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Developing public managers' reflective thinking through continuing management education

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Purpose – The aim of this paper is to outline how public managers' reflective thinking capacity is developed through integration of education and practice using a real-life organizational problem as the educational starting point. Managers' reflective thinking capacity becomes important due to an increasing organizational complexity and the growing trend of introducing post-new public management paradigms.

Design/methodology/approach – Inspired by Brinkmann's (2012) approach to the inquiry on everyday life materials, semi-structured interviews were conducted with public managers taking a public management programme. A phenomenologically inspired content analysis was applied in the process of scrutinizing the findings, subsequently informing the discussion on the development of problem solving through public management education.

Findings – The analysis indicates that the managers' pre-understanding of continuing education at the university level, their personal objectives, along with a growing experience with and insights into problem-based learning, appear to facilitate their integration of theory and practice. As revealed in this paper, an inquiry that integrates daily organizational practice and theoretical models and terms, as the origin of the Personal Development Module, seems to facilitate managers' reflective thinking and self-reflexivity.

Originality/value – This paper illustrates that learning processes facilitated by seminars like the Personal Development module not only facilitates the development of reflective thinking, but managers also seem to develop competencies in self-reflexivity – the latter being an underdeveloped element of Dewey's (1933) notion of reflective thinking. Thus, further theoretical and empirical research is needed to explore the potentials of developing a pragmatically inspired notion that offers an understanding of managers' self-reflexivity. By inquiring about managerial puzzlements through a personal development lens, a self-reflective focus adds to the Dewey-inspired approach to reflective thinking.

Introduction

Societies are currently undergoing dramatic changes, requiring public sector organizations to develop new ways of fulfilling their obligations. In turn, this necessitates new types of structuring, organizing and problem solving. The deriving consequent growth in organizational complexity has led to an increasing interest in continuing management education, as managers often resort to access to and application of new knowledge in their endeavour to cope with new and unknown organizational

challenges. Education is thus outlined as a relevant way for managers to increase their competencies in coping with complexity (Taylor and Niemeyer, 2017).

Management education has gained much attention; however, the dominant discussions have centred on how to educate students to become competent managers (Armstrong and Fukami, 2009) and less on how to educate and develop the competencies of managers who are already in organizational practice. The criticism against current management education frameworks primarily targets the strong focus on theory and methods, the lack of theory–practice integration and the marginal focus on managers’ reflective competencies (Armstrong and Fukami, 2009). Particularly, management education is criticized for teaching people short-term economic thinking so that subjects are decontextualized, impersonal, mechanical and standardized. Management education is also described as conservative, lifeless, and focused on passing on commodified information and explicit and evidence-based knowledge (Morrell and Learmonth, 2015). The strong focus on content and theoretical analysis implies that students do not gain competencies in solving organizational problems. As a way of overstepping the theory–practice boundary, O’Toole (2009) suggests that students work on real organizational problems.

Mintzberg (2005) argues that the strong focus on theory provides students with the misleading understanding that they can become competent managers by studying theoretical models and methods. He also contends that management cannot be taught in a classroom since management is not solely an academic genre. According to Mintzberg, management is a practice – a way of doing. Thus, he problematizes continuing management education as having attracted much less attention, yet it has a greater potential for management learning because management is a practice that needs to be taught as such (Mintzberg, 2005; Thomassen and Jørgensen, 2021).

Aalborg University (Denmark) has many years of experience in offering continuing management education to skilled public managers working in organizational practice. Its educational programme uses the pedagogical concept of problem-based learning (PBL), which is, among others, inspired by John Dewey’s (1933, 1938) pragmatic educational philosophy.

This paper explores how the Personal Development Module (PDM), as part of the part-time Master’s Programme in Public Governance (MPG), seems to facilitate the development of managers’ reflective thinking capacity, thereby enhancing their competencies in coping with increasing levels of organizational complexity. Reflections and experiences of two public managers, who have completed the PDM, are included to illustrate the outcomes of the PDM. The paper seeks to answer the following research question (RQ):

RQ: How can Personal Development Modules like the PDM facilitate public managers’ capacity in reflective thinking through integration of education and practice in inquiry of real-life organizational problems?

The paper is structured as follows: first, a brief review of the literature on reflection in management education is presented. Second, PBL and the theoretical inspiration of Dewey (1933) are outlined, along with an introduction to the PDM and how it is integrated into the MPG. Third, the applied research methods are described. Fourth, the main empirical findings from the interviews with two public managers are presented. Finally, the implications of the empirical findings are discussed, pinpointing how the PBL-inspired PDM seems to facilitate the development of public managers’ reflective thinking capacity through an inquiry that integrates theory and organizational practice.

Theoretical Background

Reflection appears to have received much attention in the discussion on management education, which is briefly outlined here to provide the theoretical backdrop, along with an introduction to PBL.

With his books, *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1987), Donald Schön has extensively influenced the debate regarding managers' way of knowing in organizational practice, from which relevant knowledge about how to educate managers has been derived. Schön's motivation for engaging in the debate stems from the discrepancy between managers' daily practice and the technical rationality influencing business schools' teaching practice. Technical rationality was originally introduced in business schools in their endeavour to attain academic rigour and a higher status (Armstrong and Fukami, 2009; Schön, 1987). Technical rationality assumes that academic knowledge is superior to knowledge gained in practice, implying that general academic knowledge can solve unique organizational problems. Thus, business education is about introducing students to theoretical knowledge at the highest possible level. However, Schön is critical towards this instrumental understanding of managers' problem solving. Instead, he describes management practice as artistry, implying a complex and ever-changing process sensitive to the organizational situation. In describing management as artistry, Schön outlines the often-cited notions of knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Knowing-in-action means that "our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is *in* our action" (Schön, 1983, p. 49). For some reason, if our actions do not lead to the anticipated results, reflection-in-action describes inquiry and reflection unfolding during the problem-solving process. Vince and Reynolds describe it as thinking on our feet (2009). Reflection-on-action is inquiry unfolding after a situation has occurred and might entail "the writing up of recordings, reviews of group sense-making and the formation of themes and/or questions" (Vince and Reynolds, 2009, p. 4). Schön's argument is that the instrumental approach to problem solving that future managers learn in business schools is not helpful in a complex organizational practice. Furthermore, organizational problems constantly change; thus, business schools ought to equip future managers with the competence to analyze and define the characteristics behind the problems (Schön, 1983, 1987).

From the 1990s and onwards, critical reflection, as part of critical management studies, has gained increasing interest in business management education. Inspired by constructionist and deconstructionist approaches, "the fundamental task of critical reflections is to identify and question taken-for-granted beliefs and values, particularly those which have become unquestioned or 'majority' positions" (Vince and Reynolds, 2009, p. 5). Critical reflection also focuses on examining power and knowledge relations, and not least on revealing more or less tacit understandings of social and political issues. Thus, the objective of educational activities based on critical management studies is to equip managers with the competence to critically reflect on organizational situations, which can lead to more critical, responsible and ethical actions (Cunliffe, 2004). According to Cunliffe (2004), it is nonetheless easier to discuss critical reflection than to use critical reflection in organizational practice. Thus, she emphasizes the importance of integrating critical reflection in management education, and from a social constructionist position, she introduces the term reflexivity to describe the competence in critical reflection.

Cunliffe (2004) extends the discussion by introducing the notion of self-reflexivity. Here, we question our own ways of being and acting in the world. We also inquire into how we make sense of our lived experiences and whether we act responsibly and ethically (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005). In self-reflexivity, we critically investigate and evaluate our beliefs and ideologies. Thereby, we “become responsive to others and open to the possibilities for new ways of acting” (Cunliffe and Jun, 2005, p. 229). However, it does require a continuous willingness to be a transforming self, as we continue to recognize the need for changes in relationships, organizational cultures/practices and public discourse.

Critical reflection and self-reflexivity are thus not *only* interested in management students becoming effective problem solvers, but the competency in *looking critically behind* a situation is decisive. Thus, the objective of management education changes from replenishing theoretical knowledge to facilitating the development of students’ capacity for critical reflection and self-reflexivity.

Discussion on Knowledge Transfer in Management Education

The issue of knowledge transfer also has a dominant, although often implicit, voice in the debate regarding the education–organizational practice connection. The transfer of knowledge and competencies between contexts was originally addressed by Thorndike and Woodworth (1901), outlining their theory on identical elements. They argue that transfer is only likely to occur if there is a high degree of similarity between the learning context and the application context. In 1908, Judd presented an alternative, focused on how to transfer and apply general and abstract theoretical knowledge in situations of high level of insecurity (Thomassen, 2022). Judd’s definition of transfer thereby follows the technical rationality line of thinking.

After the publication of the works of Thorndike and Woodworth (1901) and Judd (1908), the American philosopher John Dewey (1916) published his pragmatic learning theory. Dewey criticized the traditional way of teaching focused on transferring as much knowledge into students’ minds as possible. He was genuinely interested in developing democracy and providing people with the best possible life conditions. To accomplish these goals, people must be able to competently solve the problems they encounter, not only in school but in life as such. According to Dewey, students’ competency in replicating abstract and de-contextualized knowledge will be insufficient to facilitate students’ learning. Instead, he introduced a real-life problem as the educational starting point. Thereby, education is about asking why the problem occurred and how to solve it. Using this approach, new knowledge about methods and theories is gained and applied in a problem-solving process. Learning thus develops through people’s active involvement in solving the problems they experience in everyday life. Hence, Dewey (1938) exceeded the education–practice.

People gain new experiences when they feel surprised – suddenly, they do not receive the same result as they normally do. People become puzzled. The feeling of puzzlement is the motivation for engaging in an investigation of the relation between their action and the unexpected result. Thus, to create motivating learning environments, it is not the teacher but the student who should define the problem to be explored (Dewey, 1938). According to Dewey, inquiry is the process that brings people from puzzlement to a feeling of settlement. Reflective thinking is the process used in inquiry, and education (e.g., via PBL) plays an important role in developing students’ reflective thinking. Dewey (1916) describes reflective thinking as a continuous process that consists of five phases: 1) being

perplexed when the action does not work, 2) intellectualizing and defining the problem, 3) studying the situation and forming a hypothesis, 4) reasoning and 5) testing the hypothesis in action. It is important to note that reflective thinking is not about finding *the correct* solution; instead, the focus is on finding *the best possible* solution.

Problem-Based Learning in Continuing Public Management Education

Dewey's (1916; 1933) pragmatic learning theory has extensively influenced PBL (DeFillippi and Milter, 2009; Thomassen and Jørgensen, 2021), and since the end of the 1960s, PBL has developed in different directions although unified by the profound focus on a real-life problem as the educational starting point. In higher education (especially medicine), PBL has gained increasing interest. However, in business education, PBL has been relatively rare (Hmelo-Silver, 2004; Joham and Clarke, 2012), even though PBL is argued to be a relevant pedagogical approach in the endeavour of educating managers in a complex organizational practice (O'Toole, 2009). Based on research from the use of PBL in medicine, Ungaretti *et al.* (2015) discuss how to implement PBL in management education. They emphasize the importance of organizational commitment and present several issues to consider when introducing PBL, for example, faculty preparation, problem selection and teaching/learning process (p. 178). Smith "assesses PBL's relevance and potential value to management education and the ways business students might benefit from PBL" (2015, p. 359), such as the development of reflective thinking and problem-solving skills. Joham and Clarke (2012) explore PBL's potential in developing critical management skills and how PBL can prepare students for their future careers. Based on an Australian case study, Joham and Clarke (2012) conclude that PBL has the potential to facilitate the development of critical management skills. However, a strong focus on providing appropriate levels of structure and facilitation is necessary for students to achieve their full learning potential.

In the PBL literature, only a few papers explore the application of PBL in continuing education. Stegeager *et al.* (2013) discuss the educational effectiveness of PBL "in securing an efficient transfer of learning from university-driven continuing education to the context of the workplace" (p. 151). Thomassen and Jørgensen (2021) explore the relation between PBL in continuing management education and the development of managers' sensitivity towards sustainable management practice.

The above literature review illustrates heterogeneity in the management education debate, each perspective pointing at relevant and important issues in management education. Thus, it is relevant to explore how the PBL-based PDM facilitates the development of public managers' reflective thinking capacity. The PDM is introduced in the next section.

Personal Development Module

PBL has been the pedagogical foundation at Aalborg University, Denmark since the university was established in 1974. PBL is used in all its programmes, from engineering to social science and humanities, including its continuing education programmes.

In 2008, the MPG was established as a part-time master's programme in the acknowledgement of increasing complexity in the public sector. The objective is to offer public leaders a flexible programme with the highest level of relevance to their organizational practice. The 60-ECTS programme has three mandatory courses: science and methodology (3 ECTS), introduction to

professional leadership (5 ECTS) and the PDM (5 ECTS). Through elective modules, the student has the freedom to choose the remaining 47 ECTS according to individual interest and organizational relevance. Thereby, each student creates his/her individual combination of modules. The modules are not organized in a specific order; thus, the student can mix the modules according to his/her individual interest and organizational relevance. To support a good balance between work and education, the student can schedule the programme's duration between two and six years.

The objective of the PDM is to strengthen managers' capacity to continually monitor and facilitate their personal leadership development. The PDM consists of lectures and workshops; however, the focal point is the mandatory learning group. The students are placed in learning groups of 5–6 members, securing a heterogenous combination of positions and professional backgrounds. A university teacher facilitates the learning group meetings. The module has a nine-month duration, and in total, the students participate in ten days of lectures and learning group meetings.

When meeting in the learning groups, each management student is asked to present a relevant issue or topic from daily practice. The educational starting point is thus management practice. Perhaps the management student is puzzled about how to resolve a conflict among some of the employees. The learning group members act as co-investigators, asking relevant reflective questions – the learning group is not intended to solve the problem. The learning group develops a high level of confidentiality and mutual respect, as the issues discussed are very personal. As the learning group members come from different organizations, each group meeting becomes a safe zone. The group members also visit one another's organizations, often conducting interviews or observations on behalf of the "host" student. Thereby, the "host" student receives valuable information to use in his/her personal development process, and the visiting co-students gain new insights about another type of organization (e.g., a military sergeant visiting a hospital doctor).

The management student may investigate several topics throughout the first half of the course because the managers' daily practice changes, too. Examples are communication, the implication of pre-understandings, power relations between students and colleagues, and so on. Thus, a close connection between education and organizational practice is secured. However, in the second half of the course, it is important for the management student to choose a topic to investigate in-depth, with the help of relevant theories and models, among others. The university teacher does not define the topic; it is solely up to the student.

The management student hands in a ten-page assignment, investigating his/her chosen personal development topic. During the exam, all members of the learning group are present. The exam is best described as an extended learning group meeting. Evidently, the module's main objective is to increase management students' capacity to inquire about organizational and managerial challenges in connection to their daily management practice, and not least, to equip them with the competence to engage in future personal development processes.

Methodology: Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection is inspired by Brinkmann's (2012) approach to qualitative inquiry in everyday life, where the quality of research is not based on the number of interviews, among others, but on

scientific rigour, where theory is used in the analysis to achieve broader validity and generality. This paper fulfills these criteria. Preferably the paper was based on more empirical data, however, the interviews have undergone a rigorous research process thereby securing validity. In addition the research is exemplary (Thomassen and Steentoft, 2020) implying that the findings are transferable to other similar situations.

For ten years, I have had the pleasure of running the PDM. Recurrently, I have become aware that the public managers learned something new; however, this “something new” remained somewhat unclear. Thus, inspired by Brinkmann’s (2012) recommendation to investigate everyday life, I conducted two semi-structured interviews. Thereby, knowledge was gained regarding the managers’ experiences and learning from taking the PDM course. The analysis revealed a number of findings, which are used in the discussion on how the PDM strengthens the managers’ capacity in reflective thinking.

Interviews

The two managers were selected for the interviews, as they had both passed the PDM, and in class, they had been explicit about their experiences (positive and negative) in their pursuit of continuing management education. Conducted via Zoom, the interviews were recorded and fully transcribed afterwards. Four themes were listed in the interview guide: 1) current position, 2) a general perspective on the MPG, 3) the personal development programme and 4) management in the future. The themes were chosen to secure the focus on the topic of the investigation, while having a clear emphasis on creating space for the managers to explicate their experiences and learning.

Data Analysis

Giorgi’s four-step data analysis approach was followed when structuring the analysis: 1) The interview transcripts were read to acquire a general sense of the content. 2) The material was re-read to discriminate among the meaning units. 3) The researcher described the insights drawn from the meaning units. 4) All of the transformed meaning units were synthesized “into a consistent statement regarding the subject’s experience” (1985, p. 10). Steps 2 to 4 were repeated until no new additional findings were identified. Because of the four-step analysis process, the themes and issues presented in the analysis are not based on predefined categories or conceptualizations. In the Discussion section, the empirical findings are used in the explanation on PBL in continuing management education. The objective is to elucidate learning possibilities and potentials, as well as problems and possible pitfalls, and not least, point in the direction of further development.

The two interviewed managers

The two managers work in very different organizations. Manager A is a human resources (HR) manager in a hospital comprising 4000 employees, of which 30 work in his HR department. Manager A started in the hospital as an office clerk and has worked his way up. He has no prior post-secondary education.

Manager B studied law at the university and has worked in different public organizations. Today, she is the head of a secretariat in a large organization offering concerts, theatre performances and other cultural events. She has worked in this position for 11 years. Manager B has participated in different types of continuing management education prior to pursuing the MPG.

Analysis: Experiences, Learning and Surprises

This section presents the experiences and learning that were identified through the analysis as particularly relevant to the two public managers.

Why did the managers pursue the MPG?

The implication of the managers' motivation and argument for enrolling in the MPG seems important in their sensemaking about the educational activities and their learning outcome. Furthermore, the "home organizations'" interest in Manager A's and Manager B's participation appeared to influence their sensemaking about the interrelatedness among their personal development as managers, the educational activities and the relevance to the "home organization".

Manager A was urged by the hospital director to enrol in the MPG due to the growing organizational complexity. Manager B participated due to her deep interest in management. The organization neither encouraged her nor showed interest in her new knowledge. She solely participated due to her own motivation, and she considered it a privilege to have the opportunity to gain new knowledge and inspiration. She took the exams even though she had no particular interest in passing them. In contrast, Manager A needed a degree to attain the same educational level as that of his employees in the HR department. Evidently, the managers enrolled in the MPG from two different positions.

Manager A explains, "I chose [the] Master of Public Governance at Aalborg University because the course descriptions were oriented towards organizational practice and not only theory", underlining his interest in securing a close connection between the organizational and the educational contexts. Manager B chose MPG because it is a research-based programme. Hence, the managers had two different arguments for choosing the MPG at Aalborg University.

Connecting education and organizational practice

The two management students do not refer directly to the PBL elements in the PDM. However, they comment on the structure and how different types of activities facilitate learning and increase the likelihood of connecting education and daily practice. Particularly, Manager A emphasizes the integration of daily practice in class:

Our experiences from everyday organizational practice and the challenges and problems we face are included in the classes. The teachers invite us to participate in discussions [...]. What I value the most is, however, when we, in small groups, discuss how the notions from class are applicable in each of our organizations. Discussions are important to me, as organizational practice and theoretical positions become integrated, and I get new insight[s].

Manager B concurs with Manager A, as she explains:

I really liked the integration of theory and practice. Especially the sessions in which discussions were included, challenged my way of understanding things, and new perceptions were added.

Discussions imply students' active involvement; knowledge is not just presented to them. Through discussions, together, the students inquire about the content of the presented curricula. Connecting curricula to daily practice has two implications: 1) the understanding of the specific model, theory or term increases, and 2) the link to and possible impact on organizational practice increase. Evidently, the management students are those who *do the transfer job*, thereby increasing the likelihood of connecting education and practice.

Manager A reflects on the teacher's role and the type of experiences that he/she brings into the classroom. As outlined above, Manager A is interested in the close connection between education and practice, and it appears that the teacher's experiences and professional insights are evaluated in this light. Manager A expresses his opinion that teachers who primarily focus on theory and have no practical experience from public organizations other than the university cannot facilitate their learning to the same extent as teachers with experience from other organizations can. Hence, metaphorically speaking he prefers a short distance between the classroom and organizational practice. From his point of view, experience from other organizations increases the teachers' level of trustworthiness. Hence, Manager A evaluates the teachers and the classroom activities according to his assumption about how easy they can connect education and practice.

Students hand in a written assignment at the end of the PDM course. Manager A positively comments on the possibility to use a relevant problem from his organizational practice and analyze it via models or theories from the module. From his perspective, it is important for the content of the assignment to be useful in organizational practice as well, instead of having a purely theoretical focus. Having passed an exam, Manager A met with the hospital director to present his findings and to discuss how the new knowledge can improve the HR department or the hospital as such. Manager A's new knowledge is valued and used actively.

In contrast, Manager B has no interest in doing assignments and passing exams. To her, the important learning takes place in class. She likes to take a break from daily practice and be inspired by teachers and fellow students.

Exam is [a] waste of time. I do not do this to get a master's degree. I participate in courses because I think [that doing so] is interesting and motivating. It makes good sense to try to combine theory and practice in these assignments, but for some reason, my assignments seemed to focus on more or less the same. (Manager B)

Manager B's comment illustrates her understanding of the activities against the background of her motivation and interest. Her lack of interest in earning a degree seems to prevent her from valuing the learning potential in analyzing an organizational issue or topic as part of writing the exam paper. With inspirations from the courses, Manager B has performed experiments in her organizational practice because as she explains, "I get very passionate when I get new input." However, her objective is not to facilitate changes in her organization as such but to gain new experiences herself.

Manager B highlights the fact that she especially gained new knowledge during the class discussions, but she does not comment on the teachers' experiences from other types of organizations, aside from the university.

Personal Development Module

Manager A enrolled in the PDM because it is mandatory, not because he had interest in the module. He had no prior experience from this type of module, and at first, the course seemed a bit too nutty.

When I first heard about [the] PDM, I thought, “This is very Aalborg-ish.” However, as I slowly got it under my skin, the intention and the structure became clearer – then, it actually made sense. (Manager A)

As Manager B had earlier participated in modules focused on personal leadership development, her initial assumption was that she would most likely not learn something new.

I thought [that the] PDM was going to be a walk in the park. I must admit that to my surprise, I gained new insights that I had not thought of. The positive dynamic in the learning group was especially fruitful, maybe because we, in a positive tone, challenged and questioned each other’s understandings and because our daily practice was always the starting point of our discussions. (Manager B)

Manager A also emphasizes the importance of the discussions and learning processes unfolding in the learning group:

Personally, I experienced a great level of openness regarding the issues [that] each of us had in our organizations. We actually used real cases from our everyday practice as launching pads for our discussions. [...] You get in a learning group where you learn via others – that is the essence.

Both managers note that learning is closely connected to the tone and the way of giving respectful feedback on the often very personal leadership dilemmas discussed during the learning group meetings. As Manager A states, “I think that the outcome of this module is closely connected to your willingness to be open and receive competent feedback from fellow students and the facilitator.”. Finally, he underlines the strong commitment in holding some of your fellow students learning in one’s hands – it is a big responsibility as their learning depend on your way of engaging in the learning group.

The two managers express their view that the PDM has induced a change in their way of perceiving themselves. Previously, they did not question their way of being a manager. However, the change in perspective does include a new type of fragility:

I became increasingly aware that my, up until now, quite strong perception of myself as a strong leader was suddenly on shaky ground. So far, management education had been a question of action – of transferring my acquired knowledge to the organization, influencing my employees in new ways. Suddenly, it became clear to me that if I wanted to change my organization, I had to start changing myself – the need for and value in reflection became increasingly clear. (Manager A)

Manager B explains her approach prior to the PDM:

“I am as I am, and most of my employees think [that] they have a good leader. [...] The Personal Development Module has given rise [to my need] to reflect on how I want to appear and how I appear. And how I reflect [...].

Participation in the PDM appears to have extended the managers’ knowledge about different ways of using theories and models in the inquiry about organizational and managerial problems. They also seem to have engaged in the process of critically inquiring into their pre-understandings through self-reflexivity. Even though Manager B finished the PDM a couple of years ago, the module still influences her way of working as she continues to combine theories, methods and the development of her management practice. However, this is “something which mostly takes place in my head” (Manager B).

Besides gaining new knowledge, Manager B mentions the fact that the PDM has changed her way of working. Today, she does not jump directly into problem solving; instead, she works more analytically by investigating the problem first. Increasingly, she involves her employees and hands over assignments to others. “Earlier, I made fast decisions. I have become more open and aware of asking questions instead – I think [that] it has influenced my way of managing. I have become more reflective about my management role than I was earlier” (Manager B).

At the time of the interview, Manager A was about to write his master’s thesis and summarized his learning so far:

I have gained a new language. Organizational change is no longer just organizational change; now, changes can, for example, be linear or incremental. I can describe my organization in new ways. [...] as I started using new words, parts of the organization that had earlier been a black box suddenly contained a lot of nuances. My reflective capacity has increased [...]. Maybe the most important thing is that I have become much better in observing and listening – now, I value slow decision making, taking my time to reflect. In addition, I daily experience the value of reflection.

Summing up

The analysis reveals that the two managers’ approaches to continuing management education influenced how they initially understood the educational activities and the connection between education and organizational practice. Over time, the relation between education and organizational practice has become more nuanced, and the managers’ understanding of themselves as active agents in the learning processes has become clearer. Both managers experience learning as unfolding during inquiries about organizational issues through dialogues with fellow students. Both comment on the connection between theory and organizational practice and how these elements are linked in class and in the assignments. To their surprise, the managers acquired new learning during the PDM. The structure and the fact that students bring problems and issues from their organizational practice seem to facilitate mutual inquiry and reflection. Besides providing new methods and theories, the PDM has facilitated an awareness and interest in analyzing presumptions, thereby developing the managers’ self-reflexivity.

Discussion

This section discusses how the PBL-inspired approach to continuing management education holds the potential to answer the RQ.

RQ: How can Personal Development Modules like the PDM facilitate public managers' capacity in reflective thinking through integration of education and practice in inquiry of real-life organizational problems?

The theoretical section mentions several notions and perspectives, each focusing on different elements or arguments in relation to management education. In conjunction with the empirical findings, the discussion focuses on how the PDM facilitates management students' reflective thinking and the fact that self-reflexivity unintentionally seems to flourish as part of the programme.

Why Did the Managers Pursue the MPG?

The analysis reveals that the managers have two different arguments for pursuing the MPG. Manager A must increase his reflective competencies due to the increasing complexity in his organization, whereas Manager B is motivated by her personal interest in continuing education. Manager A's sensemaking about the educational activities is based on his presumption of how the education will improve his reflective capacity. Manager B focuses on the state-of-the-art knowledge that a research-based continuing management programme can provide, securing her feeling of being inspired when leaving the classroom.

The managers' reasons for pursuing the MPG seem to highly influence the learning outcome. Clearly, Manager B's approach colours her attitude towards writing the exam paper. As the exam paper in the PDM is based on the PBL principles, the objective is to inquire about an organizational problem with the help of selected theories and models from the module, facilitating the development of the student's analytical and reflective competencies, along with gaining deeper insights into how to use theoretical terms when solving real-life problems. Evidently, the structure and the objective follow Dewey's (1933) way of thinking. Manager B's profound inner motivation and pre-understanding of exams as tests of her knowledge level, instead of opportunities for learning, seem to hinder her awareness of the double intention behind PBL exams: 1) examination of her understanding and application of theories and methods of problem solving and 2) development of her reflective thinking capacity. Dewey (1916; 1933) argues that when people become puzzled, they can let it pass or inquire into it. The exams annoy Manager B; however, she does not scrutinize her annoyance. This finding shows that the well-intentioned learning potential is not utilized.

Connecting Education and Organizational Practice

Both managers value the discussions in class or in small groups because they gain new and valuable insights from these activities. Moreover, the use of examples from the managers' daily practice seems to further increase their learning outcomes.

Regardless of the discussions unfolding in class or in small groups, the students engage in an inquiry into the content of the new model, theory, or paradigm (among others) by using situations from daily practice as the analytical content to which they apply the new notion. During a mutual enforcing process, the understanding of the notion and of its relevance to and usefulness in organizational practice increases, along with a new and more nuanced comprehension of organizational practice as

such. The students' way of gaining new insights thus follows Dewey's (1933) reflective thinking. Organizational practice is used as the analytical object, and by using the new notion during their inquiry, the students acquire new knowledge and create a link between education and organizational practice.

Evidently, the question of action in management education becomes interesting because the findings show that actions (in this case, discussions) facilitate learning. However, the discussions are seldom tested in organizational practice. Management students are urged to conduct experiments; however, it is not a requirement. They are reluctant to perform experiments and thus do not gain knowledge, for example, about the effect of introducing appreciative inquiry during their meetings. Instead, the understanding of appreciative inquiry is connected to the discussions among the management students. Dewey (1938) emphasizes the importance of action; thus, focusing more on experiments in organizational practice as part of the educational activities has the potential to further increase the learning outcomes. The present investigation thereby illuminates the PDM's learning potential that is not fully utilized.

Manager B does not comment on the teachers and their way of running the class, whereas Manager A clearly evaluates the teachers according to his own main interests in a close practice-education-practice connection. As Manager A participates in more modules, he becomes aware that education is not *just* about the application of theory in organizational practice. Education also involves acquiring novel perspectives, a new vocabulary and a reflective capacity. It appears that the understanding of the education–practice relation has become more nuanced, from 1:1 application of new knowledge to new knowledge that begins to be helpful in inquiring about organizational problems or situations. It seems that the PBL-inspired PDM has enhanced the development of competencies in defining and inquiring about complex problems through reflective thinking. Thus, models, theories and notions do not provide the answers; instead, they are tools or instruments to be applied in flexible ways in problem-solving processes – they are, so to speak, tools to think with (Dewey, 1933). Thus, this approach follows Schön's (1987) argument that through education, students must become capable of integrating methods, theories and notions in flexible ways.

The above discussion reveals that the PBL way of continuing management education facilitates managers' learning processes through their ongoing inquiry into the link between education and management practice. Thus, the knowledge transfer occurs as integrated processes (Dewey, 1938), thereby providing an understanding of the transfer as an alternative to those of Judd (1908) and Thorndike and Woodworth (1901).

Personal Development Module

The findings illustrate the fact that the PDM has created a disturbance in both managers' self-perceptions. From feeling highly competent, Manager A suddenly experiences a feeling of insecurity, and Manager B acknowledges that she must revise her understanding of being an unchangeable leader. As Manager A states, "If I want others to change, I have become increasingly aware that I must start with myself", and as Manager B notes, "I have started to sit on my hands if I sense that I must hold myself back." These examples indicate that the two managers have become increasingly aware that paying more attention to their ways of thinking and acting has a positive impact on their organizations.

Cunliffe (2009) asserts that self-reflexivity is important in management education, and she hopes that managers bring their self-reflexive competence into their management practice. Cunliffe argues from

a critical social constructionist point of view, whereas PBL stands on a pragmatic foundation. Pragmatism (Dewey, 1938) is not occupied with revealing hidden and power-suppressing structures, as when a critical social constructionist approach is deployed; instead, the objective is to facilitate the development of students' competencies in reflective thinking. The findings show that the structure of the PDM and PBL as the pedagogical approach can facilitate managers' learning processes in the direction of increased self-reflexivity, thereby adding a reflective layer to the understanding of reflection in PBL. Cunliffe (2009) states that it is easier to talk about self-reflexivity than to practice it – the PDM exemplifies the potential of the PBL approach to enhance management students' awareness and competencies in self-reflexivity.

Positioning the PDM as a mandatory module signals continuing management education is not only about application of new knowledge in daily management practice. Continuing management education is also about the manager's personal development and a side effect appears to be self-reflexive competences. Thus, Master of Public Governance through the Personal Development Module extends Schön's discussion of how to educate reflective managers (Schön, 1987), as he primarily focuses on the manager's competences in reflective problem solving not having a special eye on the manager's personal development.

So far, the discussion has focused on how the PBL elements in PDM facilitate the management students' capacity in reflective thinking. It seems that PBL does not explicitly focus on what Cunliffe (2009) calls self-reflexivity. In the *traditional* approach to PBL, students are not required to critically analyze the implications of their pre-understandings on their ways of solving problems. The issue of self-reflexivity in PBL therefore seems to be a relevant issue for further investigation.

Conclusion

The paper set out to investigate this RQ: How can Personal Development Modules like the PDM facilitate public managers' capacity in reflective thinking through integration of education and practice in inquiry of real-life organizational problems?

With an inspiration from Dewey (1916, 1933, 1938), the assumption integrated into PBL is that education is about developing students' problem-solving competencies by enhancing their skills in inquiry and reflective thinking through integration of theory and real-life organizational problems. However, during the process of answering the RQ, an interesting and important element emerged, adding a new dimension to the established understanding of PBL. Specifically, the personal development model that adds self-reflexive thinking to the process of reflective thinking currently forms the understanding of the learning processes in PBL.

The origin in real-life problems seems to facilitate the understanding of the presented theories, model and methodologies, along with an increased knowledge of the notions' relevance in practice. The inspiration from Dewey (1916, 1933, 1938) stands out, as learning processes unfold due to the active engagement in the inquiry about puzzling problems. The active involvement progresses during discussions and when writing exam papers. Keeping Dewey's reflective thinking in mind, it also stands out that testing the reflective thinking in real life (e.g., through experiments) has little room for implementation. With reference to Dewey, the impact of continuing management education on organizational operations could be increased if the theoretically analyzed practical problems would be tested in organizational practice.

As outlined in the Theoretical Background section, the discussion around management education seems to be characterized by how to connect education and organizational practice. In this investigation, the management students state that by integrating education and organizational practice throughout their inquiry into real-life organizational issues, the theoretical themes have provided new ways of perceiving organizational problems and situations; the organization, so to speak, has become more nuanced. Based on the managers' experiences, their new knowledge improves their daily practice because they can work with problem solving in a more processual way, having a high level of compliance with the organizational situation. Hence, knowledge is transferred and used through the managers' learning processes – they are the ones creating the link between education and organizational practice.

Reflection plays an important role in management education (Schön, 1983, 1987; Vince and Reynolds, 2009), along with self-reflexivity, which has gained increasing interest (Cunliffe, 2004, 2005). The findings demonstrate that introducing the PDM in a PBL-based master's programme seems to enhance 1) the managers' self-reflexive competencies and awareness of why it is relevant to investigate their assumptions about their way of being managers and 2) their awareness of their influence (as managers) on the organization. The results also show that the managers find it relevant to bring their self-reflexivity into their daily practice as it leads to a more nuanced understanding of themselves as active agents in complex organizational settings.

This paper highlights Dewey's (1916; 1933) notion of reflective thinking as especially relevant to investigate further, as the findings indicate that the notion of reflective thinking does not capture the managers' development of competencies in reflecting on their own assumptions and pre-understandings, and not least, the implications thereof. Cunliffe's (2004; 2005; 2009) notion of self-reflexivity is used; however, the notion has its origin in social constructionism, not pragmatism. Hence, further empirical and theoretical research could focus on possible ways of extending Dewey's notion of reflective thinking or engaging in developing a new theoretical term that would be helpful in capturing the managers' development of what could perhaps, from a pragmatic stance, be called self-reflectivity.

Limitations

The study has at least two limitations. First, the paper is based on two interviews, whereby the paper's validity might be questioned. However, the analysis follows a rigid academic structure, and the objective has not been generalisability but exemplarity. Second, further development of Dewey's notion of reflective thinking is suggested. This suggestion can be questioned considering the empirical foundation, thus further research is needed to clarify the relevance of this suggestion.

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