Aalborg Universitet

AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Creating space for Reflexivity at an MBA

Larsen, Mette Vinther; Gjerding, Allan Næs; Kringelum, Louise Brøns

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

EURAM 2019

Exploring the Future of Management

SIG 06 – INNO – Innovation

ST06_11 – teaching and Learning with a difference

Creating space for Reflexivity at an MBA

Abstract

While executive programmes, including MBA studies, have proliferated in recent years, there

has been an increasing focus on how executive teaching contributes to contemporary

challenges facing executives in their everyday life as organizational heads. In particular,

researchers on management learning have called for a balance between hard and soft skills,

practice-oriented reflexivity, and new ways of bridging theory and practice. The present paper

answers this call by focusing on how a relational and social construction approach can assist

the development of executive programmes in order to accommodate the need for more

reflexive practices in the everyday life of the executive. The paper addresses how reflexivity

can be supported during MBA programmes, which is demonstrated by a longitudinal

experimental effort where the authors of the paper applied seven different management

learning practices to a Danish MBA programme. The point of departure for the application

consists of three premises: 1) Management learning is a situated, relational, contextual and

problem-based practice where the organizational challenges of executives must be explored

from within their real business situations; 2) management learning emerges from incidents,

phenomena and ways of relating that represent not anticipated or unexpected insights by which the executive is struck; 3) management learning revolves around reflexivity. The paper arrives at two significant findings and a question for future research. First, reflexivity is not and cannot be perceived as a planned or progressive process. Second, reflexivity is a relational practice that involves unsettling taken-for-granted assumptions and perceptions. Third, the occurrence of reflexivity in management learning seems to depend more on process than content in management learning – however, further research on the relationship between the how and what of management learning is warranted.

Keywords: Management learning, MBA, reflexivity, withness-thinking, striking moments

Introduction

The amount of executive programmes offered by universities, business school, university colleges and private consulting houses are increasing rapidly (Mintzberg, 2004; Warhurst, 2011). This increase can be perceived as a response to the growing complexity that executives face in their everyday managing. The 21st century presents organisations with numerous pressures in terms of digitalization, environmental challenges, social impacts, shortened technology cycles, and transient business models.

Therefore, executives are required to understand their organisations as part of a wider socioeconomic system in rupture. In effect, the ability of society to educate executives who are able to reflect more critically on leadership and societal impact becomes paramount (Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2016; Helin, 2016).

Simultaneously, the critique of executive programmes and especially MBA also increases, as argued in the call for submissions; "Teaching no longer means 'spoon-feeding' (Chia, 1996; Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Mintzberg, 2004; Warhurst, 2011). The critique of management learning at executives programmes revolve primarily around how the issues being taught at

MBA's are too abstract, impractical or orthodox or detached form executives' 'real' business situations (Chia, 1996; Chia & Holt, 2008; Warhurst, 2011). In general, three interrelated questions of concern regarding executive programmes and MBA's are raised in the literature (Baruch & Leeming, 2001; Blass & Weight, 2005; Chia, 1996; Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2008; Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Mintzberg, 2004; Muff, 2012; Varela et al., 2013): 1) How should executive programmes balance the development of "hard" and "soft" skills? 2) Are executive programs adding value to society, organizations and the participating executives by turning them into better and more reflexive executives? 3) Do the management learning practices and processes, applied in executive programmes, bridge theory and practice in sufficient ways?

In attempts to deal with the three questions of concern, some researchers argue for more 'experimental methods' (Mowles, 2017), 'entrepreneurial imagination' (Chia, 1996), the 'importance of engagement' (Bell & Bridgman, 2017) and 'reflexivity' (Cunliffe, 2008) to shape both the curriculum and the teaching practices used at executive programmes. The overarching purpose of the critique is to invite business schools to reflect upon – as stated in your call for submissions – "What does teaching management mean today?" Multiple business schools have acknowledged the need to rethink their teaching practices, and more than 650 business schools worldwide has embraced the 2007 United Nations initiative; The Principles for responsible Management Education (Millar & Price, 2018). The purpose is to rethink executive education in order to better meet the increasing societal demands for a responsible education system (Millar & Price, 2018).

Extant research on executive programmes increasingly imply that bridging theory and practice in reflexive, responsive 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). However, only few studies approach executive programmes with a reflexive

methodology. Reflexivity is an invitation for executives to think more critically and responsively about their own assumptions and how it shapes their managing (Alvesson et al., 2017; Cunliffe, 2016; Larsen, 2018). Working with reflexivity in executive programmes is an acknowledgement of how executive programmes should not only support executives become more effective leaders (the harder skills), but also help them become critical and reflexive (the softer skills) as they work with bridging theory and practice (Beal, 2016; Chia, 2005; Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2016; Helin, 2015; Muff, 2012).

Research question

We can recognize the above-mentioned challenges and critiques from our experiences with teaching at a Danish MBA program at Aalborg University's business school. At every cohort, we meet executives who find it difficult to imagine how the theory learnt during the seminars can be used to cope with the everyday complexities they face in their 'real' business situations. Some struggle with bridging theory and practice in reflexive ways. Furthermore, we experience how during the MBA, a large part of the executives come to 'master the language of the upper echelons' (Warhurst, 2011) and develop their 'harder skills', whereas the equally important 'softer skills sometimes are less developed.

This experience has raised some questions amongst ourselves Like; "What kind of business school do we want to be?" and; "What kind of MBA do we want to offer?" These questions have motivated us to explore more fully the management learning potential embedded in the teaching practices applied at the Danish MBA at which we teach. Based on a two-year long qualitative research project we have developed seven individual different management learning practices that were applied during the first year of the two-year long Danish MBA program.

The seven management learning practices developed and applied are based on a relational approach to management learning that draw attention to three interrelated premises that will be further unfolded later in the paper:

1) Management learning is a situated, relational, contextual and problem-based practice where executives' organisational challenges should be explored from 'within' their 'real' business situations

2) Management learning emerges from incidents, phenomena and ways of relating where something unexpected or not anticipated has 'struck' or 'touched' the executive enrolled in the executive program

3) Management learning revolves around reflexivity and the ability to strengthen executives' ability to think more critically and responsively about their own assumptions and how it shapes their managing as they work with bridging theory and practice

Based on these premises the paper seeks to explore; *how can space for reflexivity be created at an MBA?* Much in line with Miller & Price (2018) and Warhurst (2011), we want to draw attention to the processes of management learning and move beyond the question of focusing merely on *what* is being taught at business schools, by also focusing on *how* it is being taught. Some researchers have 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 be taught differently at executive programmes. By presenting and discussing seven management learning practices developed and applied, this paper introduces a different '*how*'. A '*how*' that builds on and expands existing knowledge on how business schools can support executives in bridging theory and practice in relevant, sufficient and reflexive ways.

Findings and structure

The study presented here, identifies two central findings that are of significance. First, the research results indicate that reflexivity is not something that can be planned. Reflexivity occurs whenever the executive experiences a concrete and actual incident, phenomenon or way of relating from his or her own practice that strucks or touches him or her. As the data will show the executives engage in reflexivity in various ways and at different moments – not as a result of the progression of the seven management learning practices or how the individual management learning practice was formulated – but as a result of the executives experiencing a 'striking moment' that then is explored from 'within' the 'real' business situations. The seven management learning practices can create space for reflexivity to occur, but reflexivity is and cannot be progressively planned. Second, reflexivity is a relational practice that occurs between people, it is difficult for the executives (and people in general) to engage in reflexivity on their own. The researcher can in different ways invite the executive into reflexively exploring the moments that have struck him or her, but the researcher has to wait for the moment to occur. When the striking moment occurs, the researcher has to engage in a joint exploration of the striking moment through dialogue, written questions and/or remarks when 'softer skills' are to be developed.

The findings and discussions also support arguments raised by scholars like Bell & Bridgman (2017), Cunliffe (2002, 2004, 2008, 2016), Scaratti et al., (2017), Shotter (2010) and Shotter & Tsoukas (2014) about how knowledge and management learning should be engaging and take its point of departure from within concrete and contextual events where executives explore striking moments. Furthermore, our findings support the argument that reflexivity is not a tool, but a continual engagement in the unfolding of events where multiple perspectives and a desire to explore unknown aspects of a phenomena or situation is sought and embraced (Cunliffe, 2004, 2016; Scaratti, 2017; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014).

The findings on how reflexivity can be supported during MBA programmes offer new insights and expands existing knowledge on how business schools can support executives in bridging theory and practice in relevant, sufficient and reflexive ways. Furthermore, they shed light on how executive programmes can balance the development of 'harder' and 'softer skills' better by creating space for executives to reflect more critically on their managing. In addition, the data indicate that there might be an interplay between what is taught at an MBA and how that moves beyond the metaphor of 'spoon-feeding'. Our findings point at a question that could be relevant and interesting to research further; *whether including theory that are anchored in a relational ontology in the MBA curriculum enhance possibilities for creating space for reflexivity at an MBA?*

The paper is structured as follows. First we unfold the three interrelated premises that constitute the theoretical foundations of the paper. Second, the method applied, the seven management learning practices and the context of the study is presented. Third, we present the empirical insights into how three executives enrolled in the MBA program at a Danish University in different ways and at various moments experienced a concrete and actual incident, phenomenon or way of relating from their own practice that struck or touched them and encouraged them to engage in reflexive inquiry. Fourth, the findings and the empirical and theoretical implications of the study are debated and concluding discussion.

Theory

Several international scholars have researched executive programmes and management learning (e.g. Alvesson et al., 2017; Chia& Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2016; 2004; 2002; Mintzberg, 2004; Muff, 2012; Ruth, 2017; Warhurst, 2017). These studies have identified the motives for participating in educational programmes, examined the value-adding aspects of and argued for organizational readiness and the need to combine theory and practice - especially in relation to MBA programmes if executives are to improve their skills during executive programmes.

(Beal, 2016; Baruch, 2009; Chia & Holt, 2008; Hay & Hodgkinson, 2005; Mihail & Elefterie 2006; Mintzberg, 2004; Sørensen, 2018).

Shortly, the three interrelated premises that constitute the theoretical foundations of the paper are unfolded: 1) Management learning is a situated, relational, contextual and problem-based practice where executives' organisational challenges should be explored from 'within' their 'real' business situations; 2) Management learning emerges out of incidents, phenomena and ways of relating where something unexpected or not anticipated has 'struck' or 'touched' the executive enrolled in the executive program, and; 3) Management learning revolves around reflexivity and the ability to strengthen executives' ability to think more critically and responsively about their own assumptions and how it shapes their managing as they work with bridging theory and practice. Before we unfold these premises we will present how management learning is understood, when a relational and social construction perspective is applied.

Management learning from a relational perspective

The notion of management learning presented here, builds on a relational and social construction ontology (Cunliffe, 2002; Gergen, 2009; Hosking, 2011, 2010; McNamee and Hosking, 2012). An ontology which acknowledges and assigns primacy to relations and how people in the present co-construct meaning and talk and socially construct a local reality into being (Gergen, 2009; McNamee, 2015; McNamee and Hosking, 2012).

We are inspired by researchers like Hay & Hodgkinson (2008), Ruth (2017) and Warhurst (2011) who argue for a more nuanced understanding of management learning and the function of MBA programmes. These scholars suggest a more relational and processual perspective on executive learning, where there is less focus on the formal curriculum (the 'what' of MBA) and

more focus on the processual, relational and identity constructing aspects during the MBA program (the 'how' of MBA). An MBA is "An element in a life story." (Warhurst, 2017: 7)

In 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 a critical and pragmatic thinking; being able to deal with uncertainty and be able to relate reflexively to oneself, other and the surroundings: "Learning occurs as we reflexively engage in in internal and/or external dialogues in an attempt to make sense of our experiences." (Cunliffe, 2002: 36)

The significance of incorporating reflexivity in executive programmes has been advocated by scholars like; 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 focus 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 relational understanding of knowledge, management and management learning

To talk about management learning in this perspective shapes the understanding of two central phenomena; 1) managing and; 2) knowledge. First, managing is understood as a contextual, relational and embedded practice that is filled with uncertainties, surprises and fluctuating ideas (Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2004; Shotter, 2006). It is a process of continual becoming

and wayfaring for the executive, people around him or her and the processes they participate in: "Management we would argue, is essentially about 'becoming aware, attending to, sorting out, and prioritizing an inherently messy, fluxing, chaotic world of competing demands that are placed on a manager's attention…'" (Chia & Holt, 2008: 473). Managing in this perspective becomes a responsive and relational process where the executive is deeply immersed in everyday 'real' business situations and attempts to make connections between his or her immediate experiences and existing knowledge as sensible evaluations and judgments before acting are made (Chia & Holt, 2008).

Second, this perspective on management learning means that knowledge is understood as fluid rather than static and concrete. Any understanding is active, responsive and developing. Understanding and knowledge are never final, they are always in the process of becoming something else (Ingold, 2010; Shotter, 2006). Understandings and knowledge are unique and momentary constructions that stem from the dialogues and conversations people have with each other as they attempt to make sense of the concrete situations and figure out how to move forward in meaningful ways (Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Ingold, 2010; Shotter, 2006; 2010).

The knowledge an executive take to be meaningful and significant in a given situation depends on the supplementary actions of other people and how shared generalized other ways of co-constructing meaning is realized within the specific context (Cunliffe, 2002; Mead, 1974; 1932). Knowledge is contextual or as argued by Cunliffe & Scaratti (2017) 'situated': "[Situated knowledge] can broadly be defined as knowledge embedded within a social, historical, cultural and political time and place that reflects contextual features and lived experiences." (p. 30) The implications of this perspective on managing and knowledge is that management learning becomes a transformative process that focus on the very flux of the organisational and executive life we try to grasp and make sense of – "a life of the real." (Bergson, 1911 IN Shotter, 2006: 585). Management learning is a relational process where the

chosen curriculum, formal knowledge and rational modes of cognition has to be contextualized and situated within 'real' business situations in order to have an impact and allow for new perspectives and ways of orienting to emerge and shape the doings and sayings of executives (Chia & Holt, 2008; Cunliffe, 2002; Ruth, 2017, Warhurst, 2011). Inspired by Cunliffe (2002), 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) A perception that underlines the significance of exploring the 'softer skills' and the 'how' of management learning during MBA programmes.

Engaging in management learning during MBA programmes revolves around developing what Shotter (1993) refers to as 'practical' rather than abstract and generalizable theories. Management learning is an engaged process where researchers invite executives into perceiving their known experiences from different perspectives (Bell & Bridgman, 2017; Cunliffe, 2002; Ruth, 2017; Shotter, 2010). This is a relational activity where researcher and the executive are sensitive to the unfolding of events and – little by little – initiate a; "Translation into practice that marks the difference." (Scaratti et al., 2017: 59), and jointly create possibilities for change in the executive's everyday interactions.

This understanding of management learning does not implicate that curriculum, formal knowledge or rational modes of cognition are less relevant. On the contrary. As presented earlier in the paper the intention is to be able to balance the development of the 'harder' and 'softer skills' during an MBA program. In addition, it is an acknowledgment of how business schools have multiple possibilities for developing teaching practices that support executives in bridging theory and practice. As stated earlier, this is not merely a question of what is being taught at MBA programmes, but also how it is being taught.

Knowledge and learning is situated within the executive's unique context. What we suggest is that when management learning takes its point of departure in the 'real' business situations that

executives live in, and then relationally support the executives in becoming aware and attend to different perspectives, we are able to create space for executives to reflect more critically and reflexively on their managing. Hence, support the development of executive programmes that add value to organisations and society.

Management learning occurs from 'within' executives' 'real' business situations

To argue that knowledge and learning are situated processes is closely related to Shotter's notion of 'withness-thinking' or 'knowing from within' (2010; 2006, 2005): "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) To know something from within is an acknowledgement of organisational life, thereof also learning are not abstract processes, but contextual and ongoing reconstructions of the 'real' business situations executives live in (Cunliffe, 2002; Shotter, 2010).

To work from within is to assign primacy to the unfolding, dynamic and complex relational every day organisational life that executives participate in. Furthermore, it is to acknowledge that if any change or learning has to occur, must be immersed in the executive's responsive and ongoing 'real' business situations (Shotter, 2005). The notion of within emanates from a relational thinking where it is acknowledged how the organisational reality executives live in is a socially constructed reality that they together with other organisational members talk and act into being as they attempt to make sense of it (Cunliffe, 2002; Shotter, 2006). Managing is a contextual and relational practice and the executive is not detached, objective or merely observing (Chia & Holt, 2008). He or she is continually immersed in myriad of relational constructions of meaning that shape how organisational life unfolds (Shotter, 2005).

This means that when management learning has to occur from within, it is a move from abstract things, theories, cognition and thinking into thinking and talking about changing by making interventions within the unique and 'real' business situations: "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." (Shotter, 2005: 585) The purpose with management learning is not to work with generalizations but real stories experienced from within and support executives in constructing possibilities in a situation they had not previously thought of or sensed (Shotter, 2010). Researchers invite executives to; "Regard a case differently" by applying knowledge to ongoing and concrete organizational challenges (Beal, 2016; Shotter, 2010).

Management learning emerges out of striking moments

When management learning has to occur from within the executives' 'real' business situations, inquiries often focus on phenomena, incidents or ways of relating that has '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 experience something unforeseen, unplanned and unanticipated that makes the executive feel imprisoned, stuck or reduced in some way, because he or she struggles with being able to see and make new connections (Shotter & Katz, 1999). These experiences often mark the beginning of management learning processes, where time is spent on exploring the issues that the executive cannot immediately make sense of or figure out how to evaluate or judge in sensible ways (Cunliffe, 2004; Shotter & Katz, 1999).

A situation that offers the executive a unique opportunity for learning, where learning becomes: "A unique, complex, embodied, responsive process in which we are 'struck'… and moved to change our way of being, talking and acting." (Cunliffe, 2002: 36) 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 researcher and the executive work through the situation and identify the; "Difference that makes a difference." (Bateson, 1972: 286)

By relationally working through the situation, it becomes possible to make sense in different ways and; "Find uniquely new beginnings for genuinely innovative changes in organizations." (Shotter, 2010: 273) When a researcher and executive explore 'striking moments' they often spend time focusing on something already in plain view that needs to be understood or made sense of differently. To explore striking moments can be perceived as a trying-out process where the executive and the researcher relationally try to get a sense of how a different perspective can generate new ways to go on (Shotter & Katz, 1999). It is a process where researcher and executive refrain from seeking explanations, conducting analyses, offering interpretations and instead allow themselves to be more explorative (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). These kinds of inquiries reflects two significant aspects of management learning perceived from this perspective. First, it underlines a central relational premises; "We can achieve jointly what we cannot achieve apart." (Shotter, 2010). Second, it points to the need to perceive management learning as contextual moments. Being struck and developing new perspectives cannot be done intentionally or produced by following intellectually devised theories, plans or protocols (Shotter, 2010). Being struck is not a deliberate action, it is something that occurs as executives pay attention to and are curious about the 'real' business situations they are a part of.

Management learning revolves around reflexivity

The two above-mentioned premises for management learning are interrelated to this third premise. As presented earlier in the paper, scholars like Cunliffe (2002; 2004; 2016) have 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) Reflexivity revolves around discussions about what constitutes good management practice. 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 involves that the executive is willing to unsettle his or her taken for granted assumptions and meaning structures regarding a specific situation and be capable of thinking in different ways and embrace multiple perspectives when it comes to managing and organising (Cunliffe, 2004; 2002). 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 researcher and executive to jointly explore how they relationally evaluate, make judgments and decide to move on.

A central argument for creating space for reflexivity at an MBA is closely related to a relational ontology in two ways. First, reflexivity is an acknowledgment of how the 'real' business situations the executive is a part of are socially and relationally talked and acted into being (Cunliffe, 2002; Gergen, 2009; McNamee & Hosking, 2012). Second, reflexivity revolves around embracing how the 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, 2002: 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, they are a part of (Cunliffe, 2004).

To be reflexive about an incident that has struck the executive is often a relational inquiry practice. Executives (like all other people) often rely on their taken-for-granted assumptions and meaning structures as they experience a striking moment they want to make sense of. These taken-for-granted assumptions enable the executive to make sense of the incident quickly, and intuitively the executive knows how to move on. Cunliffe (2002) refers to this instantaneous process as 'reflex interaction' where the executive just react in-the-moment and respond to other people on the basis of instinct, habits, and/or memory. Many of the conversations an executive engage in are shaped by reflex interactions, as he or she is responsive towards other people and the surroundings (Cunliffe, 2002). 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 jointly explore the part the executive play in constructing the situation: "Our learning depends on our ability to take this reflex interaction further and reflect in or on the process." (Cunliffe, 2002: 49)

To engage in 'reflective thinking' (Cunliffe, 2002) 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 programmes as it is a way to bridge theory and practice in intellectual, logical, objective and analytical ways (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Cunliffe, 2002; 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 retrospective and anticipatory (Cunliffe, 2002; Hansen & Larsen, 2018).

Reflective thinking can then be understood as objective and rational ways 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, 2002, 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 invite 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, 2002, 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, 2002). It is a management learning process where executives are encouraged to look more critically on their own assumptions and actions with the purpose of developing more collaborative responsive and ethical ways of managing organizations. To create space for reflexivity at an MBA becomes primarily a question of *how* business schools can support executives in bridging theory and practice and enable them to meet the organisational and societal demands in relevant and sufficient ways.

Method

In total 41 executives enrolled in two different cohorts at a Danish university's business school offering a part-time MBA participated in the two-year long research project. The executives are practicing managers from public and private small and medium-sized Nordic organisations. The explored MBA was conducted at a Danish university that puts Problem-Based Learning at the core of teaching activities. This affects our discussions about "What kind of MBA should we offer?" as it is an integrated aspect of our management learning perspective that bridging theory and practice has to be based on executives' concrete and actual work-related problems.

The curriculum of the explored MBA program is congruent with the requirements of the Danish accrediting body. Core modules on the program include strategic management, marketing, finance, HRM, negotiation, organising and change management. However, in relation to 'how' these topics are taught, the processual and relational aspects are prioritized. Meaning that it is of pivotal importance that the management learning processes that the executive embark on are situated within his or her 'real' business situations.

This means that when we engage in discussion about the MBA we offer, focus is not only on acquiring competences underpinned by formal knowledge and rational modes of cognition (the harder skills). Focus is also on supporting executives in building softer skills that enable a critical and pragmatic thinking, where the executive becomes capable of dealing with uncertainty and relating reflexively to oneself, others and the surroundings. The guiding assumption is that attaining these competences strengthens the executive's ability to meet the increasing, volatile and unpredictable societal demands.

The ontological and epistemological implications of the relational ontology behind the notion of reflexivity and management learning presented above suggest an interpretivist research approach and entails a critical self-reflexive inquiry practice (Cunliffe, 2002; Madsen et al., 2018; McNamee & Hosking, 2012) This is a practice of inquiry, where transparency and the notion of continually questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about how data can be generated and understood are essential (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006; Madsen et al., 2018). Hence, the data presented in the paper are to be understood as 'constructed understandings' (Hay & Hodgkinson, 2006: 113) that are based on the formulation of seven management learning practices, the dialogues we have had with the executives and the following choice we have made as we researched the data and chose examples for the paper. In this process, we have also engaged in reflexive inquiry and chosen data with enabled different perspectives to surface (Cunliffe, 2016; Madsen et al., 2018; MacNamee & Hosking, 2012). What we present

are findings that enable us to gain new perspectives on how it is possible to create space for reflexivity at an MBA.

The purpose with the seven management learning practices was to invite the leaders to bridge theory and practice based on reflexively exploring striking moments from within their 'real' business situations. In addition, invite them to reflect on their own words as they formulated them – written and oral - and make new connections and go on in different ways (Shotter & Katz, 1999).

Inspiration for the seven management learning practices

As we worked on developing the management learning practices to create space for reflexivity during the Danish MBA we found inspiration in existing literature on management learning. We found other scholars that had worked with exploring how business schools can rethink their teaching practices and support executives in bridging theory and practice in critical and reflexive ways. Here we draw attention to especially three studies as they in different ways have shaped the becoming of the seven management learning practices we developed and applied. The first is a study Ruth (2017) has conducted where Ruth over three years invited approximately 100 MBA students to write essays where they reflected on the role the MBA had in their personal and professional life. The purpose of the study was to make the MBA more relevant to students and influence their goal-seeking and goal-development: This study builds on a growing strand of research (e.g. Hay & Hodgkinson, 2008; Muff, 2012; Helin, 2016; Warhurst, 2011) that indicate that management education is a part of an identity construction process. Identity work issues are salient and omnipresent during MBA 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).

Ruth (2017) writes that acquiring an MBA can be a transformative and reflective process and identify metaphors like; 'The show goes on', 'The quest', 'Born again', 'Deus ex machine', 'The voyage', 'The servant' and 'The big apple' as he inspired by Orr (1991) argue that: "Real education is mastery of one's person." (Ruth, 2017) The conclusion of Ruth's study is: "It would appear that when it comes to the MBA, there are, as in life, few straight paths and clear boundaries, but many interesting stories to be told." (Ruth, 2017: 18) What this study draws attention to is the significance of acknowledging how doing an MBA is not merely a question of attaining harder skills through reflective thinking. Building softer skills and supporting the executive in his or her identity construction process through reflexive inquiry is equally important.

The second study we were inspired by was Cunliffe's (2004) work on inviting MBA students to write reflective and/or reflexive journals as a way to engage in their own learning, surface tacit knowing, improve their analytic and creative writing skills and build self-awareness: "Reflexive journals… offer a means of exploring new possibilities for being and acting." (Cunliffe, 2004: 421) Cunliffe asked her students to write journals to critically and reflexively question their own learning. She invited the executive to start by unfolding an incident or situation where they had felt struck and based on that engage in double-loop learning. Furthermore, she encouraged them to be open, listen for voices that otherwise would have been silenced and identify assumptions that then could be critically and reflexively questioned. Cunliffe was involved in the executives' learning process by writing questions and comments in the margins of the journals inviting the executive to engage in reflexively exploring the incidents and situations where they had become struck.

Cunliffe concludes: "The reflexive journal is based on the assumptions that learning is meaningful when embodied, when we interweave theory and experience, and when we focus on developing skills of lifelong learning. It challenges students to think about learning in

relation to the topics covered in the course, explore their learning, and create a personal development plan." (Cunliffe, 2004) What inspired us about this study was the significance of initiating the management learning based on striking moments that the executive has experienced. Furthermore, how inviting the executive into writing about their 'real ' business situations and commenting and questioning their writing in reflexive ways can be understood as an engaging invitation for executives to think more critically and responsively about their own assumptions and how it shapes their managing.

The third study we were inspired by was Goumaa et al. (2018) work on supporting active understanding during online MBA. Inspired by 'Community of Inquiry' (CoI), they examine the potential for critically reflexive learning and active understanding online by inviting students into online dialogues with the involved teachers. The study builds on a notion of learning as a process of attaining new perspectives, changes in outlook and practices and independent thought. During the online MBA, the executives were asked to hand in written week assignments that should support their active understanding of the theory and help them with bridging theory and practice from within their ' real' business situations. During the online communication, the role of the teacher was to both encourage dissent and contribute to create a safe learning space where the executives were confident enough to venture beyond their current beliefs and explore other and different perspectives. To support this, the teachers focused on the executives' capacity to create and recognize the nuance and difference in written communication as they reflected on knowledge and their real-life management problems. The teachers engaged in online dialogues with the executives, raised questions and in various ways helped the student redirect attention and notice things which: " no one has doubted, but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes." (Shotter, 2006: 598 IN Goumaa et al., 2018: 5) This study drew attention to the need for the researcher to pay special attention to the language that the executive uses as he or she bridges

theory and practice from within his or her 'real' business situations, and engage in joint explorations of other and different ways to make sense of striking moments. In addition, it also illustrated that how the researcher engaged in management learning plays a dual role in the online communication with the executive, i.e. in terms of creating a safe learning space and reflexively questioning the executive's taken-for-granted assumptions.

The becoming of the seven management learning practices

The above-presented three studies of inspiration served to qualify the seven management learning practices developed and applied to create space for reflexivity at the Danish MBA. They were designed to invite the executives enrolled to make new connections and incorporate reflexivity while we were teaching within a rather traditional and conventional curriculum (Cunliffe, 2002; Cunliffe & Scaratti, 2017; Shotter, 2008). Even though there are several theoretical and ontological convergences with the above studies, the seven learning practices developed differs from the above studies in three ways:

1) The seven management learning practices differ in content and structure. The purpose was to invite the executives into exploring their 'real' business situations from multiple perspectives and supporting the executives to bridge theory and practice in a variety of ways. Thus, enabling the executives to experience striking moments from different angles.

2) A progression was developed with the purpose of increasingly inviting the executive to engage in reflexive inquiry. The intention was to gradually invite the executives into moving from reflex interactions over reflective thinking and to reflexive inquiries at their own pace. This was decided in order to acknowledge that exploring striking moments from within, unsettling one's taken-for-granted assumptions and seeking other and different perspectives is a process that takes time.

3) The seven management learning practices were longitudinal and distributed over the MBA's first year. The purpose was to prioritize 'how' management learning is taught and move beyond merely focusing on 'what', and furthermore, to work on better balancing the development of softer and harder skills as theory and practice is bridged in reflexive ways.

Even though the seven management learning practices differed regarding structure and content, they all incorporated elements that invited the executive to explore a striking moment from within their practice from a reflex, reflective and reflexive perspective as they worked with bridging theory and practice. In every management learning practice the executive was free to choose the organisational, strategic or managerial situation form within his or her 'real business situation' that he or she felt most relevant and sensible to explore. Except from the second management learning practice the executive could individually choose the model, perspective or theory that he or she felt most relevant when bridging theory and practice.

The table below presents the seven management learning practices more detailed. Each management learning practice consisted of an assignment that was presented to the executives at the last day of the seminars held at the MBA's first year. The executives were given two weeks for each management learning practice assignment and based on every assignment one of the researchers sent the executive a mail with written feedback and one to three questions inviting the executive into further reflexive inquiry. It was not mandatory for executives to reply, which in practice meant that some executives responded back whereas other did not. In total the 41 executives participating in the research project generated 270 assignments.

Management learning practice number	Amount of responses	Content	Purpose	Intended progression
1	41	• Identify a strategic and/or organisational challenge	• Create a safe learning space • Invite the executive into trying to bridge	• Initiate a learning process where the executive starts to

		• Explore it from two different theoretical models or perspectives • Present the first concrete action to initiate to deal with the challenge	theory and practice from within and based on a striking moment	bridge theory and practice • Invite the executive into an online dialogue • Invite the executive into engaging in primarily reflex interaction
2	39	• Describe the perception of leading based on the presented financial managerial perspective • Link the financial managerial perspective to four lenses on strategy • Describe how to combine the different perspectives on managing from within the organisational context	• Invite the executive into combining different perspectives on managing • Encourage the executive to bridge theory and practice from within	• Continue creating a safe learning space • Support the executive in bridging theory and practice based on different perspectives • Invite the executive into engaging in reflex interaction and reflective thinking
3	38	• Contact an existing, potential or previous customer, supplier etc. that could contribute with a different perspective on the organisation • Ask the contact to indicate what is of significance regarding cooperating with the organisation and where the organisation is challenged regarding the cooperation • Identify how the responses have reworked existing perceptions of the organisation • Integrate macro economic perspectives to make sense of the responses • Initiate a concrete action based on reflections on how the organisation	• Inspire the executive to engage in reflexive inquiry with someone who have a different perspective on the organisation • Encourage the executive to explore the organisation from a societal perspective • Invite the executive to see the organisation as a part of a wider socioeconomic system in rupture • Acknowledge how organisational life emerge out of specific saying, doings and ways of relating that always can be reworked by changing the everyday interactions	• Encourage the executive to experience and proactively seek an unsettling moment • Become more familiar with engaging in reflex interaction and reflective thinking based on concrete situations • Bridge theory and practice based on a societal perspective on the organisation • Experience how the 'real' business situations the organisation is a part of are socially constructed and therefor can be changed through reflexively inquiring them and identify new sayings, doings and ways of relating

		wants to interact with the surrounding milieu		
4	36	• Take a photo illustrating the interplay between a concrete marketing initiative and the strategic focus of the organisation • Unfold how theory and practice can be combined to make sense of the concrete interplay between marketing and strategy • Reflect upon how photographing shapes existing perceptions of managing	• Invite the executive to make sense of an organisational situation from within based on a more experimental method than merely writing • Explore a different 'how' in attempts to bridge theory and practice	• Invite the executive to move from reflex interaction over reflective thinking to reflexively inquiring by acknowledging how his or her own assumptions shapes their managing • Encourage the executive to try out a more experimental method illustrating how the constructions the executive engage in shape the becoming of the organisation
5	40	• Engage in a reflexive inquiry with a researcher based on a concrete organisational dilemma where the executive feels stuck and wants to explore further from different perspectives • Read and comment on a dynamic summary of the organisational dilemma explored • Reflect on the explored dilemma and present the concrete actions initiated since the reflexive inquiry	• Assign time to reflexively explore a concrete striking moment from within • Expose and explore contradictions, doubts, dilemmas and possibilities related to the organisational dilemma explored • Invite the executive to explore how he or she might be able to contribute to the 'real' business situations differently by talking, acting and relating differently *within* them	• Move the dialogue from online to face-to-face and maintain the safe learning space • Invite the executive to engage in primarily reflexively inquiring a striking moment from within
6	38	• Identify a concrete operational economic situation and relate it to the organisation's strategy • Discuss how and when operational economic aspects limits the strategic development of the organisation	• Invite the executive to apply a different perspective on the organisation and his or her managing • Encourage the executive to acknowledge how the sense he or she makes about the interplay between operational economics and	• Encourage the executive to embrace how the constructions the executive engage in – financial, strategic and managerial - shape the becoming of the organisation

		• Reflect upon the managerial implications of adopting an operational economic perspective	strategising are responsive, reflexive and critical ways of relating within the organisation	
7	38	• Engage in an action learning conversation together with other executives enrolled in the MBA based on a concrete striking moment from within their 'real' business situations • Identify inquiring practices that will be used to explore the striking moment from other perspectives • Choose inquiring practices that will be used to handle the striking moment from within when returning to the organisational context • Reflect upon how the chosen inquiring practices have affected the further development of the striking moment	• Invite the executives to support each other in reflexively inquiring a striking moment • Encourage the executives to acknowledge how a striking moment can be understood in multiple different ways as it is explored with people from outside the concrete organisational context • Inspire the executives to embrace how their taken-for-granted assumptions shape how they make sense of a striking moment and are able to rework their understandings by talking, acting and relating differently	• Invite the executive to experience the potential of an unsettling moment where taken-for-granted assumptions and reflex interacting are challenged • Inspire the executive to proactively engage in reflexive inquiries with people from outside the organisational context

Table 1

Findings

Looking back on the two-year long research project and researching the 270 assignments that was designed to create space for reflexivity at the Danish MBA, we have identified some findings of global significances. In this paper, we illustrate and discuss three significant findings:

1) Reflexivity is not a planned or progressive process. It is the result of an executive exploring a striking moment

2) The interplay between 'how' and 'what' is taught at an MBA can strengthen the possibility of bridging theory and practice in reflexive ways

3) Reflexivity is a relational practice, where the softer skills of managing are developed whenever the specific opportunity presents itself – be it in conversation or in mail correspondence with the researcher.

Before illustrating and discussing the three significant findings, a more general and inclusive feedback and evaluation of the seven management learnings practices is presented. After each seminar at the MBA the executives are asked to evaluate the content, relevance and structure of the seminar. After the seven management learning practices were held we asked the executives to evaluate them separately applying a five-point Likret scale and following this procedure when asked the executives *in toto* the seven management learning practices. The result of the evaluation can be seen in the table below (and as everybody else we also struggle with a low response rate):

	Year 1 Respondents: 14	Year 2 Respondents: 7
Relevance of the assignments in relation to concrete work related challenges *(1-5 whereas 5 is the highest)*	4,5	4,3
Relevance of assignments in relation to the learning process during the MBA *(1-5 whereas 5 is the highest)*	4,6	4,5
Additional feedback (six out of twelve)	*"The assignments have given me a lot to think about. They have been challenging and therefore really great. The fact that we also got feedback and were asked the right questions in the mail correspondence kept the reflection going."* *"It has been an interesting process that has tied the individual seminars really great together."*	*"These assignments are an important aspect of my learning and forces me to add new perspectives on my managing."* *"The mail correspondence and feedback on my assignments was a free opportunity to reflect again on my perspectives on the organisation and managing."*

| | *"It has been a really great progress that has strengthened my ability to reflect upon theory and my every day practice. The returned questions have created space for further reflections that have altered my planned approach to the problems."* | |
| | *"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 regarding the assignments have contributed to the fact that the identity development – 'big word' - that I am in the midst of are progressing and not decreasing."* | |

Table 2

The evaluation, including the comments, shows that the management learning practices were useful and relevant for the executives' learning process and concrete work-related challenges. We had more or less expected this to occur. However, we had not expected the extent to which the assignments tied the seminars at the first year of the MBA together, thus creating a process of learning across a curriculum of rather different seminars. Furthermore, we had not anticipated that the mail correspondence following the assignments would be so significant to the executives as it proved to be. Initially, inspired by the Goumaa et al. (2018) study, the primary purpose with the mail correspondence, questions and remarks was to establish trust, ensure safe learning space for the executives and support their work with bridging theory and practice. However, as some of the executives replied with comments like: "*Your feedback is very valuable."* and *"Thank you once again for your thorough and useful feedback. It is much appreciated… and I am happy to answer your questions."* a different perspective was added. The mail correspondence proved to be a way we as researchers could create space for reflexivity during the MBA and support the executives in bridging theory and practice from

within in reflexive ways. To explore further some of the findings from the study, the following explores three empirical incidents.

Reflexivity is not a planned or progressive process

This first insight occurred as a result of the third management learning practice where one of the executives, Mike, invited an existing customer to formulate in writing what he found of significance and wished to further develop in the cooperation with the organisation where Mike was a sales manager. The customer replied that he experienced the communication with the organisation to be insufficient. Too often expensive misperceptions occurred, a more professional project management was required, and mandatory legal documentation was lacking which in negative ways affected the cooperation. Receiving this feedback from the customer was unexpected and came as a shock to Mike, and as he reflected upon the feedback and further process, Mike wrote in his assignment (our translation):

"It has been interesting and a learning experience to apply an 'outside-in' perspective on the organisation and experience how a smaller student assignment can lead to relevant considerations. The customer who responded to the questions has subsequently contacted me on the phone and told me that he was very positive concerning the invitation to improve our cooperation… In addition to the written response, a telephone meeting has been held, where we spent approximately an hour on discussing how we could improve the cooperation and avoid misperceptions…

I learned that we have to be better at organising, planning and realizing the complexities of the cooperation and allocate the necessary resources and competences… The notion of 'The learning organisation' comes to my mind, where knowing becomes a process. In relation to this, I find it relevant that we as an organisation become better at sharing knowledge with customers…

The insights I have gained from this assignment has to be used constructively within the organisation… I have scheduled a meeting with our CEO where we will go through the points the customer has made with the purpose of concretizing how we as accompany can develop ourselves."

What we want to draw attention to with this insight is how a striking moment from within Mike's 'real' business situation triggered the urge to change and rework the way Mike and the organisation related, talked and acted with their customers. Mike became struck by the customer's words and reply as the customer's words and voice challenged Mike's existing

taken-for-granted assumptions about how the cooperation with the customer was. This initiated a learning process where Mike in dialogue with the customer became aware of and attended to a different perspective on the organisation. Jointly they explored issues that Mike could not immediately make sense of, but as the conversation unfolded between Mike and the customer, Mike got a sense of new ways to move forward.

This kind of responsive and engaged thinking and acting that led Mike to immerse himself in the 'real' business situation and together with the customer explore something that for the customer already was in plain view, just occurred. That Mike and the customer began constructing practical theories on how to change their way of relating (drawing on and transforming the notion of 'The learning organisation'), being and acting was not an integrated aspect of the third management learning practice. It was not the result of a planned progression from our side and we doubt that it could have been produced intentionally. Based on Mike's other management learning assignments which did entail questioning taken-for-granted assumptions, it becomes obvious that this incident just occurred, as a result of Mike experiencing a striking moment where he felt the urge to engage in reflexive inquiry and together with the customer begin to talk and act a different local reality into being.

We are not arguing that the developed and applied management learning practices are not part of the reflexive inquiry that occurred. We believe that they were a part of how Mike bridged theory and practice by engaging in dialogue with the customer, but in a more intrinsic and complicated manner than originally thought. What is worthwhile underlining is the significance of creating space for striking moments to occur and be explored based on how, when and what the executive privileges. This is especially important when the purpose is to develop teaching practices that are relevant for the executive, organisation and society, and support the executive in bridging theory and practice in reflexive ways.

The interplay between 'how' and 'what' is taught at an MBA

The second insight occurred as a result of the seventh management learning practice, where

Matt, a regional sales director in a larger Danish supermarket chain, experienced a striking

moment as a result of the annual employee satisfaction survey. Regarding the of: *"My closest*

manager follows up on my development", *"My closest manager is a good leader"* and *"My*

closest manager handles conflicts and problems in a constructive way" Matt got a significant

lower score than the year before. This concerned and challenged Matt and started a reflexive

inquiry process where Matt unfolded how he by bridging theory and practice would work on

changing his way of being, talking and relating with his five department managers. In his

assignment Mike unfolded the situation (our translation):

"It challenges me as a leader that I am experiencing a negative development concerning the
employee satisfaction compared to last year. It is in no way satisfactory that my closest
employees do not perceive me as a good leader and do not experience that I prioritize their
development. I have to do something about that… I have to admit that I have neglected my
employees at the cost of myself… I have taken it for granted that they were content. I have
refrained from giving them direct feedback and I have not taken the development conversations
serious enough… I have prioritized the corporate aspects over the department's…

I have received the following feedback form my employees: ' Can you be more present?',
'Could you engage us more in what you are doing?' and 'We want to know more about your
business, is that possible?'… I am extremely motivated to change the course of this. I want to
include my team more as a group in internal and external projects and focus on their
development… I have talked with my wife, my closest manager and the CEO about this and
gone through piles of data to come up with solutions…

I know I have to change my priorities and work on changing the employees' mindsets…
Sensemaking *will help me construct a shared frame of reference revolving management and*
development… I want to include these conversations at our monthly 1:1 meetings… ***Reflex,***
reflective and reflexivity *will help me prioritize time and create space for learning… I will use*
the daily conversations I have with my employees to create space for reflexivity… ***Relations***
with my five department managers have to be strengthened… I know some of them want to
develop themselves… ***Meshwork*** *will help me and my employees acknowledge how we in every*
situation have the possibility to act by reflex or engage in more reflexive and learning inquiries
to create new understandings and ways to move on."

As with the previous insight, it was a striking moment from within Matt's 'real' business

situation that initiated a reflexive inquiry where Matt engaged in a process based on an

unanticipated but unsettling experience. As in the case with Mike, Matt also engaged in joint

explorations, relational and ongoing reconstructions of what he took-for-granted with different

people to allow for new perspectives, other ways of talking and acting within his local context to emerge. In addition, this striking moment just occurred and Matt attempted to bridge theory and practice in ways that would offer new explanations, sensible evaluations and judgments before acting. In the course of this, Matt also developed practical theories and situated knowledge as he tried to identify more responsive and ethical ways of relating with his five department managers. What strike us as important are especially two observations. First, looking at the words and expressions that Matt is using, it becomes clear how learning during an MBA incorporates developing 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 the contextual complexities of their 'real' business situations.

Second, and exemplified in Matt's assignment, is how there might be an interplay between what is taught and how it is taught that could be worthwhile exploring regarding the creation of space for reflexivity at an MBA. Initially, our taken-for-granted assumptions led us to believe that when focusing on the processes of management learning it would primarily be a question of exploring how theory was taught. However, the present insight challenged those taken-for-granted assumptions. At the seventh seminar that revolved around strategic and organisational change and reflexive leadership, half of the course material was founded on a relational and social construction ontology and introduced concepts like sensemaking, meshwork, relational leading, reflexivity, becoming and language as ontology. Furthermore, at this seminar the executives engaged in action learning conversations, explored and reworked their 'memories about the future' (Larsen & Willert, 2018), participated in reflexive dialogues and in other ways explored theory and practices that were anchored in a relational and social construction ontology.

What we want to draw attention to here is that maybe in the process of creating space for reflexivity at an MBA, we as researchers can strengthen the executives' ability to think more

critically and responsively about their own assumptions and how it shapes their managing as they work with bridging theory and practice by introducing them to theory that is anchored within a relational ontology. Maybe theories building on a relational and social construction ontology can allow for reflective thinking and reflexive inquiry to interweave more closely, as these theories invite the reader to move beyond objective and rational ways to bridge theory and practice. Furthermore, the relational stance invites the executive to embrace how the accounts he think describe the world are accounts he or she have participated in constructing. We find that these inferences are plausible by looking at how Matt when engaging in reflective thinking and drawing on theory continually acknowledges and highlight his own co-constructive part in the outcome of employee satisfaction survey and in making sensible judgments before acting.

Maybe this is the 'difference that makes a difference' in business schools attempts to help executives bridge theory and practice in sufficient ways and support executives in becoming more effective, critical and reflexive leaders. Maybe it is just a figure of our imagination or something in between. Nevertheless, it is a striking moment that opens up for a different perspective on how it is possible to create space for reflexivity at an MBA.

Reflexivity whenever the specific opportunity presents itself

The third incident occurred in the aftermath of the fourth management learning practice where Nigel, a leading marketing consultant and architect, replied to comments that one of us had provided based on the reflections he presented in his assignment. In his assignment, Nigel had unfolded how he – based on a concrete incident - as a marketing consultant is tired of participating in competitions on projects when the conditions for competing are ill prepared and unclear. Nigel writes about how these conditions turn the presentation into a guessing game and he concludes the assignments by writing: *"In the future I will do no more competitions before I have completed my MBA."*

These last words caught our attention and in the reply sent back to Nigel we wrote: *"Good morning Nigel… Thank you very much for assignment four and the fine picture. I am quite intrigued by your reflections over strategy, customer relations, focus and life in general. You finish the assignment by writing; 'In the future I will do no more competitions before I have completed my MBA.' It invokes my curiosity.*

What are you referring to here? What do you want to achieve with this statement? And who will be affected by this?... As always this is nothing but thoughts and reflections from me and you are not obliged to respond or relate to them in any way. I wish you a great morning. All the best researcher A"

The same evening Nigel responded back (our translation): *"Dear researcher A, thank you so much for your fine reply… I am sitting here a Summer night, and after having been out sailing and swimming I beginning to get in contact with my thoughts and here they come. When I am writing that I will do no more competitions before I have completed my MBA, I am saying it to myself with the purpose of not spreading myself too thin and maybe gain inner peace.*

Maybe if I say it out loud and write it several times I will one day succeed in not engaging in a project that I know I do not have the time to complete. Or maybe it is just a part of wo I am to constantly be engaged in something and not really pay attention to the higher purpose of it all. I do care about the higher purpose, it is what ties it all and me together… Even though I help other people develop themselves I sometimes get a bit confused and cannot focus….

My old friend who sailed around the world, and who died last Christmas – way too soon, told me; ' without no harbor (as your destination) no promising wind'. While I am writing this to you, I realize that he always assumed that you were on your way… Sleep tight, and thanks again for your feedback which made me think. All the best Nigel"

As with Mike and Matt, Nigel also experienced a moment from within where he felt struck and began exploring different perspectives. As in the case with Matt, this insight underlines how management learning also – like pointed out by the Ruth (2017) and Warhurst (2011) studies – is an identity constructing process; *an MBA is an element in a life story* (Warhurst, 2011).

However, the aspects that we want to draw attention to with this insight is the following: First, it becomes obvious how engaging en reflexive inquiry is a relational process that in this case occurs between the researcher and Nigel; *People can achieve jointly what they cannot apart* (Shotter, 2010). Based on the reply on the assignment, the researcher invites Nigel into reflexively exploring the moment that has struck him. In the dialogue, Nigel and the researcher refrain from seeking explanations, conducting analyses and offering interpretations. Time and space is instead spent on being responsive and engaged in matters discussed and allow new and other perspectives to emerge.

Second, as previously pointed out, a striking moment cannot be planned. It occurs whenever the moment feels right. This necessitates that if space for reflexivity at an MBA is to be created, the involved researchers have to be ready to engage in reflexive inquiries with executives when the moment occurs. Sometimes it occurs during a research conversation or in a written assignment. At other times, as presented here, it occurs in a mail correspondence. As argued previously, management learning occurs in dialogue by being engaged and immersed in the fluxing, chaotic 'real' business situations that the executive inhabits. This does not mean that the involved researchers have to accessible all hours of the day and week. However, it draws attention to – as the Goumaa et al. study (2018) illustrates, that the involved researchers need to 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. Especially if theory and practice are to be bridged, the harder and softer skills balanced and add value to society by creating space for reflexivity at an MBA.

Concluding discussion

Based on a relational ontology, the paper set out to explore; *how can space for reflexivity be created at an MBA?* This perspective was chosen, because reflexivity by several scholars have been identified as a possible way for business schools to educate executives who are able to reflect more critical on leadership and societal impact. In addition, reflexivity can be perceived as a sensible way to bridge theory and practice and balance executives' development of harder and softer skills during MBA's when the purpose is to design executive programmes that add value to society.

What the three insights above draw attention to are two significant findings and a question that could be relevant and interesting to research further. The first finding identifies that reflexivity is and cannot be perceived as a planned or progressive process. Initially, we had designed the

seven management learning practices as a stepwise progression from reflex interacting over reflective thinking to reflexive inquiring where the executives incrementally would become more accustomed to the notion of engaging in reflexive inquiries. However, as the data illustrate reflexive inquiry occurred as the executive experienced a striking moment from within his 'real' business situations, and those striking moments occurred at different times and not as the result of a planned process. This finding does not indicate that the seven management learning practices were unnecessary or played no part in supporting the executives in bridging theory and practice in reflexive ways. On the contrary. We argue that the seven management practices strengthened the executives' possibilities for bridging theory and practice in reflexive ways. However not in a progressive or planned way. But as an omnipresent invitation for the executive to explore a striking moment, unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions, add new perspectives and identify new engaged and responsive ways of thinking, acting and talking within the local context. This means that when space for reflexivity is to be created at an MBA, it is significant that there is a certain variety in how the executives are invited into reflexive inquiries. It is not foreseeable what and when an executive will become struck by incidents occurring within their 'real' business situations. Some will, as in the case with Mike, be struck based on feedback from a customer, others will, like Matt, be struck as a response to his score in the annual employee satisfaction survey. Whereas others again, like Nigel, will be struck as the result of exploring the interplay between marketing and strategy. The conclusion we can draw from this is that in creating space for reflexivity at an MBA it is utterly significant that different experimental methods, theoretical perspectives and ways of inquiring are included in the management learning practices developed and applied.

The second finding draws attention to acknowledging reflexivity as a relational practice. Mike, Matt and Nigel all engaged in inquiries with other people for reflexivity to occur. As the relational ontology indicate, management learning occurs in internal/external dialogues. It is a

processual, relational, responsive and engaged process where phenomena or incidents are explored from within based on striking moments and taken-for-granted assumptions are unsettled. If new perspectives on issues that the executive cannot immediately make sense of are to emerge, then the executive needs to engage in reflexive inquiries with someone from outside their local context. In addition to this that the specific someone involved has to be willing to – as the customer in Mike's case, the closest manager, CEO and wife in Matt's case and the researcher in Nigel's case – immerse themselves in the unfolding of events and dedicate the necessary time and space to explore issues that the executive cannot immediately make sense of from within. In relation to the objective of creating space for reflexivity at an MBA this necessitates that a researcher can and should invite the executive into this relational practice, and then be patient and wait for a striking moment to occur. The conclusion we can draw from this is that this requires that the researcher is able to, as indicated by the Goumaa et al. (2018) study, create a safe learning space for the executive where he or she wants to engage in reflexive inquiries. Simultaneously, the researcher has to invite the executive into unsettling his or her taken-for-granted assumptions to create space for reflexivity. Moreover, the researcher has to be interested in immersing himself in the unfolding of events from within the executive's 'real' business situations, and be explorative, and refrain from seeking explanations, conducting analyses and offering interpretations.

A final question that could be relevant and interesting to explore further emerges from our finding and revolves around the interplay between what and how teaching is realized at an MBA. What especially Matt's management learning assignment draw attention to is that maybe there is an unacknowledged interplay between what and how teaching occurs at MBA's that is worthwhile exploring further when the purpose is to create space for reflexivity at an MBA. The overall findings of this study point to that reflexive inquiries are unforeseeable and occur based on what the executive perceives as a striking moment. This indicates that bridging

theory and practice in reflexive ways, primarily is a question of how management learning occurs. Simultaneously, our data and findings challenge this taken-for-granted assumption, because a large part of the data (what) used at the seventh seminar was anchored within a relational ontology. These findings indicate that there is an interplay between how and what that moves beyond the metaphor of 'spoon-feeding'. It is most likely a more complicated interplay with no simple answer, as the possibility to create space for reflexivity at an MBA is an interwoven interplay between the involved researchers, the applied management learning practices, the curriculum and not least the enrolled executives' learning process. However, the question we want to raise here and encourage other scholars to participate in researching is; *whether including theory that are anchored in a relational ontology in the MBA curriculum enhance the possibilities for creating space for reflexivity at an MBA?* We are not here arguing that theories anchored in a relational ontology work in magic ways. Because no theory does, but we consider it worthwhile to research further the interplay between what is being taught at MBA's and how it is being taught when we – as business schools and in responsible ways - seek to create space for reflexivity at an MBA.

References

Alvesson, M., Blom, M. and S. Sveningsson, 2017. "Reflexive leadership. Organising in an imperfect world". London: SAGE.

Baruch, Y., 2009. "To MBA or not to MBA". Career Development International, 14: 388-406.

Baruch, Y. and A. Leeming, 2001, "The added value of MBA studies – graduates' perceptions". Personnel Review, 30: 589-601.

Beal, B., 2016, "In touch with the softer side of MBAs". Development and Learning in Organizations, 30: 31-33

Bell, E. and T. Bridgman, 2017, "Why management learning matters". Management Learning, 48(1): 3-6.

Blass, E. and P. Weight, 2005, "The MBA is dead – part 1: God save the MBA!". On the Horizon, 13: 229-240.

Bateson , G., 1972. "Steps to an Ecology of Mind". Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Chia, R., 1996, "Teaching paradigm shifting in management education: University business schools and the entrepreneurial imagination". Journal of Management Studies, 33: 410-428.

Chia, R., 2005, "Book Review: The Aim of Management Education: Reflections on Mintzberg's Managers not MBAs". Organization Studies, 26: 1090-1092.

Chia, R. and R. Holt, 2008, "The nature of knowledge in business schools". Academy of Management Learning & Education, 7: 471-486.

Cunliffe A. L., 2002, "Reflexive dialogical practice in management learning". Management Learning, 33: 35–61.

Cunliffe, A. L., 2004, "On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner". Journal of Management Education, 28(4): 407-426.

Cunliffe A. L., 2008, "Orientations to social constructionism: Relationally responsive social constructionism and its implications for knowledge and learning". Management Learning, 39: 123– 139.

Cunliffe A. L., 2011, "Qualitative research Morgan and Smircich 30 years on". Academy of Management Proceedings, 14: 647–673.

Cunliffe, A. L., 2016, "Republication of "On Becoming a Critically Reflexive Practitioner"". Journal of Management Education, 40: 747-768.

Cunliffe, A. L. and G. Scaratti, 2017, "Embedding Impact in Engaged research: Developing Socially Useful Knowledge through Dialogical Sensemaking". British Journal of Management, 28: 29-44.

Gergen, K.J., 2009. "Relational Being: Beyond the individual and community". Oxford: Oxford University Press

Goumaa, R., Anderson, L. and M. Zundel, 2018, "What can managers learn online? Investigating the possibilities for active understanding in the online classroom". Management Learning, Online first.

Hansen, L. H. and M.V. Larsen, 2018, "Leadership as a profession? The significance of reflexive judgment". In Örtenblad, A.R. (Eds.), Professionalizing Leadership: Debating Education, Certification and Practice. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Hay, A. and M. Hodgkinson, 2006, "Exploring MBA career success". Career Development International, 11: 108-124.

Helin, J., 2015, "Writing process after reading Bakhtin: From theorized plots to unfinalizable "living" events". Journal of Management Inquiry, 24: 174-185.

Helin, J., 2016, "Dialogical writing: Co-inquiring between the written and spoken word. Culture and Organization".

Hosking, D. M., 2010. "Moving Relationality: Meditations on a relational approach to management". In Bryman A. et al. (eds.) SAGE Handbook of Leadership. Thousand Oaks CA: SAGE Publications

Hosking, D, 2011, "Telling tales of relations: Appreciating relational constructionism". Organization Studies 32(1): 47–65.

Ingold, T., 2010, "Footprints through the weather-world: walking, breathing, knowing".Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute, 16(1): 113 - 135

Larsen, M .V., 2018. "Exploring Unadjusted Gestures and Responses in Research Conversations with Organisational Members". In Madsen C.Ø. et al. (eds.), Relational Research and Organisation Studies. NY: Routledge, Routledge Series in Management, Organizations and Society, pp. 40-63.

Madsen, C. Ø., J. G. Rasmussen, M. V. Larsen and L. Hersted, 2018. "Studying Organising through Relational and Social Constructionist Ideas". In Madsen C.Ø. et al. (eds.), Relational Research and Organisation Studies. NY: Routledge, Routledge Series in Management, Organizations and Society.

McNamee S. and D. Hosking, 2012. "Research and Social Change – A Relational Constructionist Approach". New York: Routledge.

Mead, G.H., 1932. "The philosophy of the present". Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

Mead, G.H., 1974. "Mind, self and society from the standpoint of a social behaviourist". Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Mihail, D. M. and K.A. Elefterie, 2006, "Perceived effects of an MBA degree on employability and career advancement. The case of Greece". Career Development International, 11: 325-361.

Millar, J. and M. Price, 2018, "Imagining management education: A critique of the contribution of the United Nations PRME to critical reflexivity and rethinking management education". Management Learning, 49(3): 346-362

Mintzberg, H., 2004. "Managers not MBAs: A harder look at the soft practice of management and management development". San Fransisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Mowles, C., 2017, "Experiencing uncertaingty: On the potential of groups and a group analytic approach for making management education more critical". Management Learning, 48(5): 505-519.

Muff, K., 2012, "Are business schools doing their job?". Journal of Management Development, 31: 648-662

Ripamonti, S., Galuppo, L., Gorli, M., Scaratti, G. and A.L. Cunliffe, 2016, "Pushing action research towards reflexive practice". Journal of Management Inquiry, 25: 55 –68.

Ruth, D., 2017, "What is your MBA for? What's the story?". Management Learning, 48(1): 7-22

Scaratti, G., Galuppo, L., Gorli, M., Gozolli, C. and S. Rimamonti, 2017, "The social relevance and social impact of knowledge and knowing". Management Learning, 48(1): 57-64

Shaikh, A., Bisschoff, C. and C. Botha, 2017, "A comparative model analysis of managerial competence of business school educated managers". Problem and Perspectives in Management, 15: 128-146.

Shotter, J., 1993. "Conversational realities: Constructing life through language". London: Sage.

Shotter J., 1996, "'Now I can go on:' Wittgenstein and our embodied embeddedness in the 'Hurly-Burly' of life". Human Studies, 19: 385–407.

Shotter, J., 2005, "Inside the moment of managing: Wittgenstein and the everyday dynamic of our expressive-responsive activities". Organization Studies, 26: 113-135.

Shotter, J., 2006, "Understanding process from within: An arguments for 'withness'-thinking". Organization Studies, 27(4): 585-604.

Shotter, J., 2010, "Situated dialogic action research: Disclosing "beginnings" for innovative change in organisations". Organisational Research Methods, 13(2): 268-285.

Shotter, J. and H. Katz., 1999, "'Living moments' in dialogical exchange". Human Systems, 9: 81-93.

Shotter, J. and H. Tsoukas, 2014, "Performing *phronesis*: On the way to engaged judgment". Management Learning, 45(4): 377-396.

Sørensen, P., 2018, "Developing Leadership Behaviour: The Impact of Leadership Education". Doctoral dissertation, Aalborg University, Aalborg.

Varela, O., Burke, M. and N. Michel, 2013, "The development of managerial skills in MBA programs". Journal of Management Development, 32: 435-452.

Warhurst, R., 2011, "Managers' practice and managers' learning as identity formation: Reassessing the MBA contribution". Management Learning, 42(3): 261-278

Weick, K., 1995. "Sensemaking in organizations". New York: Sage.