The main aim of this paper is to show the mechanisms intrinsic to narrative fiction that explain the pervasiveness, until recently rarely acknowledged, of narrative fiction in organizational life and management education.

Our basic hypothesis is that the key for understanding that pervasiveness is the role of the faculty of imagination in both narrative fiction and organizational action. The central part of the paper examines how narrative fiction is both the result of the faculty of imagination and a way of developing imagination for action, the sort of imagination that, as the last section poses, is specific to management.

Narrative fiction and postmodernism

The very close connection between narrative and postmodernism may not appear to be immediately evident. Narrative, defined by Ricoeur (1984) as “the discourse of a narrator recounting the discourse of the characters,” arises from the natural human need to give meaning to things. Because it allows the constitution of an identity, it is, in fact, the very condition of possibility of individual and social existence (Polkinghorne, 1988).
Postmodernism is the label that our era gives to itself. This very self-labeling may provide us with a clue for understanding the postmodern condition: its ironic attitude of general questioning, and even sometimes of mocking, similar to that of the post-Socratic Hellenistic schools. If modernism was the cultural moment of blind faith in reason, with its two key concepts of optimism and progress, postmodernism not only underscores how far humankind already is from the modern dream, but it even questions whether this dream is “the best of all possible dreams” or not—that is why it defines itself as post-modern.

More specifically, one of the main changes that takes place if we compare modernism and postmodernism has to do with the nature of “discourse” (Cooper and Burrell, 1988). Whereas modernism sought universal, cosmopolitan discourse, postmodernism begins with the recognition of the impossibility of such a discourse and proposes instead a more modest project: to forget about the search for the “grand narrative”—to put it in Lyotard’s terms—and to learn from les petits faits divers, from local narrations such as autobiographies, novels, and tales. The particularity of this new discourse is its ironic mode. Thanks to this irony, which produces a multiplicity of meanings, we are able to reproduce manifold reality, an effect similar to the one caused by humor in general (Fox, 1990).

Postmodernism, then, underlines the nonmonolitic character of reality and therefore tries to capture it with different sorts of narratives, which are sequences of meaning producing small wholes, so to speak. In this way are narrative and postmodernism closely related.

Narrative fiction and the business world

The world of business, economic life, and organizations has been frequently reflected in narrative fiction (Burden and Mock, 1988). Examples may be found in the portraits by Dickens and the French realists of the emerging industrial society, in the accounts by Steinbeck of the darkest sides of the pre-Roosevelt era, or in the glamor of the life-style of successful entrepreneurs and managers depicted in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby and The Last Tycoon. This tradition has had a very recent continuation in Tom Wolfe’s The Bonfire of The Vanities and David Lodge’s Nice Work.
Some popular literary productions, novels as well as autobiographical accounts, many times of a motivational sort, have served as vehicles for informal business education, from Horatio Alger's "rags to riches" stories, to autobiographies, such as Iacocca’s, and personal accounts of life in organizations, such as Lewis’s Liar’s Poker.

Narrative fiction now plays an active role in formal business education in a number of influential business schools that use the case method (cases are a particular type of narrative fiction) as a pedagogical tool. In some cases, business education being carried out in short seminars or intracompany courses explicitly uses narrative written by the participants as a way to prompt processes of "double-loop" learning, that is, those aimed at the very way those participants learn (Burgoyne and Hodgson, 1983; Argyris, 1990). Moreover, one narrative device, metaphors, are considered as the representational form through which people both experience and conceptualize organizational life (Morgan, 1986).

This pervasive presence of narrative fiction in management education has, in recent years, become widely acknowledged. This is due to two main factors: First is the emergence of the concept of "corporate culture," and its emphasis on values and on their embeddedness in organizational symbols, tales, myths, and stories. Moreover, some of the most popularly successful vehicles through which the culture approach to organizations has spread could themselves be considered narratives.

Peters and Waterman’s In Search of Excellence provides an example. Here we can find certain characteristics that are usually found in myths: first, an imperative character, composed of expressions defined more by intention than by content ("Excellence!"); second, a natural, innocent vision of reality that ignores the complexity of situations (the criticisms on the extreme simplicity of the book were quite harsh); third, that the myth "excellence" as a tradition and, at the same time, as a goal is not completely arbitrary or false; fourth, the fact that the primary relationship between "consumers" of the myth (in this case, U.S. managers confused by the early-1980s economic crisis) and the myth itself is established more in terms of usefulness than in terms of truthfulness. Finally, the myth transforms historical personalities into archetypes and makes permanent use of tautological formulas.

A second factor favoring an increasing use of literature in business education has been the acknowledgment of the importance of an ethi-
cultural dimension in business. This has led some management schools to use fiction as a way of teaching moral issues. One of the best-known attempts in this direction is Robert Coles’s course at Harvard, “The Business World: A Social and Moral Inquiry through Fiction” (Coles, 1989).

In the next section we discuss how the imagination works and how its functioning is reflected in narrative fiction.

Narrative fiction and imagination for action

Our main theoretical sources are Aristotle’s Poetics, Kant’s Critique of Judgment and Paul Ricoeur’s Time and Narrative. (All the following quotes from these authors are from these works, unless otherwise indicated.) These three authors share the conviction that both the creation and enjoyment of fiction is an activity that teaches us. This learning is mainly about the human condition and human relations. Since human relations are a basic part of the business world, narrative fiction may, then, address a fundamental part of learning management.

To understand the mechanisms of fiction demands, first of all, that we dismiss the prejudice that fiction is opposed to truth. Not only is fiction not opposed to truth, but it is in fact a way of finding truth. The etymology of the term “fiction” may be clarifying: it comes from the Latin word fictio, which means something made, fabricated. Thus, to know something is to know how it is made. The opposite of fiction would, then, be “fact.”

This may be clearer if we introduce the Aristotelian distinction between historical and poetical truth. In chapter 9 of his Poetics, Aristotle establishes that truth in history refers to facts, to what has happened, whereas poetical truth looks for what may have happened or may happen, according to verisimilitude or necessity. In this regard, Aristotle also stated that poetical truth is superior to historical truth, because it treats what is universal and not what is particular.

A contemporary philosopher of education, Scheffler (1982) also defends the idea that metaphors and fictional works should not be considered as falsity or untruth:

Fiction, though literally referring to nothing, may metaphorically refer to anything ... . Literally fictional works may thus express metaphorical truths, or contain literally fictional terms metaphorically applicable to
things . . . Fiction [aims] to capture mentions, or representations, rather than to denote objects . . . Thus, not only is the threat of meaninglessness eliminated from the literally fictional, but also the general threat of falsehood.

Once the prejudice of fiction as opposed to truth has been removed, it is possible to explain why it provides a special kind of knowledge. The main point is that, by connecting emotion and cognition, they expand our experience of reality, enabling us to grasp new relations among things, and to enrich our feeling as well as our understanding. [p. 283]

Fiction and its devices, such as metaphors, belong to what Kant, in his *Critique of Judgement*, called aesthetic ideas:

In a word, the aesthetic idea is a representation of the imagination, annexed to a given concept, with which, in the free employment of imagination, such a multiplicity of partial representations are bound up, that no expression indicating a definite concept can be found for it. [p. 179]

Regarding creative imagination, Kant wrote:

In its aesthetic function, imagination is free to furnish of its own accord, over and above that agreement with the concept, a wealth of undeveloped material for the understanding, to which the latter paid no regard in its concept, but which it can make use of not so much objectively for cognition, as subjectively for quickening the cognitive faculties, and hence also indirectly for cognitions. [p. 179]

Kant’s comments on imagination may be complemented by some contemporary arguments by Vernon Howard (1982), who outlines the following functions of imagination: (1) imagination connects ends and means, presenting both in a continuum, allowing us to answer the question: Why am I doing this?; (2) it is an activity of inquiry, not of mere repetition, that makes us capable of learning from our mistakes; and (3) it supposes the assimilation of what is done and a growth of personal standards. In a word, imagination permits us “to have an experience” in Dewey’s sense: the ability to present before one’s eyes past and future events in such a way that they are seen as recollection and anticipation of one main event. Imagination is, then, as important in life as it is in art.

In *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur (1984, 1986, 1988) conceives of narrative as a synthesis of the heterogeneous, which is possible thanks
to the operation of the productive imagination. This synthesis of the heterogeneity proper to narrative is what Ricœur calls the “configura-
tional act”:

It will be recalled that I compared the “grasping together” characteristic of the configurational act to judgement as understood by Kant. Remaining in a Kantian vein, we ought not to hesitate in comparing the production of the configurational act to the work of the productive imagination. This latter must be understood not as a psychologizing faculty but as a transcendental one. The productive imagination is not only rule-governed, it constitutes the matrix of rules. The productive imagination fundamentally has a synthetic function. It connects understanding and intuition by engendering syntheses that are intellectual and intuitive at the same time. Emplotment, too, engenders a mixed intelligibility between what has been called the point, theme or thought of a story, and the intuitive presentation of circumstances, characters, episodes, and changes of fortune that make up the denouement. In this way we may speak of a schematism of the narrative function. [Ricœur, 1984, p. 68]

Several points emerge from Ricœur’s observation. The unity that narrative carries out is made possible by the dynamics of the emplot-
ment (in using the term “emplotment,” and not “plot,” Ricœur stresses that we are speaking of an operation and not of a structure). The dynamics of emplotment is the composition of facts, the creation of a configuration out of a mere succession, and constitutes the first condition of possibility of both history and fiction. By the mediation of the fabula (as Aristotle called the plot), all the episodes of a narration converge and acquire meaning.

Ricœur says that the plot or configurational act belongs to what Kant called reflective judgment. Kant distinguishes between the determinant judgment, which invests itself in the objectivity it produces, and the reflective judgment, which is able to turn upon itself as its own object, and examine the very way it operates. In this sense, Ricœur proposes to consider narrative forms as a special kind of reflective judgment.

To understand the value of the configurational act that constitutes narrative, Ricœur uses a three-stage process he calls mimesis: prefiguration, configuration, and refiguration. He attempts to explain how passage through the second stage, configuration, denotes an enrichment of our experience. At the beginning, there is the mute experience
of life—*in-significant* in the literal sense: without meaning as yet—but shared by every human being; this stage may be called prefiguration, the very stream of life. Any novel shapes this experience, which is the moment of configuration or acquisition of meaning, and is given by an author in the work he or she creates for a reader. The moment of refiguration takes place when the latter receives it, developing a new grasp of reality that may change his or her acting.

The key point is that art makes a unity of diversity, not only because of its own unity—to be *one* painting, *one* novel, *one* song—but also because it is a single unit capable of being shared by a multiplicity of human beings (the intersubjective domain opened by aesthetic works and made possible by what Kant defined as the universal communica-
bility of art) and involves us in our entirety, that is, emotionally, practi-
cally, and intellectually. As a summary of Ricœur’s ideas, see figure I.

Above we have dealt with the main condition of possibility of the narrative function: the *fabula* or composition of facts and how it should be located in a general schema that stresses real life as the origin as well as the end of art.

An example of this condition of the possibility of narrative is Henry James’s tale *The Figure in the Carpet*. This tale is interesting precisely because it narrates the importance of looking for the *fabula* of a novel and also because its plot can be seen as an allegory of life. The main character of *The Figure in the Carpet*, a young literary critic, writes an article about the novel *The Middle*, by Hugh Vereker, a very well known novelist. At a party, the author tells the critic that, although his article is very intelligent, he has missed the main point of his novel. The critic then becomes obsessed with the idea of knowing the real meaning of Vereker’s book. His search is referred to as the ability to see the figure in the carpet: “It was something, I guessed, in the primal plan, something like a complex figure in a Persian carpet.” The entire narration illustrates his inability to find it. And the reader’s quest for James’s “figure in the carpet” parallels that of the critic within the story. In his revealing final words, the narrator warns us that we are all “victims of unappeased desire”: our way of dealing with reality is to try to make sense of what we see, that is, to look for the figure in the carpet.

In fact, the tale, in discussing the goals of literary criticism, is also discussing the goals of life: to see, through the chaos, an order. We can engage, then, in the following word game: The figure in the carpet
Figure 1.

(metaphor) of “The figure in the carpet” (tale) is that we always look for “a figure in the carpet” (meaning) in art as well as in life. This is a natural human tendency, one that usually is satisfied by literary and other artistic works, or, as is the case with our tale, at least these works show that that we try to satisfy this tendency. James’s tale is a very nice example of how a narration reflects on itself. The main metaphor of the tale, which is its title, already contains the signification of the whole tale, which is to be able to see, to understand, to feel what it is like. But the narration adds something very important: it makes us literally invest time in order to gain a profit—learning.

There is a second condition of possibility of narrative fiction: the fictionalization of the author and the reader. In the process of writing
and reading, both, author and reader become others, able to see through different eyes. This makes possible a communication in which the interlocutors occupy a position different from the ordinary one. Whereas the first condition of possibility, the *fabula* or plot, establishes the principle of composition, this second condition of possibility establishes the principle of aesthetic communication.

Regarding the fictionalization of the author and the reader (the second condition of possibility specific to narrative fiction), we can take as an example a tale by Jorge Luis Borges: *La Forma de la Espada* (The Form of the Sword). In this tale, a man explains the origin of a wound he has on his face. He relates how he protected another man, John Vincent Moon, who later betrayed him. At the end of his narration, the speaker reveals that the person he has been talking about is himself—he is the traitor. Before the end of the tale a paragraph gives away the clue of this ending: “What one man does is something done, in some measure, by all men... Perhaps Schopenhauer is right: I am all men, any man is all men.” In fact, what the narrator of this tale does is what any author does: he is capable of explaining something because he is putting himself in the position of a third person (any man), and, in so doing, the author is inviting his listener to do the same thing. This reveals the connection between fiction and ethics: to act morally is to act in such a way that one is able to occupy the position of others, to have a feeling of belonging to the human community, to be a *we*, not an *I*. This tale illustrates very well the categorical imperative of Kant’s ethics: Act in such a way that your behavior could be a universal pattern.

In sum, the configurational act is a kind of reflective judgment with a capacity for distancing itself from its own production and of splitting itself in two. So, now we can understand Ricoeur’s definition of narrative fiction: “the discourse of a narrator recounting the discourse of the characters” (1986, p. 88). And now we can also understand how these conditions of possibility of narrative fiction explain the two main categories with which narrative fiction plays: narrative voice and point of view.

The narrative voice is the deep voice of a novel. This voice is not that of the real author but a superior creation, which, after Booth (1961), is also usually called “the implied author.” It is the fictive projection of the real author in the text, the result of all the voices (narrator or narrators and characters) included in it. Thus, narrative
voice is related to a problem of communication and, following Ricœur, may be defined as “the silent speech that presents the world of the text to the reader (1986, p. 99). To consider narrative voice is to answer the question: “Who is speaking here?” On the other hand, this point of view answers the question: “From where do we see what we see?” and responds to a problem of composition. Ricœur defines it as “the invitation addressed to readers to direct their gaze in the same direction as the author or the characters” (1986, p. 99).

As an example of the power of playing with the narrative voice, let us discuss La Muerte de Artemio Cruz (The Death of Artemio Cruz) by Carlos Fuentes. This novel, which narrates the life of a Mexican businessman, uses three narrative voices. One of them is a first person (an “I”) and follows the logic of a first-person novel, whose main characteristic is limited knowledge. Another voice is a second person (a “you”) which is very unusual in narratives. And the third one is a third person (a “he”) that follows the logic of a third-person narrative, that is, omniscience. Each episode is narrated according to these three voices in the following order: first, the third person; second, the first person; and finally, the second person, as if the intention were to go from the most external to the most internal spheres, from facts to feelings and motivations. These first-, second-, and third-person narrators cannot be considered in isolation because each is intimately bound up with the other two. Each of them, though, serves a different purpose.

The first person presents the events as they are consciously lived by the person, that is, from within, the so-called “stream of consciousness,” and would represent the psychoanalytical “I.” The second person enters as soon as the first person loses consciousness; it narrates at the same time from within and from without because it is at the same time presenting the feelings of the protagonist and judging them. Thus, using psychoanalytical terms, it would represent both the “id” (the voice of the unconscious mind, of instincts) and the “superego” (the moral consciousness). Finally, the third person follows the omniscient logic of a third-person novel, presenting the events in chronological order. This complex structure is very powerful for conveying the message that within a person there is always a kind of dialog or struggle. In particular, the use of the second person narrator, who usually employs the future tense to narrate the past, is a good device to show the functioning of moral thinking.
A second example of the possibilities brought by the point of view may be found in the four novels of Lawrence Durrell’s *Alexandria Quartet: Justine, Balthazar, Mountolive, and Clea*. Each novel is narrated by a different character, from his or her point of view. Thus, the reader is confronted with four different versions of the same events. In this way, the author presents us with the complexity of life, and shows the differences in perception, motivation, and action of all the characters.

An outstanding use of the technique of the “narrative voice” is by Gabarro (1975), author of one of the best-selling cases of the Harvard Business School (*Peter Olafson/William Jurgens*). A series of events is presented successively—from the point of view of two different characters. Since the case containing the point of view of the second protagonist, quite different from the first one, is only handed out at the end of the discussion, the purpose of the exercise usually becomes quite obvious to the audience (who, although aware that the first version is subjective, usually identify with it, taking it as authoritative)—the point being the difficulty of assessing poorly structured situations, so frequent in organizational life, and the need to imagine the pressures and interests that other persons have, which strongly influence their perspective on a given situation and judgment of persons.

Once we have established the two main conditions of possibility of narrative fiction—namely, the *fabula* and the fictionalization of the author and the reader, and its main categories, namely, narrative voice and point of view—it is important to stress two ideas. The first is that, as Ricœur has sustained, “a text does not become a work without the interaction between the text and the reader” (1984, p.76). The second idea, closely related to the previous one and anticipated in the discussion on Borges’s tale, is that any narration allows, in fact demands, different readings, and that it cannot be reduced to any particular reading. In discussing our interpretation with others, we discover other ways of understanding it. The reading experience has been the center of attention of literary critics in recent years and the contributions of two critics of the so-called School of Constanze deserve special mention.

Iser (1978) proposes that a literary work should be considered as having one artistic pole and one aesthetic pole. The artistic pole is the author’s text and the aesthetic one is what the reader does with the text. Any work must, then, be located between these two points. This virtual position results in its actualization being the result of an interaction
between the author and the reader. The reader Iser is talking about is the implied reader, which is a transcendental model that allows us to explain how the text of narrative fiction produces an effect and acquires a meaning: "The implied reader . . . [is] a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily defining him . . . [it] designates a network of response-inviting structures, which impel the reader to grasp the text" (p. 34). Finally, Iser shows that what the text offers is schemes to guide the reader's imagination and proposes to consider the notion of the "traveler's point of view" which explains the reader's attitude to the literary object during the reading process.

Jauss (1980) maintains that three stages may be considered in the reading experience. Poiesis refers to the joy produced by the poetic savoir faire of the artist; this joy is experienced by both the artist and the reader, because the act of reading may also be seen as correlative to the act that has created the work. Aisthesis represents the moment of receptivity, thanks to which the reader is liberated from his daily life. Finally, catharsis, which refers to the Aristotelian notion and corresponds to what Ricoeur called refiguration, would be the moment in which the reader is freed to make new evaluations of reality. Catharsis has a moral effect because it allows us to distance ourselves from our own affects; it has to be understood in the two senses that the Greek word allows, as clarification and purification. Thanks to this catharsis, we can say that a literary work teaches us.

Another tale by Borges, entitled Pierre Menard, autor del Quijote (Pierre Menard, author of Don Quixote), illustrates some of the theoretical questions posed by Iser and Jauss in their studies of the reading experience. Pierre Menard is a twentieth-century writer who is trying to write Don Quixote again: "He did not want to compose another Don Quixote—which would be easy—but the Don Quixote." After great efforts, he writes chapters 9 and 13 and a fragment of chapter 22. Although these pieces coincide exactly with the original Quixote, they are a new creation, because they have been written by a different author in a different time, and because they are going to be read by new readers. That is why, when Pierre Menard re-writes the Quixote, his is not the same narration as that of Cervantes. So the paradox of this text, which is at the same time identical and different, points to the notion that the creativity of a text is not only the author's making, but also the reader's: the reader is the co-creator of any text because he or she is always giving new meanings to it, depending on his or her new histori-
This idea is also implied in a Borges poem, *La Dicha* (Enjoyment): “... The books of the library have no characters, these arise as I open them ...” (p. 43).

This tale points toward one of the main reasons for trying to relate fiction and education. Fiction, by its very nature, feeds the most genuine human attitude: the dialog. This dialog is first between the reader and the text and then between the reader and other readers. In sharing our reading of a text, we teach and learn from others; we feel as if we are part of the human community.

A good example is Henry James's tale *The Middle Years*, in which the main character, the old writer Dencombe, is a kind of alter ego of Henry James himself. Dencombe desires an extension of his life to be able to demonstrate all he has learned in his life so far; he thinks that if he could begin again, with the benefit of all he has learned in one life, he might be able to show in another all he is capable of. His meeting with a young doctor, one of his admirers, makes him realize that in fact “what he has done is that of which he is capable.” So the young doctor tells him: “What people ‘could have done’ is mainly what they have in fact done.” And he adds: “The second chance has been the public’s—the chance to find the point of view, to pick up the pearl!” (Here we find again the idea of the act of reading as the essence of literature, and the moment of the realization of the potential inventiveness of a text: in the minds of others the work lives other possibilities). At the end of the tale, Dencombe tells Doctor Hugh: “Not my glory—what there is of it! It is glory to have been tested, to have had our little quality and cast our little spell. The thing is to have somebody care.” And he adds: “A second chance—that's the delusion. There never was to be but one. We work in the dark—we do what we can—we give what we have. Our doubt is our passion, and our passion is our task. The rest is the madness of art” (p. 258).

Working alone in the dark is genuinely a figure for the imagination as James understood it. The final words of the narrator are very telling because they can be read on two levels: as the recognition on the part of the narrator of the truth discovered by Dencombe and as a kind of internal reflection on what the story has accomplished: “Poor Dencombe was barely audible, but he had marked with the words the virtual end of his first and only chance.” Here, again, the task of the artist may also serve as an allegory for life: we only live once, and the only perfection we can achieve is to do something and to be able to
learn from our mistakes. In fact, at one point Doctor Hugh tells Dencombe that the real reason for his admiration is that he is able to learn from his mistakes: "'I prefer your flowers then to other people's successes,' said gallant Doctor Hugh. 'It's for your mistakes I admire you.'" And also: "'I want to be like you—I want to learn by mistakes!'" This convergence of work and life represents the Greek idea of *areté* (virtue or excellence), in the sense that the goodness of the thing done shows the goodness of the doer (in fact, this sense has survived in the Italian word *virtuoso*, which is usually applied to the best practitioners of any art). In this way, what James states about art serves to help understand life: the important thing is to act, to give something (the best one can do) to others. So, at the end, the man and the artist rejoin each other in the search for goodness (it is in the very effort of carrying out a "remembrance of things past" that we attain a "time regained").

To sum up the preceding ideas it could be said that narrative fiction is a way of knowledge that is especially useful for connecting us to the human community to which we belong. It allows us "to have an experience," to use Dewey's expression, which, though fictional, is no less meaningful and truthful.

**Imagination for action and management**

At the beginning of the paper, we stated that narrative fiction was already widely present in management education, both formally and informally. We hypothesized that imagination, playing a critical role in both fiction and management action, constitutes the linkage between both activities. The previous section detailed the mechanisms intrinsic to narrative fiction that explain it both as a result and as a learning tool of imagination for action. This section briefly considers the reasons, based on the epistemological status of business knowledge, for the central role of imagination in management activities and, consequently, in management education.

People in organizational life need to interpret it in a way that allows them to fit their experience to their visions of human existence (Cohen and March, 1986), need to develop models for action instead of mere models of action (Geertz, 1973). This need is augmented by the insufficiency of formal knowledge, mostly based on academic disciplines, which is usually transmitted through institutions of business education.
Managerial decision making and action require the use of several types of knowledge because of the extreme complexity of managerial tasks, which Whitley (1989) characterizes as: “(1) highly interdependent, contextual and systemic; (2) relatively understandstandardized; (3) changeable and developing; (4) combining both the maintenance of administrative structures and their change; and (5) rarely generating visible and separate outputs which can be directly connected to individual inputs.” Since our current management theories are not as complex, dynamic, “changeable,” and “chaotic” as the organizational world they refer to (Stevenson and Harmeling, 1990), standard formal theories need to be complemented by practitioners, in their decisions and actions, with other kinds of informal, nonacademic, knowledge.

One may propose, then, that the knowledge employed by organizational actors has to be conceived of as a “package” containing a mixture of several components. Among these would be: (1) technical or instrumental knowledge (for instance, financial techniques); (2) decision-making habits and intuitions (Simon and Prietula, 1989); (3) mundane knowledge, What They Don’t Teach You at the Harvard Business School; to use the title of a best-selling book (MacCormack, 1984); (4) socially “embedded” knowledge, some of it of a “passive” sort, channeled through strong and weak ties (Granoveter, 1973), which, for example, provides the information and resources required for the pursuit of business opportunities; and (5) valuative elements.

These components participate in managerial decision making and action in varying proportions and, as in the case of ideologies, they do not fit together in ordered patterns, but rather more like a bricolage (Bourricaud, 1980), with none of the ingredients being sufficient to account for all the contents of the decisions taken, actions carried out, and their results (Hackman, 1985).

Narrative fiction serves partially to satisfy the demand for some of these elements of nonformal knowledge and for learning one of the functions that Cohen and March (1986) have posed as essential to administration: symbolic maintenance. Imagination for action plays a key role in these elements of nonformal knowledge. Their lack of standardization requires the ability to develop plots in which means and ends are numerous and flexible, in which there is a potential for different stories, that is, a high component of ambiguity, in which the subject’s actions create reality (for instance, entrepreneurs), and, at the same time, create herself or himself, and so on—that is the sort of
mental imagery that, as the previous section tried to show, is very specific to narrative fiction.

This demand for elements of nonformal knowledge has intensified in recent years because of a phenomenon that in management parallels the demise of modernism in the domain of general social discourses: the fall of the grand narrative of managerial roles, of the grandiose Fayolian notion of managerial activities (planning, budgeting, implementing, and controlling), and, consequently, of the status of academic knowledge as the dominant way to acquire managerial skills. Mintzberg's (1973) critique of managerial tasks à la Fayol has brought us a notion of managerial activities which are less universal and reproducible and more particular and idiosyncratic, less abstract and more personal. And, above all, more skeptical—and which text is more skeptical, and ironic, that is, postmodern, than Lewis's *Liar’s Poker*?

This devaluation of the executive's figure and role explains the success of entrepreneurship in the 1980s. It brings sentiments and passions into the organizational sphere, reversing a process of "disenchantment of the managerial world," to borrow Weber's expression. In a way, it can be said that entrepreneurship represents the postmodernist phase in business, a new "charming" phase, as suggested by its emphasis on creativity, its relentless pursuit of opportunities (Stevenson, 1983), and its lack of systemic framework of reference, its emphasis on *petit faits divers*, as posed by Weber (1978) who stated that superior to bureaucracy in the knowledge of techniques and facts is only the entrepreneur, within his own sphere of interest, and by Kilby (1971, p. 7): "[entrepreneurs have] 'a certain narrowness which seizes the immediate change and nothing else.' " It is not casual, then, that entrepreneurial stories, accounts, tales, myths, and so on, which are based on narrative mechanisms, have been one of the main media through which the entrepreneurship wave spread (Binner, 1990).

The above-mentioned devaluation of the figure of the manager as executor of a series of standardized operations, and the correlative reevaluation of the personal characteristics of organizational actors have also a lot to do with the success of businessmen's biographies and autobiographies. The case of autobiographies, historical or fictional, is very interesting because, on the one hand, it shows how important it is to have a *fabula* (that is, a crucial event or turning point from which all the episodes that are going to be narrated are made intelligible), and, on the other hand, because it deepens the idea of the fictionalization of the author—and few
examples are as good and illustrative as Lee Iacocca’s (1986) best-selling autobiography. In speaking about autobiography, we are in fact talking of a construction of the self (it may again be recalled that fictio implies construction), in which, by playing with past events and present signification, the author is able to transcend him or herself.

No wonder, then, that those authors who place learning processes in the center of their theories and organizational interventions make an important use of small autobiographies. For instance, one of the important steps in Argyris’s consulting is to make managers write stories of moments in which incidents took place and learning could not occur out of them (Argyris, 1990). Moreover, Argyris asks his clients to write two stories, one in which an objective narrator describes what took place and what people said, and a second one in which the narrator describes his thoughts about the events. That is, Argyris asks their clients to take the decisions and carry the actions characteristic of narrators: to decide a fabula (composition of facts) that will give unity or finality to the diversity of facts, and also to answer, in two different ways, the questions that all narrators have to face: point of view (who is going to see and talk) and narrative voice (from where is one going to speak?). What is special about autobiography and about this sort of exercise is that they directly transform the author into both writer and reader of his or her own life, and in so doing it allows him or her to learn from his or her own experiences.

The aim of this paper has not been to detail techniques for the classroom use of narrative fiction but rather to explain the features of narrative fiction that make it so apt for developing imagination for action. If, as posed in the paragraphs above, narrative fiction at least partially satisfies the demand for a nonstandardized business knowledge, one closer to wisdom than to routinized activities, it would be nonsense to propose techniques for the use of narrative fiction in management learning. Our hope has been, rather, to provide arguments from literary studies that legitimate the use of narrative fiction in business education.

References


James, H. “The Figure in the Carpet” and Other Stories. [Includes “The Middle Years”]. London: Penguin, 1986.


Copyright of International Studies of Management & Organization is the property of M.E. Sharpe Inc.. The copyright in an individual article may be maintained by the author in certain cases. Content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.