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Using Action Learning Conversations and Social Poetics to explore Striking Moments and support Reflexivity in Business and Management Education

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss the role faculty at business schools and universities have to support executives in transforming business for good. We suggest Action Learning Conversations (ALC) as a method to support executives in exploring the social poetics of striking moments from a reflexive stance. We illustrate how faculty can support executives in embarking on future-forming conversations that will lead to more humanizing, ethical, and sustainable ways of leading. We present our understanding of management learning processes as relational and reflexive processes situated within “real “ business situations, and discuss how we, as faculty, can create safe learning spaces where seeds for future-forming processes, transforming businesses for good, can be sown. Two empirical examples from a Danish MBA executive cohort are presented and discussed leading to a conclusion that sheds light on how ALC and social poetics can be used to explore striking moments and support reflexivity in business and management education.

Keywords

Social poetics, striking moments, reflexivity, management learning, action learning conversations, future-forming conversations

Introduction

“When I look back at the progress so far, the notion of transformative learning comes to my attention. Many of the executives on the cohort are under a lot of pressure from their work and that can negatively affect the possibility to develop new perspectives. The supportive and guiding role you have taken ... has contributed to the fact that the identity development – ‘big word’ - that I am in the midst of is progressive and not decreasing.” (MBA executive student, 2019)

The 21st century presents organisations and executives with numerous challenges like digitalization, environmental challenges, geopolitical tensions, and shortage of resources.

Executives are increasingly asked to understand their organisations as part of a wider socioeconomic system in transition where ESG goals are shaping the transformation of businesses in both regulatory and ethical ways. Today’s challenges call for more sustainable and collaborative business models as well as for more humanizing, ethical, and responsible ways of leading.

Business schools and universities offering management learning play an important role in creating learning spaces that support executives in reflecting more critically on leadership and the societal impact of organisations (Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2016; Helin, 2016). As stated in the call for papers for the EURAM 2023 conference: “Never before have management scholars been placed in such an important role in society ... researchers, educators and thought leaders, business school academics cannot only play a role in helping ‘Transform Business for Good’ but have a moral duty to do so.”

This is a call that casts light on the existing and future role for business schools and universities. It invites researchers and faculty¹ who design and facilitate these learning spaces to

¹ Throughout the paper the terms faculty and researcher are used interchangeably dependent on whether we refer to one researcher who is part of the faculty or the faculty as a whole. The term “one of the faculty” is also used.

address and discuss central and interconnected questions about the role and aspects of management learning:

- How do we understand management learning and the role we, as faculty, have in supporting executives in developing ethical, responsible, and reflexive ways of leading?
- How do we, as faculty, create the learning spaces that enable business students to train and develop sustainable, ethical, responsible, and reflexive ways of leading?

As the opening quote from a Danish MBA executive student indicates, there are challenges associated with taking a master's degree and at the same time having a full-time job. There is an omnipresent risk that the necessary development of new perspectives and transfer of knowledge from a theoretical universe to "real" business challenges is not realized. This is due to the extreme pressure executives face to fulfill their jobs and, at the same time, develop new perspectives on themselves, their organisations, and the wider societal context. Another risk is that the faculty designing the executive programs focus too intensely on "what" is being taught and less on "how" it is being taught (Miller & Price, 2018; Warhurst, 2011). Hence, the necessary learning spaces that support executives in bridging theory and practice in meaningful ways is lacking (Miller & Price, 2018; Warhurst, 2011).

For as long as executive education has existed, it has been critiqued. The critique primarily revolves around how business schools have prioritized "harder skills" over "softer" ones, focused more on abstract theorizing than "real" business challenges, and how the learning spaces offered fail to support executives in addressing how ways of leading add value to society and the organizational context (Baruch & Leeming, 2001; Blass & Weight, 2005; Chia, 1996; Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2008; Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Mintzberg, 2004; Muff, 2012; Varela et al., 2013). To address this criticism, more than 650 business schools worldwide have embraced the 2007 United Nations initiative: The Principles for responsible Management Education (Millar & Price,

2018), where the purpose is to rethink executive education in order to better meet the increasing societal demands for a responsible education system (Millar & Price, 2018).

In light of these critiques of executive education, researchers have, in various ways, experimented with using ‘online dialoging’ (Goumaa, 2018), ‘personal essays’ (Ruth, 2017), and ‘reflective/reflexive journaling’ (Cunliffe, 2004) as ways to explore how management learning can incorporate more experimental methods, entrepreneurial imagination, reflexivity, and draw attention to the significance of engagement in executive programs (Bell & Bridgman, 2017; Chia, 1996; Cunliffe, 2008; Mowles, 2017). What these studies illustrate is that the “how” of teaching executive programs is just as important as the “what,” primarily because identity work and management education are intertwined. “Real education is mastery of one’s person” (Ruth, 2017). Moreover, creating a safe learning space where executives can question their own taken-for-granted assumptions and explore other possible ways to make sense of and address organisational or leadership challenges is pivotal if theory and “real” business situations are to be bridged in reflexive ways (Cunliffe, 2004; Goumaa et al., 2018).

As part of the faculty for different executive programs at universities and business schools, we are well aware of the need to balance “harder” and “softer” skills; the “how” and the “what” when creating safe learning spaces for executives. Furthermore, we are inspired by McNamee (2003; 2007), Cunliffe (2001; 2002 b) and Goumaa et al. (2018) thinking of learning as a conversational and dialogical process. As such, we, as faculty, invite executives into safe learning spaces where they are able to curiously explore different perspectives concerning some of the “real” organizational challenges they are facing and can begin to explore their own taken-for-granted assumptions before they start solving them.

Much in line with Shotter (2005; 2016), McNamee (2000; 2015; 2016), Gergen (2014; 2015) and Cunliffe (2002b; 2004; 2008), we refer to these ways of relating with learners as a way of

inviting social poetics into the learning spaces to explore striking moments from a future-forming perspective. The purpose of creating these learning spaces is to support executives to lead in more humanizing and reflexive ways and address the above stated call for identifying what types of teaching and learning spaces support executives in developing ethical, responsible, and reflexive ways of leading. Moreover, how do we, as faculty, create learning spaces that enable executives to train and develop sustainable, ethical, responsible, and reflexive ways of leading?

There are many ways we, as faculty and teachers, can invite executives into these learning spaces, and in this paper, we present one dialogical method: Action Learning Conversation (ALC). It is with reservations that we refer to ALC as a method, as ALC, like any other conversational processes, is anchored in a more philosophical understanding of how communication enables faculty and executives to relate in dialogical ways (Cunliffe, 2004; McNamee, 2007; 2003). ALC is a structured conversation that we have found suitable in different learning contexts for executives who are interested in exploring “real” business challenges from a reflexive and dialogical stance with the purpose of generating new and alternative perspectives before designing a way forward that deals with the challenge is chosen. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to participate in the dialogue about the existing and future role executive education plays in transforming business for good by teasing out how ALC is one out of multiple conversational processes we, as researchers and faculty, can invite into the learning spaces we offer that support executives in leading in more reflexive, sustainable, ethical, and humanizing ways.

This paper is structured in the following way: The theoretical section introduces key concepts such as ‘management learning,’ the relationship between ‘executive and faculty,’ ‘striking moments,’ ‘reflexivity and ethics,’ ‘social poetics and imagination,’ and ‘future-forming conversations.’ This is followed by a presentation of the conversational process used to reflexively explore striking moments in socially poetic and future-forming ways – that is, in Action Learning

Conversation. Subsequently, two empirical examples from a Danish MBA executive cohort are presented and discussed culminating in a conclusion that sheds light on how ALC and social poetics can be used to explore striking moments and support reflexivity in business and management education.

Theory

Extant research on executive programs increasingly implies that bridging theory and practice in reflexive, ethical, and critical ways is of pivotal importance in order to enable executives to meet organisational and societal challenges (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Muff, 2010; Shaikh et al., 2017). Being able to realize this as part of the faculty who offer executive education calls for a consciousness and explicitness regarding the underlying philosophical assumptions shaping the learning spaces used to invite executives into these reflexive and dialogical processes.

Management learning and the relationship between executive and faculty

The notion of management learning presented here builds on a relational and social constructionist ontology (Cunliffe, 2002; Gergen, 2009; Hosking, 2011; 2010; McNamee and Hosking, 2012). This is an ontology that acknowledges and assigns primacy to relations and how people in the present co-construct meaning and socially construct a local reality (Gergen, 2009; McNamee, 2015; McNamee and Hosking, 2012). Hence, management learning becomes a relational process where the chosen curriculum, formal knowledge, and rational modes of cognition must be contextualized and situated within “real” business situations in order to have an impact and allow for new perspectives and orientations to emerge and shape the words and actions of executives (Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2002; Ruth, 2017; Warhurst, 2011). Inspired by Cunliffe (2002a), we suggest perceiving management learning as “A unique, complex, embodied, responsive process in which we are... moved to change our way of being, talking and acting.” (p. 36).

In our understanding of management learning, we are inspired by researchers such as Hay & Hodgkinson (2008), Ruth (2017) and Warhurst (2011) who argue for a more nuanced understanding of management learning and the function of executive programs. These scholars suggest a more relational and processual perspective to executive learning, where there is less focus on the formal curriculum (the ‘what’ of teaching) and more focus on the processual, relational, and identity constructing aspects during the executive program (the ‘how’ of teaching). From this perspective on management learning, focus is not solely on acquiring competences underpinned by formal knowledge and rational modes of cognition (the harder skills) – it is also a relational and contextual process where aspects as identity work, reflexivity, and being able to expand one’s way of managing is explored from within (softer skills) (Ruth, 2017; Warhurst, 2011).

According to Muff (2012), most CEO’s and HR directors find that mastering ‘soft skills’ are of prime importance in succeeding in business today. Some of the competences needed to build softer skills are enabling critical and pragmatic thinking, being able to deal with uncertainty, and being able to relate reflexively to oneself, other, and the surroundings. “Learning occurs as we reflexively engage in internal and/or external dialogues in an attempt to make sense of our experiences.” (Cunliffe, 2002: 36). A central part of what constitutes management learning revolves around the university’s, business school’s, and faculty’s ability to create learning spaces that enable the executives to work with their everyday “real” business situations. These learning spaces must also invite the executives to – in various ways – bridge theory and practice based on the contextual, relational, and embedded processes filled with uncertainties, surprises, and fluctuating ideas that these executives face every day (Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2004; Shotter, 2006).

This means that the understanding of management learning presented here is closely related to Shotter’s notion of ‘witness-thinking’ or ‘knowing from within’ (2010; 2006; 2005). Witness-

thinking is “A *relational-responsive* way of understanding... It is a kind of momentary knowledge that one can only have *from within* one’s active, ongoing relations with others and otherness in one’s surroundings” (Shotter, 2005 162f). In a similar fashion, learning is not an abstract but contextual process, where the learning spaces offered should enable the executives enrolled in the management learning to reconstruct their ‘real’ business situations through various and exploratory ways of bridging theory and practice (Cunliffe, 2002; Shotter, 2010).

To think of management learning as processes where the executives are invited to work from within is to acknowledge that if any change or learning occurs, it must be immersed in the executive’s responsive and ongoing ‘real’ business situations (Shotter, 2005). To work from within is, as Shotter (2005) writes, “A form of engaged, responsive thinking, acting and talking, that allows us to affect the flow of processes from within our living involvement with them.” (585). This approach to management learning also affects the relationship between learners (executives) and faculty. Inspired by McNamee (2007) we understand teaching and learning as collaborative conversation, where knowledge is constructed based on what people do together.

Anderson and Goolishian (1997) use the term “not-knowing” as a way to describe the relationship between a professional and a learner as a meeting between people who are experts in their own lives. Even though people possess this expertise, adopting a not-knowing position means they are simultaneously interested in questioning their own taken-for-granted knowledge as they combine their experience and ideas to generate unique and contextual knowledge that will enable all to understand and handle the unique situation in which they find themselves. “Might we find, if we play with the notion of teaching as conversations that we can easily draw on the resources we have readily available for conversation, and thereby transform learning ... into ... an activity with which we all have some degree of expertise? That is, can we invite others into generative and

transformative conversations where we can create what counts as knowledge together?” (McNamee, 2007: 316f).

Following this line of argument, learning becomes a way of relating where the different ways of making sense, understanding situations, various kinds of expertise all serve as triggers to explore reflexively the striking moments that an executive might experience. In the process of faculty relating with executive students, both faculty and executives have different responsibilities. It is assumed by the executive students that we, as faculty, identify a certain amount of relevant literature to read prior to the seminars. That we, as faculty, touch upon and discuss the chosen theory during the seminar with the students and invite them into various learning spaces where the executive students have the possibility to bridge theory and practice in various ways – both based on cases from other companies and their own “real” business challenges.

Simultaneously, amongst the faculty it is expected that the executive students appear at the seminar having read most of the literature and have reflected upon what they have read. Furthermore, it is expected that the executives are ready to engage in various learning spaces where they present their own experiences. In the process of dealing with their “real” business challenges, it is expected that they become open to question both their own and the faculty’s taken-for-granted assumptions as we jointly generate knowledge. As faculty, we bring the expertise of process and facilitation to the learning spaces, and as executive students, they bring the expertise of being the first-person storyteller (Anderson, 1997). Jointly these different kinds of expertise can create learning spaces where reflexivity can flourish and create unique and transformative ways of bridging theory and practice.

Striking moments

When management learning occurs from within the executives’ ‘real’ business situations, inquiries often focus on phenomena, incidents, or ways of relating that have ‘struck’ the executive. “To be

‘struck’ or ‘arrested’ by another’s words... is to find oneself resonating to a whole multiplicity of other, many quite new possibilities” (Shotter & Katz, 1999: 2). Being struck occurs when an executive experiences something unforeseen, unplanned, and unanticipated that makes the executive feel imprisoned, stuck, or reduced in some way because he or she struggles with seeing and making new connections (Shotter & Katz, 1999). Interestingly enough, it is often when small, concrete and taken-for-granted assumptions about how people relate or how organizational processes function are being challenged that the existing meaning structures people embody come short, and room for new ways of making sense and connecting events emerge (Shotter, 2005).

These striking experiences often mark the beginning of management learning processes, where time is spent exploring the issues that the executive cannot immediately make sense of or figuring out how to evaluate or judge in sensible ways (Cunliffe, 2004; Shotter & Katz, 1999). When a striking moment occurs, the executive is offered a unique opportunity to learn something new about him/herself and the situation. Based on a joint sensitivity to the unfolding of events and exploration of different perspectives and possible ways to make sense of the situation, the executive can – often accompanied by fellow executives and faculty - work through the situation and identify the “Difference that makes a difference” (Bateson, 1972: 286). Ordinarily the difference that makes a difference goes by unnoticed because people are entangled in a continuous flow of patterns of meaning and taken-for-granted ways of relating, communicating, making sense and acting that they have co-constructed with significant others (Shotter, 2005). As these constructions have been reproduced over a period, they make up a kind of shared background of normative expectations and anticipations that become a shared form of life to which people act accordingly (Shotter, 2005).

When a striking moment occurs these ways of living and constructing meaning are paused and it becomes obvious how each and every way of relating is a unique first-time event that

enables people to act in many different ways dependent on how the involved make sense of the situation or event (Shotter, 2005) A striking moment then becomes an opportunity for the executive to embark on rearrangement or making new poetic connections between what we know and take for granted (Cunliffe, 2002a; McNamee, 2000; Shotter, 2005).

Reflexivity and ethics

The significance of incorporating reflexivity in executive programs has been advocated by scholars such as Alvesson, et al. (2017), Cunliffe (2016; 2008; 2002), Hansen & Larsen (2018), Mintzberg (2004), Muff (2012), Ripamonti, et al. (2016) and Weick (1995). This novel strand of research within the field of management learning focuses on how a reflexive methodology supports executives in qualifying the way they address organisational and societal challenges (Alvesson et al., 2017; Cunliffe, 2016; Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Hansen & Larsen, 2018; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). A reason as to why reflexivity is significant in management learning is related to a growing strand of research (e.g. Hay & Hodgkinson, 2008; Muff, 2012; Helin, 2016; Warhurst, 2011) that indicates that management learning is part of an identity construction process. Identity work is salient and omnipresent during executive programs and many executives go through a constant managerial process of becoming, where they construct a new sense of themselves and how they want to process their professional career (Warhurst, 2011). Being reflexive about oneself and how one's leadership is shaped by – but also shaping – organizational life is a central aspect of being able to lead in more humanizing, ethical, and responsible ways.

Cunliffe (2002b; 2004; 2016) has suggested that reflexivity and management learning are closely related. “I suggest that the practice of critical reflexivity is of particular importance to management education because by thinking more critically about our own assumptions and actions, we can develop more collaborative responsive and ethical ways of managing organizations” (Cunliffe, 2004: 408). In simplest terms, reflexivity involves questioning our own assumptions and

beliefs. It means entertaining doubt about our own certainties. It is a way of thinking and being in the world, and not a technique. According to Pollner (1991, in Cunliffe, 2004) reflexivity can be understood as “An ‘unsettling’ i.e., an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse, and practices used in describing reality” (p. 407).

To be reflexive the executive unsettles his or her taken-for-granted assumptions and meaning structures regarding a specific situation and is able to think in different ways and embrace multiple perspectives when it comes to managing and organising (Cunliffe, 2004; 2002b). This mainly occurs when the executive feels struck by unanticipated, unplanned, or unforeseen incidents occurring within ‘real’ business situations. The striking moments can motivate an urge towards exploring new perspectives by inviting faculty and executive to jointly explore how they relationally evaluate, judge, and decide to move forward.

A central argument for creating space for reflexivity in an MBA program is closely related to a relational ontology in two ways. First, reflexivity is an acknowledgment of how the “real” business situations the executive encounters are socially and relationally enacted into being (Cunliffe, 2002b; Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Second, reflexivity revolves around embracing how these socially constructed, “real” business situations can be altered by engaging in other ways of relating, communicating, and acting. “We construct the very accounts we think describe the world. We therefore need to question the ways in which we account for our experiences” (Cunliffe, 2002b: 38). Reflexivity can be perceived as one of the ‘softer skills’ of management as it is an invitation for executives to embrace the responsibility they have in creating the social and organisational realities of which they are a part (Cunliffe, 2004).

To be reflexive about an incident that has ‘struck’ the executive entails a relational inquiry practice. Executives (like all other people) often rely on their taken-for-granted assumptions and patterns of meaning as they experience a striking moment of which they want to make sense.

These taken-for-granted assumptions enable the executive to make sense of the incident quickly, paving the way for the executive to intuitively know how to move on. Cunliffe (2002b) refers to this instantaneous process as ‘reflex interaction,’ where the executive reacts in-the-moment and responds to other people on the basis of instinct, habits, and/or memory. Many of the conversations an executive engages in are shaped by reflex interactions, as he or she is responsive towards other people and the surroundings (Cunliffe, 2002b). However, if learning is to occur and the executive wants to explore other perspectives on the situation that has struck him or her, he or she has to engage in dialogues with e.g., a researcher and fellow executives and jointly explore his or her own part in constructing the situation. ”Our learning depends on our ability to take this reflex interaction further and reflect in or on the process” (Cunliffe, 2002b: 49).

To engage in ‘reflective thinking’ (Cunliffe, 2002b) about a striking moment can be perceived as a learning process where theory is being used to offer insights into the situation the executive has experienced. Reflective thinking is a learning practice often applied at executive programs as it is a way to bridge theory and practice in intellectual, logical, objective, and analytical ways (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Cunliffe, 2002b; Hansen & Larsen, 2018). Hence, it helps the executive make sense of the moment that has struck him or her. However, it is also a kind of objectifying process as the executive applies an outside-in approach and uses theory as a frame to reflect upon his or her ‘real’ business situations. Theories are used to categorize, explain, create order, make connections, and perceive practice in different ways – both retrospectively and anticipatorily (Cunliffe, 2002b; Hansen & Larsen, 2018).

Reflective thinking can be understood as an objective and rational way to bridge theory and practice where the executive uses theory to talk *about* ‘striking moments.’ In this sense, reflective thinking differentiates from ‘reflexivity’ as reflexivity works from *within* when striking moments are to be explored and understood (Cunliffe, 2002b; 2004; Shotter, 2006). Reflexive

inquiry is a different kind of management learning as the executive is encouraged to think about how he or she relationally construct the organisational realities surrounding him or her.

Furthermore, reflexive inquiring invites the executive to explore how he or she might contribute to the ‘real’ business situations differently by talking, acting, and relating differently *within* them (Cunliffe, 2002b, 2004; Hansen & Larsen, 2018; Shotter, 2006).

Thus, reflexivity becomes a different way to bridge theory and practice because contradictions, doubts, dilemmas, and possibilities are exposed and explored (Cunliffe, 2002b). It is a management learning process where executives are encouraged to look more critically at their own assumptions and actions with the purpose of developing more collaborative, responsive, and ethical ways of managing organizations. Reflexivity helps bring forth the different and sometimes competing understandings of the world or a given situation and assists in dealing with these differences in respectful ways. Reflexivity calls for shared ethical standards among faculty and executive students.

One of the first things the faculty at the Danish University from which the data presented below emerged, does before initiating any MBA executive seminar is to articulate that the “Chatham House Rules” apply both during and after each seminar. Furthermore, during the specific seminar that is the focus of this paper various presentations and discussions articulate different philosophical approaches to communication and argumentation. In addition, reflexivity that each kind of understanding, knowledge, and perspective invite is discussed from a contextual setting where certain taken-for-granted assumptions and values are privileged. Hence, no knowledge, understanding, or perspective is “right” or “wrong.” It is the differences among competing perspectives that are interesting and that encourage discussion about how they can be bridged and inform each other. Moreover, attention is given to the relational understandings of organisational reality the executive would help co-construct when one perspective and construction

of meaning is privileged over others. The critical self-reflexivity centers on what would be for the common good of the organisation and its societal context. Inherent in these processes are a kind of relational responsibility or relational ethics where the guiding assumption is, “Rather than blame or judge or evaluate an individual’s action in isolation, a relational constructionist ethic urges us to ask what our interactive processes are creating” (McNamee, 2017: 5). This kind of relational ethic does not mean anything goes (i.e., a position of rampant relativism). On the contrary, what is highlighted here is the acceptance of how any utterance or understanding emanates from one context, hence every part of the conversation has an equal voice (McNamee, 2017). The richness in reflexivity appears when the executives from various contexts begin to be curious about the kinds of organizational realities, they are co-constructing based on how they make sense of the “real” business challenges they each bring with them and discuss. Connecting reflexivity with a relational ethic is a process of “Respect[ing] the professional code of ethics to which we are bound and simultaneously maintain[ing] respect and curiosity for the diverse and complex moral orders created in the lives of those with whom we work” (McNamee, 2017: 7)

Social poetics and imagination

When faculty and executives explore ‘striking moments’ they often spend time focusing on something already in plain view that needs to be understood or made sense of differently. Exploring striking moments can be perceived as a process of ‘trying out’ – together – a sense of how a different perspective can generate new ways to go on (Shotter & Katz, 1999). This process begins by identifying those moments, those comments, those actions that ‘strike’ the executive and researcher. What stands out? What raises his or her curiosity? These are what Shotter & Katz (1999) refer to as ‘striking moments.’ It could be something as simple as receiving a response from a direct report that was unexpected. Instead of assuming that the other’s response is an indication that “he or she is not interested in this project,” the executive and faculty might ponder alternative

explanations and marvel at the novelty of the response. How many alternative understandings can be created? Each one opens a possibility for diverse forms of action and co-action and liberates the executive from unquestioned and unexamined assumptions.

This kind of pondering can be described as a process of, what we presented earlier, making poetic connections or social poetics. “To talk of poetics is to give wings to the imaginative” (McNamee, 2000: 146). Social poetics can be seen as a form of management inquiry that revolves around crafting new meanings and images where the purpose is to invite multiple and often different perspectives and understandings into the conversation, thus allowing for an exploration of an executive’s “real” business challenge (Cunliffe, 2002a; Larsen, 2018; McNamee, 2000). In relation to reflexivity, social poetics aims at moving beyond the reflex and reflective ways of constructing meaning because poetic language destabilizes what is taken-for-granted (Cunliffe, 2002a). Raising questions, jointly questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, and introducing new perspectives enable the executives to “wander around” his or her striking moment with the intention of trying out different understandings, making new connections between events, and improvising with identifying different ways to move forward (Cunliffe, 2002a; Larsen, 2018; McNamee, 2000). As Cunliffe (2002a) writes, “Poetic talk can make a crucial difference to the way we respond, act, and make sense of our experience because it engages attention, invites response, leaves much open to the imagination, and gives color to a situation.” (138)

In that sense, inviting social poetics into an exploration of a “real” business challenge creates a reflexive space where the executive, together with fellow executives and the faculty, can jointly explore the unknown, can improvise, imagine, and consider how a certain understanding of the “real” business challenge has emerged, how the understanding has shaped the development of the “real” business challenge, and how the “real” business challenge can be understood and dealt with differently (Cunliffe, 2002a; Larsen, 2018; McNamee, 2000). This process creates space to

play with bridging theory and practice in various ways without having to – in that moment – decide and choose how and what to do. Hence, social poetics is an invitation to pause the instantaneous urge to construct meaning and for a moment explore different patterns of meaning. In the process, “We suspend passing judgment or making ‘final’ decisions until we have made inquiries into or initiated conversation about the communities that grant each action its coherence” (McNamee, 2000: 147).

Social poetics is in this way a possibility to voice the complexities of the issues being explored (McNamee, 2007). And in doing so both faculty, fellow executives, and the executive whose “real” business challenge is being explored refrain from seeking explanations, conducting analyses, offering interpretations. Instead, they allow themselves to be more exploratory (Cunliffe, 2004; Shotter, 2010; Shotter & Katz, 1999). By catching glimpses of new possible ways to act and make sense, the executive incrementally begins to change his or her way of working with those around him or her (Cunliffe, 2004; Shotter, 2010). As McNamee (2000) writes, “Social poetics describes how participants in relation jointly create meaning and how, in that meaning, the seeds of transformative dialogues are sewn” (150).

Action Learning as future-forming conversations

When striking moments are being explored from a reflexive stance, where social poetics are invited into the learning spaces, executives and faculty jointly engage in a kind of future-forming conversation where focus shifts from what already exists to unfolding what does not or might yet exist, but could be created: “What if we closed our eyes and began to imagine the worlds of our hopes? What if we replaced the persistent rush to establish ‘what is the case’ and began to ask, ‘what kind of world could we build’?” (Gergen, 2015: 8).

What Gergen addresses with his notion of future-forming conversations is how people are socialized into a tradition where the assumption is that there is a right way to understand a

situation and a right way to intervene, but once new poetic connections have been made between different perspectives and patterns of meaning, people are able to see how any understanding is relational and contextual (Gergen, 2015). Furthermore, those involved can see how it is possible to co-construct alternative understandings by adopting a more ethical, responsive, and reflexive stance towards patterns of meaning and action that could support realizing an organizational reality that is for the common good. When universities and business schools embrace the moral responsibility of the common good, they support managers in transforming business. These future-forming conversations become pivotal. They are pivotal because future-forming conversations offer executives the possibility of entering reflexive ways of addressing some of the “real” business challenges that have struck them. Executives are invited to try different ways of making sense of a “real” business challenge and sow the seeds for transformative dialogues. They are encouraged to explore how solving their challenge in ways that address the common good demands a continual balance between developing softer and harder skills, experimenting, making mistakes, and learning from these mistakes in the safe environment that executive programs offer.

In the following we present *ALC* as one method/conversational process that can be used in designing reflexive learning spaces for executives. *ALC* is a structured kind of conversation that we have found suitable in different learning contexts for executives who are interested in exploring “real” business challenges from within. *ALC* can be used as a frame for embarking on future-forming conversations, because the purpose of *ALC* is to invite executives to explore “real” business-anchored striking moments from a reflexive stance by inviting social poetics into the conversation and supporting executives in identifying ways to move forward that are transformative and for the common good.

Method and empirical context

Action Learning (AL) is a widely accepted way of learning and developing executives and organizations within the public and private industry as well as NGO's. Action Learning is based on the idea that peer knowledge and experience are prioritized over expert knowledge and that there is no right answer to a problem, but as incorporated in social poetics, multiple perspectives to be explored (Revans, 1982, 2011; Pedler et al., 2005; Brook et al., 2012). In the 1940's, Revans developed and used action learning to support peer-learning among executives in situations that were new to the involved executives, where the executives lacked experience and were not sure what was going to be the outcome of a specific challenge (Revans, 1982, 2011).

Since Revan's introduction of AL, researchers have experimented with the method, developed various variations and, without luck, attempted to reach a shared definition (Brook et al., 2012). Such failed attempts support the anti-technique stance of relational practices. And, while this stance may be in some respects frustrating, it makes the method adaptable, context-sensitive, and flexible dependent on the concrete learning space a faculty wishes to design. The guiding principle is to "Learn how to ask questions in conditions of risk, rather than to find answers to questions that have already been precisely defined by others" (Revans, 1982: 65).

Hence, AL is an experimental, question-driven conversational process rather than an answer-driven process aimed at working with actual problems where there is a shared interest in appreciating complexity and adding new perspectives to an existing problem (Revans, 1982; Pedler et al., 2005; Brook et al., 2012). In many ways, AL is ideal in relation to supporting executives in reflexively exploring striking moments from their own "real" business situations by engaging in making poetic connections between different theoretical and practice-anchored perspectives and embark on future-forming conversations. Brook et al. (2012) refer to AL as a social process that is rather demanding for not only the executive who presents a "real" business challenge, but also for the fellow executives who assist in shedding new perspectives on the challenge. It is demanding

because, during an AL process, fellow executives need to both support and challenge each other in ethical ways (Brook et al., 2012). Of course, the challenges are respectful and relationally sensitive. As is the case with reflexivity and social poetics, there is an underlying assumption that diverse understandings of a problem are not competing with one another but rather, from a dialogic stance, that each perspective is coherent for those who hold it. To respect and practice this calls for quite a bit of attention and empathy from the fellow executives as they use questions and their own experiences to not only reach a meaningful understanding of the challenge, but also invite new perspectives into the conversations (Revans, 1982; Pedler et al., 2005). Questions and perspectives that may not previously have occurred to the executive who introduced the “real” business challenge open space for further reflexivity (Revans, 1982; Brook et al., 2012).

Based on the knowledge and insights of AL and the desire to construct learning spaces that support executives in bridging theory and practice in reflexive ways based on their “real” business challenges, a concrete conversational process consisting of five steps was developed to facilitate future-forming dialogues among the executives at the Danish executive MBA that makes up the empirical setting for this paper. Below, the five steps are presented and linkages to the theoretical perspective underpinning the paper are unfolded:

- 1) Executive presents his/her concrete challenge and answers clarifying questions related to the challenge such as number of people involved, physical setting, length of challenge etc. The purpose is twofold. First, the executive in focus gets to tell his/her story using his/her own words and directing attention to the initial understanding of the challenge. What often is expressed here is the striking moment where the instantaneous reflex patterns of meaning and what the executive together with his or her significant others takes-for-granted. Fellow executives are asked in this step to pay close attention to the words, phrases, metaphors, examples, and non-verbal communication that the executive uses to be able to explore this later

in the ALC. Second, fellow executives and person(s) from the faculty involved in the process generate a shared understanding of the “real” business challenge: who is involved, how long has the challenge been there, where has the challenge surfaced, etc.

- 2) Fellow executives and person(s) from the faculty individually formulate open, curious questions that, after formulation, are read aloud and discussed among the fellow executives. Questions can revolve around words chosen, gestures used, what reflections and questions the challenge brings to their attention. During this dialogue the executive who is in focus can take notes and reflect upon the different questions being raised. However, the executive is not invited into the conversation to answer the questions, etc. The task of the executive is to listen and reflect upon what fellow executives and faculty have paid attention to as the challenge was presented. In this step, the process of inviting different perspectives based on the various patterns of meaning, knowledge, and experiences that each of the participants in the process embody are invited into the conversation to initiate reflexivity. As the executives listens to the questions raised by fellow executives and faculty the executive becomes aware of how his or her taken-for-granted assumptions shape the way he/she talks about the “real” business challenge. Furthermore, as the executive listens, he or she can incrementally begin to make other and new poetic connections based on the open and curious questions that bring new perspectives to the table. Since it is a part of the conversational process that the “real” business challenge is not solved, the executive is "free" to experiment with constructing multiple, different social poetic patterns of meaning.
- 3) Fellow executives and faculty individually formulate assumptions about the “real” business challenge and the executive in focus. After the formulation, these assumptions are read aloud one at the time and the fellow executives and faculty discuss the assumptions and the different perspectives inherent while the executive in focus takes notes and listens. The purpose is to continue the process of inviting different perspectives, taken-for-granted assumptions, and

patterns of meaning into the conversation by encouraging reflexivity and using social poetics to identify unknown aspects of the challenge (if there are any). In this step, it is pivotal that the fellow executives and faculty embrace the multiplicity of perspectives in ethical ways and not strive towards reaching an agreement but continue to invite the complexities and different poetic connections into the conversation. As in the previous step, the executive only listens, hence he or she does not have to make any instantaneous reflex decision but can continue the process of curiously exploring the striking moment from multiple different theoretical and practice-anchored perspectives.

- 4) Based on the preliminary presentation of the challenge in step 1, the shared questions, assumptions, and accompanying dialogue, everyone in the group individually reformulates in one sentence what they think the “real” business challenge revolves around. After the challenge has been reformulated, the sentences are read aloud one at the time. The purpose is to make it explicit that the strength of ALC is that there is not one right understanding of or solution to a concrete challenge, but multiple, and agreement is not the goal. In this aspect, the richness of reflexivity and social poetics are embraced as each person from the group articulates his or her own take on a future-forming conversation that will be for the common good for the organisation, the societal context, and congruent with the ethical stance and values that the executive in focus embodies.
- 5) The executive in focus individually writes down what he or she identifies as the primary initiative to be realized based on the ALC. Perhaps it can be to gather extra information, have a dialogue with a colleague, change a process etc. After formulation, the initiative is read aloud, and the fellow executives and faculty listen. After that, there is a short break and a change of executive in focus. The purpose is to allow the executive in focus to articulate and make concrete what action he or she intends to carry out based on the ALC. This also means that the

ALC is not finalized with a solution to the “real” business challenge. On the contrary, the reflexive and social poetic explorations of different perspectives are kept open. It is intentional that there is a quick change in executive in focus because if more time is given in this step, the fellow executives will often want to “help” the executive in focus solve the “real” business challenge quickly.

Usually, an ALC lasts between 30-40 minutes, and it is beneficial to identify an executive in the group who is responsible for keeping track of time and ensuring that the focus during the ALC is to ask questions, invite new and different perspectives into the conversation, and not agree, but support the multiplicity. It should be noted that this is a process that is extremely difficult because, in practice, the executives often want to agree rather quickly and identify the one best solution. Furthermore, it is very difficult for the executive in focus to avoid answering the questions being raised in step two or to provide feedback on the assumptions being shared during step 3.

Data and discussion

The examples of how ALC was used to create learning spaces for executive students come from a Danish MBA executive program offered at Aalborg University Business School. Aalborg University has an applied Problem-Based approach to learning, which means that teaching activities and learning spaces are aimed at bridging theory and practice based on executives’ concrete and actual work-related problems. The curriculum of the MBA program is congruent with the requirements of the Danish accrediting body and contains classic core MBA modules such as strategic management, marketing, finance, HRM, negotiation, organising and change management. In relation to “how” these topics are taught, the processual and relational aspects are prioritized, which means that when faculty and executives engage in discussion, focus is on acquiring competences underpinned both by formal knowledge and rational modes of cognition (the harder skills). Furthermore, emphasis is on supporting executives in building softer skills that enable

critical and pragmatic thinking, where the executive becomes capable of dealing with uncertainty and relating reflexively to oneself, others, and the surroundings.

ALC has been an integrated aspect of the executive program's seventh three-day seminar since the program's beginning. The seventh seminar revolves around organizational and strategic change and is the last seminar of the program's first year. The purpose of the seminar is to gather all the threads from the six previous seminars and support the executives in developing an approach to organizational and strategic change that is anchored in a sustainable approach to organisations. This means that during the seminar the faculty work in various ways, inviting the executives into learning spaces where the executives initiate organizational and strategic change based on reflexive analyses of what is for the common good – societally, organisationally, and based on their own ethical approach to leading. Based on individual, group, and plenum discussions of sensemaking, different philosophical understandings of communication and argumentation, leading and strategizing as ways of relating and the notion of reflexivity, the executives work on developing different perspectives on a “real” business challenge from their own organizational context that they have been asked to think about and formalize prior to the seminar. It is a prerequisite that the “real” business challenge that the executives bring to the seminar is a challenge that still lingers with them, where they play an active role both in the challenge and the solution and where they are still working with figuring out a solution.

In the afternoon on the second day of the seminar the executives are gathered in groups of four and are invited to explore their “real” business challenge in an ALC. Prior to the ALC, the executives have (in the morning of the seminar's second day) worked in learning groups with other executives presenting and discussing their company strategies and attempted at identifying different ways they would be able to qualify and anchor the strategies based on their ways of arguing and communicating internally and externally. It is intentional that the executives

are asked to discuss their company strategies with each other before embarking on an ALC as it often is easier for the executives to start by exploring different perspectives on a strategic matter than it is to start exploring different perspectives on a “real” business challenge where they themselves are an active part of not only the challenge but also the solution.

As most of the executives in the program are not familiar with ALC as a conversation process, the faculty introduce and illustrate the process quite thoroughly. The faculty also act as a conversation partner in the various ALC sessions on equal terms as the other group members. However, the faculty have the extra dimension of supporting the executives in learning the method and the various steps as the conversation unfolds. During the introduction, illustration, and evaluation of the ALC it is stressed that ALC intentionally is a different kind of dialogue. The executives often struggle during the first few ALC because they spontaneously jump into a desire to rely on their reflex and instantaneous ways of constructing meaning and solve the challenge or reach a shared understanding of not only the challenge, but also the solution. They “forget” that the value of this kind of dialogical process is to engage in socially poetic and imaginative explorations of different perspectives through reflexively unfolding different kinds of future-forming conversations. Adding to that, the executive whose “real” challenge is being explored, initially finds it difficult to remain silent and listen to the different perspectives, considerations, and assumptions. During the conversation and in the evaluation of the ALC, the executives often express that after they have accepted to listen and not defend their own perspective, it was a relief to listen to and curiously explore the different perspectives that their fellow executives presented and discussed.

To follow up on the ALC, the executives spend most of the third day of the seminar first in groups of four, then in groups of two (walk & talk) and subsequently alone (journaling) to continue the discussion of the different perspectives to their “real” business challenge and support each other in various ways in figuring out how to bridge theory and practice by choosing theoretical

perspectives they want to use in dealing with their “real” business challenge. The seminar is concluded with a written assignment where the executives send their “real” business challenge to one of the faculty along with a written response. In their written response, the executive articulates what the challenge revolves around, why the challenge is important, who is involved in the challenge, how they plan to deal with the challenge, which theoretical perspectives they want to use, where they plan to start and, when they will start dealing with the challenge. Each of the executives receives written feedback from one of the faculty that contains two to four questions that again will present new perspectives to the challenge. In the online dialogue about the assignment, the researcher refrains from seeking explanations, conducting analyses, and offering interpretations. Time and space are instead spent on being responsive and engaged in matters discussed and that allow new and other perspectives to emerge.

Following, we offer two examples of how ALC can be used as one out of multiple conversational processes where faculty can invite executives into learning spaces that support the executives in leading in more reflexive, sustainable, ethical, and humanizing ways. The first example revolves around an interpersonal challenge that the executive was facing with his CEO, and the second example illustrates how ALC can be used to deal with an organisational striking moment. Furthermore, the second example illustrates how being part of ALC in general invites learners to focus on striking moments related to their “real” business challenges. In the second example the executive makes a change in his “real” business challenge during the seminar and revisits the company’s strategy and the role he must play as CEO.

From monologue to dialogue

Matt is a middle manager in a Danish company with 30-40 employees that develops IT equipment for the military. Prior to joining the company, Matt had a career in the Danish military, hence Matt has contextual knowledge about the Danish military that can qualify the development of IT

equipment and the dialogue with the Danish military related to sales meetings. The CEO of the company that Matt has joined is the company's founder and has only limited experience within the Danish military. Before Matt joined the company, the CEO was perceived as the most insightful person regarding the development of IT equipment for the Danish military. Since Matt joined the company, a few other people with a career in the military have also joined the company and they answer directly to Matt. Matt appreciates that more people with a military background and contextual knowledge have joined the company as it strengthens the company's ability to develop and sell the IT equipment that adds value to the Danish Military. However, over the last few months, Matt has increasingly experienced challenges communicating with his CEO.

“In my part of the organisation we can easily agree on the development and strategy for the company, but when I present these ideas to my CEO we often end up in an argument. I feel that when I present my CEO with constructive and valid arguments, he literally does not listen. I sense that when I present my case, he is not listening but instead spends all the time coming up with arguments for his own decision. Several times, I have found myself in a situation where I have said to him, ‘You are not listening to what I have to say.’ The outcome is that I often avoid dialogues with my CEO, and he does what he can to avoid me, so we do not end up in the same situation again.”

During the ALC, fellow executives and one researcher addressed some of the formulations that Matt used in his presentation of the “real” business challenge such as, *“It is a waste of time to be in these discussions,” “Several of my colleagues feel the same as I do,” “He does not have as much military insight as we do,”* and *“He is used to being involved in everything.”* Subsequently, the fellow executives and one from the faculty started presenting perspectives like: *“When you use terms like: It is a waste of time to be in these discussions, then I hear it as an*

expression of a deep dedication to the company," "It almost sounds like there is a battle between which of you has the right or best way to develop the company," and "Maybe the CEO feels threatened by you and your department." Also raised are questions like: "How would it be possible for you to construct meaning and not engage in power struggles with your CEO?" and "What would it take for you to change the dialogue with your CEO?"

In the written assignment after the seminar, Matt reflected on the perspectives that he and his fellow executives had explored during the ALC and the remaining part of the seminar and wrote: *"When we talked about my challenge (ALC), we touched upon subjects that I might not have been conscious about like maybe I threaten the CEO's authority, culture, and cliques ... previously all the IT developers went to the CEO for confirmation and now they turn to me ... After our walk & talk on the last day of the seminar I decided that I would try to start the communication with my CEO afresh. I would, as soon as the possibility presented itself, invite my CEO to a dialogue, actually a walk & talk (to take us out of the usual physical setting). My strategy would be to articulate the purpose of the conversation up front. We had the conversation a week after the seminar ... Subsequently, there have been several situations where I have been able to present some ideas and observations without us ending up in a discussion ... It has been a challenge for my CEO not to take the opposite perspective and it has been a challenge for me not to start arguing my case ... However, in the short time we have worked on starting afresh, I sense that the chemistry between us is improving ... We still have a long way ahead of us, but at least we are on the same path and, who knows, maybe in time we will both come to realise that our differences might be the most valuable aspect of our cooperation."* (Matt, Fall 2022)

One of the authors of this paper participated in the ALC where Matt shared his "real" business challenge. As Matt presented his challenge in step 1, it became apparent both verbally and non-verbally how the situation was frustrating to Matt, but also that the responses he received from

his CEO made little, if any, sense to him. Matt found himself in a striking moment where all his taken-for-granted assumptions and patterns of meaning for how he and his CEO could further develop the company in meaningful ways were challenged. As a response, Matt reacted by reflex and communicated with his CEO based on instinct and habits leading to the unfortunate outcome that Matt and his CEO both tried to avoid communicating with each other. Hence, the ALC was an opportunity for Matt to start exploring this striking moment from a more reflexive stance inviting social poetics into the conversation.

The written assignment from Matt illustrates how, during the ALC, he worked with and explored a striking moment from his ‘real’ business situation where he tried out different perspectives to make sense of and figure out how to deal with an unsettling experience. In the assignment, Matt unfolds how the ALC opened him up to different perspectives on his communicative challenges with his CEO. He also engaged in joint explorations and reconstructions of what he took-for-granted, allowing for new future-forming perspectives. These future-forming perspectives opened the possibility for other ways of talking and acting within his local context to emerge. Matt tried to identify more responsive and ethical ways of relating to and communicating with his CEO that hopefully would support both of them in pursuing what he believed was for the common good of the organisation and would strengthen the relationship between them. When looking at the words and expressions that Matt uses, such as, “*We touched upon subjects that I might not have been conscious about.*” and “*It has been a challenge for me not to start arguing my case,*” it becomes clear how learning during an MBA can incorporate the development of softer skills. As argued by Warhurst (2011) and Ruth (2017), management learning also revolves around supporting executives like Matt in becoming more reflexive in their handling of the contextual complexities of their ‘real’ business situations.

Being reflexive about oneself is an inherent aspect of management learning. However, as the opening quote indicates, these executives are often under a lot of pressure from their work which can negatively affect the possibility to develop new perspectives. Hence, there is a need for creating learning spaces that are safe for these executives to enter and where they jointly – with fellow executives and faculty – are invited to wander around in striking moments and, as in Matt’s case, have the possibility to look for and find new ways to make sense of and connect events.

What Matt’s written assignment illustrates is how the feedback and new perspectives presented during the ALC served as invitations for Matt to – in ethical and humanizing ways – challenge his own taken-for-granted assumptions about the interpersonal relationship between himself and his CEO and the interpersonal relations between him and “his” team. During the ALC, and in his written assignment, Matt became aware of how his own patterns of meaning and understanding of the “real” business challenge was not “wrong,” but was perhaps not supporting what was for the common good for the company and the people working in it. Matt had, with his CEO, unintentionally co-created a situation where their differing understandings were competing and not qualifying one another. During the ALC and the remaining part of the seminar Matt realises that now, having this new knowledge, he wants to act upon it. Hence, he wants to start afresh and invites his CEO for a walk & talk and in that way invites his CEO into a different future-forming dialogue that is based on imagining the world of their hopes, leaving behind discussions about “what is the case” and “who is right.”

To embark on this kind of reflexive questioning of one’s own taken-for-granted assumptions and engage in social poetics generating other and more ethical and responsible future-forming dialogues is a courageous move that demands a great deal of the executive and also of the fellow executives who accompany him or her on the journey. It also requires the faculty who are designing the learning spaces to be present, flexible, and open to unfolding possibilities. As the

Goumaa et al. study (2018) illustrates, the involved researchers must be sensitive to the unfolding of events, pay attention to the words, metaphors, and explanations that executives use as they write and talk about their local context, and continue to invite the executives into reflexive inquiries. However, we note that further enriching this experience is how the fellow executives, as in Matt's case, approach the ALC in extremely humanizing ways, expressing a relational ethic. That relational ethic illustrates that, when it comes to management learning, it is not merely a process of acquiring formal knowledge and rational modes of cognition, it is also a process of identity work, where the learners support each other in developing relational and contextual knowledge. "Management learning is a unique, complex, embodied, responsive process in which we are ... moved ... to change our way of being, talking and acting" (Cunliffe, 2002b, 6). Furthermore, management learning is a relational process where the enrolled executives jointly dare to be bold and engage in developing both harder and softer skills.

Reversing the organisation's downward spiral

Carlos is the CEO of a Danish medium size harbour that previously made its primary income from the fishing industry. However, times have changed and although fishermen still call at port to load their fish, fishing will not, in the long run, ensure the survival of the harbour. During the morning of the seminar's second day, Carlos presented and discussed the harbour's strategy with fellow executives and one from the faculty. During his presentation, Carlos came to realize the need for jointly developing a strategy for the harbour. *"I have come to realise that we lack something so obvious as a unique value proposition. It makes sense since we have never formulated a vision. I know our unique value proposition and come to think of it, I have also formulated a vision on behalf of all of us. But the fact is that neither my board nor my employees know the vision or the unique value proposition. Furthermore, we have not discussed our biggest problem; we are not making enough money on our prime activities to survive ... We have existed since 1896 but the fishing is not*

even how it was 20 years ago. Actually, it is declining. So, if we want to survive, something has to happen.” (Carlos, Fall 2022)

This realization meant that Carlos actually made a change regarding the “real” business challenge he had prepared and brought with him to the seminar. He did not make the change during the ALC, but subsequently after the second day on the seminar when on his way home he reflected on the seminar:

“This (MBA) seminar has really been an eye opener for me regarding our strategy. Initially, I introduced an organizational challenge that is quite trivial; an employee is not practicing enough autonomy. We discussed the challenge through an Action Learning Conversation (ALC), where the other leaders presented several valuable perspectives that I kept reflecting upon.

However, based on a more thorough reflection in the car on the way home, I realized how strong a tool ALC actually is, and I came to think of an organisational challenge that is actually far more relevant to me; our company strategy (or lack hereof) ... it suddenly became clear to me that we do not have “a really really good strategy” like Prof. X. mentioned.

Hence, I chose to change my focus and continue to work with that organisational challenge through the remaining part of the seminar ... the reality surrounding the harbour has changed, we are aware of it, but have not acted upon it, and we are experiencing a strategic drift. We need to do something different strategically if we want to reverse the downward spiral.” (Carlos, fall 2022)

Based on the written assignment it is not possible to pinpoint exactly what made Carlos change his focus regarding his “real” business challenge. One of the authors of this paper participated in the presentation that Carlos made regarding the harbour’s strategy and subsequently, participated in raising reflexive questions and presenting different perspectives together with two other fellow executives. During the group dialogue, after Carlos had presented the harbour’s strategy, it became apparent how Carlos did not have a response to many of the questions the fellow

executives and the faculty raised. As Carlos expressed in his written assignment, he might have all the answers to the questions raised, but none of the significant people who were to realise the harbour's strategy and ensure the future survival of the harbour knew the answers or had been involved. Carlos also expressed a similar realization during the group dialogue. But, as the other two group members also were assigned time to present and discuss their company strategies, the dialogue ended there. However, not for Carlos, who, on the contrary, experienced the situation as a striking moment of significance for not only him, but also the harbour. Maybe that was the trigger that initiated the change or maybe it was something else. However, what is worth underlining is the significance of creating multiple different learning spaces for striking moments to occur and be explored based on how, when, and what the executive privileges.

In this specific situation, Carlos made a change in the “real” business challenge that he wanted to work with during the seminar after he, together with fellow executives, experienced how the social poetic exploration of different perspectives during ALC was constructive and gave wing to the imagination. The “real” business challenge that Carlos instead chose to work with was a challenge where he knew that he and the harbour's other significant stakeholders had to spend time on reflexively exploring their organizational challenge. He realized the need to jointly develop a new strategy that would be for the common good for both the harbour and its societal context while also ensuring the harbour's survival:

“Based on the six W-questions I have realized the following:

What: *We need to rethink the strategy.*

Why: *We do not have the financial capacity to continue with business as usual.*

Who: *The board, management level, and the employees need to be involved.*

How: *The list of questions we need to embark on is so long, we have material for several seminars.*

We are experiencing strategic drift and we need to move ourselves strategically.

***Where:** We will have to start in the management group by agreeing on the process and start identifying our unique value proposition.*

***When:** As soon as possible, the ground beneath our feet is burning.*

I could write many pages on this. The main thing is what I have come to learn – we need to embark on this journey. I can only regret, I have not learned this before. I wish I had this knowledge earlier because it is only knowledge now. We have to start working with this knowledge, so it instead becomes a competence.”

What Carlos expresses in this final part of his written assignment is a realization of how the "harbour" needs to change the existing dialogues and engage in different future-forming conversations. What strikes us with this example is the courage Carlos exhibits by choosing a “real” business challenge that only can be solved by bringing the notions of reflexivity and social poetics back into his organizational context and to continue working with bridging theory and practice within the “real” business situation. This move illustrates to us the whole purpose of executive education – being able to create learning spaces that support executives in participating in transformative dialogues based on “real” business challenges and bringing these transformative dialogues back into their original context to have the impact that generates transitions for the common good in humanizing, ethical, and responsive ways.

As faculty, we could have argued against the shift in “real” business challenge from day two to three in the seminar. However, that would not have made sense as the purpose of the seminar and the executive program is to create the learning spaces that enable the individual executive to reflexively explore the striking moment that the executive finds relevant for himself/herself, organisation, and society. Hence, the shift was necessary for Carlos to in his work

with bridge theory and practice in reflexive ways that, in his case, made it possible to transform his business for good.

Implications

What we present in this paper are findings that enable us to illustrate and discuss how ALC, as a dialogical process, can support executives to lead in more reflexive, ethical, and humanizing ways. The seminar process described here, and the two case illustrations presented, suggest several issues be taken into consideration when designing an executive learning environment. First, how should we be thinking about teaching? How might faculty occupy a collaborative stance with executives such that together new understandings emerge (as opposed to unidirectional “insight” delivered from teacher to executive)? What if we understood our role as faculty as a possibility to invite executives into safe learning spaces where seeds for transformative dialogues, changing business for good, are sown? Such a stance would emphasize the collaborative aspect of management learning where the purpose is to pose curious questions to one another and invite all to entertain multiple understandings of a situation: “Rather than place my focus on the content of my courses, I am now more centered on building a sense of community in my classroom” (McNamee, 2007: 317). In order for learning through reflexive dialogue to transpire, faculty should provide the safe learning spaces that enable this kind of management learning. Second, we must consider if there are more sustainable practices for working with executive education. In other words, can emphasis on “soft” skills and collaboration around “real” business challenges address the organizational and societal demands that executives face today? We present ALC as one kind of conversational process that creates those “safe learning spaces” where executives are invited to relate to themselves and each other in more collaborative (as opposed to competitive) ways. ALC is one process for exploring how management learning can incorporate more experimental and entrepreneurial methods. We invite fellow colleagues to further explore the richness of these methods and discuss how we, as

business schools and universities, can embrace “real” business challenges in the way we design learning spaces for executives. Third, to the extent that relationally oriented learning spaces are developed, are executives able to cultivate generative humanizing abilities that can effectively replace abstract, context-insensitive forms of learning? As the opening quote indicates, executives are under the pressure of time in their ambitions to develop new perspectives and bridge theory and practice in reflexive ways. This invites us, as faculty, to ponder how we can better blur the boundaries between learning spaces and “real” business situations. Furthermore, we are invited to experiment with how we make the best use of time within executive seminars to explore intra- and interpersonal, as well as organizational, challenges from within. And finally, most often neglected in executive education is the ability to engage in reflexive inquiry – to question one’s own certainty. . At the same time, it is probably the most important skill one can develop because, once an executive is able to question his or her own certainty about an issue, he or she becomes open and curious about alternative understandings: “The institution of education should be recognized as transformative – one that creates the world” (McNamee, 2007: 316). In a world of multiple rationalities, and in organizational life where values and beliefs are often not aligned, being able to *at least* entertain the coherence of a different perspective is critical. If organizations and society are to survive, and if executives are to embark on the journey of engaging in the future-forming conversations that change business for good, we, as faculty, believe the most critical ability is the ability to entertain diverse understandings and support executives in developing more sustainable, ethical, and humanizing ways of leading.

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