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*student perspectives*

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# Sharing experiences and the co-creation of knowledge through personal stories – tools for critical thinking: student perspectives

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## Abstract

Highlighting students' voices and sharing personal learning experiences with peers can be useful teaching tools. We introduce student instructors and their stories to create learning processes among student instructors and the peers they are teaching. We argue, furthermore, that peer learning can add to employability skills once students are outside the university setting by enhancing students' critical thinking skills. We are inspired by Kolb's learning circle, but we also wish to expand on his arguments by adding sharing experiences as an equal concept in learning processes. We use our own knowledge and experiences as lecturers (Helene Balslev Clausen and Vibeke Andersson) and student (Theresa Schaltz) to set the scene for experiential learning. In our case, peer learning is based on our Creative Learning Lab, which forms the backdrop for student instructors' sharing experiences through personal stories (Andersson & Clausen 2018). Creative Learning Lab is an initiative which puts students at the center, and which includes external stakeholders in academic work. This study uses interviews with student instructors and students. In addition, we use observations from the student instructors (represented by Theresa Schaltz). Our main findings show that, by using students' personal stories, experiences are shared with the students instructors, and this adds to the deep learning processes and co-creation of knowledge. Our key findings show that motivation increases among students during peer learning.

**Key words:** Sharing experiences, personal stories, problem-based learning, critical thinking, employability, student instructors, co-creation of knowledge.

## Introduction: Personal stories and sharing experiences as tools in the problem-based learning model

Universities have an increasing emphasis on employability skills and on how to enhance students' work readiness. In a new research project on problem-based learning (PBL), which started in January 2017 at Aalborg University, Denmark, we seek to explore new ways of including students in our research to enhance critical thinking, which is considered pivotal as an employability skill in the 21$^{st}$ century (Mayburry & Swanger, 2011; Sheldon, Fesenmaier & Tribe, 2011). In Denmark, principles of collaborative and co-creative learning have their institutional places at Aalborg and Roskilde Universities which, for decades, have organized their pedagogy based on principles such as PBL, student-led direction and participation, students taking responsibility, and teachers as facilitators (see for example Kjaer-Rasmussen & Jensen, 2017; Bovill, 2011). These co-creation processes in teaching activities have resulted in increased student engagement, involvement, and high-level learning outcomes (Iversen et al, 2015). However, the wider debate of the purpose of higher education is ongoing and highly relevant. Another discussion is whether liberal arts educations should be focused on developing the ability to think critically about complex problems, or focus on the development of vocational job readiness. Some argue that educators have an obligation to prepare students to be lifelong learners – and not only for employment – and others argue for incorporating critical thinking more explicitly as part of the learning process (for an extensive discussion about increasing neoliberalism in higher educational institutions see Stone *et al.*, 2017; Mayburry & Swanger, 2011). In our research project on PBL, we explore how sharing experiences as a relatively new methodological tool within PBL in higher education can encourage critical thinking skills to create 'deep learning' (Kolb & Kolb, 2009; Kolb, 2015) and be an integrated part of generating employability skills. This paper examines sharing experiences through personal stories as transformative pedagogical tools in the classroom, as a way of reflecting on and co-creating diverse cultural understanding using a case study approach with 7$^{th}$ semester Masters students in sustainable tourism development.

Recognizing personal stories and experiences as a way of knowing is intertwined with learning processes, which are based on critical and multicultural understanding,

dialogue, and reflection (Bolton, 2010; Alterio & McDury, 2003). However, as a methodological tool, sharing experiences through personal stories requires sensitivity towards the context and different ways of capturing stories, which is what we seek to explore in this paper. By co-creating formal and informal stories, we make sense of the world (Bruner, 2005). Bruner uses the term "pre-narrative" to describe the stories we carry with us, which we have heard, read, shared, and maybe felt, that evidently shape our experiences and perceptions. Similarly, it might be necessary to reflect upon the stories, which are constructed when grouping tourism students in classes with sharing experiences and stories as the main pedagogical tool, to create intercultural understandings (Blichfeldt & Smed, 2017). In tourism scholarly literature, there are many such examples, including case studies, about tourism policy and planning (Chambers & Airey, 2001; Dredge & Jenkins, 2011), destination development, and branding (Kim & Young, 2017; Stevenson, 2016). These stories are used by exploring the context, differences, tensions, and complexities, in order to encourage discussion and the critical appreciation of tourism issues (Stevenson, 2018). Our argument is that our ability to communicate not only our own experiences, but to understand others' experiences, allows us to take on a wider perspective, which makes it a powerful pedagogical transformative tool (Alterio&McDury, 2003). Specifically, in this paper, our interest is an approach to learning and teaching in which stories involve sharing insights and lived experiences as a way of developing critical thinking and deep learning.

## Methodology and research questions

The background for this paper is a study trip to Cuba in March 2017, where seventeen 8th semester students studying for their Master of Arts with a focus on Global Tourism Development participated in the 'Creative Learning Lab' research project. The first part of the research project was a twelve-day field trip outside the university setting. The students conducted fieldwork to be able to solve several real-life, hands-on problems, which were set by a North American non-governmental organization that wanted to start several sustainable tourism development projects in Cuba. Participating in the Creative Learning Lab is extra-curricular and ungraded (Andersson & Clausen, 2019).

Subsequently, the students divided themselves into groups to prepare and present a consultancy report with their innovative ideas and results to the Cuban Ambassador and Consul to Denmark, who then presented several of the reports at a conference in Cuba at the beginning of June 2017. Two of the five tourism projects will probably be implemented in Cuba (personal communication from the Cuban Ambassador, 14th of July 2017). By expanding the research project to include the former 8th semester students conducting lectures for the then-current 7th semester students, the research project also has a longitudinal component beyond observing and facilitating students' learning only one semester, as we (the teachers) conducted fieldwork for a whole year. By experimenting with integrating the students into new learning processes in the existing study program, we invited two now-9th semester students who went to Cuba during their 8th semester to teach the new 7th semester students of the Master's program of Global Tourism Development. The purpose of this was to bring the world into the classroom by spanning the roles of teacher, students' experiences, and students (7th semester) to open up to co-creating learning spaces and places. The data for this paper consisted of interviews with student instructors (the 9th semester students) and 7th semester students. The interviews were recorded. Our research questions are then: how can students' experiences and their stories about their Cuban experience engage other students?; How can this encourage critical thinking?; Can student instructors use stories and sharing experiences as tools to inspire newly-integrated 7th semester students to reach way beyond the scope of their experience and make them think and reason outside their usual mindsets by imagining a region (Cuba) with languages, cultures, and philosophies that are distinctly different from their own?

Learning is related to the way the student participates in the teaching environment, and to the meaning which is integrated into this participation. Thus, the central question is: What is at stake for students' participation to bring this further into deep learning? In addition, how do we as lecturers support or create 'meaning' through experiences of meaning? By linking the PBL model with the student instructors' approach, we brought the world into the classroom by giving the students a voice and having them give a lecture to the newly-integrated Masters students (7th semester). The classroom would then become shared by individuals creating a common experience, or a space where the many

experiences come together and merge to form a single unit of knowledge which would be understood by all the participants. Thus, to provide the experiential component of learning, we rely on resources (the 9th semester students' stories) to simulate a real environment. Also, another element to consider when discussing the common classroom experience is that, in order for the students to be actively engaged in any activity, that activity has to be motivating (Clausen & Andersson, 2019). In this paper, we let student instructors (represented by Theresa Schaltz) share their experiences and thoughts when teaching their peers.

We gathered three interviews with student instructors and 6 interviews with the 7th semester students which the student instructors taught. The interviews were made after the student instructors had taught their classes. We acknowledge that this is a rather small sample of interviews gathered from a single course, which makes it difficult to produce general conclusions.

## PBL in higher education

Higher education often primarily focuses on the cognitive domain, even though studies in sociology and pedagogy demonstrate that it is not sufficient to do so (Bowden & Marton, 2006). We draw upon the Aalborg University model of PBL, which has its roots in critical theory, and where knowledge is gained through creative learning based on complex real-life issues. PBL entails a shift from teaching to learning, where the main task of the teacher is altered from transferring knowledge into facilitating learning (Kolmos, 1996; Kolmos *et al.,* 2006). One of the strengths of contextualizing PBL problems is that it helps students acquire situational knowledge which is critical for them to effectively retrieve and apply appropriate content knowledge (see for example Kolmos, 1996; Iversen *et al.,* 2015). Universities are often portrayed as significant generators of education and research (see for example Dredge & Bosman, 2015). However, not much research addresses how universities could, or should, ensure that graduates are truly able to take on the role of change agents (see for example Blichfeldt *et al.,* 2017*)* within the tourism industry. In line with Dredge and Bosman (2015), we acknowledge that universities need to break down not only the disciplinary boundaries, but also the artificial divide between theory and

practice, and classroom and fieldwork, enabling students who think and learn about tourism to meet the people who work in and around tourism. In doing so, the students engage in and enhance their learning experience to be a process of acquiring capacities and skills to communicate and act according to socially-negotiated norms within a professional setting.

## Experiential learning

The concept of experiential learning (or teaching) comprises a few ideas that should be defined before we can move on to explain how we put theory into practice. The relationship between theory and practice is to be found in various cycles of learning, such as the seminal work of Kolb (1984, 2015). The one principle connecting these authors is the importance of linking reflection and application, so as to make learning effective or to be what is considered 'deep learning' (Kolb, 2015). *"To learn from their experience, teams must create a conversational space where members can reflect on and talk about their experience together"* (Kolb & Kolb, 2009:52). We consider these 'teams' to be multifaceted. Teams can consist of student groups, student-and-student instructors, and students-and-lecturers/facilitators. Our main argument is that learning is not a unidirectional process, and that it includes various actors. This is a core argument in Kolb's learning circle, where students learn from a process of experiential learning which transforms observations, experiences, and reflections in order to achieve abstract conceptualization (Kolb, 2015). We use the concept of learning as a process inspired by Kolb and used in PBL when we analyze personal stories and sharing experiences as tools to support co-creating teaching practices.

## A different teaching approach

Our responsibility as lecturers or 'facilitators', as we prefer to call ourselves, is to establish a deep learning environment where students can develop a dialogue and do more than just observe and register the theoretical components.

Mead (1970) argued that people's understanding of a story is deepened (and its impact on them amplified) when they respond to it with presentational and experiential forms of knowing, keeping it alive and active in their bodies and imaginations, *before* bringing their rational minds to bear on it. Thus, as Bruner (2005) explains, while humans receive information and arguments with a rational mindset through which they can exercise critical judgment, they receive stories with a different mindset – which he calls the narrative mode. Furthermore, as suggested by Alterio & McDrury (2003), using storytelling and sharing experiences in higher education can be a learning tool which can transcend cultural differences, bringing different perspectives into play. According to Kearney (2002), to create an experience out of a story told in class is 'narrative sympathy'. This term directly links to experiential learning, as the students' abilities to generate new knowledge and (re)negotiate their understandings, and challenge their stereotypes are connected within this controlled learning environment. Often, the interactive and expressive style of telling personal stories creates active engagement from the students (Alterio & McDrury) 2003). Stories and dialogues are not only entertaining, they also help students *"make connections within and between self and other, subject and object, and thought and feeling"* (Alterio & McDrury 2003: 34).

## Ninth semester students unpacking their fieldwork stories

Participating in the Cuba study trip resulted in a deep learning experience for the present author (Theresa Schaltz). The wealth of culturally-foreign impressions and experiences provided many opportunities to reflect on and apply theoretical concepts studied at university in Denmark. Some concepts needed adaptation to be applicable. This offered substantial insights and inspiration to share some of the insights gained from the Cuba experience.

The personal stories and sharing experiences approach is a suitable medium to convey further learning, because stories engage both the feelings and the imagination of the teller and the audience (Mead, 1970). The purpose of the lecture given to the 7th semester students upon our return from Cuba was to employ stories to create a shared space between 'us and them' to use personal stories to also immerse them in our Cuban

experience. The shared space should inspire both reflection on stories and critical application of theoretical concepts in order to facilitate deep learning.

Ninth semester students most important insight from the Cuba experience was that context is key. By contextualizing their learning experience and theoretical concepts, they gained situational knowledge. The main point aimed to pass on was, thus, the importance of context and therefore three stories were chosen, each posing different issues and encompassing different theoretical concepts. The concepts were related to cultural understanding, researcher bias, mobility, power, tourism as development, and research ethics.

The 7th semester students were provided with stories from 9th semester students' experiences in Cuba. The description of the stories included frustrations and thoughts during the situations, in order for the 7th semester students to understand other students' experience of it, as well as vivid descriptions of the physical location to enable the students to 'travel' there mentally and become immersed in the Cuban setting of the story. The aim was, thus, for the students to internalize the stories and relate to them emotionally before they did so analytically. The stories were followed by discussion questions pertaining to cultural understanding and situatedness regarding e.g. the perception of time, emic vs. etic understanding, and interpretivism vs. functionalism. Further, students were asked to discuss the influence of researcher bias on interpretations. The story provided the setting, and students could reflect on how the theoretical concepts related to the given situation and how they could be applied in the context.

We conducted the lesson by first giving a brief presentation explaining the context surrounding the Learning Lab in Cuba and the overall lines in Cuban tourism development. The purpose of the presentation was to mentally prepare the 7th semester students for the casework and to outline the context of the cases. Following the presentation, the students were divided into groups of 3-5 individuals, and each group was given a case to discuss and reflect upon. As the groups worked, my fellow student teacher and myself circulated and facilitated discussions in the groups. After working with the cases, the groups split up, and half of each group's members joined another group where the cases and reflections from the first matrix groups were presented and discussed. Before the end

of class, we had a plenary follow-up, where the most central points from each case were highlighted.

The students were given the following three cases to work with and discuss in matrix groups:

## Case 1: Cultural understanding - emic and etic points of view

*Two student instructors booked a tour of tobacco and coffee farms with a guide. We booked the tour informally, meaning that our guide did not work for an official state-owned tourism agency. We had booked the tour for the following morning at 9 o'clock, and had arranged to meet at the main square of the town. On the morning of the tour, we were at the main square a few minutes before nine, waiting for our guide. He arrived at five minutes past nine. He asked us if we could wait for 15 minutes because he had something, which he needed to do. We thought it was a bit strange that he had arranged for us to meet at nine o'clock when he was not ready at that time, but we decided to use the time to go and withdraw cash to avoid having to do it later. Once the 15 minutes had gone by, he still had not come back. We were sitting in the square waiting for him, and suddenly noticed him running around talking to tourists and trying to sell tours. We waited more than 45 minutes for him, and got a bit annoyed. We talked about how we could have used the time differently and just met him at 10 o'clock instead so we would not have had to sit there and waste our time. Finally, the guide came back and told us that we could go with him now. He did not tell us where we were going, but led us away from the main street and down an alley. Here, he brought us to his friend's car. This was going to be our taxi to the tobacco farm. The car was old, dirty, and worn out, and one of us had to sit on the gearshift. It was also an unofficial taxi, meaning it did not have the state-approved certificate for taxis. This also meant that it was illegal for him to drive us in the car. We were only in the car for a few minutes before we arrived at the tobacco farm where the tour could begin.*

Discussion questions

*Use the concept of time to discuss cultural understanding.*

- *Discuss the concepts of functionalism and interpretivism - how would a functionalist interpret the case/how would an interpretivist do so?*
- *How does the situatedness/bias of the researchers affect their interpretation of the situation?*

<u>Relevant concepts</u>

*Situatedness, cultural bias, emic/etic understanding of culture, understanding of time (polychromic vs. monochromic), ethnocentrism*

## Case 2: The influence of mobility/immobility on the tourism experience

*One of the touristic activities which our group participated in was a guided mountain bike tour. Five of our fellow students had booked the tour via one of our contacts. When they met up with the local guide, he gave each of them a mountain bike, helped adjust the seat, and showed them the route on a map. Then the tour started. The guide was friendly, but there was a lack of information, and the guide showed no consideration of the participants' previous experience with mountain biking, and thus their expectations and qualifications for the trip. Two of the students had never tried riding a mountain bike before, which quickly became an issue since they had trouble using the gear system from the very beginning of the ride. This resulted in additional stops during the first 20 minutes; stops, which might have been unnecessary if the guide had introduced the bikes and gear system before departure. Furthermore, the guide did not provide helmets as these were not available, and he did not seem concerned about this either. This was unsettling for several of the participants because it made them feel less safe during the tour.*

<u>Discussion questions</u>

- *Which (implications of) different mobilities are present in this case?*
- *How does the Cuban guide's mobility/immobility affect the situation/tourists/his role in tourism?*

- *How does the guide's inexperience with being a tourist influence his work as a tourism actor?*

<u>*Relevant concepts*</u>

*Various types of mobilities (e.g. social, economic), tourism as development, cultural understanding and power understood as opportunities*

## Case 3: Informant relationships and cultural understanding

*While in the village Viñales in Cuba, two student instructors stayed in private accommodation in a so-called casa particular. We had a good relationship with the couple hosting us, and they offered to organize most of the activities we wanted to do and gave us various recommendations. We, and our two fellow group members, were interested in visiting an agricultural cooperative called Alamar, and our hosts insisted on organizing our taxi transportation there and back (two hours each way). Before we agreed to this, one of our hosts sat one of us down for 45 minutes for a very serious discussion about the importance of only using certified guides and drivers – especially for the sake of our own safety.*

*The driver who our hosts hired for us was their son. During the rather long drive to Alamar and back, several things occurred:*

- *Immediately after departure, the driver asked us to lie to the police if they stopped us during the drive. Despite the long talk by our host the day before, his son was not a licensed taxi driver and was not allowed to drive tourists around. We were asked to tell the police that we were friends with him, instead.*

- *After 20 minutes of driving, the driver stopped in a village to pick up his mistress, who joined us for the rest of the ride. He did not consult us about this, even though we had paid for a private tour.*

- *On the way back, the driver again asked us to lie to the police if we were pulled over.*

*Upon our return, we politely expressed our discontent with the events described above, and our host became quite upset with his son and apologized to us.*

_Discussion questions_

- _Which ethical dilemmas are present?_
- _Discuss the challenges of being a researcher and a tourist/private person when interacting with informants at the same time._
- _Is it possible to be only a researcher?_
- _When is it okay to leave the researcher role and act as a private person?_


_Relevant concepts_

_Situatedness, research ethics, cultural understanding_


## Discussing personal stories and sharing experiences as tools

As several 7th semester students commented after the lectures, this way of creating understandings and debate through personal stories and sharing experiences was useful in the classroom context because it enabled us to engage with and critically discuss those things that fix or simplify our ideas about culture, including the stereotyping and idealizing practices that we undertake when we start working in unknown contexts.

The 7th semester students that the student instructors had been teaching commented on this new type of class:

"… at first it seemed weird… Master students teaching me and then with stories from their study trip … it didn't seem relevant … then in the end I actually reflected on my own perceptions and questioned my way of looking at the world" (Student D)

These stories enable students to question their assumptions about people and places, and maybe even to use their own practices and values to critically evaluate the influence of cultural context. Students are taken beyond their mental frameworks and forced to expand and adjust their thinking to incorporate new knowledge.

"… Interesting with the stories as approach, it is different and makes you reflect a lot more because you are allowed to bring in your own experiences as stories" (Student A)

Through sharing personal stories and experiences with other students, our aim as lecturers is for them to make the stories their own stories, taking decisions, thus 'domesticating' the stories, so to speak which, in turn, would enable them to internalize the newly-acquired information. Thus, these learning experiences span boundaries between theory and practice, and bring the real world into the classroom. By enabling the older students to act within a professional setting and reframing their knowledge in action from their fieldwork in a professional context, they had to take responsibility. By using the existing material and resources in an innovative way, we unlocked the experiential potential of the classroom. Rather than only becoming recipients of information or theoretical components, the 7th semester students –as well as the student instructors who were teaching –became active contributors to the learning, as well as the teaching, processes. By taking the role of *teachers* upon themselves, they also accepted their responsibility to voice the Cuban context. The student in class learned not only about the Cuban context, but also about the different political context and livelihood conditions. The student instructors also gave meaning to it in the course of the whole process, and through these experiences and they could personalize and transform their existing knowledge about Cuba into something valuable, for example in the questions to the 7th semester students which are presented after each case above. The student instructors also positioned themselves in the teaching by setting up expected learning outcomes for their peers (see the list of relevant concepts after each case and questions). Jamal (2004) and Carmargo & Gretzel (2017) identify the importance of developing knowledge about context which requires multicultural literacy. The Creative Learning Lab is designed to engage students and develop understandings of practice in specific contexts. However, making 9th semester student instructors reflect on and further debate their experiences, decisions, and interactions in Cuba in class with the new 7th semester students is of key importance in our wish to support the development of critical thinking and multicultural understandings among students, all of which are crucial skills in an employability context.

Figure 1 is inspired by Kolb's learning circle (Kolb 1984, 2015) but, in addition to concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation which form part of the original circle, we have added 'context' as an

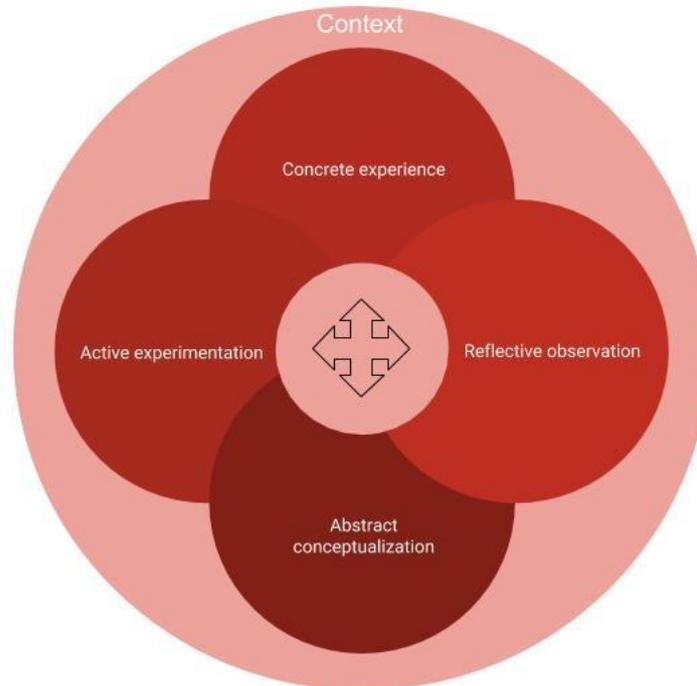important factor in all experiential learning.



Figure 1: Adding context to Kolb's (1984, 2015) Learning Circle

Alterio and McDrury (2003) examine the link between storytelling and reflective processes, and demonstrate how students can use this tool to inform, develop, and advance their learning. They outline a five-stage storytelling approach: finding, telling, expanding, processing, and reconstructing. We will regard these stages in storytelling as used by Alterio and McDrury as stages in personal stories for story making and shared experience as well. These stages can be incorporated in Kolb's model (1984, 2015, an adapted version is shown above): *finding* is what takes place in active experimentation, *telling* is Kolb's concrete experience, *expanding* is reflexive observation and *processing (and reconstructing)* is represented in Kolb's abstract conceptualization. Our argument is, thus, that sharing experiences is a process of deep learning, as shown by Kolb's experiential learning processes. The combination of sharing experiences –when used on a more abstract level in teaching practices –and awareness of creating deep knowledge by engaging students, and student instructors, can form a new and different learning experience for students.

## Conclusion

The deep learning was not only related to the 7th semester students, but also to the 9th semester student instructors' teaching. The story-making practice as a tool to create reflective students presented in this case enables students to contribute to a shared understanding of the "other". The process of identifying the most significant learning experiences from Cuba, whether unfolding in the details of everyday life or boldly and obviously presenting themselves, made student instructors reflect more consciously on the experiences. This enforced the learning they gained from each situation, because they needed to explicitly describe the insights and consider the relation between theory and practice. Molding their real-life experiences to be stories which contained learning potential for others allowed a space in which to unfold the importance of cultural context in ways that demonstrated some of the nuances not always included in theoretical concepts, thus also challenging these.

The empirical pieces of stories generate engagement by opening up possibilities for shared cultural experiences through ethical conversations in groups, which supported a deeper understanding of one another derived from a common platform (Stevenson, 2018). The co-creation and transformative development is supported and enhanced by sharing experiences. At the same time, the practical and social developments which are made possible through an orientation from student instructors did add depth to the original teaching method through personal stories and shared experiences, which is useful for students in gaining employability skills. Our case demonstrated that these innovative practices have the potential to engage students, and could potentially translate into many different learning and teaching contexts.

## Disclosure statement

The authors, Helene Balslev Clausen, Vibeke Andersson and Theresa Schaltz, declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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