

Rooms of Wonder: A Post-Seminar Conversation about Art and Science

Matilda Dahl ^a, Carolina Frände ^b, Maria Grafström ^c and Anna Jonsson ^d

^a *Department of Business Studies, Campus Gotland, Uppsala University, Sweden*

^b *Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, Sweden*

^c *Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, and Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research, Stockholm University and Stockholm School of Economics, Sweden*

^d *Stockholm Business School, Stockholm University, Sweden*

Sometimes it happens that we find ourselves in a room where a conversation takes place that stays with us. We sense a spark, or what Gaston Bachelard would call a “*poetic moment*” – a moment of rupture, of intensity. Through poetry, we can experience these moments, that make us stop and wonder – moments that open our imagination to think anew (Bachelard, 2013).

Can there also be moments that make us to reimagine what research can be, even in a mundane classroom at a business school? A university classroom is maybe not what we would recall as a small, intimate poetic space in itself, very far from being a cozy cupboard, drawer, or seashell (Bachelard, 2014). But the space becomes what we fill it with, and at certain moments, the act of being together – truly engaging in conversations – in the (physical) room of the seminar, we sense it... Moments of ‘aha’s’. Of rupture. Of intuition. Of sense of belonging. Of sharing. Poetic moments in academia?

We, a group of artists and scientists, met in a panel, in a classroom at Linnaeus University in Kalmar during the yearly conference on business administration, organized by The Swedish Academy of Business and Management (‘FEKIS’, in Swedish) in the fall of 2025.

How to recall it? How to share it? How to make you, the reader of this text, feel it? It cannot be created again; it was back there, back then. Instead of trying to recall and re-iterate what happened in the room, we started a conversation about why we need to create these rooms, rooms where art and science meet. Rooms where artists and scientists meet.

This text written in form of a dialogue that departs from such a moment, in a seminar where the authors of the text engaged in a conversation about art and science. Who is speaking in the dialogue?

Matilda Dahl teaches sustainability in an international master's programme at Uppsala University Campus Gotland, and enjoys working with artists and crafting poetic texts in her classrooms and research. She inquires into how we can think differently about what a successful business is and could become, and is curious about how poetry and art can inform research methods. Over the past two decades, she has had conversations about life in academia with her dear friend (the only researcher who is still in academia from a big group of young women getting to know each other as PhD students in the early 2000s), her name is:

Maria Grafström and she is teaching organizational courses at Stockholm University and works at the Stockholm Centre for Organizational Research (SCORE). Maria is interested in how to write differently, inspired by other genres, in order to reach out to society with research results and make students and citizens engage and care. For instance, Maria has engaged in projects in which a comic artist translates research into comics and has written a textbook in organization theory together with a novelist – collaborations that she did together with:

Anna Jonsson, who is passionate about creating new spaces for collaboration between art, science, and society. She regularly initiates seminars and publications with the aim of research to reach out, but also for learning from and about other actors in society. In line with this, she has explored, with Maria and a photographer, how collaboration between academia and practice can take shape and be organized. Anna also works at Stockholm University, and is eager to explore additional art forms as a method for communicating science, perhaps together with:

Carolina Frände, who is a last-year doctoral student in business administration. She has been working as a professional theatre director for 25 years. Her thesis is a critical study of artistic leadership in the Swedish theatre industry. In her work, she develops a new methodology where the participants are invited to play a crafted board game together in order for anecdotes about the artistic leadership role to be told and embodied in the room.

Matilda: Maria and I decided that we would attend the FEKIS conference in Kalmar, as a way to get together and get time to talk about art and science, to keep the spark alive...you know that spark that makes you keep the energy to write, read, inquire?

Nowadays, it has become so important to me to choose rooms and choose people that I know can give me energy and inspiration. To think together. About the role of art and poetry for research. Eventually, I got an email from Anna and Maria about the seminar they had in mind...They invited Carolina, who is a doctoral student in business administration but also a theatre director. Maria, how come we ended up having that inspiring seminar in Kalmar, where we – once again! – realized there was so much in common between practicing art and practicing science?

Maria: I agree, it really did turn into an inspiring conversation! Together with Anna, I have been exploring what can happen when we, as researchers, collaborate with artists. The talk we had with all of you in Kalmar was a way to continue these ongoing discussions – we could not think of any better way to do it than with other scholars who want to or have experience of working with art and science! As research scholars, we are trained in how to create ‘scientific rigour’ – we are to build on extant knowledge and research, to structure, to see patterns. Yet, the work of inquiring and exploring asks something else from us, right? To somehow be sensitive to everything we do not know about, to be curious, and to wonder. To keep reminding ourselves that we actually do not know what questions to ask beforehand. And this, I think, art – in any form – can help with. By crossing between art and science, we can bring to light aspects that we tend to take for granted – things that have become almost invisible in our own practice. Or sometimes the opposite: things we are not really able to see when we are doing research work. That is also something you and I have talked and reflected upon, Anna (e.g. Grafström & Jonsson 2018; 2020), and one of the reasons we have tried to create these kinds of ‘meetings’ together, right?

Anna: Yes, exactly! The seminar served as a reminder of the importance of *meeting* – in the sense of an encounter and an active engagement, something more than just ‘a meeting.’ It also reminds me of the great value in reflecting on the meeting between art and science, namely that

new ideas are born when we learn from and about each other. It opens up new perspectives and, at the same time, reminds me of the importance of being able to shift perspectives, which I feel is increasingly necessary in order to understand our contemporary world. The conversation became an example of – perhaps one might even call it a form of *embodiment* – what happens when we reason and reflect about each other’s perspectives and experiences together: a form of knowledge creation (or *kunskapande*, as I believe is a better word in Swedish). In a short essay on collaboration, with the subheading “*the art of knowing and creating together*” (Jonsson, 2020), I used a reference to Kjersti Bale (2010) who refers to Roland Barthes’ concept *noema* to describe how something is added to a photo, or a sculpture, when it is looked at. In order to see the full picture, we have to move our body – and take another perspective. When we do so, we will also get a better understanding of the skills and qualities of other persons and perspectives. An active act in itself. This, about taking different perspectives, also became very clear when Carolina shared her experiences of moving between the theatre and academia, and how you see both the theatre and academia with slightly different eyes. You described it so well yourself, so perhaps you could say something about that, Carolina?

Carolina: Yes, exactly, art—no matter which form one practices—is an explorative act. In my artistic field, which is the theatre, talking in terms of ‘craft’—the practices and the skill with which one approaches them—has come to be seen as somewhat “unartistic” (Goebbels, 2013). During my time as a doctoral student, I have increasingly come to think of research as a practice or a craft (Cunliffe, 2010; Bell & Willmott, 2019; Brown, 2020). I arrived at SBS with the perception that research was mainly a headache, less of a bodily act. During my first year as a doctoral student, I carefully kept my theatre practice separate from the new craft, research. Above all, I thought that what I do artistically in the theatre could not possibly contribute to my research. Eventually, however, a few experiences changed that mindset. Such stories are always reconstructed in hindsight, embedded in narratives driven - both artistically and scientifically - by the desire that an experience of mine could be understood by or even meaningful also for someone else. The experiences I am referring to are, of course, not singular moments of enlightenment, but the result of a long and mostly unconscious ‘going-on’ of thoughts, that surfaces at a certain point in time – when reading a book, engaging in a seminar or just talking to someone over lunch at campus, that is, at a microlevel in everyday-researcher-work life. By the way, one of the first books I read in my doctoral studies inspired me a lot, *Om undran inför samhället* by the Swedish sociologist Johan Asplund (1970)...

Matilda: (gets excited and interrupts). Oh yes, that was such a poetic moment for me in Kalmar, when suddenly several of us in the room talked about and referred to what Johan Asplund, a scholar who has in a very convincing way argued that the lines we draw between art and science are not really helpful. He himself shows that maybe these boundaries are stopping us from doing really interesting science, to think anew. For me, this scholar (who refused to be photographed and refused to be translated!) has been an immensely important inspiration for so many years: making me want to make research and teaching into a fun, witty, detective story-alike journey. When I succeed, I do enjoy my job as a researcher and teacher so much... but the various systems we are caught in often stop me and exhaust me. I need art to keep alive in academia somehow, without using art and poetry, I guess my soul and thinking spirit would starve to death somehow.

Mathias (review editor of this text) imagined by Matilda: But Matilda, I asked you in a review comment to write something about Asplund, and give some references, could you please do that now?

Matilda: Yes, sorry, I got carried away...Amazing is not, when the words just keep on flowing? It started off my Asplund journey with reading his small yellow book (Asplund, 1970) as a compulsory literature on the undergraduate level at the Stockholm School of Economics. It was

actually one of the very few books during my whole four-year education in business administration that made a lasting impression on me, that I actually remember, and also read again. And again. And again. And then I introduced it as compulsory literature at the undergraduate level at the university where I teach now. Why did that small yellow book go through the buzz? Well, first it is small (all other books were very thick). Second, it did not give any definite answers and contained quite weird drawings. Third, it made me wonder what it was actually about. I did understand it was about the importance of actually wondering, of being curious. And the book made me curious. I was not the only one. 50 years later, a group of scholars in business administration wrote an anthology as a celebration of this very book of Johan Asplund, re-using the title *Om undran inför samhället* (since Asplund did not want to be translated, I refrain from doing it) to the title *Om undran inför företagsekonomi* (Alvehus & Ericsson, 2020). We realised that many of us had been exposed to that yellow little book during our studies 20 or so years ago and that it had all affected us deeply. One common ground we all had was the importance of crossing the border between art and science, and that we had been in different ways, taking art as inspiration in our scientific work for decades after. For me, it has meant developing methods inspired by poetics (Helin et al., 2020) as well as searching for new ways to approach business and business problems in classrooms where we try to teach sustainability (Dahl et al., 2021). If we need to develop new questions and new answers - in a world that cannot continue operating according to industrial high energy consumption, eternal growth models - we also need to approach our research ‘objects’ in new ways, right? So, Asplund has also been an inspiration in my writing, to try to use fewer words, to try to make the reader wonder and care about other things than “economic growth” (Asplund, 1991; Dahl, 2020). And these readings have made me think about philosophy of science on a deeper but also more fun (!) way (Asplund, 2003). But sorry, Carolina, I really got so excited by this, tell me what this reading did to you?

Carolina: When I read about “aspect-seeing”, and I almost automatically imagined Asplund (1970) —based on the pictures I had seen—moving like in a choreography around whatever phenomenon he was interested in, exploring it from every possible angle, not only looking but also feeling, smelling, listening. This actually connects to the embodiment you were talking about Anna... Suddenly, he got an impulse, maybe he sensed something, and moved away from the object—to a different spot in the room where he continued his aspect-practice but now from a distance. Returning from his association, he did so with even more aspects to explore. It was the first time I read a text that plain and simple, in a concrete way, described what I do - what is actually going on in my work - as a director in the theatre. I still think this way: both artistic and scientific work search for their form, stretch out in time and space to try, twist, and turn. That is why, over time, I have come to regard my doctoral education as a kind of craft education—a period during which I am supposed to learn a practice and equip myself with a set of tools so that I can also express myself in the form that is research.

Maria: Hearing about the links between theatre and research might help us to better put words on how we actually see things and explore - and maybe also to ask what we do not do? And why not? Of course, we talk about methods, but this is more about stepping back and questioning the frameworks we work within. So, we need your perspectives from the theatre world in our field. But it cannot always have been easy? What helped you in realizing the potential of your previous field of knowledge to feed into academia and in particular business administration?

Carolina: Yes, it has been a journey... The second experience that made me realize I actually ‘knew’ something that might be relevant for my research took place during a doctoral course at Hanaholmen. The topic was “*an encounter between theatre practice and business administration*”. No such course had ever been given before, so it was certainly a strange coincidence that it

happened during the short period that is my years as a doctoral student. In one session, everyone—both senior researchers and doctoral students—was given the assignment to enact a short dialogue, just a few lines on a page, with no further instructions. I chose to be an observer. As long as I just sat and watched, the exercise had little effect on me. But when two participants who felt stuck asked if I would like to help them, something happened. I asked a few questions about how they imagined the scene in which the lines were spoken and then suggested a setup where one of them would enter through a door behind the other, who was seated in a chair. In the moment they tried what I suggested, everything changed—all of a sudden there was a story, the scene sparked thoughts and curiosity in them and in the audience. It made me wonder if perhaps my experience as a director could, in fact, be useful also in research. One could say that the methodological contribution in my thesis – a board game I have developed as a tool for generating field data – in a way is an academic director’s tool. The game frames what, why, where, and how participants in my field studies go about contributing to research.

Matilda: For me, it is so obvious that art and academia can enrich one another; I would even think that most interesting things would happen when we cross between them. But I guess academia often has a view of art as very different from academic work, and also, I guess we have a different view of art compared to artists, right?

Carolina: Yes, I have often heard academics talk about ‘the artistic’ as magic, as something fantastic that just happens, a trick. But art is not magic—it is a craft, just as science and research are. But if art has elements of magic, then science surely does too. What do you think about this—the magical in ‘the artistic’ and ‘the scientific’?

Maria: This is also so interesting! As our work is to explore – trying to understand something by describing it, viewing it from different angles, with various theoretical glasses on – and, as you put it, Carolina, in this respect, it is very much a craft. Starting as a researcher, I knew I really liked writing, to make sense of something by using words, to structure and organize, and to see patterns, but I find myself struggling with what can be described as being creative – to paint the text with some colour, to stretch boundaries, and to find new and illustrative ways to tell about, and thus understand, phenomena. From this perspective, science, however, suited me rather well – I realised that most often I could get around with following “rules” in my writing, in terms of theory, method, and how to structure an analysis. This gave me structure, and maybe also confidence, to write. But then, over time, I found myself getting stuck, knowing almost beforehand what to write – at least how to write, how to present the analysis. This made me start reading and thinking, and, most importantly, try to practice writing in different ways.

Matilda: How did you do that?

Maria: Over time, when I explored writing in ways other than how I was originally ‘taught’, I think that was when writing really became my most valuable ‘analytical resource’. It became a way for me to challenge and develop not only how I write research, but how I *do* research, as writing is researching – it is a “method of inquiry” (Richardson 2000). With the ambition to move from writing as “*a mode of telling*” to a “*mode of ‘knowing’*”, I try to remind myself of why I write and keep coming back to the way Richardson (2000, p. 924) puts it: “*I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it*”. In one way, it is as simple as that – but at the same time, perhaps there is a bit of magic in the writing process? Even though I certainly believe that writing is a craft, and we learn this practice by doing it again and again and again, at the same time, there is something that is not easily expressed in the actual process of writing, is not there?

Anna: I feel partly the same, partly different from your experience Maria. Initially, I found it difficult to write – and at times, still do – and outline what it was that I wanted to say, since my brain had a million things that it wanted to say. While I felt trapped in the academic work and

academic writing, I realize now that I was looking for chances to explore my many ideas and to ‘be creative’ in other places and rooms. In the early years, the way I explored that was primarily through fieldwork – by talking to the ‘tribe’, the ‘others’, that I was studying. That, I have also tried to describe in an essay (realizing now that that format also suits me better, as it allows you to wander off in your thoughts), by referring it to ‘The tiger dance’ or some sort of generative dance, as an ongoing conversation, where knowledge is generated in the intersection between research and practice (Jonsson, 2019). I have always received great interest in my research amongst those that I have studied, and the feedback that I have received is that my curiosity spills over.

Carolina: But would you call that magic?

Anna: Hm... Yes, coming back to your reflection about the trick and where the magic happens – to me it has always been in conversations with others. Not only has it provided me with new questions, ideas, and perspectives, but it has also encouraged me to delve deep into the exploration part. And as I have gone along, by talking to others, I believe I have developed my language and, eventually, also my writing. However, lately – or for the last 10 years – I have also, together with Maria, explored this magic in the meeting with different art forms such as fiction, comic art, and photography, and have not only enjoyed the “wins” there are from changing perspective, see the bigger picture, but also to set ‘my creativity’ free but surrounding me with people who also find the process of exploration rewarding. I do not know how you feel, Matilda, but from reading and listening to your experiences, it seems as if we share that feeling. Or would it be possible to also talk about exploiting different practices in different fields?

Carolina: Sorry for sneaking in – will not be long. Just to share a brief reflection that came to me reading your different angles on magic in research – and in art. I am in the marathon phase of writing the final version of my thesis. At the beginning of the autumn, when I started out, I was not really getting anywhere, just going in circles – even though it actually was clear to me what I wanted to say. I had it all in bullet points, structured, but I was most days able to write a less than nothing. It was frustrating beyond reason. This is, of course, no unique experience, more like everyday life in academia it seems. But then, all of a sudden, like ‘magic’, I was writing. There seemed to be no reason, nothing had changed, no spark had lit up the sky, and I had not made any adjustments. It was not exactly a state of flow, but it was writing, and it moved me forward. Since I did not feel that I had done anything that could have caused the stagnation to break just when it did, I started to wonder when the standstill would return. Now – a few months later – it still has not. I write, and I get a little further every day. And now I think I know what happened back then. It is something I think both of you, Anna and Maria, touch upon: to find the right point of entry, a ‘Once upon a time...’. I recognize it from my work in the theatre. I do not have to know everything, but I do need to have an idea of what door to open. Until I get the right one, the one that leads to the story I know is in the material, the story does not want to and can not be told. That is my magic – also in science, to find the right door to enter through.

Anna: The door metaphor is further interesting to reflect on, and I come to think of another panel discussion that I listened to. It was a discussion of how science is communicated and what role essay writing can, or could, play in academic writing. Julia Ravanis was one of the participants in the panel, also known for her wonderful book on chaos – *Skönheten i kaos* (Ravanis, 2022) – and who recently was rewarded for her writing and ways for communicating science, talked about the possibilities of exploring ideas and questions in the essay format. As I recall the talk, there was also an argument about closing one door in order to open up another door. You need to leave one practice, at least for a while, in order to get perspective and, in that way, get

closer. But also, which is also reflected in her book on chaos, about how reflections enrich you with feelings about perhaps longing and frustration, and the feeling of other people's view of you.

Matilda: Wow, this is what I would call writing in a 'flow of consciousness', and I am getting this feeling that we just could go on. And the reason we started was actually not only that we met in Kalmar but that we were approached afterwards by Marina Jogmark and Katarina Ellborg, who attended the seminar and contributed to the conversations and who work at Linneus University with art and science, kindly asked us if we would like to write a text where we reflected on the seminar. Thank you, Marina and Katarina; these encouragements and invitations mean so much.

It also bounces back to the importance of the meeting, as Anna has pointed out. The 'doing' in the classroom that I so much, be it with students, artists, or researchers. Preferably, all of them. We have also, several times in this text, touched on the "magic" and the craft of both art and research. We meet in those experiences. Crafting, working, and sometimes, getting the spark, the intuition, the 'magic'. The poetic moments.

As Mathias Lafolie, Head of Culture for the Municipality of Kalmar, who was with us in the panel, so wisely said: the most important is that we – artists and scientists – meet as equals, on the same 'level', and look one another into the eyes (he showed that with his body somehow as I remember: that the scientist should not be looking down at the artist) and start talking, listening, understanding, learning and – eventually perhaps – working together. There are many obstacles to this, the most obvious ones being institutional and financial. But at both our universities (Linnaeus and Uppsala Campus Gotland) we have had the privilege to have artists in residence: an artist gets invited and paid for being at the university. And when we start sharing rooms, in our everyday lives, having lunches together, organizing seminars and excursions together, well...maybe... we will have more of these poetic moments together as well.

Now we hope that you, dear reader, sensed this feeling of an ongoing conversation. And we look forward to engaging in more conversations and actions with you. So, please see this as an invitation to join and create more buzzes of thoughts about art and science: maybe about the practice of art and the practice of science, about attempts at crossing these borders, about forgetting about the borders. Join us in putting light on and reflecting on our practices and processes of gaining knowledge and spreading that knowledge.

Well, my dear friends and co-authors, if I were to send this text to you once again we could just continue, right? But we need to stop now, we need to be silent, to end this conversational written 'talkshow'.

We sat in a classroom
There were two theatre directors¹
And a lot of scholars in business administration
A popular seminar?
The topic: art and science
We talked and compared
About the craft
And the "magic"

¹ Mathias Lafolie, Head of Culture for the Municipality of Kalmar is just as Carolina a professional theatre director.

Of doing research
Of doing art
Of not making such a big fuzz
About differences

We search for knowledge
We explore societal problems
We use methods to approach the unknown
We get inspired
We work hard as we care

It seems like we might be doing pretty similar things
Sometimes – often times?
Artists and scientists
Creating poetic spaces
Unexpected moments
Of understanding
Of silence

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