Aalborg Universitet

AALBORG UNIVERSITY

DENMARK

Reflective Roleplaying in the Development of Dialogic Skill

Hansen, Lone Hersted

Reflective Role-playing in the Development of Dialogic Skill

By Lone Hersted

Abstract

Whether an organization prospers depends importantly on the relationships among its participants, and central to the success of relationships is the process of dialogue. This article describes an action-based educational practice for enhancing dialogical and relational skills among members of an organization. The effort draws on concepts of participatory research, collaborative learning and dramatic acting. Specifically, the practice combines collaborative role-playing, polyphonic reflection, goal articulation, and facilitator cooperation to achieve educational ends. The project was carried out together with approximately 60 organizational members over a period of 18 months. Results suggest that this combination of practices enhanced dialogic, relational, and reflective skills among leaders and employees of the organization. Among the various results, particular attention is here paid to the outcomes of reflective role-playing for acquiring bodily awareness, changing and expanding perspectives, developing critical self-reflection, and enhancing relational consciousness.

Keywords: adult learning, reflective learning, transformative learning.

The aim of the present article is to provide the reader with an overview of a practice for collaborative, organizational learning and knowledge building based on roleplaying and reflection. The effort was particularly inspired by action research and playbuilding as qualitative research (Norris 2009). The article is based on the assumption that social worlds are created and sustained through communication. In effect, language has a constituting force, and by developing skills in dialogue we can enhance the relationships in which we take part – in groups, teams or entire organizations. From this point of view, an organization can be seen as composed of multiple voices moving continuously within webs of relationships (Hosking 2011, Author et al. 2013). Echoing Wittgenstein's (1953) metaphor of "language games" and the "forms of life" of which they are a part, I focus here on the discursive practices taking place among the actors in the organization. The article describes a project based on the assumption that skills of participation in dialogue can be enhanced through training and reflective practice. Or more broadly, through significant educational experiences, we can alter the course of our relationships, and create better work places and more flourishing social worlds.

Learning and knowledge building is here approached as an embodied, dialogical process. Theoretically the practice draws from developments in discourse theory and from action research in the context of the dramatic arts. The practice represents a view of research as a relational process where the participants are reflecting together and producing knowledge in-the-making. Here I do not draw a hard distinction between participatory research inquiry and initiatives for collaborative learning. After introducing the grounding views, the practice of reflective role-playing will be described. The practice was introduced into an organizational setting over a period of eighteen months. Several outcomes of this skill-building practice will also be discussed.

The Constituting Force of Dialogue

The present project draws from the social constructionist view that through our collaborative participation in language we create our conceptions of reality and value (Gergen 1994). Seen from this approach, values and meanings are co-constructed and constituted through the social activities of every day life. In other words: values and meanings are not stable, mental entities belonging to the individual, but products of social interaction, always in movement. This orientation lends special dimension to conceptions of transformative education and as well to research from a

participatory standpoint. For one, it places a strong emphasis on pedagogies of participation, that is, learning processes that extend the focus beyond the individual learner. Further, a constructionist view suggests that by working within processes of meaning making, educational practices may contribute to major transformations at all levels of society.

If meaning is co-constructed, it is essential for educational purposes to attend to the processes of origination. While there is much to be said about the context in which meaning is generated, practices of dialogue have been central to the interests of many educators, e.g. Freire (1970), Mezirow (1991, 2000), and Wells (1999). At the same time, many definitions of dialogue have been developed and described over the years, each with its particular implications for education. Most of these definitions can be characterized in two ways, first by their view of dialogue as the sharing of subjective worlds, and second by their idealization of dialogue. The former commitment is to a mind-world dualism in which words are understood as expressions of the mind, and the latter, a view of dialogue as a highly specialized and inherently valuable form of conversation. In the present project, neither of these views is embraced. Drawing from the Bakhtinian school, I find it more useful to view dialogue as a form of *coordinated action*. As Voloshinov (1929) put it:

> Meaning is realized only in the process of active responsive understanding. Meaning does not reside in the word or in the soul of the speaker or in the soul of the listener. Meaning is the effect of interaction between speaker and listener […] (p. 103).

Instead of transmitting messages from A to B and reverse, we co-construct meaning through our coordination of action – discursive and otherwise. Meaning is created in the mutually responsive interplay between the interlocutors in a process of continuous coordination. Like a game of football, no single person is in control of the outcomes (Author et al. 2013 p. 9). This also means that dialogue may serve many different purposes, both positive and negative. Even disagreement and animosity are relational achievements.

There are a number of educational implications following from the view of dialogue as coordinated action. Among the most important, traditional pedagogies of education – including lectures and readings – are limited. Dialogue is a continuously unfolding process that challenges participants at every moment with novel circumstances. Much like playing chess or basketball, optimal learning requires immersion in ongoing activity. Second, dialogic skill is not solely an

individual acquisition. That is, if meaning emerges from coordination, the skill resides not in either participating party, but in the way their actions are related. This represents a shift from focusing on the individual to a participatory view of communication, and *emergence* in relationships. Further, dialogic knowledge cannot be reduced to the use of language alone. Following Gergen (2009) and Shotter (2001), it is important to see dialogue and relating as an embodied and sensual social practice. Thus, in order to develop insights into ways in which we communicate and relate to each other, in the present project it was essential to establish an arena for active participation. We were here dealing with what Cunliffe and Shotter (2006) define as "participatory ways of knowing," while simultaneously fostering ways of "knowing-in-action" (Schön, 1983).

Embodied Learning, Dramatic Role-Play, and Reflection

As I am proposing, dialogical skills are optimally learned through embodied action. Such a view of education is scarcely new. In this sense the project echoes Dewey's (1916) view of learning-as-practice. Interesting as well were Vygotsky's (1966) writings on learning through play. Following Vygotsky, children's play can be seen as a form of *embodied imagination*, in which the participants realize the outcome of their imagination through creative activity. The present work is also consistent with Lave and Wenger (1991), who propose that "learning, thinking, and knowing are relations among people in activity, in, with, and arising from the socially and culturally constructed world" (p. 50). And the project puts emphasis on the *collaborative learner*, one who joins in the process of *way-faring* (Ingold, 2008) and discovery. Most important in the present case, collaborative learning was realized within a dialogic process in which all participants shared responsibility for learning.

With such views in place, I also drew on my own background in the dramatic arts to explore more fully the possibilities of a skill-enhancing pedagogical practice. Dramatic role-playing seemed to me the optimal vehicle for engaging participants in active dialogue. Through role-playing, participants could become both physically and psychologically involved. This would be especially, I believed, if the participants could choose episodes of relevance to their work life. New insights might emerge as participants "inscribed their bodies" with new forms of action, not a *knowing about* but a *knowing-from-within* (Shotter 1993, 2006). In these role-playing episodes, participants might become increasingly aware of multiple dimensions of communication, not only

the spoken words, but as well the voice, tone, pitch, rhythm of speech, bodily movements, gestures and facial expressions etc. Further, they might begin to notice more carefully the actions of others. While playing the role as another person - for instance a young boy, a mother, or a colleague - the "actor" would begin to identify with that person, to practice an embodied imagination in which he or she experiences the world from the perspective of the other. In this process the "actor" may begin to grasp the understandings of the other person and the context in which he or she resides. For the organization, we find here the potential of role-playing to enhance mutual understanding, and increasing the motivation for exploring more viable ways of relating.

Yet, in my view, this kind of action-based learning is vastly enhanced by developing a reflexive consciousness of dialogic process. The acquisition of skills is essential, but the ability to reflect on the process in which they function enables one not only discern when and where such skills are indeed skillful, but to create variations as new situations emerge. One may acquire particular skills, but be unable to understand how and when they are most adequate, what alternatives might be open, or how they might be altered or applied as new situations occur. In other words, dialogic skills may be vitally enhanced through thoughtful reflection. To sharpen the participants' understanding of the choices available to them, the present practice placed a strong emphasis on critical and creative reflection. Such reflection was initiated not only through the questioning by the project facilitator, but through a *polyphonic reflecting team* (to be described shortly). Thus, during the role-playing there were frequent periods in which the participants entered into critical and creative reflection on the episodes. As Schön (1987) might put it, as participants (both the "actors" and the reflecting team) discussed the role-playing episodes and the relationships from a multi-voiced perspective – they began practicing *reflection-on-action* in order to enhance and qualify their *reflection-in-action.*

In brief, this practice of reflective role-playing was developed to enhance dialogic skills, develop critical self-reflection, increase bodily awareness and relational consciousness, expand embodied imagination, and enable participants to see relational episodes from different perspectives.

Organizational Context and Process Design

The dialogue training took place over a period of 18 months at a 24-hour care center for adolescents

(between 12 and 18 years old), who were removed from their parents. The institution was situated in the countryside, and was owned and operated by the local municipality. The project included both the leaders and employees of the center (including pedagogues/social workers, schoolteachers, psychologists, secretaries, gardeners, and kitchen workers). All participants had daily contact with the young people living at the institution.

The project was composed of 22 training days spread over 18 months with six different groups. Typically there were around 8-10 participants in each group (with exception from the leading team consisting of 5 persons: 1 principal, 1 vice principal and 3 team leaders). Each group went through 3 days of training except from one group who asked for one extra training day, and the leading team, who went through 6 training days (3 days in the initial phase and 3 days in the final phase of the project). Several of the dialogue training sessions were recorded on video, except for cases where the participants did not wish to be recorded. Video recordings were made of representative samples, transcribed and analyzed. Participants were ensured anonymity, and professional secrecy was promised regarding the lives of the adolescents living at the institution. To explore the potential effects of the present practice, nine participants joined focus groups at the end of the project to discuss and reflect on their experiences. The focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full length. We shall discuss learning outcomes after describing the practice itself.

Reflective Role-Playing as Learning Practice

To provide a more detailed understanding, practice of reflective role-playing can be viewed in terms of five central components: defining learning goals, setting rules, selecting and performing disorienting dilemmas, activating a polyphonic reflecting team, and over-all facilitation including evaluation of each session. In my view, the success of this practice depends on the close attention given to these components.

Defining Learning Goals

As a researcher and facilitator of the process I hoped that we could reach some overall common objectives for the project such as developing dialogical and relational skills through the enhancement of bodily awareness, the expansion of perspectives, the increase of critical self-reflection and the enhancement of relational consciousness. But in my experience, learning takes place most effectively when participants are actively seeking to achieve some end. We cannot easily instruct people or impose a set of goals in which they have no interest. I thus invited the participants in this project to formulate their own learning goals. In this way they were positioned as experts on their own learning needs. On the very first day of the dialogue training the participants were invited to reflect upon, define and discuss their desired learning goals, both at an individual level and at group level (as mentioned earlier there were typically around 8-10 participants in each training group). The group process was especially effective inasmuch as the participants began to build on each other's ideas, and added extra dimensions to their own learning goals. Examples of their learning goals:

- We will behave in appreciative ways
- We wish to be present in the moment
- We will say what we mean and mean what we say
- We want to investigate how we can talk about things that seem to be difficult to talk about
- We want to become better listeners before drawing conclusions

The participants wrote their learning goals in personal notebooks and shared their goals on a poster hanging on the wall. During the process of dialogue training we currently returned to these learning goals, and some goals were modified and refined by the participants as training proceeded. For instance one of the leaders defined in the first phase "I wish to be clear in my communication" as his personal learning goal, but later modified it to "I wish to be clear and appreciative in my communication". It appeared that the formulation of goals at both levels had a motivating effect among the participants because in this way they took more ownership of the process.

Setting Rules for Play and Learning

According to Huizinga (1955), play can be defined as a 'free activity', which is more or less structured by its own rules and unfolds in accordance with its own boundaries of time and space. In this understanding play is "standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary life' as being 'not serious', but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly" (p. 13). Huizinga admits that playing can be "instrumental towards the acquisition of knowledge", but he also reminds us that "true play knows no propaganda; its aim is in itself" (Huizinga 1955 p. 238). Particularly important is that play offers us a context for experimenting and trying out actions difficult to perform in daily life. However, Huizinga also saw that while free in certain respects, play was not random. Implicit rules were endemic to play. In this, he also agreed with Vygotsky (1966), who claimed that while participants create imaginary situations in play, play is always governed by rules. From earlier projects with similar target groups I also knew the importance of setting the frame (context) for the process and defining clear rules. It is a matter of defining a form of contract together *with* the participants. If participants slacken the respect for the rules, the process is immediately affected, and the learning process becomes less intense. Thus we agreed on rules for being present, focused, non-judgmental, and respectful towards each other.

There is an additional reason for establishing rules. They establish a safety zone for new experiments and possibilities to occur. When participants are not familiar with role-playing, they might feel anxiety at public performance. In this context, rules are helpful, because they can constitute a safe frame for play. The rules serve as a kind of emotional scaffolding, which enable the participants to risk sharing and experimenting. Here, risk taking and playfulness are two sides of the same coin. In Vygotskian terms, one could claim that the rules are scaffolding the creation of a safety frame, which allows participants to work from within and beyond the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

Exploring Disorienting Dilemmas

Half a year before initiating the project I had worked for a short period as a consultant for the organization, and had found it marked by high levels of tension. The reasons for these tensions were multiple, and essential points of departure for the present project. Often there were conflicts in

relation to the young people living at the institution concerning compliance with the institutional rules; but there were also tensions concerning coordination between staff members, and in the relationship between staff and the leading team. Later on I discovered that there were also tensions at stake in their relationship to the parents of the young people, and in the staff members relationship to external working partners and in the leading group. To maintain maximum participation in the role-playing to follow, and to enable the role-playing to be maximally useful, participants were asked to select challenging interpersonal episodes they had experienced in the organization. For example, they might select challenges in relation to the adolescents living at the institution or to their parents, or in relation to colleagues, other working partners, authorities or stakeholders. Thus, the role-playing challenges were loaded with tensions, reflecting conflict and alienation within the organization itself. I viewed these role-playing challenges in terms of what Mezirow (1994) calls *disorienting dilemmas*. According to Mezirow (1991), the learning process should facilitate the appropriation of new perspectives. As he explains:

> The educator who wishes to facilitate transformative learning provides different meaning perspectives that offer new ways of responding to a situation according to new rules that the learner is taught to follow. The educator then encourages the learner to apply the new perspectives (rules) in specific problem situations. Perspective transformation is never complete until action based upon the transformative insights has been taken (p. 56).

Thus, as participants played out these dilemmas, they were encouraged to create alternatives to the normal but dysfunctional routines of communication. They were invited to look at the episodes from new perspectives and to try them out. Often the presented scenarios were divided into smaller sequences, where specific key utterances, movements, and gestures were questioned and acted out in alternative versions. We could, for instance, change a short fragment, a gesture, a sentence spoken in a particular way, the tonality of voice and play the whole scenario again with new variations. In this way the routine perspectives (and often institutionalized patterns of acting) were de-constructed, and new (and more generative) scenarios were developed.

Activating the Polyphonic Reflecting Team

To facilitate consciousness of the dialogic process and the potentials available to the participants, we generated in each session a reflecting team among others inspired by Tom Andersen (1991). During the role-playing, the reflecting team members were challenged to observe and listen from specific perspectives. This could be, for instance, the perspective of an adolescent, a teacher, a pedagogue, a social worker, a mother, a father, a friend, a leader, a representative from the union etc. By observing the episodes from these different perspectives the dialogues in the reflecting team become multi-vocal. Drawing from Bakhtin (1984), I termed these *polyphonic reflecting teams*. The members of the reflecting team were then encouraged to participate in dialogues about the observed episodes in the role-play. They were invited to contribute with new ideas and alternatives to scenarios not from an abstract theoretical position, but from *within* the situation. Participants were moving on the edge between *the recalled and re-constructed past* and an *imagined future*.

The reflecting team was encouraged not to express judgmental points of view in their remarks, but instead to show *curiosity* and *wonder* in humble ways. The facilitator reminded them to be careful in the ways in which they expressed themselves, for example, using formulations such as: "It strikes me that…", "What makes an impression on me is that…" or, "I wonder why…." The role players were not obliged to follow the ideas from the reflecting team. The person who originally offered the episode (the disorienting dilemma) was free to choose what to do next. For instance the facilitator might ask, " Now you have been listening to the reflecting team for a while – is there something from what you have heard from them that makes sense to you or somehow inspired you?"

As an example, in a session, two employees showed a scenario where one of them played the role as her self and the other played the role of a 12-year old girl who lived at the institution. The girl had hid herself at the lavatory and locked the door, probably in order to smoke a cigarette, which was not allowed at the institution. Apparently, the employee was afraid that the girl would throw herself out of the window. In order to get her out of the lavatory, the employee started yelling at her in a strong voice. After a while, the girl unlocked the door and stepped out of the room, but it rapidly ended up with a physical fight between the two, where the girl finally was forced down by the employee.

After the presentation of the scenario we had a shared reflection in the reflecting team where we looked at the episode from different perspectives from a non-judgmental approach. We

agreed that using violence was not a generative, nor an acceptable, way to move on, so how could the scenario develop in alternative ways? Through the dialogue with the reflecting team, many different aspects concerning the episode and the life story of the girl were illuminated, and we discussed several alternative initiatives such as: how can we as employees in general build up mutual trust by relating to the girl in more appreciative ways, showing her that we care for her? How can we start talking with the girl in more personal and solicitous ways? Etc. After a long dialogue in the reflecting team, new alternative ways of approaching the girl were enacted through new scenarios, for instance where the employee was avoiding being commanding in her use of language and her use of voice, and avoiding taking a physically threatening attitude, but in stead slowing down the rhythm, speaking with a lower voice, showing more patience, and trying to open up for a dialogue instead of entering into a game of power etc.

The reflecting team members were not only observing, listening and having dialogues together about the episodes, but as well (by invitation from the facilitator) occasionally moving into direct dialogue with the roleplayers. Here they not only functioned as spectators but they became what the Brazilian theatre director, Augusto Boal (1979) called "spect-actors." The idea of Boal, inspired by the German theatre director and dramatist, Bertolt Brecht, was to move the spectator from being passive to active, from witness to protagonist, "to restore to him his capacity of action in all its fullness" (Boal 1979 p. 155). In our practice the distinction between spectator and actor was thus dissolved; in one moment the participant could be a spectator, in the next, an actor. These kinds of shifts among the roles created an important dynamic in the process and contributed to the active involvement of all participants. At the same time it contributed to capacities for changing perspective.

Sometimes a member of the reflecting team was invited to place him- or her self behind one of the role-players and try to identify with this person. The facilitator asked, for instance, " How do you think X experiences the situation we just have seen taking place?" or, "What do you think is important for X in this situation?" The multiple voices of the reflecting team were invited into the process in order to expand the complexity and contradictions of the disorienting dilemma in which the participants were stuck. Through reflective dialogue, new openings and different possibilities for action emerged. The attempt was to enhance both *reflection-in-action* and *reflection on action* (Schön 1983).

From a social constructionist perspective reflexivity and experimentation of this sort is essentially a local process of co-constructing; insights and solutions are always *in-the-making.* In this I assume a perspective of *becoming,* rather than the more usual *ontology of being* (Chia, 1995). Participants are engaged in an ongoing relational process, never assuming a taken-for-granted knowledge, but opening up to multiple possibilities (Gergen, 1994; Hosking, 2008). We shift here from a focus on *knowledge* to the process of *knowing*, a process for which all are responsible, and that can be characterized as "unbounded, fluid, bodily sensed and often tacit, i.e. implicit in one's practices and expressions" (Cunliffe & Shotter, 2006, p. 235).

The Roles of the Facilitator

As I saw it, the roles of the facilitator were multiple: First of all, it was a matter of ensuring a nurturing frame for participation. This also meant approaching the participants with respect and appreciation. Building confidence is crucial for participation, which means that *an open relationship* between facilitator and participants is central for learning. The facilitator must also contribute with enthusiasm into the process. It is important that participants can trust in the possibility for positive outcomes. Most important, the facilitator must help in developing new practices and a new consciousness. In my view, the facilitator must, on the one hand be humble and take a *not-knowing-position* (Anderson 1990), and on the other hand, must function as a game-master, one who can take initiative, formulate questions and might even act as a provocateur. In effect, the facilitator must also be a collaborative learner, one who joins in the journey of discovery. Drawing from Shotter's (2010) view of '*withness*'-thinking, the facilitator must ideally move *with* the participants, not imposing his or her views on them. At the same time the facilitator must inspire the participants to see the disorienting dilemmas from new and different perspectives, and help them imagine and to act out alternative scenarios. As I saw it, the facilitator cannot and should not manage the process, but can be a significant influence by drawing distinctions and highlighting specific aspects and details, while leaving other aspects in the shadow. By asking questions the facilitator can draw the attention to specific issues, zooming in and out, moving in time between past, present and future, moving from micro to macro and reverse. The facilitator can also invite participants to dwell on specific dialogic moves and invite reflection on alternatives. Here I drew from the questioning orientation of Cecchin (1987) and psychiatrist Karl Tomm (1987-88), and

especially what is often defined as reflexive, circular questioning. Such questions invite participants to see an episode from different perspectives and to imagine alternative scenarios in their relationships. Thus, the facilitator might ask the role-players directly: "What would be important, do you think for person X?" "And how would Y respond to this, if he or she heard your discussion?" Or the facilitator might ask the reflecting team what could be characterized as meta-questions: "What do you think characterizes this language game?" "Do you notice some specific patterns in their communication?" He or she might also turn to genre questions "If this was a movie, what kind of genre do you think is played out here? For instance: a thriller, a melodrama, a comedy, a tragedy or something else?" or: "What other kind of scenarios could they create together if X and Y started communicating in new ways?" Or, "What kind of utterance could be the first helpful move towards an alternative way of communicating?" The facilitator doesn't have "the right answers" but in collaboration with the participants the facilitator could participate in a creative *wayfaring* (Ingold 2008).

The task of the facilitator is also to ensure that the roleplaying does not end up as a farce with stereotype figures. If the roles become too much like caricatures it is important to search for more details about the context and the involved persons. It is a matter of avoiding placing people into static categories but seeing each person as a living being, 'a unique other', who will always be moving and changing. The polyphonic (or multi-voiced) self is, according to Bakhtin (1984), never finished, but always in a process of movement. It is mandatory that the facilitator does not fall into or reinforce rapid conclusions, but remains curious and questioning in ways that help the participants to open their eyes for the multiple facets of the episode and the persons involved.

To summarize the preceding, the practice of reflective role-playing can be visualized as a learning cycle closely related to action research. Though it is important to emphasize that this kind of learning is non-linear and much more complex than any model or figure can illustrate.
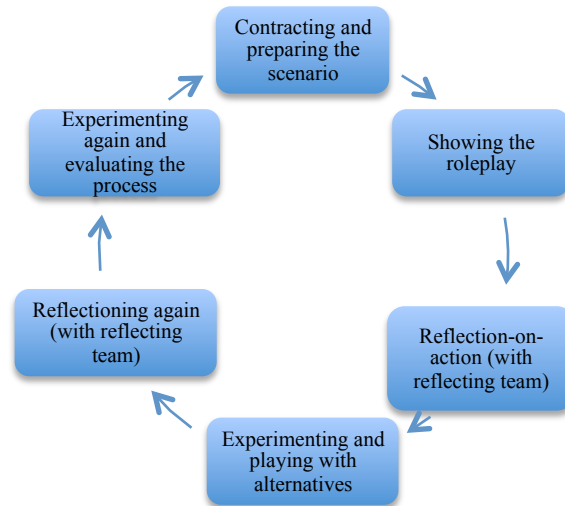
Figure 1. Phases in a
dialogue training session

Learning Outcomes

Learning can be viewed as a transformative process (Mezirow 2000) building on new interpretations of one's experience. In the project we worked with reflexive processes where participants shared and explored specific experiences of tension and conflict in the organization. The overall goal was to improve the communicative and relational skills among the participants. This also meant enhancing consciousness of the bodily dimension of communication, the ability to change perspective, the ability to reflect on one's utterances, and the ability to build up and sustain fruitful relationships to others. It was important for my purposes to gauge whether such outcomes occurred. Was there any evidence that participants gained useful knowledge from their immersion in the process and reflection? As mentioned, relevant data concerning the learning outcome were collected through three semi-structured, focus group interviews, each an hour in length.

The focus groups were mixed and set up from the criteria of variation between professional fields. Participating in the focus groups were nine representatives from different categories of employees (the vice principal (male), a team leader (female), two school teachers (female), three pedagogues (male), one secretary (female), and one kitchen employee (female). The combination of participants was casual and pending on the participants' working schedules, which meant that we could only count on persons who were at work at that particular day and who could take off an hour in order to

participate in the interview. The interviews were carried out 3 weeks after the entire dialogue training process had ended. At that time the overall project had been running for one and a half year. The questions in the semi structured interview guide were formulated around overall themes such as previous expectations among the participants and their reflections concerning their experience of the process, the method, and the learning outcome. The focus group interviews were transcribed in full length and coded into major themes relating to the experiences and the outcomes of the learning experience. While these discussions yielded a rich repository of reflection on the reflective role-playing, I will focus here on illustrative comments relevant only to the outcomes of 1) acquiring bodily awareness, 2) changing and expanding perspectives, and 3) increasing critical self-reflexivity and relational consciousness. Of course the comments from the participants in these focus group interviews could be coded in other ways, however I find these overall themes particularly relevant and useful seen from my approach to dialogue, in particular influenced by Bakhtin, Shotter and Gergen and as well inspired by Cecchin and Tomm.

Acquiring Bodily Awareness

As proposed, role-playing as a collaborative learning practice, gains potency through its engaging participants in fully embodied action. Comments from the focus groups suggested that indeed, many participants did become conscious of the bodily dimension of their learning. For example, as one of the participants commented on the role-playing process:

> It plays a direct role that we are not just sitting down inactively falling asleep, but it also causes us to start focusing on making the voice and the body fit together, right. It is important to consider if it is appropriate to assume a relaxed and loose body posture depending on the person you are having a conversation with. It is also essential to think about how open and inviting your appearance is, and just all in all to think about if the position you are sitting in is suitable for the social environment. Often I am sitting with my arms crossed like this, and this position I mostly try to avoid at work, also depending on which kids I am talking to. Thus, I have definitely become aware of some things and learned how to do things differently.

As another participant expanded on the importance of the experience:

I think it plays a role for our new students […] The girls, who have known me for a long time, do not get distracted by my body language and posture, it does not matter to them. They know me too well, and know that it is really my eyes they have to pay attention to, and not my arms etc. The newcomers, on the other hand, do not know that. And therefore it is important that I remember to think about these things, which I do now. […] In my section at work we have been working a lot with body language and signaling effects in relation to the kids because some of our students have problems specifically when they want to appear as a funny person. Often we are thinking; "argh, what an irritating brat…" But, that is not what the young person intended to signal […]. Instead of provoking a crisis, one can get out of it in a whole different way by changing the dialogue, right? Thus, I think that the process has been very useful for us in my department. Besides, it has also been entertaining….

The following comment also provides an indication of what I termed "embodied imagination" and how the person participates in his own "inner theater" when anticipating future conversations and meetings.

The awareness of one's own body language is really important, and I have definitely felt this awareness, which is a good thing. Also if I know that I am going to have a certain conversation with someone, I am now able to run the event through in my head before the meeting starts and use some of the things we have learned. I am able to imagine, which scenarios will possibly take place in the forthcoming conversation… and I also use this when dealing with other colleagues but in a different way.

This way of practicing "embodied imagination" or rehearsing in ones own "inner theater" from an anticipatory approach can be helpful, for instance in order to prevent tensions from escalating into conflicts, because the person has already imagined alternative ways of communicating, which may lead to more generative dialogues and meetings in the different social settings.

Changing and Expanding Perspectives

A major aim of reflective role-playing was, as mentioned, to expand the ability of participants to take multiple perspectives. In the dialogue training taken-for granted assumptions were frequently challenged. New ideas and insights were added to the various episodes by the reflecting team, as they looked at the performances from different perspectives. The following comments suggest that the practice met with some success. As a first step in appreciating multiplicity, one may simply become aware of the limits of a single answer or direction. As one participant expressed in the focus group:

> It is not something that we normally do, or even have time to do. I think it was great, and I got to know my colleague much better after that episode. I also like the fact that the other participants were asked to reflect and come up with useful opinions. And luckily it was not like: that was good/that was bad, or that was right/that was wrong. It was more about making some useful and deep reflections, which created a really open space in which no answer book existed.

In our inquiry it was not a matter of finding *The* answer but a matter of embracing multiplicity and experimenting with many different possible ways to go and, by doing so, expand the communicative repertoire in order to become more resourceful and more flexible dialogue partners. Often we get involved in conflicts because we get stuck in our own perspective and we forget to see a situation from other points of view. One of the leaders used the metaphor of "wearing blinders" in referring to the way in which we often become locked into a given perspective:

> It is like wearing blinders, metaphorically speaking. It is really difficult when something has stuck to your mind. And you ask yourself how you can change circumstances so the world can be viewed in a wider perspective? It is quite challenging to really do something and change circumstances when wearing blinders. Actually, I think that the environment and people surrounding you play a role too and can do something when it comes to make a development possible. And that's the real challenge, I think, when trying to use all these things looking forward.

The practice of questioning common (and often institutionalized) ways of thinking had the aim to help participants seeing a situation in a broader perspective and find alternative ways of being-in-relation-to-others. But what would happen after the project had finished? Would the daily routines from earlier take over again? The leader sticks to the point that the environment and the people surrounding a person play a significant role and that one can easily get caught in usual patterns of acting and responding. In other words if you want to change the culture of an organization you cannot do this alone; it must be a common effort. Speaking more directly to the expansion of perspectives, one participant offered:

> I think it is very useful to experiment with different perspectives. If you are dealing with a person it is unquestionably a good idea to try and see things from the other person's perspective. And, the ability to do that is something you can work on for the rest of your life, because it is actually very difficult to see things from a different perspective than your own.

Another expanded on the importance of multiple perspectives:

> I think it is useful if everyone is aware of what it actually means to see things from another person's perspective. You have to be able to understand the other person's way of thinking, and you have to let go off your own thoughts and feelings. You have to be able to figure out what a young person with certain challenges is thinking. Of course it can be rather difficult, especially when you're not having any professional psychological qualifications. But it is still a good idea being trained in seeing things from other perspectives.

Enhancing Self-Reflexivity and Relational Consciousness

As a final focus, I had hoped that reflective role-playing would enhance the participants' consciousness of their actions in dialogue, and the way these contributed to the ongoing interchange. Cunliffe (2002) defines a *second-order reflexivity* in which we reflect upon ourselves in-relation-to-others. She considers self-reflexivity as "crucial because it is the basis for questioning the way we relate with others. By focusing on our own, often unacknowledged, representations of realities and working from within our experience, the impetus for change can be far more powerful

than that mediated by externally imposed frames" (Cunliffe 2002, p. 40). In the focus groups, a number of participants suggested that the role-playing practice contributed to such reflexivity. As one commented:

> I became aware of some different aspects of myself which surprised me quite a lot, and I remember thinking: 'Am I really doing things like that? I probably am, and that is definitely something that I will work on changing now'. […] Thus, in these scenarios I have definitely learned a lot. And then you understand yourself better. It is not about who to blame and who is responsible. It is about throwing light on the situation and understanding the connection to your routines in everyday life, I think. It is important to remember that it is okay to tell someone that you get annoyed when the person does or says certain things… it is difficult and challenging not to appear verbally abusing, but it is okay if you do it in a proper way. It exists among all kinds of staff… and to me it is a continuing working point. It is about becoming aware of and conscious about it.

There were several indications that participants became more sensitive to the ways their actions were embedded in relational process. At a first level there is awareness that one must adjust to the individual habits or styles of each person. As one participant put it:

> You also pointed to the fact that in every situation in which we are involved, every one of us has our own personal luggage with us… someone know each other from other places and others have probably been in situations similar to this in which you are exposed and might feel uncomfortable, and so on. Every experience from the past is with you when you are engaging in a conversation like that.

Another began to see how it is possible to learn from each other through roleplaying. The following utterance points out the possibility of continuing using roleplaying in the daily life of the organization

> Acknowledgement is the necessary and important thing here. For instance when [A] is saying: "Maybe we should try to replay the thing you just did before?" That is a great idea. It is useful to think about what you can change and do better… and, also to try and learn from each other.

It might be useful for [A] and me to enter into role-playing, in which we are acting like [B] does in certain situations. You can really learn something from that exercise.

Another commented:

Well, it was definitely something that made me think a lot about how people react and why they react in a certain way. There is possibly a reason for certain kinds of reactions, and you don't always know what has been going on beforehand. Sometimes specific situations cause particular reactions, and… well, in that way I find the things we have learned very useful.

One of the leaders nicely summarized the potentials of the practice, with an emphasis on the relational character of dialogue:

When circumstances ask for it, you remember some of the things you have learned and are much more aware of what kind of position and approach you should choose. Because of that, I find the exercises rather useful. When I'm going to engage in a conversation with someone, I think about the different techniques I can choose from, and sometimes I take the perspective of the student and place myself in his/her position. That would possibly work when trying to get a social worker to take a different approach. You know, and ask the right questions like; how would you think about it if you were in the students' position? […] I have made use of that method, also in relation to the teachers. In specific situations I have asked the teachers to identify with the students, and feel what it is like to be in their situation.

One may surmise, here, that a major strength in roleplaying is its capacity to activate the imagination and offer a space for creating an alternative future. Boal (1979) pointed out that the aesthetic space can contribute to liberate memory and imagination. As one of the pioneers in drama pedagogy, Jon Lilletvedt wrote: "Genuine dramatic activity builds on the capacity of the human to transcend – transgress or step out of – this 'here and now' in which one physically finds oneself. We have the capability in the imagination to create new conditions for ourselves." (Lilletvedt 1970 p. 6). Pedagogical practices such as the present may contribute significantly to such ends.

Potentials and limitations

As this project suggests, dialogic role-playing combined with a polyphonic reflecting team can serve as a significant tool in the development of dialogical and relational skills. The practice outlined here draws attention to the ways in which we use language in constituting reality, our relations, our identities and the creation of new opportunities in our social worlds. Adopting an explorative, experimental and playful approach, this educational practice was designed to increase discursive and relational awareness, and to invite creativity in developing new and alternative possibilities for action. Similar to Mezirow's transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 2000) the practice emphasized working with disorienting dilemmas, recognizing others' perspectives, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, developing self-reflexivity, and experimenting with new roles. Additionally, however, the attempt was to work actively with the imagination, emphasize embodied learning, focus on relational skills, and employ playful experimentation.

However, it is also important to mention that this enquiry must be carried out with a high sensitivity to the context, to the social climate in the organization and to the special needs and challenges among individuals. To some people, participating in roleplaying with reflecting team, may seem anxiety provoking because this way of working questions our usual ways of thinking and acting and we become exposed to one another, which often implies that we also become vulnerable. Therefore, the facilitation of these kinds of processes must be carried out with a special awareness and a high degree of ethical responsibility characterized by principles of being present, focused, non-judgmental, and respectful towards each other. As mentioned earlier, it is important to avoid putting people into static or stereotype categories but seeing each person as a living being, 'a unique other' in constant movement. In addition, it is my experience that the processes become most fruitful while working in groups consisting of no more than 8-10 participants.

References

Andersen, T. (1991). *The Reflecting team: Dialogues and Dialogues About the Dialogues.* New York City: W. W. Norton & Company.

Anderson, H. (1990). Then and Now: From knowing to not-knowing. *Contemporary Family Therapy Journal* 12, pp.193-198.

Hersted, L. & Gergen, K.J. (2013). *Relational Leading: Practices for Dialogically based Collaboration.* Ohio: Taos Institute Publications.

Bakhtin, M.M. (1981). The Dialogic Imagination. *Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin.* (ed. By M. Holquist). Austin: University of Texas Press.

Bakhtin, M. M. (1984). *Problems of Dostoevsky's poetics*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Boal, A. (1979). *Theatre of the Oppressed*. London: Pluto Press.

Cecchin, G. (1987). Hypothesizing, Circularity, and Neutrality Revisited: An Invitation to Curiosity. In: *Family Process 26* (4) pp. 405–413, December 1987.

Chemi, T., Jensen J.B. and Hersted, L. (2015). *Behind the Scenes of Artistic Creativity: Processes of learning, creating and organizing*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang.

Chia, R. (1995). From Modern to Postmodern Organizational Analysis. In: *Organization Studies, 16* (4) pp. 579-604.

Cunliffe, A.L. (2002). Reflexive Dialogical Practice in Management Learning. In: *Management Learning 33* (1) pp. 35-61. Sage Publications.

Cunliffe, A. L., & Shotter, J. (2006). Wittgenstein, Bakhtin, management and the dialogical. In: D. M. Hosking & S. McNamee (Eds.). *The Social Construction of Organization* (pp. 226-241). Malmö, Sweden: Liber & Copenhagen Business School Press.

Dewey, J (1916). Democracy and Education. In: *Jo Ann Boydston (ed.) John Dewey: The Middle Works (1899-1924), Vol. 9.* Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.

Freire P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed.* New York: Continuum Books.

Gergen, K.J. (1994). *Realities and Relationships. Soundings in Social Construction*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London (England): Cambridge University Press.

Gergen, K.J. & Hersted, L. (2016). Developing Leadership as Dialogic Practice. Chapter 9 in: Raelin, J.A. (ed.) (2016). *Leadership-as-Practice: Theory and Application.* New York & London: Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group.

Hosking, D.M. (2008). *Can Constructionism be Critical?* In: J. Holstein & J. Gubrium (Eds.): *Handbook of Constructionist Research* (pp. 669-687). New York: Guilford.

Hosking, D.M. (2011). Telling Tales of Relations: Appreciating relational constructionism. In: *Organization Studies* 32 (1) pp. 47-65.

Huizinga, J. (1955). *Homo Ludens. A Study of the Play Element In Culture.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Ingold, T. (2008). Lines. A Brief Story. Oxon: Routledge.

Lave, J. & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated Learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Mezirow (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mezirow (1994). Understanding Transformation Theory. In: *Adult Education Quarterly, vol. 44 (4), pp. 222-232.*

Mezirow, J. (2000). *Learning as Transformation: Critical Perspectives on a Theory in Progress.* San Francisco: Jossey Bass.

Norris, J. (2009). *Playbuilding as Qualitative Research. A Participatory Arts-based Approach.* Walnut Creek (CA): Left Coast Press.

Schön, Donald (1983). *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action*. London: Temple Smith.

Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Towards a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Shotter (1993). *Conversational Realities: Constructing life through language.* London: Sage.

Shotter, J. (2001). Participative thinking: "Seeing the face" and "hearing the voice" of social situations. In: *Career Development International* 6 (7): pp. 343-347.

Shotter, J. (2006). Understanding Process from Within: An argument for withness-thinking. In: *Organization Studies 27* pp. 585-604.

Shotter, J. (2010). *Social Constructionism on the Edge*, Chagrin Falls, OH: The Taos Institute Publications.

Shotter, J. & A.L. Cunliffe (2003). Managers as Practical Authors: Everyday Conversations for action. In: *Holman, D. & R. Thorpe (eds.). Management and Language*. London: Sage Publications.

Tomm, K. (1987-88). *Interventive Interviewing, part I, II, and III*: Part I: *Family Process*, 26: pp. 3-13. Part II: *Family Process*, 26: pp. 167-183. Part III: *Family Process*, 27: pp. 1-15.

Voloshinov, V. N. (1929/1973). *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*. New York and London: Seminar Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1966). Play and its Role in the Mental Development of the Child. In: *Voprosy psikhologii*, 1966, 12 (6), pp. 62-76.

Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic Inquiry: Towards a sociocultural Practice and a Theory of Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wittgenstein, L. (1953). *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford, England: Blackwell.