

DEVELOPING AN EXECUTIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY: FOCUS ON COLLECTIVE CREATION

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Abstract

The preoccupation with executive education to address relevance and resource constraints, develop ability of participants to become reflexive practitioners and sustain long-lasting change in the organizations calls for new innovations and formats for executive education. Building on theories of collective creation and learning community and methodology based on narrative ethnography, we investigate how collective creation is facilitated to develop a learning community in executive education. Empirically we investigate longitudinally a set of learning camps. The study demonstrates how improvisational theater activities may strengthen collective creation and contribute to the learning community development. The sense of community is also important in fostering collective creation. The study develops a framework for developing executive learning communities.

INTRODUCTION

Organizational executives must deal with the growing pace of change by reflecting “on the unexpected, the uncertainty, and the complexity of internal and external organizational environments [which] needs to be a critical part of their decision-making processes” (Roglio & Light, 2009: 156). Accordingly, executive education aims at assisting executives in meeting these challenges. By attending executive education programs executives seek for support or motivation to make changes in their own work and organizations (De Vries & Korotov, 2007). However, executive education traditionally organized around fixed learning goals and a set program may meet some challenges: insufficient relevance of addressing vital management problems, inability for participants to assume responsibility for their learning and difficulties in fostering long-lasting change in the organizations (Roglio & Light, 2009; De Vries & Korotov, 2007; Berggren & Söderlund, 2011). Additionally, the executives may suffer

from limited time and financial resources to devote to their own development and program attendance (Anderson & van Wijk, 2010). Thus, there is a need for research that reflect on the types and formats of executive education programs that have potential to generate meaningful, long-term value for participants (de Vries & Krotov, 2007; Dover et al., 2018), as well as for sponsoring organizations (Armstrong & Sadler-Smith, 2008; Berggren & Söderlund, 2011; Doh & Stumpf, 2007).

Compared to management education research, which has primarily investigated programs for management students, executive education targeting professionals engaged in management of organizations remains relatively under-researched (Anderson & van Wijk, 2010). For example, Buechel and Antunes (2007) found that “executive education” was a topic in only 32 papers published between 1956 and 2007, as indexed in the Social Sciences Citation Index. Further, our literature search shows no major increases in the number of publications on executive education since then.

Research on learning emphasizes the importance of community in contributing to learning, through discovering of relevant themes and encouraging engagement. Senge & Scharmer (2006) developed a theory of a learning community as “a diverse group of people working together to *nurture and sustain a knowledge creating system*” (Senge & Scharmer, 2006: 197, italics in the original). Additionally, Wenger & Snyder (2000) suggested the communities of practice as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do, but who also learn how to do it better as they interact regularly in the community. Thus, the focus is not on the individuals per se, but understood as members in a community that engage into collective creation in order to learn together. Collective creation is defined here as process of co-operation (interaction and sharing of ideas) between community members and mobilizing of resources to create value (e.g. Shah & Tripsas, 2007; Wang, He & Mahobey, 2009; Bridoux, Coeurderoy & Durand, 2011). Thus, the learning community engaging into collective creation could potentially be a fruitful approach for organizing executive education in a novel way.

Much of research on communities builds on the idea of naturally occurring communities (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), and research has investigated for example the motivations of individuals to engage into collective creation in them (Bridoux et al., 2011). However, existing research has not addressed *how* to make a group of individuals (often strangers) to engage in collective creation, to act together as a community and learn together. Hence, in this paper we will address the research question: *how to facilitate collective creation and executive learning community development in executive education?* Empirically we investigate the process of collective creation and its facilitation in an executive education program longitudinally organized as a series of learning camps (Allen, 2013).

By drawing from theory of collective creation (e.g. Bridoux, Coeurderoy & Durand, 2011), our research contributes to executive education and learning community literature. Additionally we rely on literature from improvisational theater (e.g. Vera & Crossan, 2004; Gagnon, Vough, & Nickerson, 2012) to demonstrate how the improvisational theatre activities may strengthen collective creation and consequently contribute to learning community development (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009). Our approach extends prior research on group dynamics and group development, in which the process has been seen as sequential and linear by going through the pre-determined stages (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 2010). When engaging in improvisation, there is an initial framework for their collaborative activity but no ready-made script. Instead, the script emerges from collective activity. Our study finds that collective creation is supported through the use of means (e.g., posing questions based on the life-worlds of the participants or their customers), materials (e.g., designing spaces and places for supporting the community and its learning), and modes of engagement (e.g., committing to and emphasizing the responsibility of participants for their own learning) (Allen, 2013). This underscores how (ad hoc, temporary) learning communities can be facilitated by relying on improvisation theater practices (Vera & Crossan, 2004; Allen, 2013). Consequently, we provide a framework for developing executive learning communities to either replace traditional executive education programs or augment them with continued and assured learning experience (De Vries & Korotov, 2007). Finally, this study offers practical implications for the executive education practice in

both informal and formal educational settings (Armstrong & Sadler-Smith, 2008; De Vries & Korotow, 2007; Tushman, O'Reilly, Fenollosa, Kleinbaum, & McGrath, 2007).

Next, we outline our review of the literature on executive education and the potential role of learning community model in addressing some of its existing challenges, and discuss the collective creation framework used in this study. After that, we explain the ethnographic approach we took within the context of the research materials and analysis in more detail. Then, we report the research results, after which we present the discussion and conclusions with some suggestions for future research.

EXECUTIVE EDUCATION

Executives today need to deal with the unexpected, the uncertain, and the complexity of their organizational environments in their decision-making processes. Thus, they will benefit from skills that include becoming more self-aware and reflective of one's own ideas and exploring opportunities to use novel methods to personally reinvent oneself (De Vries & Korotov 2007). However, modern executive education faces several challenges: One is the dilemma of rigor versus relevance. Many executive education programs have been accused of focusing so much on academically rigorous content that they risk losing relevance (Anderson & van Wijk, 2010; Berggren & Söderlund, 2011; Roglio & Light, 2009; Tushman et al., 2007). It is critical to connect the content with an identified focal challenge (De Vries & Korotov, 2007) in a way which can stimulate the emergence of reflective practice (Roglio & Light, 2009). Here both the role played by senior executives in designing and delivering the programs (Tushman et al., 2007), as well as electing facilitators well suited to the process has been highlighted. Facilitators who act both as “reflective practitioners” and role models for participants (Roglio & Light, 2009), can enable focusing on topics of relevance and co-construction of knowledge in executive education.

The question of relevance is linked to the challenge of how to foster the participants take ownership of and responsibility for their learning (Houde, 2007; Roglio & Light, 2009). One element is the importance of participant selection for designing effective executive programs (De Vries & Korotov,

2007; Tushman et al., 2007). For example, De Vries and Korotov (2007) emphasized the importance of selecting highly motivated participants who are capable of opening up, tolerating uncertainty, and being flexible. In this sense, the program design can be based upon adult learning principles, whereby the executives are experts in their field, are motivated to learn, and have the possibility for assuming responsibility for their learning (Houde, 2007; Roglio & Light, 2009). It is vital that participants have an (equal) say in what kinds of subjects are discussed, which themes are emphasized, and how their work is scheduled in the learning process (Levinsohn, 2015). Thus the focus is on engaging participants in designing and delivering the program and assuming responsibility for their learning.

A third, inter-related challenge for executive education is facilitating real change in the executives' work and in their organizations. Although participants must be able to cognitively understand why a change is needed, cognition alone is not enough: They need to be touched and learn to touch others emotionally to facilitate change in their organizations (De Vries & Korotov, 2007). Thus, this creates a need for executive education that enables the participants to open up and share their real experiences and stories, and to provide participants with an environment in which they can be safely challenged and supported without hidden agendas. Here, the supportive role of the group is important (De Vries & Korotov, 2007). Learning community works as an environment for experimentation and openness, where the frame of mind needs to be receptive to change, as well as for formal and informal interactions enabled by the physical and architectural features of the environment (De Vries & Korotov, 2007; Levinsohn, 2015; Roglio & Light, 2009; Tushman et al., 2007).

Finally, executives experience severe resources constraints of both time and money, putting an even bigger emphasis for addressing the above challenges in executive education (Anderson & van Wijk, 2010; Dover et al., 2018). Hence, in this paper we explore the potential of the learning community model for executive education that builds on collective creation; the resources and combined expertise within the community.

LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Senge and Scharmer (2006) developed a theory of a learning community in action research and conceptualized it as “a diverse group of people working together to *nurture and sustain a knowledge creating system*, based on valuing equally three interacting domains of activity”: research, capacity building and practice (Senge & Scharmer, 2006: 197, italics in the original). Hence, they specifically suggested that a learning community continually contributes to new theory and method, new tools, and practical know-how. Second, learning communities have been linked to the idea of communities of practice. Communities of practice are defined as groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly. Further, they are defined by “a shared domain of interest” through which they develop a shared identity and come to appreciate the competences and knowledge of one another (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). As people are informally connected in communities of practice, such communities can comprise employees within a single business unit, members of a team-based organization that transcends divisional boundaries, or entirely different companies, thus making these communities distinct from organizational units (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Hence, a group of executives coming together to learn could form such a community.

In other areas of research, the learning community concept has been applied in a colloquial sense and as an object of empirical research. In education research, it refers to students, more precisely to the same group of students enrolled together in two or more courses (Andrade, 2007; Tinto, 1997). Professional learning communities are seen to consist of teachers (and sometimes of other staff members) and professionals with the aim of organizing the educational staff to engage in purposeful learning (Hord, 2008). Learning communities are also associated with contexts in which the need for community building is heightened. For example, the increase in e-learning programs and virtual platforms suggests a need for the purposeful development of a learning community to counterbalance the lack of face-to-face connections. By focusing on the learning community, a sense of being there

together with other learners can be cultivated (Brindley et al., 2009). In addition to education, learning communities have been explored in communities where individuals share a locality (Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt, 2012) or where groups of businesses share a common cause (Aylward et al., 2016).

In our paper, we build from the idea that learning communities can be defined *as groups of people who come together to focus on developing a shared area* (Senge & Scharmer, 2006). The learning community resonates with demands for executive education as it puts emphasis on how such groups share and critically investigate their practices in a reflective, collaborative, and learning-centered way (Stoll et al., 2006). The learning community's aim is to advance collective knowledge while simultaneously contributing to individual knowledge (Watkins, 2005). Learning occurs when the actors in the community develop the ability to think together and surpass stakeholders' boundaries and views (Desai, 2010). In a learning community, the members commit to a shared vision and work collaboratively and reflectively to find solutions to focal problems. Their work is based on open and honest communication, as well as mutual trust, respect, and support (Dogan et al., 2016; Hairon et al., 2017; Kearney & Zuber-Skerritt, 2012). Thus, the learning community model seems to adhere well to the ideas and expectations set for professional executive education.

COLLECTIVE CREATION IN DEVELOPING EXECUTIVE LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Collective creation

The fact that creating learning communities is not easy (Stoll et al., 2006) calls for a dynamic process instead of a fixed schedule (Levinsohn, 2015). We build from theory of collective creation (e.g. Bridoux, Coeurderoy & Durand, 2011) to denote this dynamic process. Collective creation has been studied from the perspective of strategic management (e.g. Felin & Foss, 2005; Bridoux et al., 2011) and marketing (e.g. Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009; Kurikko & Tuominen, 2012). When people come

together to focus on developing a shared area (Senge & Sharmer, 2006), they engage in collective creation which focuses on the co-operation (interaction and sharing of ideas) between community members and mobilizing of resources to create value (e.g. Shah & Tripsas, 2007; Wang, He & Mahobey, 2009; Bridoux, Coeurderoy & Durand, 2011). Thus, collective creation contributes to achieving the objectives of the group (Mitchell, 1982). Existing literature has also highlighted the importance of micro foundations of collective creation - meaning the knowledge and resources of individuals in the community (Felin & Foss, 2005; Felin & Hesterly, 2007; Foss, 2007).

The question is then, how to engage individuals – such as executives from different organizations – into collective creation, to put their knowledge and skills in use for the benefit of whole community (Bridoux et al., 2011; Felin & Foss, 2005; Felin & Hesterly, 2007; Foss, 2007). From the community perspective, Bridoux et al. (2011) suggest that the rewards and sanctions offered by the community members are important. Collective creation is also fostered by the sense of community; when members of the community experience commitment to the community and have a sense of belonging (Kurikko & Tuominen, 2012). Collective creation can be facilitated by strong members who contribute, expect others to do so too and encourage others (Bridoux et al., 2011). Thus the sense of moral responsibility contributes to collective action. (Kurikko & Tuominen, 2012). Sanctioning applied by peers helps uphold high levels of cooperation in the absence of sanctions from a vertical authority (Fehr & Fischbacher, 2002; Ostrom, 2000; Bridoux et al., 2011). Finally, it is suggested possible to enhance collective creation by creating and enhancing ties among community members or by reinforcing members' escalating engagement with the community (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009). Our ambition is to demonstrate *how* this can be facilitated in executive education.

Improvisation underpinning collective creation

The literature building on the theory of improvisational theater has inspired investigations into how improvisational techniques might contribute to the development of leadership skills (Gagnon, Vough,

& Nickerson, 2012), to enhancement of management instruction (Moshavi, 2001) and learning in management education (Huffaker & West, 2005), and to increasing creativity within organizations (Vera & Crossan, 2004), for example. In this study we look at improvisation as a mechanism underpinning collective creation (Sawyer, 2010). We explore how applying improvisational techniques can support collective creation and thus contribute to learning community development: This is done by looking at three interactive elements of group activity (means, materials, and modes of engagement) (Allen, 2013). We investigate how collective creation facilitates executive learning community development by empirically examining a set of interventions (learning camps) organized for executives. In this context, the improvisation that underlies collective creation is different from the more familiar transmission model of theatrical production, where a playwright writes a script, and a director, in turn, communicates to actors how it will be performed; the actors then perform the script for an audience (Allen, 2013; Knowles, 2004). When improvising, artists employ scores as frameworks for their collaborative activity. A score might be music or a chart (a graphical element), or it might be verbal (a list or outline), but it must in any case be open enough to allow for participants' input, ideas, and objectives such that it guides but does not impose a predetermined goal (Allen, 2013; Knowles, 2004; Haftner & Riedmüller, 2017). In this study, we explore how this type of rationale can be applied in executive education and especially in interventions, during which the participants and facilitators embark on a journey of joining learning. Based on our empirical study, we develop a framework for developing executive learning communities. Next, we will discuss the elements (the means, materials, and modes of engagement) of the framework in more detail in light of the existing literature, after which we will introduce our methodology and empirical findings.

Means to Support Collective Creation and Learning Community Development

While improvisational theater is about spontaneous action, it is often also about responding to a stimulus in one's environment (Frost & Yarrow, 1991), for example, when an audience is invited to

suggest characters and places to launch a scene or a story (Huffaker & West, 2005)—or drawing on some other source of inspiration to get started (Haftner & Riedmüller, 2017). In an educational context, Allen (2013) suggested that tools and structures support and guide the process of creation, such as posing questions to promote productive activity—“What do we choose to pay attention to, and what do we choose to ignore?”—or conducting freewriting exercises. In business literature, the primacy of the customer in facilitating the learning process is paramount. To understand what customers need, reflective questions, such as “What are our customers trying to do with our goods/services?” or “What are our customers’ goals and ambitions, and how can we contribute to them?”, can be used as a starting point (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006: 342). This view encompasses a thorough understanding of customers’ needs and expectations (Eloranta & Matveinen, 2014) as well as concrete experiences and reflections as the basis for knowledge creation and learning (Elg, Engström, Witell, & Poksinska, 2012; Grönroos & Ravald, 2011). Customer feedback could represent an interesting mean of supporting executive development, addressing relevant questions (Tushman et al., 2007), and identifying a focal theme on which participants could focus (Roglio & Light, 2007).

This puts emphasis on adopting the context of the learners as a starting point (Wenger & Snyder, 2000) in the educational program (Raffo, Lovatt, Banks, & O’Connor, 2000). Thus, *means* are about initiating the learning process from within the participants’ context, establishing a dialogic environment in which learners can collaborate in an informal setting, experiment with ideas, and determine solutions to real business problems (Raffo et al., 2000). Houde (2007) suggested a method involving analogously situated experiences, whereby participants adopt roles in a novel context to provide insights into their own context, as both relevant and innovative in executive education. Here, the role of the facilitator is to promote dialogue and reflection (Roglio & Light, 2007). In this regard, dialogical workshops focus on modes of action (e.g., dialogue), content (e.g., participants’ stories), and place, generating new opportunities for participants to create and catalyze new connections (Arnkil & Spangar, 2011).

Storytelling, for example, is a powerful tool that can create opportunities for participants to identify common issues collaboratively (De Vries & Korotov, 2007).

To reach a shared understanding, the role of dialogue and the use of different tools between participants representing different organizations and perspectives is emphasized (Halonen, Kallio, & Saari, 2010). Group work is seen as beneficial for increasing the sense of community, which, in turn, has a positive effect on learner satisfaction and knowledge retention (Brindley et al., 2009; Levinsohn, 2015). Facilitators play an important role in developing the sense of community through reflective practice, choice of instructional strategies, and adjustments to these strategies (De Vries & Korotov, 2007; Garvin, 2007; Roglio & Light, 2007). Facilitators also approach participants as equal contributors to joint problem solving and learning, thereby ensuring the equitable use of participants' resources in new knowledge creation (Schein, 1999; Schön, 1983).

Materials Enabling Collective Creation and Learning Community Development

In improvisational theater, the actors make use of the available resources at hand (Vera & Crossan, 2004; Gagnon et al., 2012). Accordingly, materials for collective creation comprise activity resources, including texts, images, props, movements, and music, as well as emotions, ideas, and metaphors (Allen, 2013). Thus, both human and material resources are used. New materials are created from existing materials: For example, participants in a theater context create a short performance in groups by using different kinds of music, pictures, and movements (Bogart & Landau, 2005). Moreover, a variety of methodologies that promote interactions between theory and practice can be used: case studies (Garvin, 2007; Roglio & Light, 2007), role playing and drama (Berggren & Söderlund, 2011; Hytti & Nieminen, 2013; Roglio & Light, 2007), simulations, interactive sessions, teamwork (Roglio & Light, 2007), individual reflection reports and personalized action plans (Berggren & Söderlund,

2011), or other art-based methods—for example, creating a mask reflecting leadership (Taylor & Ladkin, 2009).

Existing executive education research has emphasized the importance of the physical environment, such as classroom layout (De Vries & Korotov, 2007; Roglio & Light, 2007; Tushman et al., 2007) to highlight how opportunities for learning are created via interaction between participants and material objects (Levinsohn, 2005). Further, both psychological spaces (Peitsch, 2012) and physical places play a role in creating opportunities for learning. Therefore, using different types of physical places or supporting different types of mental spaces is important. Psychological spaces are affected by other participants, their intentions for and engagement in learning, and interactions during the process. Interactions can either support learning or pose challenges to it. In executive education, peers are an important component of learning (De Vries & Korotov, 2007), and there should therefore be ample opportunities for dialogue, feedback, and questions (Levinsohn, 2015).

Tomkins and Ulus (2016) suggested that moving and using space affect students' learning experiences. Rearranging furniture to suit group work initiates the work process and prepares the space for the learning encounter (De Vries & Korotov, 2007; Tushman et al., 2007). When bodies move or settle, ideas move or settle accordingly. Trust is an important element for both the learning community and knowledge creation. The movement of bodies, emotions, and ideas in classrooms affects the sense of trust between students and the facilitator and, ultimately, the learning experience (Ballantyne & Varey, 2006). Human and material resources are used to create novel materials: emotions, ideas, and concrete examples to facilitate learning and community development (Allen, 2013).

Modes of Engagement Fostering Collective Creation and a Learning Community

Modes of engagement refer to the orientation that people in a community have with each other and with their collective activity at any given moment. Improvisational theater relies on the actors being highly responsive and open to others' ideas (Gagnon et al., 2012; Haftner & Riedmüller, 2017). Complementarity denotes accepting and elaborating the ideas presented by other people (Allen, 2013). For example, in improvisational activities, it is common to use the practice, "Yes, and..." to accept and elaborate on the collaborator's offer. Another mode is collaborators' critical self-reflection on their process with the understanding that collective creation processes invite missteps and even embarrassment (Allen, 2013; Haftner & Riedmüller, 2017). This mode connects to the development of reflective practice in executive education (Roglio & Light, 2007). De Vries and Korotov (2007) highlighted reframing, encouragement, anticipation, and rehearsal as potential techniques for achieving a greater sense of self-awareness and self-efficacy. For example, reframing refers to seeing a difficult situation through alternative lenses and focusing on the individual's strength.

Engagement can be seen as a dual process (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). It is about participation, e.g., engaging in activities and conversations with other people, and also about producing physical and conceptual objects, such as words, tools, concepts, methods, stories, and documents, through interaction. These objects reflect the shared experience of a community, make it concrete, and, together with interaction, develop the capabilities to build and exchange community members' knowledge (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Interactions between learners can be viewed on a continuum on which people get to know each other and develop trust and an idea of the shared objective of the collaboration. First, communication occurs, which means that people talk and discuss. Second, ideas, and occasionally resources, are shared through collaboration. Third, cooperation is achieved, although each person has his or her own purpose in mind. Last, a community is created, one in which members have a common purpose or goal and work together to reach it (Siemens, 2005).

Collective creation emphasizes not only positive but also negative aspects (Halonen, Kallio, & Saari, 2010; von Becker, Aromaa, & Eriksson, 2015). Disjunctures are situations in which people must confront a novel and unfamiliar experience and give it meaning, which can take the form of knowledge, skill, emotions, values, or attitudes (Levinsohn, 2015). Emergent learning is a result of welcoming diverse ideas and productive conflicts instead of striving to achieve a shared vision and common plan throughout the organization and network (Desai, 2010). Learning can be promoted within executive education by confronting questions and conclusions from fellow participants to promote disequilibrium and steer away from egocentric worldviews (Roglio & Light, 2009).

When participants and facilitators immerse themselves in the learning space, sharing expertise and experiences, the learning experience is positively affected. Tomkins and Ulus (2016) discussed how facilitators must be at the same level as the participants—the “camp-fireness,” as they called it—expressed by, for example, the facilitator sitting on the floor with the students. Engagement encompasses the idea that each learner is responsible for his or her own learning. For example, Knowles (1990) and Raffo et al. (2000) pointed out that a prerequisite for learning is understanding *why* learning something is important. Facilitating the process allows the participants to take responsibility for their own learning, which is a cornerstone for executive education (Roglio & Light, 2009). For example, Levinsohn (2015) discussed how the roles of facilitators and participants evolve during the learning process, from expert-driven (teacher) to learner-driven (participants). This kind of development and willingness to make the community work and exist is inherent in the idea of communities of practice; engaging with peers and others is seen as important, instead of collaboration being driven by an institution (Wenger & Snyder, 2000).

METHODOLOGY: NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY

In view of the purpose of the research, we selected ethnography as the study method (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008). In ethnographic research, the focus is on observing “how people interact with each

other and with their environment in order to understand their culture” (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008: 138) by, for example, spending time in the community and documenting observations and experiences in field notes (Coffey, 1999). This offers a different avenue to understanding the camps compared to, for example, retrospective interviews with the participants (Silverman, 2017). In addition, we drew from narrative research, particularly the ideas of narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) and narrative reporting (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991), to convey an experience of “being there” for the reader. Narrative ethnography closely scrutinizes social situations, actors in those situations, and actions in relation to narratives. Gubrium and Holstein (2008) called for understanding narrative environments, which means that in order to understand stories, it is important to consider the circumstances of their production and reception—the context of the study. Through narrative ethnography, it is possible to access the numerous interactional practices that together form the narrative through contexts, conditions, and resources. To capture this multifaceted nature, it is important to involve oneself in, for example, direct observation. Gubrium and Holstein (2008: 256) discussed how “the narratives must be invited, incited, or initiated” in the simplest way by asking a question or inviting people to participate. In our study, the learning camps and the process through which the executive learning community developed can be seen as a social process by which the narrative was constructed via multiple voices: the voices of the facilitators and of the participants as depicted in the narratives generated by the three camps.

Context of the Research

Our study focused on a community consisting of a business development organization, five companies operating in different industries, and researchers from two universities (a university of applied sciences and a school of economics). What made this context interesting and, in our opinion, suitable for the objectives of our research was that (a) the executives and their companies were interested in developing the skills and competencies of change management together, and (b) in all these participating

companies, major changes were taking place (or had taken place) at the time. A series of three overnight learning camps were part of the collaboration. Our longitudinal research data were collected from the planning, organizing, and evaluation process of the camps. The learning camps were organized in June 2015, November 2015, and April 2016. Mia and Mary were facilitators in the learning camps and they also initiated the idea for the non-scripted, open form in order to experiment with a new format for the training. The main facilitator was Mia, who, in her 50s, was the official development director of a regional business and technology development agency. However, she presented herself as a “business coach” to demonstrate her true passion at work. Her colleague, Mary, also participated in the camps, but she adopted a passive position, much like us (the two researchers who observed and videotaped the camps). The two to three participants from the five companies were hand-picked for the program based on Mia’s familiarity with the businesses in the region. In the planning phase, we discussed the need to recruit “good companies” that were both interested in change management and willing to engage their management group in the process in the program. Mia and Mary were responsible for designing the learning camps based on their experiences and intuition. The idea was to offer sufficient time for thinking and reflection for the managers, with a focus on change management. There were no pre-determined or ready-made answers or solutions. Instead, to foster learning and change, everyone had to trust the process, engage in discussions and reflections, and share their experiences (de Haan, Culpin, & Curd, 2011). There were a total of 15 participants from five companies operating in different industries (see Table 1).

<Insert Table 1 here>

Each learning camp took place in a different location: the first in a hotel located alongside a long, sandy beach, and the other two in old ironworks villages with a long industrial history. Together with researchers, Mia and Mary chose the broad themes used to discuss change management, which were

based on data from group interviews that had been conducted with each company before the first camp. Mia and researchers also interviewed the participants between the camps, discussing the current changes and collecting feedback from the last camp, in order to stay up to date with current developments in the participating companies. Each company was allotted 1.5 hours to use as it wanted during one of the camps. The company participants were able to present a challenge they were facing or to share their best practices with others and ask for feedback and comments to, for example, engage them in group work to tackle a certain challenge.

Research Material and Analysis

The data for our study were derived from the three learning camps, each of which last for 1.5 days. Approximately 22 hours of video material was generated from all three camps. The researchers were present during each camp, observing and making field notes. In the field notes, we made initial observations and remarks about the camps. Next, we watched the video recordings to familiarize ourselves more closely with the research materials. Then, we held data workshops between facilitators and researchers to discuss the observations and ideas related to the camps. These data workshops served to make sense of the data and the process. For example, we discussed the importance of movement and different places and spaces for engagement and learning based on our observations and feedback from the participants (See Appendix A, Extract 1). Following these initial ideas, we started to review relevant literature (e.g., Levinsohn [2015], on the importance of place), as well as to analyze the video-recorded data and field observations in more depth. We analyzed the data simultaneously but independently, and then we discussed the findings together.

The video recordings enabled us to go back and look at precise interactions during the learning camps. Comparing the video-recorded data with field notes, where comments, details of interactions, and

initial findings were listed, permitted us to zoom in on social situations, units of interaction, and their interrelationships (Flewitt, 2006; Knoblauch, 2012). The analysis was based on interpretative and abductive reasoning of how the participants engaged with the learning camps and collaborated in producing knowledge of and insights into topics discussed (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) by iterating between inductively making sense of the data and reading relevant literature and theory (Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013). Prior literature enabled us to form an understanding about learning communities, executive education, and improvisation. This process enabled us to develop a coding scheme (Appendix B) and to immerse ourselves again in the data by looking at the video recordings and reading the field notes. We used coding to generate a description of the setting and the categories for the analysis (Creswell, 2009). We coded the data by analyzing the people involved, examining what they were doing and how they related to working together, assessing what kinds of knowledge they shared, and identifying the different kinds of materials and spaces, as well as how they were used (Eriksson & Kovalainen, 2008).

Next, we connected the initial codes by focusing on the interactions between the facilitator (Mia) and participants (emergence of the script from collective creation) and on the setting as a physical place (Allen, 2013). Thus, we applied literature to identify and analyze the means (the structures and tools for initiating and guiding the collective creation process), the materials (the resources, emotions, ideas, and metaphors), and the modes of engagement (participants' orientation or stance; Allen, 2013) that supported (or limited) development of the learning community in the learning camps. The iterative data analysis process is depicted in Figure 1. It is important to highlight that the facilitation initially was not based on improvisational theatre but the usefulness of means, material and modes of engagement in analysis of collective creation was realized as a result of iteration between data and literature (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996).

<Insert Figure 1 here>

Finally, we present our findings by writing narrative episodes that illustrate units of action and interaction (Eriksson, Henttonen, & Meriläinen, 2008) during each of the three learning camps. The narratives are rich descriptions that can reveal the dynamics of phenomena and can help others identify similar dynamics in their own research or in their daily lives (Dyer & Wilkins, 1991). The ability to create an interesting puzzle is a task for the researcher (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995). To keep the text concise and allow readers to easily follow the narrative, we have included quotations and comments by only some of the participants in the narrative episodes. We also gave the participants pseudonyms to increase the readability of the narratives (see Table 1). First, an individual narrative from each learning camp is presented that illustrates its means, materials, and modes of engagement. After that, an analysis of these key elements of collective creation in executive learning community development is introduced, as well as the way in which their use developed during the process.

LEARNING CAMP NARRATIVES

Camp I: Getting to Know One Another and Building Trust

The first camp takes place outside a city in a 1970s-style beach hotel with standard rooms, but Mia and Mary have done their best to redecorate the setting. Chairs are arranged in a U-shaped circle, with a small gift with a name tag on it waiting on each chair. The 14 participants arrive at the camp curious and interested, albeit some are hesitant. Mia begins the day with a quote from a Finnish business consultant and some questions, such as “What is the most important feature of a manager?” No one responds, so she replies, “Taking another person seriously is the most important attribute of a

manager.” The atmosphere is a bit stiff and class-like, but Mia shifts the tone, suggesting, reassuringly, that the work will get going. She introduces us (the two researchers present at the first camp) by stating that our role is to observe and videotape the sessions. We add, “We’re not mute but we’ll try to stick to our role.” Everybody laughs, so we feel comfortable that our observatory roles are accepted.

Next, the whole group moves outside to sit on the white, sandy beach. Mia asks the participants to introduce themselves, one at a time; to initiate this process, she tosses a small softball to one person to give him or her voice, after which it will be tossed to the next person, and so forth. While listening to each person, the others caress the sand. The atmosphere is relaxed and calm, and the rhythm in each presentation is slow. Some people reveal very little about themselves, while others reveal more. Alex (TechCompany managing director) opens up more than the others, talking about his upcoming sabbatical. The participants do not yet know each other very well and cannot remember each other’s names. Therefore, when throwing the ball, it is necessary to say, for example, “Next, you in the blue shirt.” In the end, everyone reveals something about themselves that no one else knows. Mia, Mary and we, the researchers, participate in this exercise. At the end of the presentations, Mia says, “This is our group that will work together, and everything will be based on what we’ll do together.” We then return to the meeting room, taking our time and walking slowly.

Before getting to work, Mia invites the participants to determine the rules for working together by again using a ball to denote speaking turns. Mary writes the rules on a flipchart: “Being positive, there are no wrong answers or strange ideas, throwing oneself into discussion, remembering confidentiality, listening to others, giving oneself time to listen, having fun and enjoying having fun, keeping mobile phones switched off, staying for the duration of the whole camp.” However, Alex (TechCompany managing director) immediately violates the last rule. He informs the group that he will not be able to spend the night. This results in silence. In addition, Megan (Software Company managing director)

asks about the end time the next day, as she has another appointment. At this point, Mia, rather sarcastically, asks whether anyone else is going to disappear soon. The question is met with laughter, but no one else claims the need to leave early. We are thus reassured that (most of) the group will stay together.

Mia occupies a central role in the camp. Based on the first round of interviews, she has developed a PowerPoint presentation with questions, metaphors, and arguments that she shows to stimulate discussion and conversation. For example, there is a list of arguments about change management: “Enthusiasm and reason are opposite viewpoints, and in the end, only one of them can guide the decisions and action taken in the organization.” Mia asks everyone to vote on the degree to which they agree or disagree with these statements. Like the example, the statements are provocative and complex, which Mia claims is intentional. The participants discuss the contents of the statements and their meanings rather than their opinions or experiences related to each statement. Using a softball to delegate speaking turns, which started quite well at the beach, becomes a mechanical routine. The ball is no longer thrown across the room but is instead handed to the person sitting directly beside the speaker. While observing, we make the following note: “There is a lot of sitting down, and in the same places. Think of movement!”

Mia presents the evening program, in which each of the five companies will have time to present and discuss its case. The first evening slot is given to TechCompany. This is not an accident, as Mia believes that the TechCompany participants’ openness and immersion in the process will impact others. The evening slot is said to follow “The Best Singers” television format.¹ Again, there is

¹ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Best_Singers_\(series\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Best_Singers_(series))

laughter, as the format is recognized and met with approval. The evening program starts after dinner. We move along the beach to a fire pit. Mia asks someone to start a fire. Then, she starts asking a lot of questions of the people from TechCompany. The rest of us are all observers in the audience, and we start to feel a bit uncomfortable. Finally, someone asks a question, and the others join in, changing the dynamic. TechCompany (as a technology start-up) is being open and sharing their story around the fire pit, which is seemingly inspiring the other participants, who represent older companies and more traditional industries.

TechCompany has just been sold to a large multinational firm, and the participants are really excited about the future and new opportunities: The buyer is presented as the “new groom,” and the acquisition is seen as a prosperous marriage. The metaphor is seen in particular the day after and in the following camps. For example, Peter (Packaging general manager) comments, “It has been an eye-opener to hear from TechCompany and their experiences.” After the fire pit conversation, some of us take a dip in the sea; and later, we meet the others at the hotel bar.

The work begins the following morning with a video depicting a herd of wild horses and how a trainer approaches the herd. Mia asks whether parallels can be found between taming horses and change management. The participants claim that employees (sometimes) behave similar to herds in that the leader needs to gain their trust and sometimes listen very carefully before moving on. One needs to move on but try to speak their language. After the video, Mia resumes presenting the statements and asking the participants to cast their votes. Participants continue to debate the statements’ exact meaning. Mia becomes slightly irritated and tries to suggest a more open reading of the statements.

At the end of the camp, Mia asks the participants to reflect on their most important realization, and these are collected in one picture frame. Mia also wants to share her own observations, starting the discussion with “Great that there were no stunt men here [the “right persons” were present]. We threw ourselves into the process. Excellent discussions. But was yesterday too long?” Then, the participants start sharing their ideas while simultaneously reflecting on and evaluating the two days. The opening comment by Paul (Electricity Company managing director) sets the tone for the others: “In the evening, I started thinking that creative chaos works after all. But as an engineer, I cannot help reflecting: Where is this going? Why this voting? Yesterday was long but not too long, different sessions. We sat here a long time, but the evening session was fun.” Lisa (TechCompany HR manager) states, “We were stuck with the statements and exchanging opinions. Please help us push a little further [into change].” Tony (Packaging head of sales) comments, “There were 14 monologues, not much dialogue. How to improve this?” Thus, there is a shared feeling of enjoying the experience and even gradually living with uncertainty; but, at the same time, there is frustration about some aspects (sitting down, throwing the ball, and presenting opinions based on the statements).

Mia accepts the feedback. In our short discussion after the closing of the camp, Mia feels exhilarated that the participants have started to innovate the next camp without being prompted to and to discuss how it should be developed. In her words, they felt ownership for the program. The atmosphere in the last session is friendly and open despite the (constructive) criticism. Alex (TechCompany managing director) comments, “This was the first time, so it was about building trust,” implying that all is good for now but, in the following camps, improvements should be made.

Camp II: Breaking Structures and Individualizing Learning Motivation and Needs

The second camp takes place in a wooden villa on an old ironworks mansion estate. Before going to the villa, we all meet in a meeting room to have coffee. In this opening session, Mia asks the participants to discuss “What is a good change manager like? How does a good change manager think?,” after which questions are asked, such as “How do I lead myself [as a change manager?],” and finally, “Why we are here?” This is Mia’s way of accommodating a clearer vision and the goal. Representatives from one company arrive late, while members of the Software Company (Megan, Jane) do not show up at all despite calling to say they would be late. From the Electricity Company, only Paul (the managing director) participates, as the others have pressing business engagements. Other participants express regret about these absences. Two new participants from two other companies introduce themselves.

In the villa, Mia presents the picture frame developed during the previous camp with a comment that, this time, all participants will have their own frame to guide their learning. The task for each is to think about what change in the company means for them personally, how they need to change and why, what kinds of (new) competences they will require, and how they could gain them as quickly as possible. They can use different colored pens for writing and different kinds of stickers to represent themselves and their ideas. Later on in the day, Mia introduces another activity: knitting (a scarf), with everyone taking turns. Everyone participates, albeit some of the men a bit reluctantly. The next day, there is a vote for the most courageous change manager, and the scarf is the award. Alex (TechCompany managing director) and Paul (Electricity Company managing director) receive the same number of votes. The others laughingly remind the two of them that they have to take turns wearing the scarf.

During the camp, Mia invites representatives from each company to introduce the change they are experiencing at that moment. She advises the other participants to ask questions or give advice to each company. People from TechCompany open the discussion, reporting their changed situation with a

new owner and new practices. The others are quite surprised at this turn of events, as well as at the mood at the company, but soon start asking a lot of questions: “Do you have a common strategic will?” “In the good old days, everything worked well. How did you manage things then?” “What is the worst thing that can happen?” “What are the things you can influence?” There is genuine interest in helping participants from TechCompany see the future in optimistic (but realistic) terms, not just reminiscing about the good old days of the start-up period but taking action where possible under the new circumstances.

Again, the evening program consists of special slots for the companies, this time for Packaging Ltd. and Bathroom Solutions Ltd. The evening program takes place in a Laplander hut in the woods, where we also have dinner while sitting in the dark. Everyone receives a lit candle. First, the participants from Packaging Ltd. share their case. They are trapped in a difficult situation in which their parent company is imposing the same strategy on all their affiliates without recognizing regional features or constraints. The atmosphere is really open, and others participate in the same way as with TechCompany—by asking questions to help guide actions. Then, Susan, the Human Resources (HR) manager from Bathroom Solutions Ltd., takes the floor. She shares the company’s vision and strategy as a success story and does not really open up about any challenges or bumps in the road. The others do not have questions, and silence falls in the hut. The discussion moves to family businesses, because three of the participating companies are family businesses. There is a visible change in the atmosphere in the hut. We discuss this change among ourselves (the facilitators, Mia and Mary, and the researchers) while we drive back to the villa: All of us felt uneasy due to the change in atmosphere.

The evening continues with informal discussions. Those staying overnight sit around a table, sipping hot drinks and knitting the scarf in turns. Some continue to discuss until the early hours of the morning. That morning, a lot of time is reserved for creating individual picture frames with ideas for personal

development. Some thoughts about the frames are shared with others, and everyone is asked to bring their frames to Camp III. The structure is less formal than during the first camp, thus enabling a more casual flow. For example, after crafting the frames but before lunch, Paul (Electricity Company managing director) uses the opportunity to introduce others to his company's strategy and to share the strategy process.

Before closing the second camp, Mia asks again for feedback from the participants. Lisa (TechCompany HR manager) states, "The discussion has been more free-flowing and lighter, since we haven't felt that everyone has to say something. We have talked more about our personal situations and also things that we find really difficult." Peter (Packaging general manager) remarks, "There has been more honesty and openness. It is a pity that not all of us were able to participate." Alex (TechCompany managing director) comments, "It is always a bit risky to come here (will it be useful?), not knowing the topics to be discussed and not being able to prepare. During making the frame, I, however, realized something and will be able to work with that thought afterwards. Anyway, I find this a good place to process certain issues and challenges, and also a bit therapeutic."

Camp III: Enabling Participants to Take Over

Camp III takes place in another old ironworks mansion. As a contrast to the setting, and to empower the participants, Mia has selected music from a Finnish rap artist. The lyrics emphasize looking ahead, going forward, smiling, and using obstacles as a source of strength.² Mia plays this song several times during the camp. After breakfast, participants enter a beautiful room with a high ceiling, empire sofas, and armchairs and sit in a circle with the music playing. The program kicks off with a special slot for

² Elastinen (artist name), "Eteen ja ylös" [Forward and upward], lyrics in Finnish, <http://lyricsfi.com/elastinen/eteen-ja-ylös>

Software Company. Megan (Software Company managing director) talks about the process of changing her organization and about developing new work attitudes. The others are interested in this process and experiences and ask Megan questions, comparing what they hear with their own organizations: “Would these kinds of changes be possible?” “How could they do it?” Megan cannot stay until the evening because of pressing business engagements (her colleague does not participate at all). She expresses, constructively, that perhaps these sessions are too long and refers to another program in which each meeting was held after work hours and lasted for only one evening. She found this program useful and easy to attend.

This time, the facilitators have developed questions and have inserted them into envelopes. An envelope is addressed to each participant. In turn, each open their envelope; inside is either a question or a task, such as *How could I, as a manager, focus more on solutions rather than problems? Is it okay to show one’s feelings, and what does emotional intelligence really mean? Introduce your picture frame and tell what you now think about the ideas written down in Camp II. Ask your colleagues to do the same.* Mia remains silent, and the participants take the lead in guiding the process.

The second special slot for Electricity Company takes place in the afternoon. Thus, the two companies are not directly following one another, as in Camp II. Instead of only presenting their case, Paul introduces a task for other participants, which involves dividing them into three groups and imagining the future of Electricity Company (services and marketing communication) by adopting the perspective of a consumer.

In the evening, we gather informally in a wine cellar. Mia asks everyone to design their own “power T-shirt.” Everyone gets a white T-shirt on which we can write or draw something inspirational or

personally important with colored markers. Some really get into the mood and even wear their T-shirts, while others ignore the task. Since the T-shirts are not presented to others, this is okay, and people have the right not to participate.

In the evening, Mia returns to the working method familiar from Camp I and suggests discussing statements or arguments regarding management in the digital era. In the candlelight, everyone opens an envelope containing one statement, such as “Lead with enthusiasm and endeavor to find meaning for everyone's work” and “Ally and look for new partners continuously.” The idea is to discuss each statement and what kinds of ideas it provokes. However, the discussion does not really take off, so ultimately, the rest of the statements are just read. Again, some stay and converse informally until late.

During Camp III, a new element is introduced in the process: using a Polaroid camera to capture the moment. Each participant takes a picture of another participant. When taking the pictures, the participants do not know how they will be used. In the final morning session, the Polaroid pictures are used to wrap up Camp III, as well as the whole program. Mia introduces the task: “This has been quite a journey. At the beginning, we didn't even know each other's names. And now we have come this far. Everyone now has a chance to think of one future guideline just for you. Write it on the back of the Polaroid picture and then share it with others.” The following are a few examples: “Be open to succeeding, with open meaning presence and remembering that also a very small thing can be seen as a success.” “Involve the others more!” “I'll be true and honest to myself!”

During breaks, participants have been exchanging phone numbers, and some have set a date for future meetings to continue talking and collaborating. Paul (Electricity Company managing director) comes up with an idea: “I don't really want to discuss with the representatives of other electrical companies

anymore. Because all I hear is the same old talk. I get much more out of talking with someone coming from another industry altogether, more refreshing ideas and so on.” Mia closes Camp III and the program, but no one seems to be in a hurry to leave. Instead, everyone lingers as if they are wondering, “Is this it? Is it over?”

FINDINGS - The Development of the Executive Learning Community

In this paper, we investigated *how to facilitate collective creation and executive learning community development in executive education*. The previous section introduced our findings in the form of narrative episodes, with the idea of giving the reader a sense of being there (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). The episodes highlight the process of collective creation and the development of the learning community over time. The findings also put forward how elements from the improvisational theater (means, materials and the modes of engagement) were applied and elaborated during the process. We will now discuss this development in more detail, and the insights derived from it are summarized in Table 2 which depicts key elements of collective creation in the framework for executive learning community.

Focusing on the **means**, different structures and tools were used to initiate and guide the process of collective creation. The place seemed to be an important element in designing the program and facilitating collective creation by removing the participants from their normal (city) offices and schedules. During the process, there was a growing understanding of the need for pacing—for physical and mental movement. Sitting down and working with statements in a monotonous way in the meeting room did not inspire participants to start sharing and contributing to each other. Sharing began when one firm presented their case, and others were given the opportunity to participate and contribute by asking questions and learning. At the beginning of the first camp, the facilitator assumed that the participants could make the connections between the discussions and their work or business. Based on

the feedback, this was not necessarily automatic. Thus, when the participants came together for the second time, particular attention was paid to setting the goals and making the connections.

Materials, such as resources, emotions, ideas, and metaphors, were used in various ways in the consecutive camps. Especially after the participants had gotten to know one another, the facilitators experimented with several new tools based on the idea of pushing the participants to join unfamiliar and perhaps even uncomfortable acts like knitting, taking Polaroid pictures, designing T-shirts, creating picture frames, and designing slogans. Thus, these tools were used to foster the inquiry cycle (Allen, 2013) in personalizing and individualizing learning, going from the abstract discussion of change management to the integration of these ideas into what is personally relevant and meaningful. Concrete tasks and examples can (a) work as important tools in facilitating the creation process for finding solutions and answering questions that puzzle an individual participant, and (b) support trust building and community.

Modes of engagement, the orientation or stance of the participant toward other participants, also developed (with changes in the discussion protocols from Allen [2013]), and engagement arguably had a prominent role in executive learning community development. To stimulate the participants to engage and start “owning the concept,” it was important to think about how engagement could extend episodes of complementarity (how to engage everyone in emotional and open discussion) and resist the need to validate rather than to explore the practices under discussion. First, the participants did not really reflect on their own organizations or situations but rather presented opinions and sometimes debated details in the statements. However, they were fascinated by each other, and the enthusiasm and openness of some participants were contagious. During the first camp, the participants got to know one another and demonstrated ownership of the concept and over their mutual learning by planning how to improve the next camp without being prompted to do so. When they met again, the situations

in many of the companies had changed, and the participants openly shared their difficulties. This openness suggests that a bond seemed to have developed between the participants, and that the level of trust was high—even if not all the participants joined, were physically absent, or were not as open and sharing when present. Since the most active participants were present in all three camps, the community seemed to endure the absences of some others. During the last camp, the facilitator had a less visible role than in the previous camps. The participants had learned to openly ask questions of each other, and this supported engagement in an open, trusting, and reflective discussion, rather than just offering ready-made solutions from one's own company.

<Insert Table 2 here>

DISCUSSION: DEVELOPING AN EXECUTIVE LEARNING COMMUNITY

In this paper we have addressed the question of *how to facilitate collective creation and executive learning community development in executive education*. Our interest lies in the fact that, despite the number and importance of executive education programs globally, executive education remains an under-researched domain regardless of the challenges identified for conducting executive education successfully (Buechel & Antunes, 2007; De Vries & Korotov, 2007; Roglio & Light, 2009). Creating programs for executive education that are dynamic, instead of adhering to fixed schedule and contents (Levinsohn, 2015), able to induce a sense of commitment, and focus on topics found relevant and interesting by the participants is called for. Consequently there is a need to reflect and innovate formats for executive education programs that have potential to generate meaningful, long-term value for the participants (Dover et al., 2018) and the sponsor organizations (Armstrong & Sadler-Smith, 2008; Berggren & Söderlund, 2011; Doh & Stumpf, 2007).

Our theoretical starting point in studying learning community development has been collective creation (e.g. Bridoux et al., 2013). The collective creation denotes the dynamic process of co-operation

(mobilizing resources to create value) between members of a community or organization (e.g. Wang, He & Mahoney, 2009; Bridoux et al., 2011). Our empirical study focuses on executive education program organized around learning camps as collaborations between executives and facilitators. This study was conducted through narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008). Following an abductive reasoning (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996), we rely on literature from improvisational theater (e.g. Vera & Crossan, 2004; Gagnon, Vough, & Nickerson, 2012) to demonstrate how the improvisational theater activities may strengthen collective creation and consequently contribute to learning community development (Schau, Muñiz & Arnould, 2009). This enables us to show with concrete examples from executive education context how the development of learning community can be facilitated. Based on our findings we propose a framework for an executive learning community development (Figure 2).

[Insert Figure 2 here]

Figure 2 Framework for executive learning community development

We suggest that the learning community model based on collective creation can aid in overcoming some of the existing challenges with executive education (lacking relevance, responsibility for learning, long-lasting change and resource scarcity). Next, we discuss our findings in more detail. The existing literature highlights that executive education programs may focus so much on academically rigorous content that the relevance for the participants may well be lost (Anderson & van Wijk, 2010; Berggren & Söderlund, 2011; Roglio & Light, 2009; Tushman et al., 2007). The previous research has pointed out that relevance is supported when the executive education programme relies on the combined expertise of the participants, and of facilitators supporting the knowledge creation (De Vries & Korotow, 2007; Tushman, O'Reilly, Fenollosa, Kleinbaum, & McGrath, 2007). Inviting the participants to take active role in defining the themes, working methods and structure, gives them a possibility to co-create the relevance for the program. Letting the script develop based on the

participants' experiences may help to overcome the challenge of being relevant in executive education programs (Anderson & van Wijk, 2008).

Through our analysis we demonstrate, that making changes in the structure during the process based on the participants' experiences and events (Houde, 2007), can help the executive education program to generate value for the participants. They are invited and stimulated to reflect on their own and their company's experiences by not offering easy answers but by posing challenging questions. We also believe that stories, real stories from real organizations, have an important role, creating opportunities for the participants to tell their stories, and for others to respond to them, emphasizing the focusing on current challenges or development areas for the participants (De Vries & Korotov, 2007). In addition, developing in-depth knowledge of the companies before and during the process turned out to be useful to focus on real and relevant topics. The situations in the companies changed considerably during the relatively short timeframe, and to be prepared, it was necessary to understand their changes. Thus, considerable effort was placed on preparing for the camps. The participants, however, were informed only about starting and closing times, and therefore the script could evolve flexibly during the day (Allen, 2003).

A second challenge for executive education is fostering the participants take responsibility for their learning (Houde, 2007; Roglio & Light, 2009) and moving from the teacher-focused transfer of knowledge model to student-centered education, which accounts for participant experiences (Berggren & Söderlund, 2011; Tushman et al., 2007). The findings show how the participants initially expressed discomfort with not having a clearly set goal and outline in the first camp and expected the facilitator to take control. However, they could be guided into making connections between the camp activities and their own development, and using materials (like a picture frame with notes to oneself) can facilitate this process. Based on our findings, in the beginning, the group worked mechanically and in response to the facilitator's guidance. Individuals need to understand whether they determine the focus for their collective work themselves, or whether their collaboration is contrived to advance administrative or system-imposed goals (Hargreaves & Dawe, 1990).

Once the participants get to know each other, which can be supported by the use of means and materials, they take more prominent role. This in turn means that the facilitator is able “to take a step back”. When the concrete events and examples from the businesses were applied to direct the process, the participants learned how to participate by asking questions that contributed to the engagement and taking ownership of their learning. This enabled participants to take responsibility for their own learning while simultaneously supporting the learning of others as well. Our findings demonstrate how the role of the facilitator diminished during the process of the learning camps, and how the participants became more active and assumed an increasingly bigger role in their learning. For this change to take place, our study underscores the modes of engagement. Engagement can be facilitated, but it can also develop via the actions of members of the community willing to share their experiences and encouraging others to share, too (Bridoux et al., 2011; Kurikko & Tuominen, 2012).

It is helpful if the structure differs from normal work by physically moving the managers away from their everyday work to a stimulating location and offering time for intense discussions. Different and constantly changing physical, non-typical business locations (such as the beach) and the use of different materials (such as music or frames) to empower and concretely document (personal) learning helped participants to focus on their own learning goals and thus taking responsibility for their own learning (Levinsohn, 2015). Slowing down, for example, when caressing the sand on the beach may have helped to generate the required mindset for focusing on the here and now, discussing and sharing one’s experiences and thoughts, and reflecting on what the discussion meant. Thus, to create a space for learning and creativity, it may be helpful to purposefully change locations and times for the different elements in the program, as this can enable participants to focus on entering into a dialogue (De Vries & Korotov, 2007; Halonen et al., 2010).

Executive education also faces the challenge about facilitating real change in the executives’ work and in their organizations. Although participants must be able to cognitively understand why a change is needed, it is not enough: Enabling emotions is important to facilitate change in their organizations (De Vries & Korotov, 2007). To support this, the use of different materials, can be taken as an example.

The different materials can be used in setting the expectations and liberating participants from other expectations and routines. Materials can be texts, images, movement, or music, but also emotions, ideas, and metaphors. Knitting a scarf together one by one may seem to be of little relevance to management learning, but since most people (practically all the male participants) were not familiar with this craft, they needed to take a risk, get out of their comfort zone, and possibly feel ridiculous. Our study corroborates that moving into an unfamiliar zone can be helpful in letting go of the need for a script and in embracing collective creation (Bridoux et al., 2013; Allen, 2013). Still, the participants may not be fully capable of automatically deriving key learning lessons but may benefit from guidance by, for example, asking them to reflect on their learning. Thus, the different elements and materials can be applied to guide the participants in becoming active learners and to create and maintain intensity. For example, the picture frames, which can be put in a visible place in an office, serve as constant reminders of the learning goals. Previous literature has highlighted techniques in connection with creating a safe environment for experimentation, such as reframing, encouragement, anticipation, and rehearsal (De Vries & Korotov, 2007). To facilitate the change it is also important that executive education provides participants with an environment in which they can be safely challenged and supported, without hidden agendas.

This emphasizes the importance of the learning community. Creating and maintaining this kind of environment, the supportive role of the group is important (De Vries & Korotov, 2007), thus putting emphasis on the community involved in the education. Using the means (such as scene, structure and tools) flexibly can facilitate building the environment of trust. The program structure—in terms of how it invites discussion and exchange to take place—is important for collective creation and is designed to support the building of relationships and collaboration. Our findings are in line with those of De Vries and Korotov (2007), who stressed that trust, develops gradually over time. That is why multiple modules are better, such as a series of learning camps in our case. Finally, the learning community model relying on collective creation and therefore mobilizing resources from within the group, also requires less financial investments than traditional executive education. With the potential of increased

benefits it can alleviate some concerns about the resource constraints in executive education (Anderson & van Wijk, 2010; Dover et al., 2018).

In addition, while this paper focuses on learning community development, it is to be noted that the need for strong and active members also leads to the idea that ensuring engagement in an executive learning community, participant selection is important (De Vries & Korotov 2007; Tushman et al., 2007), that is inviting participants willing to invest time and other resources to community. Although here we have viewed the community as a whole, it essentially consists of individuals. Thus, this kind of activity may not be suitable for all, and some may be more reserved and not participate in the program. In a community based on trust, this kind of individual deviation seems to be tolerated, in particular when the key, active participants, demonstrate a strong commitment and over time share increasingly personal and confidential questions about the challenges. The fact that the participants came from different industries - and most participants did not know each other beforehand - may be an important component. The participants could openly relate to each other in this new context and did not have to take on roles that they usually have with familiar business partners. They enjoyed the fresh and sometimes confrontational questions and conclusions from peers (Roglio & Light, 2009) and developed informal mentoring relationships. Overall, the executive learning community shared collective responsibility. Even when the working modes did not seem that useful in the beginning, the participants developed a commitment to each other and the model and started offering suggestions for improving the concept.

By drawing from theory of collective creation (e.g. Bridoux, Coeurderoy & Durand, 2011), our research contributes to executive education and learning community literature. Based on our findings, collective creation fosters learning community development in two ways. Firstly, by mobilizing the resources from the community (Wang, He & Mahoney, 2009; Bridoux et al., 2011), the focus is put on process. During this process, participants committed to finding joint areas of interest put emphasis on relevance, and take responsibility for their own and each other's learning, which offers potential for the long-lasting change. Secondly, strengthening the community influences positively on the process

of collective creation (Schau et al. 2009). For example, by creating a strong sense of trust in the community, members of the community may be willing to open up and offer more of their resources to the community. Applying this kind of framework to the executive education context enabled us to highlight the social and collective nature of executive education. In this study, by relying on collective creation theory we propose how an executive learning community can be developed as an alternative or additional model for organizing executive education.

We contribute to learning community literature by demonstrating how improvisational theater activities (Vera & Crossan, 2004; Gagnon, Vough, & Nickerson, 2012) underpinning and strengthening collective creation foster learning community development (Bridoux et al., 2013). Through the use of means (e.g., posing questions based on the life-worlds of the participants or their customers), materials (e.g., designing spaces and places for supporting the community and its learning), and modes of engagement (e.g., committing to and emphasizing the responsibility of participants for their own learning) (Allen, 2013), and their deliberate development and grounding in the executive education program on participants' experiences and interests, it is possible to build and strengthen the community. Consequently, learning communities need not only be naturally occurring and enduring communities (Wenger & Snyder, 2000), but can be purposefully orchestrated and facilitated. They may be short-term, ad-hoc and temporary and still serve their purpose of acting as a learning community.

Implications for Practice

Our study also offers practical implications for executive education by introducing the use of different means and materials and their role in supporting community creation over time, as well as by highlighting the importance of community from the perspective of collective creation. While our study was conducted in informal executive education, this mode of working may also be applicable in formal executive education programs. It presents a way to build trust and a sense of community responsible for joint learning, and therefore be applied more broadly to executive education. The study puts

forward the importance of places and physical artefacts to support education. Taking executive education outside of university campus or the organizational context is not simply entertaining, but offers an opportunity for learning. Similarly, the study offers insight into the importance of the ways the participants are engaged and invited to contribute with their own experiences and assuming an active role in the program. However, given the importance placed on intended learning outcomes in formal executive education programs, a fully emergent program without predefined goals may not be feasible. Hence, the model should not be viewed as replacing but rather as complementing the more dominant pedagogy of management education (Nissley, 2002), for example by organizing follow-up and post-workshop meetings (Tushman et al., 2007) to facilitate potential for internalization and lasting change (De Vries & Korotov, 2007).

The executive learning community presented here draws attention to equality between participants and facilitators and the immensely important role of engagement, even if the learning community is temporary in nature, and also how engagement can be supported. As such, the insights derived from learning communities in executive education could be transferable to other professional and vocational contexts with autonomous and motivated participants. Even though the challenges in executive education—related to program purpose, student characteristics, and class dynamics—differ from those in management education (Garvin, 2007), the learning community model introduced in this paper may have possibilities in areas of management education as well as in organizational development more broadly.

Implications for Research

We hope that the model for learning community development presented in this paper spurs further research. The use of narrative ethnography (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) enabled us to open the black box, the process of executive learning interventions. Thus, demonstrating the actual learning derived from the community by the participants in concrete terms was not in the focus. Therefore, exploring the

learning outcomes remains an important avenue for further research. In particular research is needed about whether in the long-term the learning community will be able to lead to long-lasting change in the organization. Incorporating the experiences of executives participating in these types of interventions into research is equally important. For example, the experiences of those who withdraw from the program are of interest as well as of the ways this is experienced by those who continue to be committed to the program. Furthermore, since the facilitators and their ability to work behind the scenes is of essence, their learning with and of the process represents a key future research area.

CONCLUSION

Building on literatures on collective creation (Bridoux et al., 2013) and learning community (Senge & Scharmer, 2006) and using a qualitative longitudinal research design, we explored development of a learning community through a set of interventions (learning camps). In doing so, we focused on how improvisational theater activities (Vera & Crossan, 2004) can support the collective creation and mobilizing of the resources that foster the learning community development. Our methodology based on narrative ethnography enabled us to offer a fine-grained and detailed understanding of the leaning community development process. We provide a novel framework relying on collective creation and different means, materials and modes of engagement for developing an executive learning community. We explain how the learning community model for executive education may contribute to overcoming some of the suggested challenges of executive education. The framework builds on the ongoing, relevant experiences and events and guides the participants to take increasing responsibility for their own leaning and for sustaining long-term change. Further, by relying on the combined expertise of the members, the community model contributes to the need for relevance while also addressing resource constraints (time and money). The learning community model may augment and complement existing formats for executive education. These findings pave new pathways for researching learning

communities in executive education and for understanding the social and collective nature of these learning processes.

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