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## A relational method for studying management learning in small firms

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## A relational method for studying management learning in small firms

DEVELOPMENT PAPER

### Abstract:

*We learn while we move, therefore this development paper sketches a research method we really would like to discuss with colleagues with the purpose to learn how it might be improved. The method stands on a platform of relational social constructionism and is right now used in a study of management learning through development projects in six small firms. The paper is divided into three sections. One on the ontological, epistemological and methodological setting, one on the development of an action learning model in a relational way, and one on questions related to the practical way to conduct such a study to meet its intentions.*

**Keywords:** social constructionism, relational method, sensemaking, Action Learning and discourse,

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## **A relational method for studying management learning in small firms**

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*We learn while we move, therefore this development paper sketches a research method we really would like to discuss with colleagues with the purpose to learn how it might be improved. The method stands on a platform of relational social constructionism and is right now used in a study of management learning through development projects in six small firms. The paper is divided into three sections. One on the ontological, epistemological and methodological setting, one on the development of an action learning model in a relational way, and one on questions related to the practical way to conduct such a study to meet its intentions.*

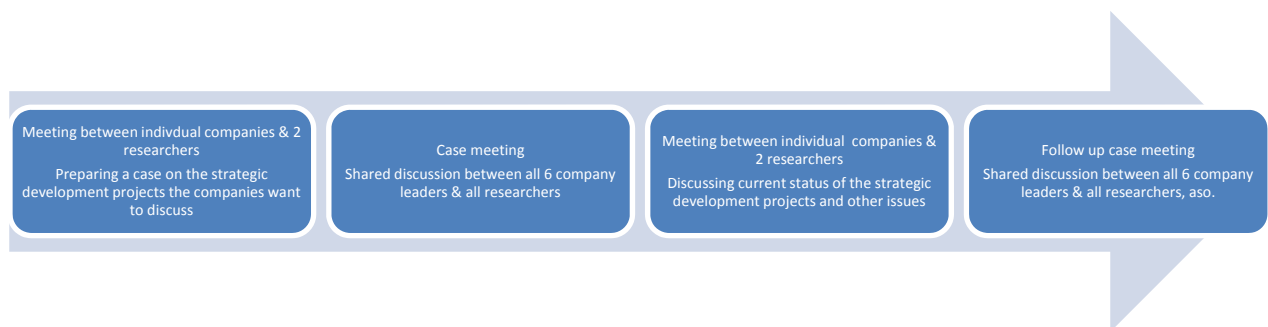
#### **Introduction**

A reason for writing this development paper is to use the possibility to participate in discussions and to get useful advises on how further to develop the methodology we use in our newly started research project. It is a project that has the intention to get deeper into understanding how managers in small firms learn while they work on development projects. We are interested in learning more about how they practice leadership as a way of being-in-relation-to-others, as Cunliffe and Eriksen (2011: 1430) put it. How do they bracket, understand and make sense of strategic challenges and how do they act upon these in what they believe to be meaningful ways? The method or pragmatic we use to learn more about these issues is by spending time together with managers from different firms and have them select projects and tasks they each believe are necessary and beneficial to develop in their firm. This way we center our attention on the local-cultural-relational reality that these managers live in (Hosking, 2010: 6) and try to make this the starting point of our joined construction process about how their challenges can be understood and handled.

Our understanding is that the knowledge needed for solving practical tasks, knowledge on development processes, and learning go hand-in-hand. Following, that this knowledge is generated as actors are on their way trying to grasp what goes on among them and figure out how to act in a sensible way (Ingold, 2008), and this knowing is constructed through living conversations in the moment (Cunliffe, 2011: 665). So if we want to know something about how managers learn to handle challenges on their way we, as researchers, have to talk with these managers as they are on their way and be an integral part of the sensemaking process in the moment (Cunliffe, 2011: 664).

Enhancing the number of actors that take part in these relational sensemaking processes we bring together managers from different small firms, who all come with their local-cultural-relation

knowledge and world view and who all practice leadership as being-in-relation-to-others in different ways. Interesting here is it what happens when these different views on the world meet each other, how do they handle the: "... *complex, back and forth, unfolding process of attempts of mutual construction, one full of tensions and taken-for-grantedness.*" (Cunliffe, 2001: 353) What happens with their local-cultural-relational realities? Do they change and influence each others' being-in-relation-to others? Do they grasp each other and try to develop shared discursive constructions or...? Since 2005 we, together with other colleagues, have gradually developed and used a methodological practices for following how local-cultural-relational knowledge is being developed and altered through communication between a manager, other managers and researchers:



This approach is strongly inspired by action learning, where a guiding assumption is: "*The Kingdom of Heaves, as we read in St. Luke, is to be found within ourselves, and it is the other searchers for it, rather than men with the packages, who will tell us when they think we are getting warm.*" (Revans, 1983: 44) This quote emphasizes that there is no single and real reality independent of the local-cultural-relational reality (Hosking, 2010: 6). It is by exploring how actors bracket and make sense of situations in various ways that they can figure out new ways of seeing themselves and new ways of engaging in their organizational life (Cunliffe, 2010: 658). And in this process the way other managers bracket and understand a concrete challenge and their ideas on how they would deal with the challenge can help and support the individual manager in enhancing the possible ways he can be-in-relation-to-others.

Earlier on we have applied the method as a process where we started by visiting the individual firms. At the meetings with the individual companies the researchers and managers talk about the current status of the strategic research projects, and perhaps other issues that are not shared with the other companies on the joined meetings. The joined meetings are app. 3 months apart and the meetings in the individual firm are placed in between these meetings. The project runs in this manner for app. 1 ½ - 2 years.

The current project is set to run in the same way, with managers from six small Danish firms, with interest in projects and products on renewable energy. They participate in the research project together with six researchers with interest in innovation, organizational development, competence development, learning and relational communication. This development paper is written by three of the researchers, and focuses on practical, methodological and paradigmatic issues in the creation of

the method as we in practice - and here and now - go along with the study together with these firms and their management.

### **The ontological, epistemological and methodological setting**

The three authors have through a number of different empirical studies, including the Action Learning method sketched above, developed interests in a (broad) relational, social constructionist paradigm for the understanding of development in organizations. This interest has been inspired by some more general outline of relational viewpoints from Kenneth Gergen, empirical studies on leadership and management from Ann Cunliffe, Matthew Eriksen, Diane Hosking and Mary Uhl-Bien, works on strategy and strategic management by Robert Chia and Robin Holt, Mats Alvessons studies on organizational change, and Barbara Czarniawska on stories and discourses. We also have in our work in research and teaching through a number of years drawn on the works done by Peter Berger & Thomas Luckmann. And we are also inspired from some of the classic writers such as Wittgenstein, Vološinov, Schütz and James.

From this broad basis we have developed a form of platform, which contains the following main elements

- Organizations are in a continual state of becoming shaped by actors' learning and their attempts to maintain the current organizing through routines and simultaneously trying to develop it in meaningful ways
- Communication are discursive processes that both interpret and construct local-cultural-relational realities
- Organizations are meshworks for multiple voices, norms and values
- Workable solutions are constructed locally, culturally and relationally through language and actions
- Learning is a relational practice, where actors together try to find their way and build better organizations
- Meaning made, sensible actions and possible understandings are local, temporal, relational and always in the making

This platform enables us to conduct studies on organizational change and management learning where it becomes interesting to follow how the individual manager in relation with the other participating managers and the researchers interweave actions and thoughts through discursive language, develop new understandings, initiate new actions and thereby enact new ways of organizing and being-in-relation-to-others (Cunliffe, 2011: 658). Our focus on management learning is how managers change their competences through working on practical tasks that include the use of signals and recipes (Røvik 2011) from without and within the organization. Interaction and mutual learning processes which include employees, co-managers and other, and own previous experiences are also focused upon. As we have experienced through our previous studies with managers in small and

medium sized firms they learn mainly from practice and together with other practitioners and from bringing together understandings and views from different local-cultural-relational realities.

Conducting studies, as the research study presented here isn't without challenges. It is difficult to follow all the twist and turns that a manager experiences in his organizational life and continually be a part of the sense he makes in the moment. Therefore retrospective communication and sense already made also come to play an important role. This is, however, not a problem per se, as the sense already made always is open for reinterpretations and often will be altered with time dependent on the current moment and situation the actor finds himself in (Cunliffe, 2011: 665). It is always possible through communication to construct new brackets and join experiences in new ways that enable the actor to see himself in another perspective and engage in the organizational life in another way, thus construct new and meaningful sense and initiate new actions based on actions previously conducted (Vološinov, 1986, Cunliffe, 2001: 357).

### **The development of Action Learning (AL)**

A version of Action Learning is our methodological framework for producing knowledge together with the six firms on development and learning. As we first saw AL it grew from a critique of the way Business Schools taught their students, by emphasizing the use of practical examples and encouraging the students to take part in AL processes. This is close to our personal favorite principle of teaching and learning: Problem Based Learning, which is the learning method the university the three of us belong to, Aalborg University. Current use of AL in the business research area has at the same time developed into a variety of onto-epistemological assumptions and methods, and we try to combine parts of these to a practical learning and research method.

During our use of AL one of our inputs is as described in Pedler et. al. (2007), that AL research can be described in 3 extreme forms

- Speculative (Knowledge is produced for its own sake, focus upon theoretical work not action)
- Emancipatory (Knowledge that is critical of current power structures and can help the individual to challenge own socially constructed ways of thinking)
- Performative (Knowledge, that leads to action and help solve problems)

Earlier our AL method was focused upon primarily the performative and to a lesser extent to the emancipatory perspectives. However based upon the research we have conducted a further interest in the emancipatory and wayfaring perspective has been developed. One of the things we want to explore with this paper is therefore how and in what way the current AL research project can be integrated in an emancipatory/relational/social constructionist approach. As we see it, AL is a contextual, participatory and change oriented process where different kinds of contributions are considered equally important. The aim of AL research methods is to bring together different local-cultural-relational realities and based upon this open up horizons for discussion, and to create

time/space for collective reflection that again leads to actions. Boje argues that; “...*organizational life is more indeterminate, more differentiated, more chaotic, than it is simple, systematic, monological, and hierarchical*” (Boje, 1995, p. 1001), which corresponds well with some of the fundamental assumptions within the AL method, we have presented, where different world views, multiple voices, norms and values are favored.

In order to work within these different worldviews, multiple voices, norms and values from a social constructionist perspective one needs to accept that all knowledge is socially constructed (Gergen, 2011). The search for one transcending truth is abandoned and instead the ongoing social construction of local-cultural-relational truths becomes the focal point of the research. The only way to access these processes are through the study of how language is being used in the moment. When these philosophical ideas are applied in the study of the AL processes with both managers and researchers one focal point becomes on studying special vocabularies, language repertoires and polyphonic expressions (Boje 1995, Potter & Wetherell, 1986). The organization becomes a “phenomena in and of language” and is best studied as “collaborative and contending discourses” (Boje 2004 p.571). Or as Chia (2000) describes it: discourse is organization. Seen in an action learning perspective construction of self and others becomes a discursive action, created in the ongoing relationship with others (Gergen 2011). To study these processes is to study language in use, focus upon the words applied, the narratives constructed, and the application of interpretative repertoires and construction of discourse: “*Within the constructionist dialogues we find that it is not the individual mind in which knowledge, reason, emotion and morality reside, but in relationships* (Gergen, 2011: 109).

Social constructionist research applies Wittgenstein’s (1953) argumentation that the ongoing language construction process is socially constrained. In other words it is socially constructed through a community, and thereby constrains what it is possible to say. We are always constrained by the ongoing language games and to make sense we have to follow certain rules: “*As constructionists also suggests, playing by the rules of a given community is enormously important to sustaining these relationships*” (Gergen 2011: 101) In the study here presented and the method chosen with bringing managers together from different local-cultural-relational realities, we also bring together different discursive rules. It hence becomes interesting to see how the managers understand their own and each others’ rules and how they might influence the way they enact the rules through their being-in-relation-to-others.

The researchers participate in this process and we also bring with us our rules, our roles are however different as we do not bring any concrete organizational challenges with us, we want to discuss. The research forum can therefor also be perceived as a shared time and space opportunity, with the purpose of exploring the reified constructions of participants and researchers. In an action learning process these socially constructed discourses must be taken into consideration. Both seen as an oppressive force upon some of the members of the group and the things that are not mentioned can be seen as equally interesting points of research. It is also important for the researcher to analyze

his/her own socially constructed truths and to question these in the research process. It is important to see the language game as a shared construction process in the group as a whole.

### **How to practice the intentions of AL in a social constructionistic way?**

It is not without problems to combine relational social constructionism, discourses and AL and this leads us to the following central questions that we wish to discuss and explore further;

- In an AL research process, who learns? Is it focused upon how managers improve their business skills, or how to improve the researchers understanding of managerial praxis. Seen in a relational perspective, the learning process is mutual and ongoing, it is developed via the exchange of language construction. How is this language focus best developed, and what can be gained from different approaches?
- In the Emancipatory perspective, there is primarily focus upon a post-modern understanding of power relationships (Derrida, Foucault), but we are not especially interested in investigating the grid of power. We are more interested in observing how all the participants in the AL process over time reconstruct their local-cultural-relational beliefs about their own and the others' discussed strategic problems and how they alter their being-in-relation-to-others.
- How is it possible to go from an AL project primarily concerned with problem solving activities to an AL project concerned with both concerned with problem solving and with studying language based social construction processes? What are the implications for method and research design?

This also raises some very practical questions in how the study can be conducted. Some of the elements in the framework for conducting this AL-research are defined. Participants are managers with development and project responsibilities in each firm. The number of participants from each firm is between one and three, but additional managers and experts from these firms could be involved. Development projects are more or less chosen by the participating managers. A time structure with an AL seminar each third month and in between visits by pairs of researcher in between has been agreed upon by both managers and researchers. Specific knowledge on the technical and commercial dimensions of each project has to be kept inside the AL boundaries. Each firm and each manager participate as long as they feel they learn from the AL process.

- What could be done to make it easier to support different perspectives actively in the AL process between managers mainly looking at processes from an analytic perspective and researchers with their different constructionistic views?
- How should we facilitate the double co-construction that goes on in relation to challenges that are kept within the specific firm and those that are discussed open at the joined AL seminars?
- How can the material collected in the individual firm by researchers and manager ('s) most efficient be used as cases at the AL seminars?



- How do we measure the progress in these processes, beyond the actual success or failure of the specific development project?
- Have methods for keeping these two levels processes: firm and inter-firm nurturing each other and securing that all participants have gained from participating?

These practical questions as well as the more methodological, paradigmatic and ontological questions are the ones we would like to discuss with colleagues at the Management Learning conference in Lancaster with the purpose of developing a full paper that can take part in further developing the field.

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