. The classroom becomes a soundscape of competing justifications, where Reuben's ethical restraint meets Judah's calculated pragmatism. **Resonance** emerges in what follows. While Reuben's position holds the moral high ground, it is Judah's pragmatism that ultimately convinces both the brothers and the class. For students, this becomes a powerful lesson in persuasive leadership: the recognition that ethical conviction must be carried by an understanding of audience, context, and affect if it is to move others toward just action in organizations and beyond.

As in a DJ's set, the movement from one text to the next adjusts the mix. I shift from slow moral introspection to the faster, more discordant rhythms of business ethics. This cumulative approach, moving from guided moral analysis to independent ethical reasoning, prepares students for their final paper, where they develop their own argument about ethical leadership through literary case analysis.

In *The White Tiger*, we examine key moments in Balram's ascent from servitude to power through his rapid, first-person confession of murder and reinvention as an entrepreneur. Using these scenes as prompts, students wrestle with whether Balram is a hero, a villain, or both, exploring the moral costs of leadership and connecting questions of freedom, ambition, and responsibility to contemporary challenges in organisational life. As students prepare their final papers, they take on the role of DJs themselves, selecting the tracks that speak most deeply to them. Some amplify questions of identity, egoism, and leadership, while others explore the tempo shifts between ambition and morality. A few pursue the darker frequencies of destructive leadership and business corruption, while others find resonance in themes of nature versus nurture or leadership tactics within the novel. Each paper becomes a unique mix of ideas, shaped by the student's own aesthetic sensibility—what they choose to turn up, slow down, or let reverberate. In this way, the DJ metaphor moves from being a teaching device to becoming a mode of inquiry, inviting students to perform their understanding of leadership as an embodied, interpretive, and ethically charged art.

Conclusion

We hope that the provocation we offer alongside the illustrative examples encourages a turn to embrace the underexplored and underdiscussed emotional and embodied dimensions of learning and opens up spaces for multiple modes of knowledge and knowing. Being in tune with the classroom, embracing aesthetic approaches takes time and makes demands on educators - in the context of the ever pressing demands of neoliberal academia, we need to create more spaces for sharing and reflection with each other. We hope this article is a conversation starter and a step in this direction.

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